

Black in English and “黑” in Chinese: A cognitive approach

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Abstract:

This paper takes the colour word "black" in English and Chinese as the object of study, and gets to make a comparative study of the similarities and differences between them from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. Based on the corpus in English-Chinese dictionary, this paper explores the development of lexical meanings by means of literature research and qualitative analysis. The author first sorted out the colour words in English and Chinese according to the meanings in the dictionary, then deduced the development process of the meaning according to the law of the meaning development, and finally compared the similarities and differences of the colour words "black" in English and Chinese. Through comparative study, it is found that: 1) the prototype meanings of "Black" and "黑" are basically the same; 2) there is incomplete coincidence in the polysemous terms of the two; and 3) there are defaults in the polysemous terms of the two. Hope to be able to reduce misunderstandings in English-Chinese communication through the study.

Key words: colour words; "black"; cognitive linguistics

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Colour is a natural phenomenon, and its related language vocabulary and semantics are common to different languages. The semantic orientation of colour is one of the most basic cognitive categories of human beings. Cognitive linguist Langacker believes that the colour domain is one of the most basic cognitive domains in language (Langacker, 1987:150-154), just like the temporal domain, spatial domain and emotional domain. As the sensory words reflecting the colour domain, colour words are an important part of the vocabulary. Cognitive linguistics emphasizes that word meaning is dynamic rather than static. When human beings express and interpret the concepts and meanings of other categories by means of thinking and cognition, the lexical meanings of colour words are no longer their prototype meanings, but other meanings evolved through metaphor or metonymy on the basis of their prototype meanings, that is, other polysemous items (Jiao Ziheng, 2014).

The association and use of colour words in different cultures have distinct national cultural characteristics (Qian Cen, 2012). Because colours are everywhere around us, especially black, which is the most common colour to be seen. Even if you close your eyes, you can find it. Different national cultures endow colour words with different connotations, and internalize them into an important part of their own national cultures. Taking the Chinese colour word "黑" and the English colour word "black" as examples, this paper tries to analyse the generating rules of the polysemy of the Chinese and English colour words, and find out their own unique meanings under the two cultural backgrounds.

1.2 Research Objectives

There are two research objectives of this topic. One is to find out the process of the development from monosemy to polysemy and the means of how they have developed. The other is to find out the similarities and differences between "black" and "黑".

1.3 Research Significance

English is the most widely used language in the world, while Chinese is the most widely used language in the world. In the process of communication, the differences between languages and cultures often lead to many misunderstandings, among which colour words cannot be ignored. The difference here refers to the differences in the extended meanings of words. Black is one of the most common colours in daily life, so it is used as a starting point to study the differences of colour words between Chinese and English cultures. Finally, by studying this phenomenon, we hope to be able to have a clearer understanding of colour words and reduce the friction in communication.

2. Theories Related

2.1 What is Cognitive Linguistics?

Cognitive linguistics was born in the late 1970s and made great progress in the 1980s and 1990s. Since Dirven organized the first forum of cognitive linguistics in Duisburg, Germany, in the spring of 1989, countless congresses have been held. Scholars have different opinions on the definition of it, so it does not have a rigorous and complete definition yet. According to professor Wang Yin (2011), cognitive linguistics is a discipline that adheres to the philosophy of experience, takes body experience and cognition as the starting point, conceptual structure and meaning structure as the centre, and strives to seek the cognitive mode behind the linguistic facts, and makes a unified interpretation of language through cognitive mode and knowledge structure.

2.2 What Does Semantic Change Involve?

2.2.1 Metaphor and Metonymy

"When our ancestors recognized and named new things, they often first grasped the visual image (such as shape and colour) that directly acted on human sense organs. And it is processed into "image of metonymy", and then by means of metonymy, metaphor and others, they are incorporated into their own language world, thus serving as the motivation for creating new words." Metaphor is the way to transform unknown things into known terms for transmission. For example, "All the world is a stage, and all the men and women are merely players (William Shakespeare)". Metonymy is the use of a part or a factor of something to represent its whole. When one thing contains another, it can frequently be used metonymically, as when "dish" is used to refer not to a plate but to the food it contains, or as when the name of a building is used to refer to the entity it contains, as when "the White House" or "the Pentagon" are used to refer to the U.S. presidential staff or the military leadership, respectively. According to Roman Jakobson (1956), metonymy and metaphor are two basic modes of meaning transmission.

