

Cultural Semantic Comparison between Chinese and English on Color Word “Yellow”

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Abstract: This paper makes a comparative analysis of Chinese and English color words from the perspective of cultural semantics, and mainly discusses the similarities and differences of the cultural semantics of “red” and “yellow” in Chinese and English.

Language, as a symbol system to record culture, is an integral part of culture. As an important part of language, vocabulary can always show cultural characteristics, such as animal vocabulary. Influenced by different times, regions, nations and cultures, colors have different meanings and associations in people’s minds, which endows colors with inner social and cultural meanings. This paper also discusses the reasons why color words are not used in Chinese and English culture.

Keywords: Cultural semantics; Color; National culture

1. Literature Review

Since 1960s, despite the emergence of cross-cultural communication (America), language and national conditions (former Soviet Union), cultural linguistics (China) and other new interdisciplinary subjects, the research contents have their own emphases. However, up to now, these three disciplines have sufficient knowledge, but their theoretical expressions are still imperfect. There is also a lack of systematic theoretical analysis and regular operation methods for the irrational meaning of vocabulary and the influence of cultural factors on semantic morpheme.

Humboldt pointed out that every language always describes the things around its own nation, and only when people enter another circle can they go beyond this circle and boundary. (Кодухов, 1987) Luo Changpei (1999) also pointed out in Language and Culture that language is not isolated but connected with many aspects. People and social phenomena cannot be isolated from other phenomena but exist or develop in isolation. Therefore, the study of linguistics must not be confined to the data of language itself but must connect linguistic phenomena with other social phenomena and consciousness.” Wu Guohua (1997) pointed out that cultural semantics is a branch of cultural linguistics, which focus on systematically discussing the national cultural semantic features of words and the formal analysis means of irrational meanings restricted by national culture. From the perspective of semiotics and naming semantics, it studies the influence of cultural factors on semantic morpheme. Through the comparison between the two languages, it reveals the semantic categories of cultural functions of vocabulary and the semantic types of national culture (such as cultural synonymy and cultural antonymy).

Word meaning originates from objective reality and is a reflection of objective reality. Anna Wierzbicka. (1992) pointed out that “language doesn’t reflect the world directly. It reflects human conceptualization, human interpretation of the world.”^[1] Wu Guohua (1997) pointed out that word meaning is the result of people’s thinking activities, which contains the understanding and attitude of the language nation towards objective reality.^[2] It is not only restricted by the society in the process of its formation, but also evolves with the deepening of social practice and people’s understanding. Therefore, the semantic content of words has multiple levels. The original meaning of a word can be justified or unreasonable. But the escape of words is always justified, and its meaning is derived from its original meaning. The emergence of irrational meaning of vocabulary and its transformation to new rational meaning are subject to many cultural factors of the language nation, which can only be analyzed on the secondary symbolic system of language. The revelation of the semantic and irrational meaning of vocabulary national culture cannot be separated from the specific cultural background (taking a culture as a frame of reference). Б.Г.Гак(1983) held that the comparative study of languages aims at revealing

the similarities and differences between languages, whether related or not. “

2. Cultural semantic comparison between Chinese and English on color

“Red” and “red” are literally the same, which means “the color of blood or fire”, but their cultural semantics are not completely the same.

In China, “Red” is one of the most popular colors of the Chinese nation. The meaning of this word is mostly positive. “Red” is a bright color. People can associate it with the sun and fire, so people use “Red” to symbolize happiness and warmth. (Zhou & Li, 2008, Red Words in Chinese vocabulary and their cultural meanings, para2)^[3], “Red” has been used to reflect the atmosphere of happy events in festivals and weddings, from clothing and utensils to colored lights. For example, during the Spring Festival, people put red couplets and blessings outside the doors, red window grilles on the windows, red lanterns hanging at the doors, and so on. The Han nationality regards “Red” as a symbol of “joy, beauty and good fortune”. In Chinese, women’s costumes are often called “Red Make-up”, and “Pretty girl” refers to beauty or beautiful appearance. “Red” often symbolizes loyalty, bravery, perseverance and frankness in Chinese drama facial makeup art. Historical figures such as Guan Yu, who are famous for their loyalty and bravery, often have “Red Face”. (Zhou & Li, 2008, Red Words in Chinese vocabulary and their cultural meanings, para7) ^[4]“Red” can also remind people of the color of blood and war. In China, “Red” is often used to represent the party and revolutionary struggle. Such as “Red Army”, “Red Flag”, “The red stronghold”, etc., symbolize the unyielding spirit of the people fighting for the victory of revolutionary struggle and national liberation. “Red” also means smooth and successful, symbolizing welcome. For example, “Go Viral” and “Sing red”. From the meanings of success and popularity, there are also the meanings of envy and jealousy, such as “Green with envy”. (Zhou & Li, 2008, Red Words in Chinese vocabulary and their cultural meanings, para8) ^[5]

