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On the Cultural Differences of Color Words between China and Western countries and Translating Strategies

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Abstract
Due to the differences of cultures, environment, and religious beliefs between China and Western countries, Peoples’ understandings of color words are different. Color words have different cultural connation of each language. Comparing the differences of color words between China and western countries and analyzing their causes can help us improve the accuracy of translation during the cross-cultural communication.

Key Words: Cultural Differences, Color Words, Western, China, Translating Strategies

1. Introduction

There are a variety of color words which express rich emotions and cultural connotations in China and Western countries. Color, as a visual effect, theoretically, people have the same feelings to them. However, due to differences in mode of thinking, religion, aesthetic views of different nations between China and Western countries. Each nation has their unique color words.

A recent survey made on the campuses of Xi’an International University shows: 5% of the students interviewed knew color words; 15% knew a little about color words; however, 80% of them didn’t know the color words at all.

With the development of the reform and opening up policy, translation becomes an important way of cultural exchange in the cross-cultural communication.
As different nations have different cultural backgrounds, customs, and environment. Some colors have already been the obstructions. Therefore, it is significant to recognize these differences in order to avoid the unnecessary cultural conflicts.

2. The Differences of Color Words between China and Western countries

2.1 Same Object, Different Color Terms

Owing to the difference of cultural backgrounds, customs and environment, the same object or phenomenon might be described with different color words.

In ancient China, yellow can only be used by the emperors. If a common people were seen dressed in yellow, which was found is frightening and strange. So during that period, the color yellow stands for the soupier power and the prestige of the king. But in western countries, purple is a symbol of noble and power. Such as in ancient Greece and Rome, the king, judges and generals always dressed in purple to show their nobleness and prestige. for example,” be born in the purple” which means somebody is born in royals households or the high-ranking family, but “raise somebody to the purple” stands for rising the king ,“marry into the purple” refers to marry into the noble family.

Red is the favorite color for the Chinese people. In ancient time, people get warm and light from the sun, and cook dinner with fire. The impression from the sun and fire is red, so they think red is a warm color that can bring them into happiness. This view is handed down from the ancient time and becomes a tradition.

At a traditional Chinese wedding, the bridegroom always wears red flowers on the chest, and the bride usually dresses in red, and the whole wedding is filled with the red character “XI” and red couplets.
In Chinese culture, red also stands for luck and joy. In Spring Festival, People will hang red lanterns, light red and stick red slogans to congratulate the spring festivals. In the evening, they will light “red candles” and set off “red firecrackers”.

People in English-countries consider “white” as a color of purity and innocence. That is the reason why the brides wear white ceremonial dress and hold white lily at weddings. White is a positive color in western countries. Such as “white soul” means pure soul, “white men” refers to gentlemen.

2.2 The same color is not always represented the same way in the two languages.

In China, black denotes honesty and justice, strength at the traditional Beijing opera; the honest and judicial men all have the black faces to show their justice, like the BaoGong. The poets like to use the black to describe the healthy and the strong young boys or girls. Besides, black stands for crime and reactionary. for example, the member of the reactionary clique called “black hand”; “black shops” is the place where the business is robbery and illegal actions; transaction of contraband goods is called “black goods”; the money that get with illegal way is called “black money”

Black is a taboo color in the West, which stands for darkness. It embodies the spiritual abandon and disgust for westerners. It means death, sinister. For example, black mass, to wear black for her grandmother, black words, a black letter day. Like the 9.11.2001, the pentagon and the World Trade Center were destroyed by the terrorists, the United States called this day as a “black 911”.black symbolizes wicked and guilty. Such as black man, a black deed, black guard, black mail, a black-leg and so on. Black can mean shame and disgraceful, for example, a black mark, black sheep, a black eye.
3. Analysis of the Causes of the Differences

3.1 The Aesthetic Views

For example, there is a custom to “paint” the teeth black in the western part of the Vietnam. The guys and the girls are more beautiful if their teeth are blacker. In American, people regard white as a sign of beauty. The white people consider themselves as more superior to the other nations, especially compared to the black people, For the women, white shin is a tradition in China, while in America and Austral people are fond of having their shin sun-tanned.

