

Original Article

Understanding Insults Across Languages: A Linguistic and Cultural Comparison of Animal-Related Idioms Among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Students

Chaizani Mohd Shamsudin ^{1*}, Husna Nurul Izzah Jamaludin@Noordin ¹, Farha Alia Mokhtar ¹

¹Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Terengganu – Malaysia

*Corresponding author: chaizani@umt.edu.my

Abstract

Idiomatic expressions related to animals, especially insults and offensive phrases, play a significant role in reflecting cultural attitudes and shaping interpersonal communication in any language. In English and Bahasa Malaysia, such expressions are frequently used but often misunderstood in cross-cultural contexts, leading to communication breakdowns. Despite their importance, there is limited comparative research exploring the linguistic features and cultural meanings of offensive idioms in these two languages. This study addresses this gap through a mixed-methods approach, compiling a corpus of animal-related idiomatic expressions and analysing their semantic nuances. Surveys and interviews with native speakers investigate how cultural contexts influence the interpretation and use of these expressions, while focus groups explore challenges bilingual speakers face in cross-cultural communication involving offensive idioms. The findings reveal linguistic patterns and cultural influences in the respondents' understanding of English idiomatic expressions. This research underscores the need for culturally informed language education and enhanced intercultural competence to minimize misunderstandings. By filling a critical gap in comparative linguistics, the study offers valuable insights for language teaching, translation, and fostering effective communication in multicultural settings.

Keywords: Communication; Cultural; Expressions; Idiomatic; Linguistic.

Introduction

Animal-related idioms are reflections of cultural mind-sets, ideologies and histories, so their learning is crucial in intercultural communication. In English and Bahasa Malaysia, animal-related idioms are often used to insult, critique or categorise social behaviour, capitalising on indigenous symbolism, religion and environment to interpret meanings that might not otherwise be understood. For instance, English idioms like "black sheep", "busy as a bee" or "wolf in sheep's clothing" are based on metaphors from Western folklore and social propaganda. In contrast, animal-related idioms from other cultures frequently draw on different connotations for the same creatures, contributing to miscommunication or even unintended offense when these expressions cross linguistic borders, especially if the speaker has limited proficiency in English.^{1,2}

Due to the fact that idioms are a big part of the English language, it is crucial that English language learners bridge the cross-cultural gap despite the significant challenges posed. Against this backdrop, this research investigates two core questions: How do cultural contexts influence native speakers' interpretation and use of offensive animal idioms in English, and what challenges do learners of English face in understanding and employing them?

¹ Dang Thi Kim Chung, 'Challenges of Translating Idiomatic Expressions: A Cross-Linguistic Analysis at a University in Hanoi, Vietnam', *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, 07.10 (2024) <<https://doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v7-i10-39>>.

² Zhimin Xiang, 'A Cognitive Metaphoric Study of English Animal Idioms', in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Humanities (ICCESSH 2017)* (Paris, France: Atlantis Press, 2017) <<https://doi.org/10.2991/iccessh-17.2017.140>>.



Cross-linguistic communication with animal-related metaphors is also complicated by the difference between implicit and explicit meaning. The moral or social implications that idioms contain are often difficult to decode for bilingual speakers and translators when the meaning remains veiled in underlying metaphors. This is especially true in educational and general discourse settings where the offensiveness of an idiomatic expression may be contingent almost wholly upon one's culture or religion, e.g. of certain animals considered haram ("forbidden") by Islam but revered in other societies.³

The High-Context vs. Low-Context model is another of Hall's theories regarding how cultures express themselves with more or less overt communication.⁴ High context cultures like Malaysia are based on common experiences, expressions and social cues, hence idioms being nuanced and culturally bound.⁵ By comparison, English is a low-context culture, where meanings are easy for outsiders to understand. Neutral idioms can become highly offensive as religious taboos, depending on the audience, but "dog" idioms undergo from a negative valence in Chinese to playful forms in English. Likewise, direct machine translations gloss over implied cultural subtexts, which is why idioms must be localized for context.⁶ In a similar way, literal machine translations might miss cultural nuances. This shows why idioms cannot be interpreted without a clear understanding of the context and also why knowledge of cultural references is paramount when interpreting idioms.^{7,8,9}

