

AN INVESTIGATION INTO CULTURAL FEATURES OF ENGLISH SLANGS CONTAINING WORDS DENOTING ANIMALS

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ABSTRACT

Understanding and using slangs correctly is not an easy task for English learners if we just base on their literal meanings. Language and culture are undoubtedly closely integrated and interdependent during their whole development processes. Therefore, in this article, an investigation into cultural feature of 359 English slangs containing words denoting animals was conducted to bring readers an insight.

Keywords: slang, cultural features, animal.

TÓM TẮT

Khảo sát về tiếng lóng Anh ngữ chứa từ chỉ động vật dưới khía cạnh văn hóa

Hiểu và sử dụng đúng tiếng lóng không hề dễ dàng đối với người học tiếng Anh vì hiểu nó không đơn thuần chỉ dựa vào nghĩa đen của từ ngữ. Ngôn ngữ và văn hóa có mối quan hệ khăng khít và tác động lẫn nhau. Vì thế 359 tiếng lóng Anh ngữ chứa từ chỉ động vật được khảo sát trong bài báo này nhằm đem lại cho người đọc về khía cạnh văn hóa mà chúng phản ánh.

Từ khóa: tiếng lóng, văn hóa, động vật.

1. Statement of the Problem

In learning and communicating process, non-native speakers of English can reach a point in their knowledge of the language where they feel comfortable with standard literary speech. They are, however, liable to get confused when they confront slangs- a linguistic modality confined to spoken language, has always been difficult to locate, to explain and to grasp as a unitary phenomenon.

Slang is full of vivid reality that almost any language has, whether wanted or not. The writer Victor Hugo took notice of using slangs in his work “Le dernier Jour d'un Condamne” (1828). He even devoted his entire volume VII in the fourth section of the massive popular novel “Les Miserable” (1861) to discuss the slang. Slang is language deliberately selected for its striking informality and is consciously used in preference to proper speech (or, more rarely, writing). It usually originates in small social group. For these groups, it is a private code that embodies their particular values and behavior and reinforces their exclusivity. As a result, understanding and using slangs correctly and effectively is not an easy task. Sometimes, non-native speakers of English find it difficult to comprehend what is meant by English slangs as well as what structures the slangs belong to. Moreover, slangs denoting animals are various in the ways of

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expressing their meanings because, in some cases, we cannot understand some expressions by basing on their literal meanings. As a matter of fact that you frequently hear such slangs from animals in your daily life:

- My God, he made a real **dog's breakfast** of that presentation". [9, p.132]
- We ain't gonna walk no eight miles... tonight. My **dogs** are burned up. [1, p.11]
- Man, who was that **fox** I saw you with? [8, p.78]
- Plinio, the barman with **duck's disease** came running up. [1, p.11].

Very often we understand every individual word in this sentence but still fail to grasp what the sentence is all about. Thus, if we do not learn slangs in general and slangs containing words denoting animals in particular, we cannot understand their exact meanings. It means that it's so difficult for us to master the deeply true and full meaning of such the phrase as **dogs, dog's breakfast, fox, duck's disease** if you are not under the light of slang, especially slangs containing words denoting animals. In consequence, we lose interaction in communication because we cannot understand speakers' intentions and opinions. Moreover, learning these kinds of slangs makes non-native learners of English understand and uses English more confidently, effectively and naturally.

Hopefully, this research will enable us to understand the cultural features of English slangs containing words denoting animals and use them in sensible as well as productive ways. Besides, learning such these slangs is one of the best ways to add to and develop our vocabulary. And with the respect to culture, language learners can get acquainted with the past and present social life of the people with theirs way of living, way of thinking and theirs traditions via slangs.

For the above reasons, the topic "**An Investigation into Cultural Features of English Slangs Containing Words Denoting Animals**" has been chosen for my article.

2. Problem solution

2.1. Definition of slang

According to Yule [10, p. 211], he defines slang in his work- The Study of Language as following "slang describes words or phrases that are used instead of more everyday terms among younger speakers and other groups with special interests".