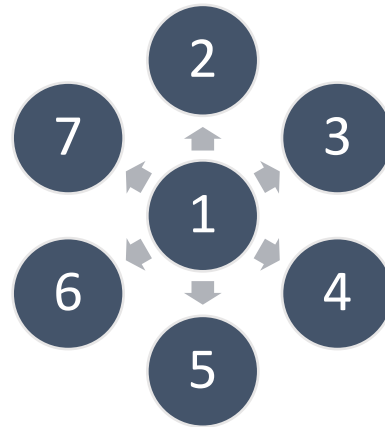
2.2.2 Radiation and Concatenation

Semantic development from monosemy to polysemy mainly follows two forms, one is radiation theory proposed by Lakoff (1987), the other is concatenation theory proposed by Taylor (2001). Lakoff's Radiation theory refers to a semantic process in which the primary meaning stands at the centre and the secondary meaning proceed out of it in every direction like rays. The meanings are independent of one another, but can all be traced back to the central meaning. Taking "face" as an example, the original meaning stands at the centre, and

the other meanings distribute separately around the primary one. Each of them was developed from the central meaning, but they are independent.

e.g. **Face**

1. Front part of the head;
2. Outward appearance;
3. The principal sight of surface of anything;
4. The front of a building;
5. A cliff;
6. A marked side of a playing card;
7. The front side of a watch.



Taylor's Concatenation theory refers to the semantic process in which the meaning of a word moves gradually away from its first signification by successive shifts of meanings until, in any cases there is not a shadow of connection between the sense that is finally developed and the sense which it had at the beginning of its use. Taking "treacle" as an example, its semantic process is like a string. The meaning at the end of the string seems to have nothing to do with the meaning at the beginning.

e.g. **Treacle**

1. Wild beast;
2. Remedy for bites of venomous beasts;
3. Antidote for poison or remedy for poison;
4. Any effective remedy;
5. Molasses



Radiation and concatenation are closely related, being different stages of the development leading to polysemy. However, the evolution of word meaning is very complex. Generally, radiation precedes concatenation. In many cases, the two processes work together, complementing each other.

3. Data Collection

This chapter is the most important part of the thesis, in this chapter, the author will show the results in graphs respectively. The data were collected from *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* mostly, and the rest of them were from other thesis or journalism. For the dictionary part, the author first searched for the words that contain “black” and “黑”, then put them into the computer. Next is to classify the words according to their meanings. The author continued to look for information from other thesis, and add them to the results collected before.

3.1 Phrases with Black

In order to get a clear mind of “black” terms, the author collected every word that contains “black” and “黑” in the dictionary. The types and examples of English colour word “black” are shown below.

Type	Example
A. The colour of ink or coal	Black board
B. Black people	Black Power Movement
C. Disease	Black death
D. Geographic position	The Black Sea
E. Astronomical phenomena	Black hole
F. Occupation	Black Smith
G. To have a surplus	To be in the black
H. Opposite of white	In black and white
I. To refuse	Blackball
J. Very dirty, shameful	Black mark
K. Bruised	Black and blue
L. Angry	Turn black with rage
M. No light	Pitch-black
N. Ominous	Black Friday
O. Illegal	Black market
P. To infract	Blackmail
Q. Evil	Black hearted

The “black” has 17 types of different terms in English. Most of them are the extension of the first term. The English word "black" is interpreted as "the colour of ink or coal" in the dictionary *Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary* (2001:98). While writing on the paper with black-ink pen, it is called “write in black and white”. “Black coffee” refers to black coffee or

tea that does not have milk in it. “Black” is often linked to illegal business or criminals such as “black market” and “black guard”. “Black” also gives people a feeling of evil. For instance, “Black deeds” is used to describe the wicked and dishonourable actions or activities.

3.2 Phrases with 黑

The types and examples of Chinese colour word “黑” is shown below.

Type	Example
A. The colour of ink or coal	黑板
B. Black people	黑人
C. Disease	黑死病
D. Night	起早贪黑
E. Geographic position	黑龙江
F. Astronomical phenomena	黑洞
G. Opposite of white	白纸黑字 黑白分明
H. Very dirty	黑乎乎
I. Angry	黑着脸
J. Integrity	黑面包公
K. No light	黑灯瞎火
L. Ominous	印堂发黑
M. Illegal	黑市
N. To infract	黑客
O. Evil	黑心

Based on corpus, there are 15 types of “black” meanings in Chinese. Some of them are unique in Chinese culture. The theory of Yin and Yang is one of the representatives of ancient Chinese philosophy, which embodies the simple view of nature of ancient Chinese. In Tai Chi Yin-Yang Diagram, white represents Yang and black represents Yin. They are opposite and unified. So, they are often used to refer to right and wrong, such as “黑白分明” and “颠倒黑白”. In Go chess, the playing pieces are called "stones". One player uses the white stones and the other, black. So, "black" also refers to black chessman or players who use the black stones, such as “执黑先行” in Chinese. In “黑乎乎”, “黑” means dirty. It also gives human beings a feeling of hopeless, like “前途一片黑暗”.