Method

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to investigate animal-related idiomatic expressions in English. Respondents were second-, third-, and fourth-year students at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, all of whom had previously taken the Malaysian University English Test (MUE) and had achieved scores between Bands 3-4 before entering university. They were given a questionnaire that included a list of 12 animals: monkey, cat, bee, puppy, sheep, wolf, lamb, piglet, snail, shrimp, mule, and chameleon. They were then asked: If someone equates you with this animal, do you think it is an insult or an endearment (praise)? This exercise provided a structural foundation, examining patterns and categorizations as perceived by the respondents to be inherent in these idioms. Next, the respondents were asked to search for idiomatic expressions that included the animals on the list. A quick search came up with common idioms such as "cat got your tongue", "as stubborn as a mule", and "monkey on your back". The respondents were asked to pool together all their search results and to discuss the meaning of the idioms with each other. Lastly, they were given the same questionnaire but this time they had to reconsider whether to change their previous answers and provide an answer as to why if they did. They were asked if their views of the animal in question had also changed. By integrating quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative data from surveys, interviews, and focus groups, the methodology provides a comprehensive outlook on the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions of animal-related idiomatic expressions. The findings

³ Falah Alarsan and Tariq Khan, 'Multi-Word Expressions in Jordanian Arabic: A Socio-Pragmatic Study of Idioms and Proverbs', *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 7.3 (2025), 260–77 <<https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i3.2151>>.

⁴ Markus G. Kittler, David Rygl and Alex Mackinnon, 'Special Review Article: Beyond Culture or beyond Control? Reviewing the Use of Hall's High-/Low-Context Concept', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 11.1 (2011), 63–82 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470595811398797>>.

⁵ Kittler, Rygl and Mackinnon.

⁶ HE Jia, 'A Study of Translation Strategies of Animal Idioms Concerning "Dog" From a Cross-Cultural Perspective', *US-China Foreign Language*, 21.12 (2023) <<https://doi.org/10.17265/1539-8080/2023.12.007>>.

⁷ Desakh Putu Setyalika Putri Dewayanti and Margana Margana, 'The Impact of Contextual Understanding on Neural Machine Translation Accuracy: A Case Study of Indonesian Cultural Idioms in English Translation', *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 12.1 (2024), 223 <<https://doi.org/10.22373/ej.v12i1.24433>>.

⁸ Pavol Sahadevan and Mukthy Sumangala, 'Effective Cross-Cultural Communication for International Business', *Shanlax International Journal of Management*, 8.4 (2021), 24–33 <<https://doi.org/10.34293/management.v8i4.3813>>.

⁹ Li ZHANG and Shan-shan LI, 'The Translation of English Animal Idioms from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication', *DEStech Transactions on Social Science, Education and Human Science*, 2017 <<https://doi.org/10.12783/dtssehs/sem2016/5414>>.



obtained from this approach will contribute to improving cultural competence, language teaching strategies, and translation accuracy in multicultural and bilingual environments.^{10,11}

Results and Discussions

A total of 83 respondents were involved in the study. Following the pretest, participants researched idioms referring to each animal in the list, at first individually and then in groups. *First*, Dramatic Perception Transformations. As shown in Figure 1, idioms that contained ‘monkeys’ showed a complete reversal in perception by the respondents. In fact, this word showed the largest perceptual shift (86.0%). In the pretest, 6.7% of participants perceived it as to be an insult and 93.3% thought of it as an endearment or praise. In contrast, analysis of the posttest showed that 92.7% perceived idioms containing this word as an insult, while 7.3% thought of it as endearment or praise. A substantial change was also seen for the word ‘cat’ (45.3%). In the pretest survey, 16.9% of respondents saw it as an insult and 83.1% endearment or praise, but in the posttest, 62.2% perceived it as an insult and 37.8% endearment or praise.¹²