In The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English by E. Partridge and P. Beale [6], slang is "a peculiar kind of vagabond language, always hanging on the outskirts of legitimate speech, but continually straying or forcing its way into the most respectable company". As noted by Dalzell and Victor (2008: xv), "slang is easy enough to use, but very hard to write about with the facile

convincingness that a subject apparently so simple would, at first sight, seem to demand”.

“Slang is a language which rolls up its sleeves, spits on its hands- and goes to work” Carl Sandburg- an American poet once described [13]. As to Chesterton G.K, he referred to slang as “the one stream of poetry which is constantly flowing”. [2, p. 61]. Another definition of slang is that slang is “words or expressions that are very informal and are not considered appropriate for more formal situations. Some slang is used only by a particular group of people” in Macmillan English Dictionary For Advanced Learners of American English. [5, p.354]

2.2. Literature review

Up to now, slangs have been a growing interest of researchers. In fact, slang has become a subject of study by several British, American... and even Vietnamese writers and linguists. In “An Introduction to English Slang” (2008) by Elisa Mattiello, slang was fully described in terms of features of its morphology, semantics and sociology. A study of how to speak and understand American slang and how slang used in popular American television shows was carried out by David Burke in two works “Street talk 1” (2001) and “Street Talk 2” (2001). Eric Partridge examined slangs under different approach. He discussed the sketch of the history of English slang and investigated slangs in some particular aspects such as journalism, art, medicine, etc. in “Slang To-Day and Yesterday” (2007). “The Oxford Dictionary of Slang” (1998) by John Ayto is a good dictionary of slang. It is a collection of slangs which are arranged in a particular area of activity or concept. In addition, there are some other dictionaries of slang like: “Dictionary of Contemporary Slang” (2007) by Tony Thorne, “The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English” (2008) E. Partridge and P. Beale, “Mc Graw-Hill’s Super-mini American Slang Dictionary” (2007), “Mc Graw-Hill’s Essential American Slang Dictionary” (2000) and “NTC’s Dictionary of American Slang and Colloquial Expressions” (2007) by Richard Spears, etc.

Besides above-mentioned works, it’s to blame if we forget to talk about the following other remarkable ones. As we know that slang is a language that touches such every field and profession in society as “Cop Talk” by Lewis Poteet and Aaron C. Poteet (2000)- a dictionary of police slang, “Military Slang” by Lee Pemberton (2006)- a collection of slang in army, “Public school Slang” by Morris Marples (1940)- a work of slang used at school, “Cowboy Slang” by Frosty Potter and Edgar F. Potter (1986)- the colorful, humorous lingo of the American West captured here in 2000 phrases and expressions.

In Vietnamese, up to now, some authors have paid attention to slang. In “Từ Điển Tiếng Lóng và những Thành Ngữ Thông Tục Mỹ-Việt” (2006) by Bùi Phụng, it is a useful collection of American-Vietnamese slangs and colloquial expressions. Besides, there are some valuable materials about slang as “Số Tay Từ-Ngữ Lóng Tiếng Việt” (2008) by Đoàn Tử Huyền & Lê Thị Yến , “Tiếng Lóng Việt Nam” (2001) by Nguyễn

Văn Khang and “Tiếng Lóng trong Giao Thông Vận Tải” by Chu Thị Thanh Tâm (1998).

As to Phạm Hoài Anh, “The Use of and the Attitudes toward Slang Expressing Surprise and Disbelief among Young Americans” really draws her attention in doing a research as M.A linguistics thesis (2010) at the College of Foreign Languages, the University of Ha Noi. At the College of Foreign Languages, the University of Da Nang, Tạ Thị Mười’s MA thesis with the title is “An Investigation into Linguistic Features of English Originated Slangs Used by Vietnamese Young People in Present-Day Life”.

Although some various aspects of slangs have been investigated, up to now, no concern has been paid to slangs containing words denoting animals and their cultural features deeply and systematically. This is reason why “**An Investigation into Cultural Features of English Slangs Containing Words Denoting Animals**” comes into being investigated in an attempt to find out the cultural features of English slangs containing words denoting animals.

