

Cultural Implications in Basic Color Terms “Black” and “White” in Chinese and English

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Abstract

Color is a kind of human perception towards the objective world. In intercultural communications, the English people and the Chinese people are different in many aspects, and their perceptions of various color symbols are not the same. Color words in English and Chinese languages have rich connotations and play a very important role in both cultural manifestations and ethnic customs. This article discusses the Chinese and English symbolic meanings of the two color words, “black” and “white” in Chinese and English cultures. By comparing and contrasting these two words’ differences in the two cultures, we can deepen understanding of the two cultures, overcoming the conflicts and promoting Chinese and English cross-culture exchanges and communications.

Keywords: black; white; difference; Chinese and English cultures; symbolic meaning

1. Introduction

Nature is colorful. In both English and Chinese cultures, there are a number of color words widely used. They are also the carriers of culture as other words. As pointed in the book of *Essentials of Comparison between Chinese and English*, “Each color word almost has two meanings, the basic and direct meaning, and its cultural extended meaning.” (Fu Xiaoling, 2004: 286) Color words not only have their own original meanings, but also have wide-ranging symbolic meanings. Color words can reflect the different cultural mentality and feelings. “No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking.” (Li Guanyi, 2002: 47) Colors often cause specific associations and arouse special reflections in people’s minds.

In their work *Basic color terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (1969), Berlin and Kay, the human linguists, tried hard to prove that the semantic structures of some cognitive areas, there are innate universal restrictions. So it is with the color words. A number of linguists firmly established the basic idea of the color words from this famous work.

Before the nineteenth century, there was a popular assumption that the color word system contained some features of linguistic relativity and reflected the cultural determinism, that is, color words were linguistically relative and semantically culture-specific.

In the middle of nineteenth century, the influence of linguistic relativity and cultural determinism on research into color words continued to the end of the nineteenth century until it was finally challenged. Magnus’s study substantially changed people’s view of the relationship between color terminologies and their physiological foundations, and to some extent, predicted the possibility of linguistic universality in color words.

In the late nineteenth century, Leavers made full use of considerable quantities of first-handed materials to proved his logical viewpoint —— there was a possibility of gradual evolution in color word system. In the following seventy years, with the rapid development of Anthropology, a group of color researchers adopted that color word system is influenced and restrained by culture elements.

People have similar perceptions of the colors, but the same understanding of logic cannot cover up the cultural difference. The color words have specified semantic meanings in different cultures. “There are similarities and differences, in terms of figurative meanings, metaphorical usages, idiomatic expressions, between Chinese and English color words.” (Li Ruihua, 1996: 24) There are many marked differences between our country and those English-speaking countries. So people’s feeling of color and their ways of expressing colors are not the same. We, Chinese people, often use “white” to show a grief to a death while people in English-speaking countries are in black when they attend a funeral or some important social gatherings. The reason is that “black” symbolizes melancholy and awfulness in those countries. Namely, the symbolic meanings of colors between Chinese culture and English culture are different from each other.

There is no surprise that colors are described diversely in different countries. Because of the divergences among the geographic environments, ways of living, regimes, nationality,

historical and cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, customs, cultural psychology, modes of thinking, aesthetic attitudes and literature and arts etc., the differences of symbolic meanings of the color words come into being between the two cultures. For example, in English culture, people always associate “red” with violence and danger. Red is the color of blood. So it is a taboo word in English culture. When English Sinologists translate *Dream of the Red Chamber*, they consider that the “red” here would make English people feel uncomfortable. They adopt the title *The Story of the Stone* to avoid the misunderstanding of the word “red”. Moreover, in the Qing dynasty, the book that was authorized by the emperor is called “red book”. It is different from the “red book” in English-speaking countries, which means the book with red cover.

The color words are cultural-loaded in different languages. Generally speaking, a particular color term may be associated with different things and emotions in different language communities. “Color is powerful in expressing people’s emotion.” (Rudolf Arnheim, *On Colors*) So to have a good master of the differences of color words and their associations, indications and cultural connotations is a prerequisite for a better understanding of the Chinese and English cultures.

