

A Study on Color Words between Chinese and English from the Perspective of Cross Culture

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Abstract

Color words are expressive language with profound culture meanings. Although the understanding and feelings to color words between Chinese and English people are much alike, the symbols and implied meanings of color words to the different nations are different because of their different customs, ways of thinking and religious beliefs. Therefore, it is of practical significance to know the differences between English and Chinese color words and their extended meanings for developing translation practice and promoting Chinese and English cultural communication.

Key words: color words, cultural differences, translation, intercultural communication.

Introduction

In Chinese and English languages, the words and phrases of different colors are very abundant. Colors may convey different messages to people of different cultures. Due to the respective cultural background and tradition, some phrases containing color words have far surpassed their original meanings. Besides, the various connotations of colors possess an important position in the intercultural communication in the modern world. The connotation of the colors is not only an important tool for intercultural communication, but also an important cultural and prominent component of the relationship between the cultural content, cultural form, between the interdependence and interaction. This thesis provides a large number of examples to illustrate the cultural connotations of the basic color words: red, white and black. It can help the readers know their cultural connotations clearly in English and Chinese, and appreciate the psychological differences so as to reduce the difficulties in intercultural communication.

1. Red Color

1.1 Red Color in Chinese Culture

In China, the red color is our country's basic cultural color which symbolizes good fortune, jubilation. The color of red has the meaning of good luck or something that goes smoothly. At the opening of a business or the opening ceremony of a fair, red ribbons are cut because they are thought to bring good fortune and success. 开门红“have a good start” symbolizes good fortune, 红运“good luck”, are both good examples. In the wedding ceremony, birthday party and some special days, people will use something red to add happiness. So the color of red in Chinese is the symbol of happy, lucky and joy. The red also conveys popularity, such as 大红大紫, 红人, 走红 which means a good business.

What's more, in ancient China, red is a graceful color, symbolizing wealth and high social position. In archaic Chinese buildings, columns, doors, windows and other structural components of palaces, temples and noble houses are painted in red. In addition, nobles, high officials and rich people are dressed in red and color of red can express psychological states, such as 满面红光“radiant with happiness”, 面色红润“in very good health”, and so on.

However, the derogatory meaning of red is also very important. It means danger, deficit and warning. Red is also the color of fire, blood and war, thus red means dangerous, such as the red light in traffic regulations serves as a sign reminding and warning drivers to stop.

1.2 Red Color in Western Culture

In American history, red is not a very good word. It is associated with the “fire”, “blood” which symbolizes cruelty, war, violence, revolution. Some Westerners take “red” as an evil omen or red for danger, stemming from the spirits of bullfighters. So the red flag that bullfighters use to provoke bulls is considered annoying.

Furthermore, red also symbolizes danger and alarm, such as, the red alert(alarming in emergency); the red adventurous story (a risky story); the red flag (the dangerous signal); have red hands(commit a murder); red ideas(revolutionary concepts); red ruin(fire, as a disaster); in the red(in debt) ; red ink(deficit); see red(be full of anger). It still symbolizes the dissipated action, such as the red waste of his youth (he wasted youth because of his dissipated action); the red light district (the place where the hookers induce the people).

2. White Color

2.1 White Color in Chinese Culture

In Chinese culture, white is contrary to red. In ancient China, no matter how low an official ranked, his robe was colored. White had never been the color of official robes because of the customary practice of taking white as the color of mourning dress. Consequently, white becomes the symbol of death. Besides, White means the aged in Chinese. Thus in Chinese, 白发“gray hair” means the elderly. 苍白“pale”, means this person may be anxious, sad, frightened or irritated. And 白眼 is an indication of contempt.

However, white in China also has the commendatory meaning. White is associated with light, goodness, innocence, purity, and peace. Ancient Chinese people believe that the white-feathered animals, such as 白鹿, 白鹤, 白天鹅, and the Chinese expressions 清白无辜 and 洁白无暇 are explicitly related to innocence and purity.

2.2 White Color in Western Culture

In the opinion of westerners, white symbolizes happiness and brightness. In western countries, wedding is called white wedding, in which the bride wears white wedding robe and white sheer, the cakes and cookies are covered with a layer of white sugar, and the invitation card is printed in white silver letters. And in Christianity, white is the most sanctified color. The priests wear white robes, symbolizing spirit and brightness. A famous saying by Ralph Waldo Emerson: “The grey past, the white future”. And there are more examples about the commendatory meaning of white, such as, white knight”, which means the winner of the politician or the business; “white lie” means the lie of goodwill which is said not to make people embarrassed; “a white day” (a lucky day); “days marked with a white stone” means the happydays of one’s life.

Nevertheless, white also has the derogatory connotation in western cultures. Such as, white feather, it means the fright and the timid, this meaning is traced back to the cockfight game in ancient times. Because the Westerners think that the cock with white feathers at its tail is not brave and timid ones, afterwards, this meaning is used widely and accepted widely. Such as: “white flag” is the symbol of failure or surrender; “white trash” is used to despise the poor white people. All of these examples are the derogatory connotation of white in Western countries.