2.3. *Sampling*

The samples should include 359 English slangs that contain words denoting animals. Data for research were collected from main books and dictionaries such as Oxford Dictionary of Slang by John Ayto (1998), Dictionary of Contemporary Slang by Tony Thorne (2005), The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English by Eric Partridge and P. Beale (2008), Vice Slang (2008) and Sex Slang (2008) by Tom Dalzell and Terry Victor, Mc Graw-Hill’s super-mini American slang dictionary (2007), Mc Graw-Hill’s essential American slang dictionary (2007) by Richard Spears.

Besides, they were searched from the websites on the internet like <http://onlineslangdictionary.com>, <http://www.iwise.com/jXMle>

2.4. *Data analysis*

This study was carried out throughout descriptive, analytical and qualitative methods. Data analysis consists of the following steps:

Step 1: To assemble English slangs containing words denoting animals from books, dictionaries and on the internet. They were collected randomly in a large quantity of 359 slangs.

Step 2: To make a general survey of English slangs containing words denoting animals after the stage of collection. In this stage, the samples from the collected data should be sorted into different categories in terms of species.

Step 3: To discover the cultural feature of English slangs containing words denoting animals, the denotations of each species that imply deserved to mention. A survey was certainly carried out to find out the cultural features slangs from animals imply.

Step 4: To get the results and conclusion.

3. Results

Slangs containing words denoting animals that are surveyed have a big number of different species; therefore, they are divided into three groups for purpose of convenience of investigation: group 1: animals are usually raised or seen in the people's surroundings (called familiar animals) (198/359), group 2 : animals that live or are usually seen in the natural surroundings (called wild animals) (155/359) and group 3: insects (6/359)

3.1. The cultural characteristics of words denoting such familiar animals as dogs, cats, pigs, chicken, etc.

3.1.1. The cultural characteristics of "Dog" through slangs (46)

- "Dog" implies a person. For example:
 - + a dog (an ugly, unpleasant or unattractive woman or girl) [9, p.130]
- "Dog" implies sex. For example:
 - + dog fashion (sexual intercourse from behind) [3, p.49]
 - + dog style (a sexual position) [3, p.49]
- "Dog" implies a bodily function. For example:
 - + dog-log (a section of dog feces) [8, p.61]
- "Dog" implies alcohol. For example:
 - + brewdog (a can of beer) [6, p.207-208]
 - + dog juice (inexpensive alcohol) [4, p.58]
- "Dog" implies education. For example:
 - + dogger (a truant) [9, p.131]
 - + dog it (to play truant) [9, p.131]
- "Dog" implies unpleasantness. For example:
 - + dirty dog (a despicable or untrustworthy person) [6, p.207-208]
 - + dog's mother (a bitch, a bitchy person) [8, p.61]

There are many other slangs having the word "dog" but they are not all analyzed in this study because of the great number. However, the common implications of the word "dog" have been analyzed. According to the survey in this study, there are over 80% slangs from the word "dog" in which dog implies a bad thing, sex or a bad person like "dog", "dog it", "dog fashion" etc... The frequency of dog in slangs, anyway, shows that dog is a very familiar animal in life.

3.1.2. The cultural characteristics of "Cat" through slangs (21)

- "Cat" implies excellence, remarkableness. For example:

- + cat's ass (an extraordinarily good or extraordinarily bad example of something) [6, p.123]
- "Cat" implies pleasure and enjoyment. For example:
 - + play cat and mouse (of two groups or people, to pursue) [12]
- "Cat" implies crime. For example:
 - + cat walker (a burglar who steals at night) [6, p.124]
- "Cat" implies cards, gambling. For example:
 - + cat's eyes (in craps, a roll of three) [4, p.36]
- "Cat" implies sexual orientation. For example:
 - + cat lapper (a lesbian) [3, p.28]
- "Cat" implies a bodily function. For example:
 - + shoot the cat/whip the cat (to vomit) [1, p.20]
- "Cat" implies trouble. For example:
 - + set the cat among the pigeons (to make trouble) [1, p.243]
- "Cat" implies unpleasantness. For example:
 - + cat (a spiteful woman) [9, p.83]

Above are just some cultural characteristics of "cat". The word "cat" has different denotations in English. They may be positive or good things like "cat". However the bad ones or something that people do not want to mention directly is more like "cat lapper", "cat walker", "shoot the cat"... This means that "cat" plays different roles in life.