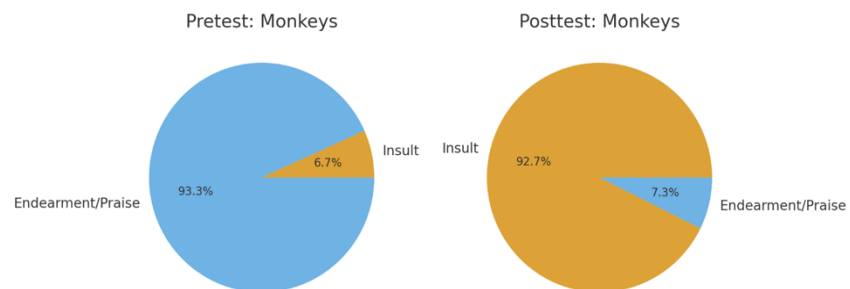


Figure 1. Perception Shift for ‘Monkeys’

Second, Reinforced Positive Perceptions. As for reinforced positive receptions, it can be seen that the word “bee” had a 16.0% decrease in insult perception. According to the pretest, 25.8% of participants perceived “bee” as an insult and 74.2% as endearment or praise. This was in marked contrast to the posttest where the number of respondents who perceived it as an insult dropped to 9.8% and the percentage of those who perceived it as endearment or praise went up to 90.2%. Meanwhile, as can be seen in Figure 2, the number of respondents who saw “puppy” as an insult decreased by 26.8%, where pretest results showed 57.3% considered it an insult and 42.7% saw it as endearment or praise. In the posttest analysis, 30.5% of respondents saw it as an insult and 69.5% as endearment or praise.¹³

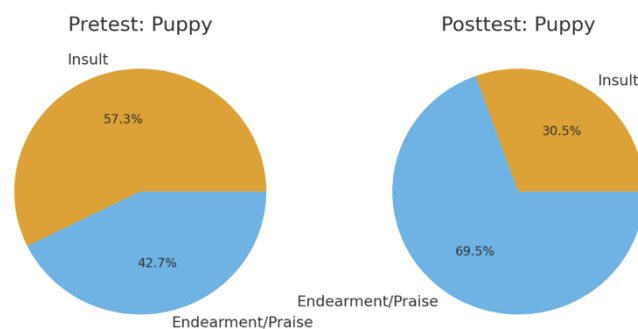


Figure 2. Perception Shift for ‘Puppy’

Third, Moderate Perception Adjustments. Some words only had moderate numbers of respondents reconsidering their answers. The word “sheep” showed a 21.4% increase in insult

¹⁰ Chung.

¹¹ Dewayanti and Margana.

¹² Leyi Qian, ‘Beyond Negation: “Not” as Evaluation and Speech-Act Trigger in Mandarin Chinese Negative Markers’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 187 (2022), 147–66 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.11.009>>.

¹³ Shuangshuang Lyu and Zhouyan Li, ‘A Comparative Analysis of Chinese and English Animal Idioms from Culture Perspective’, *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 10.6 (2020), 708 <<https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1006.12>>.



perception. Initially, 50.6% of participants considered it as insulting, while 49.4% as endearment or praise. In the posttest, these numbers changed to 72.0% having perceived it as an insult and 28.0% as endearment or praise. This pattern was similarly shown for “wolf” which saw a notable 17.5% increase in insult perception. Pretest results showed that 33.7% of respondents saw it as an insult and 66.3% endearment or praise. In the posttest, these numbers changed to 51.2% seeing it as an insult and 48.8% endearment or praise. Meanwhile, “lamb” showed an 18.2% decrease in insult perception. In the pretest, 71.9% of respondents saw it as an insult and 28.1% as endearment or praise. In the posttest, the numbers changed to 53.7% identifying it as an insult and 46.3% as endearment or praise. The word “piglet” also showed a similar result, making a 16.4% decrease in insult perception. Initial reactions from respondents showed that 94.4% classified it as an insult and 5.6% as endearment or praise. The posttest showed a significant number of respondents moderating their answer, with 78.0% identifying it as an insult and 22.0% as endearment or praise.¹⁴