The same as in English, “black” has the meaning of illegal, and has more words in Chinese. For example, “黑社会”, “黑车”, “黑户”. “Black” also reminds people of dark nights such as “黑夜”, “黑天白日”. Criminals like to do bad things at night, to steal others’

property. This kind of infraction is evil and even venomous sometimes. For example, “心黑手辣”, “黑爪”.

4. Major Findings

In this chapter, the author will compare the items from three perspectives. To get a clear view of the similarities and differences, the comparisons will be shown in graphs. In addition, the semantic development process will be shown in tree diagrams, which are deduced logically from the connections between the items. At last, detailed explanations will be given.

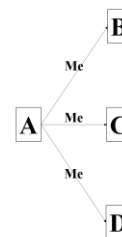
4.1 Comparison of Physical Function

When a word is used to refer to something related to space or time, it is called the physical function of language.

Type	English Example	Chinese Example
A. The colour of ink or coal	Black board	黑板
B. Night		起早贪黑
C. Geographic position	The Black Sea	黑龙江
D. Astronomical phenomena	Black hole	黑洞

The semantic process is shown in tree diagram below.

Similarities: Among these 4 types, 3 of whom have the same meanings, which shows relative consistency. This is mainly because they have the basically same original meaning. When “black” is



M: Metaphor
Me: Metonymy

used to represent a geographic position, it usually has nothing to do with its original meaning. A place was named according to some historical events or traditions. As for the “black hole”, it is not black and not a hole. It has no colour at all, because the light cannot escape from it, so that it cannot reflect. That means it is invisible to human eyes but it does exist.

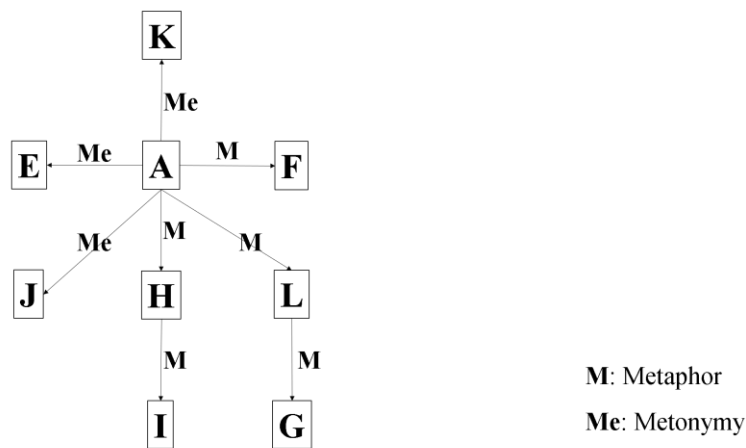
Differences: As the original meaning, “black” is not used the same way in different cultures. For example, “black tea” is interpreted as “红茶” in Chinese. Furthermore, it doesn’t appear frequently as “dark” in English, it hardly ever refer to “night”. On contrast, it is often used to represent “night” in Chinese.

4.2 Comparison of Social Function.

The social function of a language is associated with human society relations.

Type	English Example	Chinese Example
E. Occupation	Black smith	
F. Very dirty, shameful	Black sheep	黑榜
G. Ominous	Black Friday	印堂发黑
H. Illegal	Black market	黑市
I. Evil	Black hearted	黑心
J. Integrity		黑面包公
K. Black people	Black Muslim	黑人
L. Disease	Black death	黑死病

The results are put into the diagram below according to their connection.



Similarities: The black colour gives human beings a feeling of dirty. For instance, “black water” refers to the polluted water. “Black mark” not only refers to the blot on clothes or somewhere else, but also a record of something shameful that has been done. And “black sheep” means someone who is regarded by other members of their family or group as a failure or embarrassment. One point to note is that “害群之马” in Chinese expresses the same meaning by using “horse” as the image instead of “sheep”. “Black” is also associated with something ominous. For example, in western countries, "Black Friday" refers to catastrophic and unlucky days. Because it was in Black Friday that Jesus Christ died. Moreover, “black humour” that emerged in the 1960s expresses the hopelessness of the real world by making jokes about serious subjects, especially death. Then it is not hard to explain why the “black box” is orange instead. And in China, people wear white and black clothes to pay respect to their ancestors or relatives in funerals. So “黑” is always associated with death

(Yang Xuemei, 2018). For those who believe in superstition, “印堂发黑” means bad things are going to happen. Since the 1960s, with the development of the struggle against racial discrimination, "black" has gradually replaced "Negro" to refer to black people. Black has become a proud colour for blacks, who believe that "Black is beautiful". At this time, "black" has no longer been marked derogatory, but has the meaning of neutrality and even praise. Later, with the rise of the American human rights movement, "black" was no longer used to refer to blacks, but to people with dark skin, and some words with positive meanings began to appear. For example, “Black Muslim”, “Black Nationalism”, “Black Power Movement”, “Black Studies”, “work like a black” and so on.

