



English and Chinese Cultural Connotation of Color Words in Comparison

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Abstract

There are various kinds of words and phrases about color both in Chinese and English languages. These color words play a very important role in the intercultural communication of the modern world. Because of different cultural backgrounds, the meaning English color words expresses has large differences. Because the connotation of the color in Chinese and Western cultures often has different characteristics, some connotations even make the color become a color taboo or a color worship. This paper tries to explore the color at different cultural backgrounds reflecting in the different cultural connotation.

Keywords: Color words, Cultural background, Cultural connotation, Intercultural communication

1. 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, forming different connotations in cultures. The difference of the connotation of the color between different cultures is determined by each different national and historical background, the different traditions and habits, the different peoples' life experience, and aesthetic psychology of culture. It is a kind of permanent culture phenomenon. The various connotations of colors possess an important position in the intercultural communication in the modern world. The different languages of different nations and peoples in the whole world are extensive and profound. 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. If a nation's people do not understand other people's specific connotation of colors, it is impossible to carry out effective and correct communication.

The previous scholars have studied the connotation of color from different sides. Most of them concentrated on the symbolic meaning of the colors. This paper pays attention to the deeper connotation of different colors .From the Chinese and western cultural background to the traditions and habits, to the different peoples' life experience, all of these are related to the connotation of color.

2. The Connotation of Red in Chinese and Western Cultures

The red color is the strongest one of all kinds of colors for the person's eyes and brains. Red is the favorite color for the Chinese people, it stands for the joyous meaning and happiness. But in the western counties, it has the meaning of violence and anger.

The most important color for the Chinese is the red color. In China, the red color is our country's basic cultural color. It shows the Chinese material and spirit pursuit. It is the color of good luck and is used for decoration and wedding dressing, the brides always wear a red Qi Pao or a red wedding dress at wedding ceremony. Because in the Chinese traditions, the red color stands for the propitious sign. It is a lucky symbol which can bring happiness and make the brides and grooms' life better and better. Another example, at the APEC meeting of Shanghai, all the leaders wear the Chinese traditional clothes. All the clothes are of the same style, but the colors are different. Chinese leader chooses the red clothes, while most of the Western leaders wear clothes of other kinds of colors. From this example, we can see that the important connotation of red for the Chinese in various aspects of the intercultural communication. On the joyous day, the Chinese hang the red lanterns, stick the red "happiness" word on the walls when the young couple get married,

and stick the red “fu” word on the windows in the Chinese Spring Festival. The ribbon-cutting ceremony on the festival or holiday cannot be separated from the red color. The Chinese call the prosperous sign. The red also symbolizes the success. More examples are “popular singer”, “honor roll” etc.

The commendatory connotation of the red in China is known popularly. It means the success, the progress, and the revolution. But the derogatory meaning of it is also very important, which is worthy of getting. In the terrorist times, red is the symbol of the death and the common people have the feeling of danger towards the red color. When a prisoner is sentenced to death, his name is circled in red. And his clothes are always in red to show his low position as a prisoner and his crime. This tradition has passed a long time from the ancient time until now.

In American history, red is not a very good word. It is the association of the “fire”, “blood”, it 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 rag (or red flag) that bullfighters use to provoke bulls is considered annoying. According to the Random House Dictionary, red further develops to be the synonym for political radical. Furthermore, red has some extended meanings, such as cruelty, disaster, etc. Such as: the red revenge, the red battle (a cruel battle in which a lot of lives have been lost); the red revolution (the radical, violent revolution); the red activities (the left-wing radical activity). It 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), etc.

One American scholar Rudolf Arnheim once writes in his book *Chromatics* “the colors have the strong ability to express the different emotions. It is exciting that the red can make us think of the meaning of fire, blood and the revolution.” When Hawks translated “*Dream of the Red Chamber*”, the book title is translated for the “*The Story of the Stone*” (its original name), because he is aware that the red color in modern English may make the readers associate “violence”, “blood”, so he adapted the title “*The Story of the Stone*”. From this, we can see that red has totally different connotation in Western culture.

Red also has the commendatory connotation in Western culture besides the dangerous sign and meaning. For example, “red-blooded”, it means a brave person who has the big courage; “a red letter day, firstly, it is just a habit in the church to use the red letter to circle the festivals. But now, it is used in any festival which is worthy of remembering and any joyous festival; “red ribbon Bath”, it is the French glory bandage which is in red; “red-cross”, it is the national bandage of Britain.

Red is often used to describe people’s favorite people or things by Westerners. A famous poem “My Love Is Red, Red Rose” written by Robert Burns, a famous English poet, known as the English poetry of fine works.

3. The Connotation of White in Chinese and Western Cultures

In Chinese culture, white is contrary to red, It is a basic color taboo. It shows the Chinese’s material and spirit disgust. In the traditional Chinese perspective, White makes people tend to think of solemn mourning, which originated from ancient times for color of superstition. White color in China is symbol of death, lifeless performance and bad omen. So when the people pass away, the relatives always wear the white clothes and hit the white long narrow flag to the funeral to mourn him or her. And the psychological function of white is influenced by its political function. It symbolizes reaction, failure, foolish and vain action. For example, the fool is called the “idiot”. It also signifies the commoners who have little knowledge and have no fame, and such persons are called “common people”.

