A Comparison between English and Chinese Taboo Language

XUELIAN LEI

ABSTRACT

With the increasing communication between people, many taboo language problems emerge. Although a lot of Chinese scholars studied many aspects about English and Chinese taboos, there remains some margins: 1) the studies on English and Chinese taboo language mostly focus on a few of similar topics; 2) the research method is relatively simple; 3) Taboos are changing continually with time, the contrastive study of taboos between English and Chinese taboo language also needs further exploration.

This paper mainly employs the method of comparative analysis to study English and Chinese taboos. After reviewing the basis of domestic and foreign literature on taboo words, and searching for internet resources, materials from TV programs and surveys to collect relevant language corpus, the author makes a systematic comparison between English and Chinese Taboos so as to handle properly the taboo words and facilitate the further understanding of taboos. In the final part, the author gives some suggestions on how to handle taboos of English and Chinese properly, which is helpful in promoting language learning and cross-cultural communication.

DEFINITION

As the economy develops, the intercultural communication between Chinese and English becomes more important. While the emergence of English and Chinese taboo language attracts a lot of attention. Many experts and scholars from home and abroad have made their own definitions of taboos in their studies of this area. Below are some of them.

Taboo derived from Pacific Polynesia West Island of Tonga dialect "ta bu". The word that represents the "sacred" and "inviolable" or "great attention" things. British navigator James Cook went sailing to the South Pacific in 1777, he discovered the phenomena of taboos in the place.

Ronald Wardhaugh (2000) wrote An Introduction to Sociolinguistic. In this book, Ronald Wardhaugh made definition about taboos language. "people use language to convey many ideas, but they are always trying to avoid talking about some of the things that have been rude and vulgar, and it will make people feel very uncomfortable." [1]

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Xuelian Lei, foreign languages department, Nanchang Normal University, 889 Ruixiang Road, Nanchang, Jiangxi, 310032, China.
Significance

Because of the deep-rooted feudal ideology, the study of language taboo in China is later than the West. In 1980, San Lian published a book called *language and society* to study taboos. Since the 1980s, Chinese scholars hold a strong interest about studying taboo language, they published many works to discourse taboos. In 1999, the foreign language teaching and Research Press published "the Chinese and English culture and customs", this book studies the comparison of the taboo language in English and Chinese. In 2000, Beijing Language and Culture University Press published *the human linguistic research*, which discusses English and Chinese taboos and euphemism. [2]

There are taboo words in all languages, the taboo words of different countries reflect their own special culture and history. The taboo language in different culture and language is the important factors that hinder the cross-cultural. A comparative study of the differences between English and Chinese language taboos helps to eliminate the barriers to intercultural communication, and introduces the study of English and Chinese taboo into foreign language teaching, which is helpful to develop the communicative competence of language learners and users. Studying the comparison of taboos is helpful to the development of economics and politics in English and China. Understanding taboos, avoiding taboos, it can make people’s cooperation and communication become more successful.

SIMILARITIES IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE TABOOS

The Taboos of religion and gods

In English and China, many words about religion and gods are taboos. If people do not care these taboo words, they will be considered as "blasphemy". Most western countries believe in Christianity, people like reading the Bible in the West. Its religious taboo language related to Christianity. Jehovah is taboo language, when people mentioned God can not directly say "God", to say "Gosh" or "Goodman". The phrase "for Christ's sake", to say "for goodness sake." like "Jesus" or "Oh, my God!" such interjections also cannot be used casually. In China, religious taboos is mainly reflected in the food. Such as Buddhist monks should eat vegetarian food. Chinese people worship nature. They believe that all kinds of natural phenomena are dominated by the gods, in order to avoid disaster, people think it is a taboo to discuss the gods name privately, and give them a nice name, "Xi He" is called the god of sun, "Dragon King" is called the god of water. In the ancient China, a common person’s name can’t be similar with the emperor’s name. In English and China, people will not casually mention the name of the Devil, people think the Devil will bring bad luck to the person, so people don't use the word of Devil, and use Old Nick, etc, because religious faith and worship of god belongs to the domain of taboo. [3]

The Taboos about Curses

Most curse words are so vulgar that they can’t be used free. Many of the curses words are unsuitable to use in public places in English. Like shit, fuck, hell, damn, and so on, have been strictly prohibited to say by broadcast television news anchor in the broadcast. In English many people are very disgusted with this kind of vocabulary, people will feel bored and angry whenever they hear. In Chinese, there are quite a lot of
swearing and obscene words, and those who used these words would be considered rude and unpleasant, and even disgusting. The expression of human waste can make people feel very uncomfortable, because these words present people a direct disgusting imagination. Many words of curses are related to sexual organs, which should be used with caution.