“Black” and “white” are the most popular basic colors in our life and can be seen everywhere. They are the two ends of the chromatography. People from different cultures may have different even opposite perceptions of “black” and “white”. By means of comparisons and examples, this article discusses the differences of the symbolic meanings of the two color words, “black” and “white”, between Chinese culture and English culture.

2. Symbolic Meanings of “Black” in both Chinese and English Cultures

2.1 Symbolic Meanings of “Black” in Chinese Culture

In modern Chinese, black often means bad things, including a disaster, misfortune and improbity, such as “argot” (黑话), “poison-pen letter” (黑信), “blacklist” (黑名单), and “be unjustly blamed” (背黑锅) and so on. The “black box” (黑匣子) seems to be a neutral phrase which is referred to flight data recorder. But people only open the black box after an air crash. Consequently, the “black” in this phrase means unfortunate.

The “black” in modern Chinese is related to terrorism, reactionary and illegality, such as “reactionary gang” (黑帮), “sinister backstage boss” (黑后台), and “smuggled goods” (黑货) and so on. Chinese “black” also contains the meaning of sinister and ruthless, such as “an inn run by brigands” (黑店). Besides, it is also related with evildoers and evil deeds, such as “sinister gangs” (黑帮).

Conversely, in the ancient times, black was an impartial and disinterested color. That is why the roles, like Bao Zheng (包拯) (a judge on the scroll of fame in Song dynasty), Zhang Fei (张飞) (an intrepid and staunch warrior) and Li Kui (李逵) (a courageous and loyal hero) in traditional operas are seen to wear black theatrical masks.

2.2 Symbolic Meanings of “Black” in English Culture

The Christianity has a far-reaching influence on English culture. From the Bible, we can figure out that black means devil, improbity, torment and misfortune. So in English culture, black is almost always used to describe death, crime and disaster, such as “Black Death”, “black words”, “black man”, “blackmail” and “a black deed”. Black is a basic taboo color in English culture.

At the same time, in the phrases “a black mark”, “black sheep” and “a black eye”, it means dishonorable. In the phrases “black dog” and “look black”, it means depressed. In the phrases “black in the face”, “to look black at someone” and “give somebody a black look”, it means angry. Black can also mean gloomy, dismal and be low-spirited such as “black memory”.

In both English literature and performing art, black symbolizes falsehood and errors. Thus we can know that “black humor” is a ridiculous, exaggerated kind of humor. “Black flag” is the token of executing death sentence. Here is an example sentence from Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, ch.59, “Upon the corner of the tower a tall staff was fixed. Their eyes were riveted on it. A few minutes after the hour had struck something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag.”

However, in English culture, sometimes black also symbolizes decency and dignity. The celebrity and the official used to attend some important occasions in “black suit” or “black dress” to show their majesty.

2.3 Development of Symbolic Meanings of “Black”

Black has various meanings in English culture, either good or bad. But the symbolic meanings of “black” in English culture have hardly any changes.

On the other hand, the symbolic meanings of “black” in Chinese culture have changed a bit with the development of cross-culture communication. Influenced by the English culture, Chinese people sometimes take “black” as the representative of fashion, nobleness, decency. “Black” is more than the symbol of bad things now.

People almost use black color in every aspect, such as fashion industry and motor industry. The black dress makes people feel mature and prudent. Nowadays, most Chinese go to work in black to show their profession. Leaders like to be dressed in black to establish their dignity and solemnity. And in motor industry, the GL/GLS car is often painted in black. It is a kind of representation of honorableness.

2.4 Translations about “Black” in Intercultural Communication

Lots of Chinese words with “black” could not be translated with the English “black”. If we translate them with the English “black”, English people can hardly understand what they exactly mean and vice versa.