The white in China also has the commendatory meaning. White is associated with light, goodness, innocence, purity, and virginity. It is considered to be the color of perfection. White means safety, purity, and cleanliness. As opposed to black, white usually has a positive connotation. It also stands for the bright future and hope, which has almost the same meaning in English at this point.

In the opinion of Westerners, white symbolizes purity, elegance and frank. When the young get married, the bride wears the snow-white wedding dress. This tradition begins from the Victoria Ages, at that time the white wedding dress was in the most popular era. Since Queen Victorian who wore a beautiful white wedding dress married her sweetheart, the white wedding dress swept the whole world. Even now, it remains the most popular for the brides, because it is a symbol of purity and fidelity. Before the Victorian Age, the brides’ wedding dress did not attach much importance to the colors. At Roman time, the brides wore the white wedding dress, because the white is a symbol of celebration and it emphasizes the connotation of the sanctity and loyalty. And from 1850 to 1900, white is a symbol of wealth. At the beginning of this century, white represents the significance of purity and happiness. At this point, it is higher than any other kind of colors. Even the Westerners connect the white with virginity.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once says that “The gray past the white future”. For the Westerners, the white is the color which is full of future and happiness. And there are many examples about the commendatory meaning of white, Such as:

“white knight”, it means the winner of the politician or the business; “white lie”, it is the lie of goodwill which is said not to make people embarrassed; “a white day” (a lucky day); “days marked with a white stone”, it means the happy days of one’s life. In one western tale, one beautiful princess is called the Snowwhite, she is the symbol of innocence, beauty and smart. So it is clear that the Westerners regard the white as their favorite color and use its connotation widely in various aspects of life.

In English, white often stands for the hope, peace, happiness and light, but it also has the derogatory connotation in Western culture. 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.

4. The Connotation of Black in Chinese and Western Cultures

Black denotes strength and authority; it is considered to be a very formal, elegant, and prestigious color. And the black color is the Emperor’s unique color of the clothes, the common people are not allowed to wear the black clothes. And it also stands for honesty and justice in China. In the traditional Beijing Opera, the honest and good men all have the black faces to show their justice. The poets like to use the black to describe the healthy and the strong young boys or girls.

Black stands for the evil omen in China’s traditional culture. Besides, black 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.

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. In the classic ballet SWAN LAKE, the black swan stands for the hatred or the enmity. In the figure of speech, the usage of black always gives people the feeling of terror, which can be seen in the following examples. “the black art” (enchantment); black and blue (full of bruises); black day (unlucky day); black dog (unhappy); a black look (an angry look; glare at somebody); “in a black mood” (in low spirits); “black sheep” (evil member of the herd); “a black villain”, (the hooligan); “black ingratitude” (a person who is ungrateful and leave one’s benefactor in the lurch); “black words” is the unlucky words which can make others angry; “a black letter day” is the ominous day for a person; “black mail” usually means the kidnapper extorts money from victims; “black money” is the illegal money which does not make a statement of duty; “black-hearted” means a malicious person, etc. These expressions are all related to the bad, evil, indignant characteristics in Western culture.

Black not only symbolizes the death, evil and disaster, at the same time, it also has the connotation of sobriety and stateliness, black suit and the black dress are both the favorite traditional clothes for the Westerners. On serious occasions, the celebrities all like the black clothes; all the members of the symphony orchestra are all in black suit to show the respect to the audience; in the service industry, the black suit is the ones for the high-grade managers; “black-ball” is the serious ball which is different with the optional Disco. 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 caged 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”

5. Conclusion

In short, the cultural connotation in the color words between Chinese and English languages is very abundant. Here only two common colors are discussed. The color phrases have a very strong rhetoric function. They are the indispensable and important part in the intercultural communication. Because there are many differences between the Chinese and American’s favorite colors. So the phrases of different colors in the two different nations show the different meanings. If we do not understand these words and the vocabulary with which constitute the social customs and cultural backgrounds, it is difficult to understand their cultural connotations, the communication will cause ambiguity. With the development of modern society, the intercultural communication about the colors develops quickly. In order to get more progress under the specific situation about the color communication, we should pay more attention to the deep and wide meaning of the colors in different nations and get the understanding of the special English language history, geographical backgrounds and social customs. We should get to find the similarities and the differences of the same colors between the different cultures from the history aspect: the religion and the taboos of the different cultures. The religion influences the people’s life very largely. People’s many habits and taboos can be traced

back to the religion. The colors' symbolic meanings and taboos are the same. Knowing this, we are easy to know the colors' history background and the wide meaning of the colors in the specific situation.

As language learners, whether simple or complex terms, we should unearth its cultural connotation from our points of view, to identify English- Chinese differences and similarities between two languages. Only in this way will we make less mistakes in the process of using them, and improve our accuracy ,flexibility in the use of language.

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