3. Black Color

3.1 Black Color in Chinese Culture

In China, black denotes nobility, uprightness and impartiality which is considered to be a very formal, elegant, and prestigious color. In ancient China, the color of black was greatly admired. 细衣, which is made by black silk, was put on when the ministers were having an audience with the emperor. Now, black becomes the holiest color in Chinese color outlook. In the types of facial makeup in operas, black face usually represents the noble characters as uprightness, selflessness of some historic figures. Such as, 铁面无私 is used to describe an impartial person. Therefore, black usually symbolizes impartiality, unselfishness, and justice.

Besides, black stands for the evil omen in China’s traditional culture and implies gloom, disgrace, misfortune, extreme anger, etc. In the book *The Records of The Historian*, the black color is connected with the person of the lowest social status or the foolish people. In modern China, the derivatives of the black is always connected with the disaster, adversity, the black color has the reactionary connotation in China’s mainland .It often refers to the evil gang or some offenders and criminals. If we do not know this connotation during intercultural communication, it will cause trouble and obstacle.

3.2 Black Color in Western Culture

In western culture, the black color is the sign of the darkness. In the Bible, the black stands for the devil, the evil, the pain and the misfortune. English phrases like “black market”(黑市), “blacklist”(黑名单), “black hand”(黑手党) show that black is related to the feature of the bad and the evil. “A black sheep” refers to that member in a group who is thought to be a disgrace to other members. “A black lie” means a lie, which is full of evil intentions. The ballet opera Swan Lake, the black swan is the symbol of viciousness, deception and hatred.

However, the most distinct example about the commendatory meaning of black is shown by the black people in America. In the past time, the black slaves which were cadged to America are called Negro. With the success of the battle of antiracism, the black people choose the word “black” to stand for themselves. “Black is beautiful” has become the modern slogan. And in the black’s culture, all kinds of things which are related to the black people have get the “black” word. Such as: “Black- English”.

4. Color Words Translation

Both in Chinese and English languages, color words are particularly rich in cultural associations. Different languages use different color words to describe the same phenomenon, which hider us from translating English and Chinese color words properly. So when we translate color words, we are required to translate it not just in the pursuit of full reciprocity in form, but also pragmatic equivalence and accurate translation. From the practical experience of many translators, the translation of color terms has the following four ways:

4.1 To preserve color of the translation

Since English and Chinese languages have the similar associative meaning, which provides the foundation for translation. For example:

(1)O my love is like a red, red rose, that’s newly sprung in June.(Robert Burns)

啊，我的爱人像朵红红的玫瑰，在六月里迎风绽放（田乃钊译）

(2)这是一个身材高大，长头发，眼睛白多黑少的人。（鲁迅：《范爱农》）

The speaker was a tall, burly fellow with long hair and more white than black to his eyes.

4.2 To transform the images of domestication

As is noted above, the color words tend to have profound cultural connotation both from literal and extended associative meanings. Generally speaking, only native speakers can quickly access from the literal meaning of the color to associative meaning. This ability is established by his own deep understanding of national cultural traditions, especially once color words are translated into another language, the target audience will follow their national cultural traditions of the target language. Therefore, the translators must depend on cultural differences and the target language so as to adjust readers’ psychology and make aesthetic expressions.

(1) My finger was caught in crack of the door and got pinched black and blue.

我的手指夹在门缝里，压的又轻又紫。

(2) He is green with envy at seeing some people get rich.

看着有些人富起来，他就眼红。

4.3 To transfer the image interpretation

To enrich the national language, but also to maintain the original flavor of exotic, sometimes we need color words in the translation of the primitive image of the transplant, and then explain its associative meaning.

(1) White goods consume 80 percent of the electricity in his apartment.

他家里的白色家电，消耗的电量占到 80%。

(2) 在他们分别的前一天，他送给她一颗红豆。

On the day before their departure, he gave her a red bean, which is a token of their love and remembrance.

If the translator did not explain what is “白色家电”，then readers would feel confused. This is also true of “a red bean”，or readers wouldn't understand its deep meaning to express missing.

4.4. To abandon the image of the free translation

At times, the source language and target language have great cultural differences in the translation, so we have to make great efforts to explain. In this way, it is easy to make the translation become trivial, and interrupt readers' aesthetic minds. Therefore, we may choose to discard the color of the source language. For example:

(1) In America political elections the candidates that win are usually the ones who have green power backing them.

在美国竞选的中获胜的候选人通常都是有财团支持的人。

(2) 我们不允许他们给我们的国家脸上抹黑。

We are not going to let them bring shame on our country.

Since culture influences language and language in turn reflects culture, the transmission of cultural elements in cross-cultural translation is an obligatory task. Besides, from those Chinese and English cultural discrepancies, we can understand why and how these two peoples think in different ways and endow color words with different connotations, which we should take into consideration when rendering them

Conclusion

In a nutshell, having studied so much in color words, we can see the influence of social culture on color words in deep-rooted. Due to the different cultural background, social customs and religion, there is an abundant of cultural connotation in the color words between Chinese and English language. Furthermore, Different environments often cause different usage and understanding of the color words, endowing them with cultural features of a nation. Thus, the color words and phrases play an

indispensable and important role in the intercultural communication. If we do not understand these words and the phases with which constitute the social customs and cultural backgrounds, it is difficult to understand their cultural connotations, and the communication will cause ambiguity.

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