For example, “red tea” (红茶) in Chinese is not translated into “red tea” in English but “black tea”, because English people focus on the color of the tea leaves and not of the tea. Here are more examples, like “evil mind” (黑心), “evil backstage manipulator” (黑手),

“inside story”（黑幕），“a sinister line”（黑线）and “brown bread”（黑面包）。

And “black coffee” in English is not translated into “black coffee” in Chinese but “coffee without milk”（纯咖啡）。The “black art” means magic. What is more, “black ball” does not ask people to be dressed in black but dress well. In intercultural communication, we had better not fail to recognize this kind of misunderstanding in translation.

3. Symbolic Meanings of “White” in both Chinese and English Cultures

3.1 Symbolic Meanings of “White” in Chinese Culture

In Chinese, the symbolic meanings of “white” usually are not so good. Take the people whose family members die not long ago as an example. In opposition to the English culture, Chinese people are ritually all dressed in white and wear a white flower to show a grief to the decedent.

It can also symbolize innocence. Once Qu Yuan made use of the phrase “turn white into black”（黑白不分）to describe the chaotic situation of the time. In addition, in “boiled water”（白开水）and “plain boiled pork”（白肉），“white” means insipid.

Besides, white sometimes means contempt or vainness. People use “common civilians”（白丁）to describe that someone is illiterate. It is obviously a kind of contempt. The later one can be reflected in phrases like “in vain”（白忙），“no use”（白搭），“dirty look”（白眼）and “give away for nothing”（白送）。

Similar to black, in the revolutionary time in Chinese history white can be used to express reactionary, such as “the White Army”（白军），“white terror”（白色恐怖）and “the White regime”（白色政权）。

3.2 Symbolic Meanings of “White” in English Culture

Compared to those of “black”, the meanings of “white” in Chinese and English cultures have more differences. In English culture, white almost has opposite meanings to that in Chinese culture. White in English, generally speaking, is a word of purity. It symbolizes lots of beautiful things. White in the English funerals shows hope, and this is quite different from the connotation it has in China.

According to the Bible, all the offerings that Israelites sacrificed to the God were white. So white is considered to be the color of festivals. To English nations, white symbolizes purity, happiness, hope, peace and authority most of the time. We often meet words or phrases with these implications, such as “a white X'mas”, “a white soul”, “white hands”, “a white knight”, “a white lie”, “a white day”, “days marked with a white stone” and “a white book” and so on. Of course, “the white wedding” is the most popular.

White also symbolizes honest and upright in English culture. For example, “a white spirit” means honest soul, “a white man” is noble, an educated person. It symbolizes lucky too, so white is the traditional color for the brides at weddings.

White is greatly used in architecture, and white buildings give people a pleasant feeling. There is “the White Hall” in London, the United Kingdom and “the White House” in Washington, the United States.

What is more, it can be easily found in the literature and art work. In the *Bible Stories*, the angels are always with a pair of white wings and a silver halo overhead. In *Swan Lake*, the white swans represent kindness, purity. In *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, the *Snow White* is smart, kind and beautiful. She wins the most love of children. From the examples above, it is easy to find that the English people think highly of “white”.

3.3 Development of Symbolic Meanings of “White”

In the past, Chinese did not like white very well. Even they took it as the taboo color. The situation changed after “white wedding” had come to China through cultural exchange. Now we can see white color not only in funerals but also weddings.

Moreover, we call a salaried professional or an educated worker the “white-collar worker” (白领) who performs semi-professional office, administrative, and sales-coordination tasks, as opposed to a “blue-collar worker” (蓝领), whose job requires manual labor. After the introduction of Western medicine, doctors and nurses became “the angles in white” (白衣天使). These new expressions appear with the development of cultural exchange.

Though English people think highly of “white”, “white pollution” cannot be ignored. The “white pollution” arose from the explosion of industry. The production of this phrase gives “white” the bad side in English culture.

3.4 Translations about “White” in Intercultural Communication

Not only “black” but also “white” call for more attention in translation. The “white paper” (白卷) in Chinese is translated into “blank examination paper” in English. And the “black society” (黑社会) in Chinese cannot be translated into “black society” in English but “the underworld”.

Once China had a brand of batteries called “White Elephant”. When put into the international market, it was hard to sell. The reason is precisely the translated name – “White Elephant”. “White elephant” in the English countries refers to the expensive and useless thing. Because the white elephant is revered as God, those people who receive such a gift are destined to suffer a lot. Who has the capacity to worship a God? So the batteries were unmarketable.