Fourth, Stable High-Offense Categories. Where some words were concerned, the respondents were quite consistent in their reactions. The word “snail” showed a small increase in percentage (4.3%) in insult perception. In the pretest, 93.3% of respondents saw it as an insult while 6.7% considered it as endearment or praise. In the posttest, 97.6% saw it as an insult while 2.4% thought it was endearment or praise. Similarly, the word “shrimp” had a moderate increase of 7.1% in insult perception. The pretest showed that 83.1% of respondents thought that it as an insult and 16.9% saw it as endearment or praise. However, in the posttest, 90.2% saw it as an insult and 9.8% as endearment or praise.¹⁵

Fifth, Minimal Change Categories. Some words had only minimal changes, such as the word “mule” which experienced a 1.3% increase in insult perception. The majority of respondents held the conviction that this word would form an insult (86.5%) while only 13.5% saw it as endearment or praise. In the posttest, the number of respondents who saw it as an insult increased to 87.8% and those who thought of it as an endearment decreased to only 12.2%, as shown in Figure 3. Meanwhile, the word “chameleon” saw a slight decrease of 12.3% in terms of perceived insult. In the pretest, 56.2% of respondents identified it as an insult and 43.8% as endearment or praise. In the posttest, 43.9% thought of it as an insult, with 56.1% seeing it as endearment or praise.

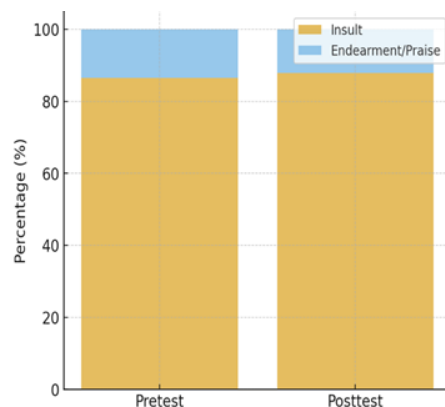


Figure 3. Perception Stability for ‘Mule’



¹⁴ Chairil Effendy and others, ‘Fauna Lexicon In Malay Proverbs: Revealing The Symbolic Meaning In The Malay Community of Sambas’, in *Proceedings of the 2nd Biennial International Conference on Safe Community, B-ICSC 2022, 20-21 September 2022, Bandar Lampung, Lampung, Indonesia* (EAI, 2023) <<https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.20-9-2022.2334189>>.

¹⁵ Zi Hong Yong and Zi Xian Yong, ‘A Cross-Cultural Comparison Of Chinese And Malay Animal Words’, *International Journal of Modern Education*, 5.17 (2023), 21–31 <<https://doi.org/10.35631/IJMOE.517003>>.



Sixth, Statistical Summary of Changes.

Table 1. Statistical Summary of Changes

Category	Term	Pretest (% Insult)	Posttest (% Insult)	Net Change (PP)	Direction of Change
Dramatic Transformations	Monkeys	6.7	92.7	+86.0	Toward insult
	Cat	16.9	62.2	+45.3	Toward insult
Reinforced Positive Perceptions	Bee	25.8	9.8	-16.0	Toward endearment
	Puppy	57.3	30.5	-26.8	Toward endearment
Moderate Adjustments	Sheep	50.6	72.0	+21.4	Toward insult
	Wolf	33.7	51.2	+17.5	Toward insult
	Lamb	71.9	53.7	-18.2	Toward endearment
	Piglet	94.4	78.0	-16.4	Toward endearment
Stable High-Offense	Snail	93.3	97.6	+4.3	Toward insult
	Shrimp	83.1	90.2	+7.1	Toward insult
Minimal Change	Mule	86.5	87.8	+1.3	Toward insult
	Chameleon	56.2	43.9	-12.3	Toward endearment

An overview of these findings can be seen in Table 1 above which summarizes all pretest and posttest results. It shows the magnitude of change in percentage points as well as the direction of change for each idiom.