3.1.3. The cultural characteristics of "Pig" through slangs (21)

- "Pig" implies physique. For example:
 - + hellpig (an fat or overweight person) [8, p.107]
- "Pig" implies eating and drinking. For example:
 - + pig out (to eat excessively or messily) [9, p.334]
- "Pig" implies work. For example:
 - + pig sticker (a butcher) [1, p.196]
- "Pig" implies sex. For example:
 - + pig party (serial consensual sex between one person and multiple partners) [3, p.133]
- "Pig" implies the police. For example:
 - + pig heaven (a police station) [8, p.159]
- "Pig" implies ugliness. For example:

+ pig in knickers (very unattractive female) [6, p.495]

- “Pig” implies a place. For example:

+ pig’s ballroom (a bar or club where unattractive females congregate) [6, p.495]

Here are some of many cultural characteristics of “pig”. As we knew, pigs are a kind of animal that overeats and big. Not surprisingly, the slang of “pig” implies weight and eating. Besides, “pig” is used to denote sex or ugliness. These characteristics are the same in Vietnamese slang “ăn như heo, phim con heo”.

3.1.4. The cultural characteristics of “Horse” through slangs (13)

- “Horse” implies drugs and tobaccos. For example:

+ horse (heroin) [9, p.225]

+ horseshoe (a hand-rolled cigarette, especially one containing strong tobacco) [9, p.225]

- “Horse” implies foolishness. For example:

+ horse’s ass (a fool, especially an annoying one) [9, p.225]

- “Horse” implies a foodstuff. For example:

+ horse cock (a large sausage) [7, p.111]

- “Horse” implies pleasure, enjoyment. For example:

+ horse about/around (to have fun, to have a good time) [1, p.236]

Although most of the characteristics of “horse” are about drug, tobacco as well as foolishness like “horse”, “horse’s ass”, horseshoe”, few of them denote fun or pleasure “horse about”.

3.1.5. The cultural characteristics of “Duck” through slangs (9)

- “Duck” implies the body and its parts. For example:

+ duck’s disease (shortness of legs) [1, p.11]

- “Duck” implies people. For example:

+ mud duck (a ugly person) [8, p.140]

- “Duck” implies cards, gambling. For example:

+ duck bucket (a poor hand that wins a pot, especially a pair of twos, in poker) [4, p.63]

- “Duck” implies easiness. For example:

+ duck soup (something easy to do, easiness) [1, p.406]

- “Duck” implies air-force. For example:

+ duck (an aircraft) [9, p.144]

3.1.6. *The cultural characteristics of “Chicken” through slangs (10)*

- “Chicken” implies cowardice. For example:
 - + chicken (a coward) [9, p.87]
 - + chicken out (to lose courage and retreat from an endeavor) [6, p.133]
- “Chicken” implies foolishness. For example:
 - + chicken-head (a foolish female) [9, p.88]
- “Chicken” implies money. For example:
 - + chicken feed (a small amount of money) [1, p.183]
 - + chicken’s neck (a cheque) [6, p.134]
- “Chicken” implies prostitution. For example:
 - + chicken ranch (a rural brothel) [3, p.31]
- “Chicken” implies contemptibleness. For example:
 - + chickenshit (anything worthless, petty or contemptible) [9, p.88]

From the above-described characteristics, it’s not absolutely difficult to realize that most of the “chickens” imply such the bad things as cowardice, foolishness, prostitution or contemptibleness.