3.2 The Mode of Thinking

Chinese and Western nations have their respective living environment and culture, which determines different ways of thinking. When thinking, westerners focus on actual effects and results. However, Chinese focus on the object of feeling. Chinese people always use the color of red to symbolize happiness, victory, warmth and prosperity.

This is because the practical use of red and its fine association with fire, they think red can bring them into warmth.

In English, it is cream or butter that is usually used to describe the color of light yellow, which is because cream and butter are the daily foods in English-speaking countries. Moreover, they use “green back” to describe American dollars just because the back of the dollars is green.
3.3 The Religious Beliefs

As an important part of historical culture, religion has a significant impact on the meaning of color words. And owning to different faiths in different religions, the believers regard the different colors as their emblems. Here are several examples.

“Yellow “is an honorable in the eyes of Buddhists. In Chinese culture, the Buddhists wear yellow clothes, and the temples are yellow, so the yellow is favored by the Chinese people and regarded as an important color.

While in English, the Christianity is the dominant view. What’s more, the Bible has the great effect on language of color terms. In the bible, yellow represents evilness and cowardice. For it is the color of Judas’s gown.

4. The Translating Strategies

4.1 Literal Translation

“Literal Translation” refers to an adequate symbol of the original almost without any change of word-order or sentence construction.”(GuoZhuzhang, P300, 2005)

In the majority of cases, the same ways of expressions of the color terms can be found in English and Chinese, and these color terms usually carry no cultural connotations and they express nearly identical meanings. Look at the examples listed below:

Ex1: 红旗 red flag

Ex2: 蓝云色 cloud blue

All these color terms are translated literally without any change of the word order. This translation method is valid when translating the constructions such as “color term +and color term” and “adjectives +color terms”
It has well proved that, in color terms’ translation, literal translation emphasizes the adherence to the form of the original text, and this translation strategy is used especially in the sphere of science and technology, or in the cases that the color terms expresses its basic meanings.

4.2 Paraphrase

Paraphrase does not translate the sentence word by word. It directly uses the phrase which is equipotent to explain the sense of the source language in context.

Look at the examples listed below:

Ex1: a white lie
Ex2: a black look

From these expressions, a white lie means a lie that does no harm and is merely more convenient or polite than telling the truth. a black look refers to a look of strong dislike, disapproval.

4.3 Loan translation

“Loan translation” refers to a method of using the expression of the target language to replace the correspondent part in the source language. A certain object may represent a certain color in one language, but there is not a same case in another language. As each language has its own habit of expression, and its own understanding in culture, some color terms in the translation should be changed into another one that are well known by the users of target language, and the translations should be more in line with the habit of the target language.

For example, in English, “green” can be used to express the psychological state-jealousy, while in Chinese usually used “red”
5. Conclusion

From what has been demonstrated above, we can get the point that there really exist great differences of English and Chinese color terms. With the development of the reform and opening up policy, it is becoming more and more important for people to be aware of the significance of the color terms’ role playing in English and Chinese. Meanwhile, learning the translation methods of the color terms well can both improve people’s translation abilities and make our cross-cultural communication more convenient. Therefore, understanding and mastering the cultural connotations of color terms really have great significance in promoting the international cultural exchanges in today’s multi-cultural society. If they are ignored, serious misunderstandings may occur in our cross-cultural communication. Colors are closely related to human’s life and have no national boundaries. Learning and mastering the cultural connotations of the color terms in East and West is highly advantageous to us.

In addition, the purpose of this thesis is to make foreign language learners aware of the differences of English and Chinese color terms and to give them some helps during their learning process. In this thesis, The writer have made a comparative study on the cultural connotations of English and Chinese color terms by analyzing the differences of them, as well as the reasons caused these differences.

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