This input from the respondents is a clear illustration of how one's interpretation of animal idioms can be significantly influenced by one's cultural background and exposure to their use in the course of language-learning. It was only after learning the meaning of idioms such as "a copycat" and "cat got your tongue" that respondents who had previously thought of the word "cat" as positive began to view it in a more negative light. Religious sensitivity and cultural awareness can play a role in changing how offensiveness is perceived.¹⁶ Hall's High-Context vs. Low-Context Model states that meaning depends on shared cultural understanding rather than literal translation. If this model is applied to the observations from this study, one can see how idioms that refer to animals which are considered as taboo in Malay culture will be considered as highly insulting. As such, idiomatic expressions such as "work like a dog" or "pig out" sound disrespectful because animals like *anjing* (dog) and *babi* (pig) are taboo in Malay culture.¹⁷

This shows that idioms express national values and moral associations.¹⁸ However, certain animals, such as "snail" and "shrimp", seem to enjoy a common notoriety and the respondents' opinions exhibit a marked reluctance to the changing of opinions where these animals are concerned. All respondents in this study were bilingual, although their English proficiency was of varied degrees. Still, all respondents exhibited an active interest in learning a new culture, where their explanations of words perceived as "rude" (the above-mentioned taboo words) were couched in guarded terms, in an effort to maintain politeness. In part, their reactions support the view that effective communication demands empathy and pragmatic awareness. At the end of the day, idiomatic expressions in general, and animal-related idioms in particular, all function not merely as wordplay but also as illustrations of cultural mores, where they reveal differing values, beliefs, and taboos.¹⁹ Understanding these idioms requires competent navigation into cross-cultural relations, where linguistic mastery must be balanced with cultural knowledge in order to ensure respectful and accurate communication in the English language.²⁰

¹⁶ Alarsan and Khan.

¹⁷ Mohd Ridzuan Md Nasir and Mary Fatimah Subet, 'Malay Proverbs in Inquisitive Semantics Approach Lens: The Case of Malaysian Textbooks', *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 13.2 (2023), 317–32 <<https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v13i2.63086>>.

¹⁸ Yong and Yong.

¹⁹ Zarifa Sadizade, 'Idiomatic Expressions and Their Impact on Lexical Competence', *Journal of Azerbaijan Language and Education Studies*, 2.1 (2025), 26–33 <<https://doi.org/10.69760/jales.2025001002>>.

²⁰ Anamari Irizarry Quintero and others, 'Idioms as a Tool for Enhancing Professional Competence and Cross-Cultural Communication', *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 2024 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/23294906241231762>>.



Conclusion

From this study, it can be seen that the use of animal idioms is deeply intertwined with cultural identity, religion, and social context. Learning the full idiomatic meaning of certain expressions transformed respondents' understanding of how a different culture portrayed these animals in their society. Apart from the marked differences between English-speaking and Malay-speaking cultures, this study also highlights the influence of Islamic values, where idioms featuring “*anjing*” (dog) and “*babi*” (pig) remain taboo. In Hall's High- and Low-Context Communication Model, this shows how meaning relies on shared assumptions rather than a direct equivalence. As for language education, current teaching approaches often require the learning of idioms through simple memorization, which regrettably neglects the cultural metaphoric basis. This research advocates contextual and story-based instruction that embeds idioms in narrative and real-life communication. Teachers should highlight cultural sensitivities, employ cross-cultural comparisons, and incorporate authentic materials to foster empathy and deeper learning. Learning idioms can be a fulfilling experience for students, but the cultural aspect should be a part of the lesson rather than being apart from it.