3.1.7. *The cultural characteristics of “Sheep” through slangs (6)*

- “Sheep” implies sex. For example:
 - + sheep (a woman who volunteers to take part in serial sex with members of a motorcycle club or gang) [3, p.159]
 - + sheep’s eyes (a glance indicative of infatuation) [1, p.65]
- “Sheep” implies business, commerce. For example:
 - + sheep’s back (the wool industry) [6, p.571]
- “Sheep” implies alcohol. For example:
 - + sheep-dip (low quality alcoholic drink) [9, p.386]

3.1.8. *The cultural characteristics of “Mouse, Rat” through slangs (23)*

- “Mouse” implies sex. For example:
 - + double-click one’s mouse (to masturbate) [3, p.51]
- “Mouse” implies a foodstuff. For example:
 - + mousetrap (cheese) [1, p.136]
- “Mouse” implies people using computer. For example:
 - + mouse potato (someone who spends a great amount of time using a computer) [8, p.140]

- “Rat” implies drunkenness. For example:
 - + rat-arsed/rat-faced (drunk) [9, p.358]
- “Rat” implies bad quality. For example:
 - + ratshit (worthless, inferior, utterly disappointing) [9, p.359]
- “Rat” implies cards, gambling. For example:
 - + rats and mice (a game of dice) [1, p.360]
- “Rat” implies illness. For example:
 - + rat bite (a skin bruise caused by sucking) [3, p.147]
- “Rat” implies insanity. For example:
 - + rat house (a mental hospital) [1, p.305]

The image of “rat, mouse” is often in association of dirtiness or illness. Under the light of slang, rat or mouse is completely alike. Their implications are the bad things that occasionally occur in our daily lives like drunkenness, sex, gambling, or disease.

3.2. The cultural characteristics of words denoting such wild animals as whale, monkey, lion, tiger, etc.

3.2.1. The cultural characteristics of “Monkey” through slangs (20)

- “Monkey” implies money. For example:
 - + monkey (£500) [9, p.295]
- “Monkey” implies sex. For example:
 - + monkey spank (of a male, an act of masturbation) [3, p.118]
- “Monkey” implies the body and its parts. For example:
 - + monkey box (the vagina) [3, p.118]
 - + monkey’s tail (a nail) [6, p.437]
- “Monkey” implies temperature. For example:
 - + monkey bath (a very hot bath) [6, p.437]
- “Monkey” implies tobacco. For example:
 - + monkey’s nuts (cigarette butts) [6, p.437]
- “Monkey” implies alcohol. For example:
 - + monkey swill (inferior, strong liquid) [8, p.139]
- “Monkey” implies a foolish behavior. For example:
 - + monkey-shines (foolish behavior) [1, p.312]

Five out of eight characteristics of “monkey” are used of refer the bad things under the language of slang like sex, foolishness and alcohol.

3.2.2. *The cultural characteristics of “Fox” through slangs (5)*

- “Fox” implies slyness. For example:
+ fox (a sly person) [1, p.291]
- “Fox” implies alcohol. For example:
+ fox and hound (a round of drinks) [6, p.266]
- “Fox” implies an ethnic, national group. For example:
+ fox hunter (an English man) [6, p.267]

Not surprisingly, most of the characteristics of “fox” are to denote the bad things because of the natural symbols of fox in many different cultures in the world.

3.2.3. *The cultural characteristics of “Mule” through slangs (6)*

- “Mule” implies sex. For example:
+ lope your mule (to masturbate) [3, p.108]
- “Mule” implies cards, gambling. For example:
+ mule teeth (in craps, a roll of twelve) [4, p.125]
- “Mule” implies a crime. For example:
+ mule (a smuggler) [1, p.98]

3.2.4. *The cultural characteristics of “Donkey” through slangs (7)*

- “Donkey” implies time. For example:
+ donkey’s year (a very long time) [1, p.361]
- “Donkey” implies sex. For example:
+ pull your donkey (to masturbate) [3, p.50]
- “Donkey” implies difficulty. For example:
+ donkey work (difficult, menial work) [6, p.211]

The image of donkey always reminds us of slow, difficult or hard working. The “donkey” in slang is the same. They are mentioned about time, difficulty and menial work.