Chinese worship and love red. On the contrary, Westerners generally hate red. Red is associated with violence and bloodshed in English. “Red revenge” refers to bloody revenge, “the red claw” refers to violent rule, and “red activities” refers to leftist radical movement. “As in Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne wears a white robe embroidered with the red word “A”, which symbolizes “Adultery”. (Li & Yan, 2007, “Typical features and change dimensions”, para3)^[6] Red is not used when celebrating festivals and weddings in the West. The bride usually wears a white wedding dress, and the groom wears a black suit. However, in ancient China, people usually wore white clothes at funerals.

In western culture, red also symbolizes vulgarity and violence. For example, “go to the red” means beginning to owe money, and “red-necked” describes vulgar peasant. In English, “red flag” means a dangerous signal or a flag of rebellion, while in Chinese, “red flag” means advanced. “David Hawks, an English turned-over, translated the title of “《Dream of the Red Chamber》” into *The Story of the Stone*”, and he also translated “Jia Baoyu” into “green boy”. All of which show that the translator has paid great attention to the cultural semantic differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Although Hawks’ translation was very authentic, he ignored China’s national cultural personality and ignored the heavy historical accumulation and rich cultural connotation behind red. “ (Yang, 2005, p333)

Red is not only derogatory but can also be positive in the west. For example, red, white and green are the colors of Christmas. Santa Claus wears a red robe and a red hat. Reindeer with red nose pulls the sled. Children hang red socks on the bedside. Here red symbolizes light and warmth. In addition to communist countries, the national flags of many western countries (such as the United States, France, etc.) also use red.

3. Reason Analysis

Language is a rational instinct of human beings. In any language, there is common rational instinct of human beings and different national cultural personalities. The commonality of thinking leads different ethnic groups to communicate with each other, while cultural differences prevent them from understanding each other smoothly. Regarding the personality of each specific nation, take yellow as an example. On the one hand, yellow has a strong sense of light and gives people a bright and brilliant association; On the other hand, yellow has the characteristics of short wavelength and lightness, thus giving people the association of decline. These associations become the metaphorical meaning of yellow. British and American people use blue to symbolize kingship and nobility, because Britain is surrounded by the sea, forming people’s worship of the sea. Chinese people use yellow as a symbol of kingship and nobility, which originated from the cradle of the ancestors of Central China-Yellow River Basin and Loess civilization. Chinese civilization is a kind of agricultural civilization originated from inland, and the philosophy of the unity of nature and man breeds the value of collectivism of the Chinese nation. Chinese descendants attach importance to harmony and cooperation and emphasize responsibility and obligation. Chinese people living in collectivism culture are conservative and introverted, and like high-context communication. On the contrary, western civilization is a commercial civilization originated from the sea, and the philosophy of dichotomy between

subject and object breeds the values of western national individualism, which attaches importance to dissent and competition, and emphasizes power and freedom. Westerners living in individualistic culture are bold and extroverted, like low-context communication, and often speak straightforwardly and openly.

It is the different preferences and concerns of Chinese and Western cultures on man and nature. Therefore, when we make a comparative study between English and Chinese, we should link the linguistic sign system itself, the cognitive function of linguistic signs, the common rationality and thinking ability of human beings and the individuality of different national cultures. In this way, we can better understand the commonness and individuality of different languages, and then understand the essential attributes and operation rules of languages, reduce the obstacles of cultural differences to communication, and promote cultural exchanges between China and the West.

4. Conclusion

As an important part of culture, language's vocabulary system must record or imply the natural or social environment of language's emergence or development. Colors have different meanings and associations in people's minds, which endows color with inherent social and cultural significance. The connection between color, subject and object gives color words a strong humanistic color. To understand the different cultural meanings of colors in the two languages, this paper analyzes the different cultural meanings of "red" and "yellow" in Chinese and English and discusses the reasons for the different meanings. We should link the linguistic sign system itself, the cognitive function of linguistic signs, the common rationality and thinking ability of human beings and the individuality of different national cultures when we make a comparative study between English and Chinese.

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