There are still more examples in our life. When we are dealing with such kind of expressions, we must learn about their background and figure out the best understanding of them.

4. Similarities of Symbolic Meanings of “Black” and “White” in Chinese and English Cultures

There are many other terms with “black” in both China and the west that could be literally translated because they convey the same meaning. For example, black symbolizes darkness

and improbity in the two cultures, such as “blackmail”, “blacklist”, “black-hearted”, “black market”, “black money”, and “black future” and so on.

And, no matter in the west or in the east, people are likely to dress in black when they are present at a funeral to express their mourning and honors to the dead and their relatives. “Black suit” or “black dress” is the most favorite conventional garments for grand occasions. And the judges in the court in both China and English countries wear black garment to show the authority of the law.

Compared to the black, the meanings of white in Chinese and English cultures have more differences. But there are some phrases like “as white as snow” in both English and Chinese. A kind of phrases, like “white market” and “white list”, which are in the mode of “black market” and “blacklist”, has the same symbolic meanings in Chinese and English cultures. As the development of the cross-culture communication, in China, when someone gets married he or she will wear white wedding dress. It is not be considered that it is unlucky.

According to the comparison and analysis above, it is obvious that the symbolic meanings of color words not only have many distinctive differences between Chinese culture and English culture, but also have a series of similarities. From this, we can see that the differences of symbolic meanings of color words are actually quite more than the similarities. Therefore, knowing more about their differences is good for us to know the English culture better and promote the culture exchange.

5. Conclusion

All cultures have generalities and specialties, so do their languages. Considering specific features of different languages and cultures, people have different reflections to the same color word between Chinese and English.

With the development of society, the color words have rich cultural extended meanings besides the literal meanings. In different languages, color words have different symbolic meanings. The same color words would have some similarities and differences. From the description of black and white above, it is obvious to see that the symbolic meanings of the two color words black and white in Chinese culture differ from those in English culture. Color words are rich in both Chinese and English languages. Meanwhile, the symbolic meanings of color words in different culture have great difference.

Fundamentally speaking, in Chinese culture, the formation of the symbol of one color is based on the Chinese feudal rule, feudal superstitions and their original and backward science and education in the past. So the symbolic meanings of colors have very strong politicized tendency and mystification. Gradually, with the development of society, they have changed a lot.

On the contrary, color symbols of English culture more benefit from the West’s openness, traditional religion and popularity of science and education. This makes the symbolic meanings of English color words less mysterious and more rational. Therefore, in English

culture, symbolic meanings of color are often more direct, usually with specific colors of objective things to symbolize some abstract cultural implications.

There is a joke widely circulated in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. A teacher asked the students to use the word “green” to make a sentence. A foreign student wrote, “I like the green hat.” The teacher can not help laughing. For people from different cultural backgrounds, the same expression may not refer to the same thing and the same thing also has different ways of expression. In Chinese, if we say that someone with a green hat (戴绿帽) means one's wife has an affair with others. This is a great taboo for the Chinese men. However, the foreign student did not know the implication of “the green hat” in Chinese. He just talked about its literal meaning.

Although there are some similarities on the applications of color words between Chinese and English, there are also a lot of differences because of the different geographic environments, ways of living, regimes, nationality, historical and cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, customs, cultural psychology, modes of thinking, aesthetic attitudes and literature and arts etc. between the two cultures. Only understanding this can people know more about both Chinese and English cultures and make better cross-cultural communication. We must learn more about their differences in order to maximize the understanding of both the two cultures and promote the cross-cultural communication.

From this we can see that the meaning of a word or a sentence depends not only on the subjective wishes of speaker or writer, but also on the external environment. This requires that, in intercultural communication, we should know well about the country's cultural tradition, values and customs, and grasp and study the color words, including their symbolic meanings and the information they carry. Then we can effectively carry out intercultural communication, and promote and strengthen cultural exchange and acculturation among the people from various countries.

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