3.2.5. *The cultural characteristics of “Frog” through slangs (9)*

- “Frog” implies an ethnic, national group. For example:
+ frog (a person who is French) [9, p.170]
- “Frog” implies a place. For example:
+ frog and toad (a road) [9, p.170]
- “Frog” implies a foodstuff. For example:
+ frog-spawn (a pudding) [1, p.137]

- “Frog” implies money. For example:
 - + frogskin (a bank note, a dollar bill) [1, p.137]
- “Frog” implies a performance. For example:
 - + frog salad (any performance that features scantily clad women, in carnival usage) [3, p.64]
 - + frog show (a dance performance that features scantily clad women) [3, p.64]
- “Frog” implies education. For example:
 - + frog slicing (a biology class/course) [8, p.79]

3.2.6. *The cultural characteristics of “Bird” through slangs (16)*

- “Bird” implies the body and its parts. For example:
 - + bird (the penis) [3, p.13]
- “Bird” implies foolishness. For example:
 - + birdbath (a silly person) [9, p.40]
- “Bird” implies dismissal. For example:
 - + get/give the bird (to dismiss, to be dismisses) [1, p.204]
- “Bird” implies drugs. For example:
 - + bird’s eye (a small dose of heroin) [4, p.15]
- “Bird” implies sex. For example:
 - + bog bird (a woman is willing to have sex in a public lavatory) [3, p.17]

The “bird” in slang is completely used to denote the bad things or something people are shy to speak out like the part of the body, sex, drugs or foolishness.

3.2.7. *The cultural characteristics of “Elephant” through slangs (5)*

- “Elephant” implies an unattractive woman. For example:
 - + elephant (an unattractive woman) [9, p.152]
- “Elephant” implies drunkenness. For example:
 - + elephant’s trunk (drunk) [9, p.152]
- “Elephant” implies drugs. For example:
 - + elephant juice (the drug etorphine) [4, p.67]
- “Elephant” implies money. For example:
 - + elephant bucks (a large amount of money) [6, p.234]

3.2.8. *The cultural characteristics of “Snake” through slangs (13)*

- “Snake” implies sex. For example:
 - + snake (to seduce or to have sex with) [9, p.405]

- “Snake” implies work. For example:
 - + snake charmer (a railway maintenance worker) [1, p.199]
- “Snake” implies anger. For example:
 - + snake-headed (angry) [1, p.253]
- “Snake” implies cards, gambling. For example:
 - + snake eyes (a throw of two ones with a pair of dice) [1, p.359]
- “Snake” implies alcohol. For example:
 - + snake juice (inferior whisky) [1, p.144]
 - + snake poison (whisky) [1, p.146]
- “Snake” implies a place. For example:
 - + snake room (a bar) [4, p.170]

Almost all of the characteristics of “snake” are the bad things. They are sex, gambling and alcohol. Basing on the survey, there is a positive feature mentioned in the light of slang which is “snake charmer”

3.3. The cultural characteristics of words denoting such insects as bees and ants.

3.3.1. The cultural characteristics of “Bee” through slangs (5)

- “Bee” implies drugs. For example:
 - + bee (a drug addition) [4, p.12]
- “Bee” implies eagerness, enthusiasm. For example:
 - + bee in one’s bonnet (obsession with something) [1, p.245]

3.3.2. The cultural characteristics of “Ant” through slangs (1)

- “Ant” implies a bodily function. For example:
 - + bark at the ants (to vomit outdoors) [11]

4. Conclusion

In short, many cultural characteristics of slangs containing words denoting animals have been analyzed. It is clearly seen that the more popular the animal is, the more cultural characteristics the animal has. In fact, such familiar animals as dogs, cats and horses... have a lot of characteristics and such animals as crocodile, dragon and lion... which rarely appear in daily life, have a few cultural characteristics. In this study, a list of cultural characteristics of 39 kinds of animals from English has been explored. It is not difficult to realize that most of the animals symbolize for more than one specific characteristic, just a few reflect only one cultural feature. The study shows the relationship between animals and people’s life by means of the figurative meanings through animals’ images. As a feature of slang, most of slangs from animals are used to symbolize the bad, the social aspects of life people shy to talk about.

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