Differences: Smith means craftsman in old English, and black is the colour of iron, so blacksmith refers to the craftsman who forges with the irons. It seems to be hard to find a word in Chinese that contains “黑” with a positive meaning. It is absolutely wrong. In ancient China, the emperors wore black suits to attend big ceremonies. In Peking Opera, the role of black face is often the embodiment of justice, such as Bao Zheng.

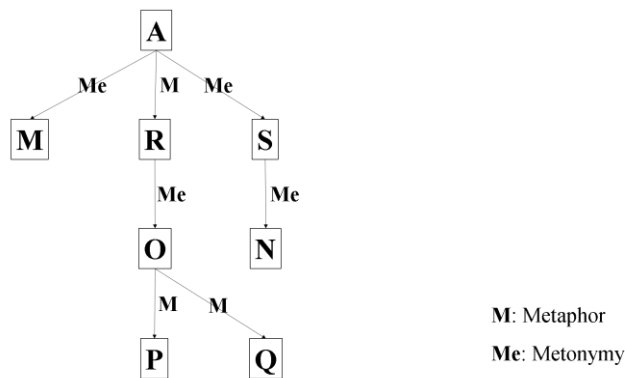
4.3 Comparison of Language Function

When a word is used as a part to combine a sentence linguistically, it is called the language function of a language.

Type	English Example	Chinese Example
M. To have a surplus	To be in the black	
N. To refuse	Blackball	
O. To infract	Blackmail	黑客
P. Bruised	Black and blue To black someone's eye	
Q. Angry	Turn black with rage	黑着脸
R. No light	Pitch-black Black out	黑灯瞎火
S. Opposite of white	In black and white With a clear distinction between black and white	白纸黑字 黑白分明

To understand better, types mentioned above are shown in the diagram.

Similarities: When black is put with one's facial expression, it is to say that he is full of feelings of anger and hate, like “turn black with rage”, which equals to “黑着脸” in Chinese. The black colour always reminds people of darkness. For example, “pitch-black” and “黑灯瞎火”.



Differences: In business English, it expresses a positive meaning. Black and red are the colours of the ink used for bookkeeping, “to be in the black” or “black figure” refers to have a surplus or a favourable balance (Wu Peijuan, 2011). There was a time in history when balls were cast in the box by members in the union to vote in order to decide whether to allow new members to join the organization or whether to expel a member from the organization. The white ball is in favour and the “black ball” is in opposition. Talking about “blackmail”, people may come up with an image of a black envelope, but actually, it derives from the old practice of a pirate tribe. Pirates bully people in the countryside by threatening the Scottish farmers to pay money for protection. If they do not provide it, the pirates will steal their crops and livestock. Mail has the meaning of deposit or margin in Old English. Black means that the crime is evil, or that the protection money is paid in cattle, which are different from silver coin. With the development of the information age, the word “黑客” has appeared, but in fact it was transliterated from the English word “hacker”. When one is hit, there will be bruises on his skin, which is called “black and blue”. When it is used as a verb, it means that to beat someone hard, like “to black someone’s eye”. “Black out” not only means a period of darkness but also a situation in which particular pieces of news or information are not allowed to be reported, such as “news blackout”. In addition, when we say someone has a blackout, it means they suddenly become unconscious. At last, the most important thing to be mentioned is that objectives can follow “黑” directly, but cannot in English.

5. Conclusion

Taking Chinese "black" and English "black" as examples, this paper explores the similarities and differences of their polysemous terms. It can be found that the English and Chinese colour words "black" have the same basic meaning and the cognitive path can be followed regularly, an evidence of the phenomenon of semantic overlap (Bai Hong, 2012).

However, the differences between the two cultures lead to their incomplete consistency, which is the asymmetry or default of the meanings in another language. These terms have distinct cultural characteristics of their respective nationalities. Meanwhile, the polysemous terms of "黑" and "black" have different or even opposite meanings, which is mainly due to the differences in cognitive psychology of different nationalities. Language, as a carrier of culture, is inevitably influenced by human cognitive differences, which proves the phenomenon of semantic mismatch. The generality of human civilization is embodied in the characteristics of different nationalities. In a cognitive linguistic approach to study the similarities and differences of polysemy between English and Chinese colour words is conducive to promoting the communication of the two cultures.

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