**The Taboos about Disease and Death**

As everyone knows, life is limited. The new replaces the old, it is unchangeable. But people dream to far from disease and death, so people think the words about death are taboos.

Sick people will feel very uncomfortable, so people don’t like mentioning words about diseases. English commonly used “long illness” or “The big C” and other words to avoid using the word of cancer. People called mental illness patients for “mad or crazy”, is considered to be impolite, so people often euphemistically referred to as “a little eccentric” or “not all there”. For AIDS, people called social disease. For Alzheimer's disease, people called "AD". In China, there is a serious illness, which is generally said to be "that kind of disease" or "bad disease".

In the world, people often avoid mentioning the word. “death”, if you have to mention, you’d better use other words to replace it. In China, when talking about death, people usually use "passe away", "go" and so on. The death of a soldier on the battlefield is called "sacrifice", and the death of a child is called "夭折". In English, people will not say "he died" straightly, but instead, they will use the following phrases "depart from the world forever", "pass away", "go to Heaven", "go to a better world", "be with God", "fall asleep" and so on. [4]

**The Taboos about Sex**

“Sex” is a sensitive topic in both Chinese and English. People often talk about sex in an blurry way, using the following phrases for “sex”: make love, art of pleasure. Pregnancy is caused by sex. If a woman is pregnant, people often say that she is in delicate condition, or she is expecting a baby. In China, pregnancy is a great thing for families, which is taken as "good news". In English and China, some personal privacy, involving the relevant parts of the human body, cannot be mentioned casually. For example, the English use "it" and "that thing" to refer to the reproductive organs, and Chinese also used a very vague word "thing" or "little brother" to instead the reproductive organs. A number of words such as "making love", "homosexual" and other words were still rarely used in conversations. People do not say "prostitute" and say "woman of streets"; called homosexuality "friends" or "roommates" and so on. Even in modern society, people only use “life problem”, "affair", "derailed" and other words to express the situation that men and women against the ethics of the relationship. In both Chinese and English, taboo words about sex should be used with caution in public places. [5]

**THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ENGLISH AND CHINESE TABOOS**

**The Taboos of Privacy**

The privacy of individuals is the biggest taboo in English. In the English speaking
countries, to ask for someone's age, family income, properties and religious beliefs are very impolite behavior. For British, the personal privacy is very precious, people like talking about the weather, work, hobbies, local and national events. While Chinese like asking the family situation, the level of salary, emotional state. Chinese people like asking "How much do you earn per month?", "What's your religion's belief?", "Are you married?". However, English people think the choice of religious beliefs and political parties is the freedom of the individual with no intervening, so British people never ask Chinese "Are you a party member?", which actually Chinese do not mind. In China, people like talking about money. For example, prices rose, wages rose, car fuel costs rose. This is a very common topic, and no one feels that it is not appropriate to discuss these issues. In western countries, personal income is a very private issue, people will not ask in conversation, even between husband and wife. In Britain, when people are talking about no money, the poor use "out of pocket" and "reduce circumstance" instead of "no money". In the UK, when people face unemployment, they often said "lay off", "get the walking ticket" instead of "unemployment".

The Taboos of Names

The taboos about names are very different between Chinese and English. In England, it emphasizes on personality, individual liberation and personal rights. As an individual, each one has its own natural rights, equality and freedom. The children call the name of the elder's directly. In English, it is not rare to see elder's name used as children's name. While in China, it will be regarded as a ridiculous thing. Using the name of an elder, a great man and even the president. While English people think it is a good way to express their respect and remembrance. People want their children to grow up to be a great man too. And people often add Mr, Mrs or Miss before the last name to call somebody. People can call somebody with professions, such as "Professor Smith", "Doctor Green". In China, people attach importance to courtesy. People should call grandpa, grandma, aunt, uncle and so on. It is impolite if the younger generation call the name of the elders directly. But in English, children can call their parents’ name directly. In the feudal society of China, people cannot call Kings and an elder's name, the emperor is supreme, sacred and inviolable. Not only the "emperor" word became a taboo word, even the emperor's name in Chinese or homophonous words are also taboos. While in the UK, name is not language taboos.

The Taboos of Number

In daily life and work, people tend to prefer some numbers and dislike some other numbers. In English, people think Friday is a taboo word, people often say that Black Friday. They think traveling, sailing, marriage, do business couldn’t happen on Friday, it is unlucky, It is more likely to happen unfortunate things, because Jesus died on Friday, and Adam and Eve made a mistake, they ate the forbidden fruit, they were expelled from the garden of Eden on Friday. In daily life, people try to avoid mentioning 13, because people think 13 is a bad number. For example, there are not 13 people sitting together to eat food, sailors refused to go to sea on 13th. Important activity will avoid the number 13. Because on the last supper of Jesus, a Jew that the 13th person, he betrayed Jesus, just for 30 pieces of silver. Eventually, Jesus was crucified and died in agony on Friday.