References

- Alarsan, Falah and Tariq Khan, 'Multi-Word Expressions in Jordanian Arabic: A Socio-Pragmatic Study of Idioms and Proverbs', *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 7 (2025), 260–77 <<https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i3.2151>>
- Chung, Dang Thi Kim, 'Challenges of Translating Idiomatic Expressions: A Cross-Linguistic Analysis at a University in Hanoi, Vietnam', *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, 07 (2024) <<https://doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v7-i10-39>>
- Dewayanti, Desakh Putu Setyalika Putri and Margana Margana, 'The Impact of Contextual Understanding on Neural Machine Translation Accuracy: A Case Study of Indonesian Cultural Idioms in English Translation', *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 12 (2024), 223 <<https://doi.org/10.22373/ej.v12i1.24433>>
- Effendy, Chairil, Dedy Asfar, Agus Syahrani, Utari Rahayu, Mellisa Jupitasari and Binar Febrianti, 'Fauna Lexicon In Malay Proverbs: Revealing The Symbolic Meaning In The Malay Community of Sambas', in *Proceedings of the 2nd Biennial International Conference on Safe Community, B-ICSC 2022, 20-21 September 2022, Bandar Lampung, Lampung, Indonesia* (EAI, 2023) <<https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.20-9-2022.2334189>>
- HE Jia, 'A Study of Translation Strategies of Animal Idioms Concerning “Dog” From a Cross-Cultural Perspective', *US-China Foreign Language*, 21 (2023) <<https://doi.org/10.17265/1539-8080/2023.12.007>>
- Irizarry Quintero, Anamari, Camille Villafañe-Rodríguez, Robyn Johnson and Linda Clarke, 'Idioms as a Tool for Enhancing Professional Competence and Cross-Cultural Communication', *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 2024 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/23294906241231762>>
- Kittler, Markus G, David Rygl and Alex Mackinnon, 'Special Review Article: Beyond Culture or beyond Control? Reviewing the Use of Hall's High-/Low-Context Concept', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 11 (2011), 63–82 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470595811398797>>
- Lyu, Shuangshuang and Zhouyan Li, 'A Comparative Analysis of Chinese and English Animal Idioms from Culture Perspective', *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 10 (2020), 708 <<https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1006.12>>
- Nasir, Mohd Ridzuan Md and Mary Fatimah Subet, 'Malay Proverbs in Inquisitive Semantics Approach Lens: The Case of Malaysian Textbooks', *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 13 (2023), 317–32 <<https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v13i2.63086>>
- Qian, Leyi, 'Beyond Negation: “Not” as Evaluation and Speech-Act Trigger in Mandarin Chinese Negative Markers', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 187 (2022), 147–66 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.11.009>>
- Sadiqzade, Zarifa, 'Idiomatic Expressions and Their Impact on Lexical Competence', *Journal of Azerbaijan Language and Education Studies*, 2 (2025), 26–33 <<https://doi.org/10.69760/jales.2025001002>>
- Sahadevan, Pavol and Mukthy Sumangala, 'Effective Cross-Cultural Communication for



International Business', *Shanlax International Journal of Management*, 8 (2021), 24–33
<<https://doi.org/10.34293/management.v8i4.3813>>

Xiang, Zhimin, 'A Cognitive Metaphoric Study of English Animal Idioms', in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Humanities (ICCESSH 2017)* (Paris, France: Atlantis Press, 2017) <<https://doi.org/10.2991/iccessh-17.2017.140>>

Yong, Zi Hong and Zi Xian Yong, 'A Cross-Cultural Comparison Of Chinese And Malay Animal Words', *International Journal of Modern Education*, 5 (2023), 21–31
<<https://doi.org/10.35631/IJMEOE.517003>>

ZHANG, Li and Shan-shan LI, 'The Translation of English Animal Idioms from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication', *DEStech Transactions on Social Science, Education and Human Science*, 2017 <<https://doi.org/10.12783/dtssehs/semi2016/5414>>