In China, "four" is an unlucky number. In modern society, license plate number,
telephone number mantissa, people all don’t like four. "Hundred years" often refers to the limit of longevity, so one hundred years old is a taboo word. In twelve month, May is considered to be "evil". Nine is a taboo figure in age, the ancients have such a statement: "the Ming nine, Dark nine, non dead or sick". The so-called "Ming nine" refers to the number nine, for example: nine, nineteen, twenty-nine, thirty-nine, etc., "Dark nine" refers to the multiple of nine, such as: eighteen, twenty-seven, thirty-six, etc.. People use euphemism to talk about age, a thirty-six year old man would say that he was thirty-five years old on last year or he was thirty-seven years old on next year. 7 is a unlucky number too. For example, table food cannot be a 7 disc, auspicious number is not 7, 17, and 27.

Chinese like saying "good things come in pairs". Chinese especially like 6 and 8, because 6 and 8 means "Shun" and "Fa". But in western countries, they like odd numbers. For example, people like sending flowers in odd numbers. Rome poet Virgil ever said that God is singular.

The Taboos of Colors and Animals

Color words in different countries express different emotional and cultural information. Chinese people like red best, they think red represents celebration. Bride should wear red dress in a Chinese traditional wedding. Chinese think the color white express death. After the death of a family, people wear white clothes, wear a white hat. But in English, people think white means purity, the bride likes white dress. White gives the impression of elegance and purity. A white soul symbolizes innocence, white express purity and brilliant; a white spirit symbolizes honesty and integrity. Red in the west likes the color of blood. In the eyes of Westerners, blood symbolizes human health. When the blood flows out, it means that people's lives are threatened. So red often means violence and war.

In China, the owl is bad, it is synonymous with bad luck. In the West, people like the owl very much. they think it means wisdom. Bats in China is auspicious, it means healthy and happiness. In the West, people don’t like bats. "As blind as a bat", it emphasize the shortcomings of the bat, meaning that bad eyesight and bats. In China, "Swallow" represents a strong and fearless, courageous spirit. In the West, swallows are used to compared the bane. Chinese believes that the dragon is all-powerful, which can save the world. In the west, people believes that the dragon represents something evil and dangerous. [6]

SUGGESTIONS

Mastering culture knowledge of different taboo languages

Language and culture are interdependent and mutually influenced. Some words forbidden in English are not forbidden in Chinese, while still some other words are forbidden in both English and Chinese languages. Therefore, if a person wants to avoid violation of taboos, he should be aware of cultural knowledge, understanding what is taboo, and what is not taboo.

Through the method of comparison, the author found that Chinese and English taboos have much in common, though there are also many differences. Different culture, different taboos reflect human common psychological characteristics—the pursuit of beautiful, peace, harmony, avoid disaster and conflict. The use of taboos
limits people’s words and deeds and the relation between man and nature. Although taboo is not only a positive feature, but also contains superstition, ignorance and backwardness, but it reflects the people's pursuit of freedom and equality, the comparison of taboos between English and Chinese is very important for today's worldwide cross-cultural communication.

**Proper use of euphemism**

The most common and wisest way to avoid the use of taboo words is to use euphemism, because it refers to the use of pleasant, vague indirect speech or phrase to replace a more precise, direct or taboo words or phrases, it not only convey the meanings, but also avoid embarrassment. Taboos and euphemism also keep with the development of society, now, a series of new letters and symbols are used to replace some taboo words. For example, people use the “xxoo” in the computer, the frequency is relatively high, especially when some games close the taboos of curse, “xxoo” instead of the curse words, players swear euphemism synonymously. “xxoo” is also a word about sex. For taboo, if there is no corresponding euphemism and alternative words, people should avoid mentioning taboos in cross-cultural communication, it can reduce many cultural conflicts.

**CONCLUSION**

As a common language phenomenon, Chinese and English taboos have a certain nationality. Understanding and mastering taboo language help people avoid conflict in communication, and facilitate mutual communication. With the development of social economy and human thought, taboo language is constantly updated and developed. Further study should be done to lessen the misuse of Chinese and English taboos. Proper use of taboos lead to more successful communication. The comparison of taboos between English and Chinese taboo language is beneficial for people to learn more of western experience, disseminating Chinese culture, which contributes to the mutual understanding and benefit of people, and win great opportunity for cooperation and development.

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