On Cultural Connotations of Color Words in English and Chinese and Translation Strategies

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Abstract. Color Words are a kind of sensuous words, mirroring the relationship between languages and social cultures, and abundant Color Words bear distinct cultural connotations in Chinese and English. So it is necessary to take serious looks into these different cultural connotations as to make our translations for Color Words into the other language more smoothly and acceptable if we want achieve greater progress in intercultural exchanges.

Introduction

Color language research finds its modern roots in the work of the anthropologist Brent Berlin and the linguist Paul Kay. Basic Color Terms: Their University and Evolution is their seminal text which was published in 1969. It is a guide for socialists and linguists to study color terms since then. And scholars in our country were mostly enlightened by this work to make their commencement on color word study. While the western researchers attach great importance to the foundation and evolution and categorization of color words in their researches, scholars in China find it more valuable to exploit color words in senses of their cultural connotation and translation solutions. This essay will be dedicated to an overall view of color words from their categorization to their cultural connotations in both societies and their translation methods and an attempt to translation in different cultures.

Different Cultural Connotations of Color Words between English and Chinese & Their Causes

White: White materials show colored stains and dirt very clearly, due to the high contrast. This is the likely reason why it is associated with purity and cleanliness in western traditions. In Chinese tradition, white is the color of mourning and death.

Black: Black is a symbol of mourning and bereavement in western societies, especially at funerals and memorial services. In some traditional societies, within for example Greece and Italy, widows wear black for the rest of their lives. In contrast, across much of Africa and parts of Asia, white is a color of mourning and is worn during funerals. In English heraldry, black means darkness, doubt, ignorance, and uncertainty. Native Americans associated black with the life-giving soil. The medieval Christian sect known as the Cathars viewed black as a color of perfection. In the Japanese culture, black is associated with honor, not death with the white color being associated with death. Black-dog biases a veterinarian and animal shelter phenomenon in which black dogs are passed over for adoption in favor of lighter colored animals. Black cats may be thought of as either good luck or bad.

Grey: In western societies, in a moral sense, grey is either used to describe situations that have no clear moral value or positively to balance an all-black or all-white view (for example, shades of grey represent magnitudes of good and bad).

In China, especially in the past years, the word gray has been vastly used and popular on the internet, such as “gray income”, which comes between illegal income “black income” and legitimate income “white income” made by public servers or clerks in given jobs, “gray zone” which means the
transitional zone between white and black, obviously this is a symbolic way of expression, we usually use black to represent false or illegality, and white in contrast, so gray is between them, it is hard sometimes for us to judge something from right to wrong, and it is where gray is used.

Red: In the western world. Red is used as a symbol of guilt, sin and anger, often as connected with blood or sex, [Oehler, Gustav Friedrich and George Edward Day, Theology of the Old Testament. pg. 320] The color red is associated with lust, passion, love, and beauty as well. While in Chinese, red is the representation of happiness and good luck.

Green: Love and lust. Stories of the medieval period further portray it as representing love and the base, natural desires of man. The Chinese term for cuckold is “to wear a green hat”. It is because in ancient China sex worker's husband wears Green Headscarf. Green is also used to describe jealousy and envy.

Death, decay and evil. Green is also known to have signified witchcraft, devilry and evil for its association with faeries and spirits of early English folklore. It also had an association with decay and toxicity. Actor Bela Lugosi wore green-hued makeup for the role of Dracula in the 1927-28 Broadway stage production. A green tinge in the skin is sometimes associated with nausea and sickness. A physically ill person is said to look green around the gills. The color, when combined with gold, is seen as representing the fading of youth. In the Celtic tradition, green was avoided in clothing for its superstitious association with misfortune and death. Green is thought to be an unlucky color in British and British-derived cultures, where green cars, wedding dresses, and theater costumes are all the objects of superstition. Spider-Man villains were often colored green to represent a contrast to the hero's red.

Prosperity. In areas that use the U.S. Dollar as currency, green carries a connotation of money, wealth, and capitalism, because green is the color of United States banknotes, giving rise to the slang term greenback for cash. Green can communicate safety to proceed, as in traffic lights. In China, green is associated with the east, with sunrise, and with life and growth.

Brown: It is rarely attached to cultural events in both cultures. But in some cases it indicates more than the color itself. For example, tried to attract his attention, but he was in a brown study. Here brown means deep. While in Chinese culture, color brown is not been used and borrowed from English.

Yellow: The word yellow can be used as an adjective meaning cowardly. The color was also used to represent the Manchus in the new flag of China: Five Races under One Union, and also under the flag of Manchukuo. The legendary first emperor of China was known as the Yellow Emperor or Huang Di. Members of the imperial family of China at that time were the only ones allowed to display the color yellow in buildings and garments. The Yellow Turbans were a Daoist sect that staged an extensive rebellion during the Han Dynasty. In Association football (soccer), the referee shows a yellow card to indicate that a player has been officially cautioned because they have committed a foul or have wasted time. In American Football, a yellow flag is thrown onto the field by a referee to indicate a penalty. Originally in Rugby League and then later, also in Rugby Union, the referee shows a yellow card to indicate that a player has been sent to the sin bin. In auto racing, a yellow flag signals caution. Cars are not allowed to pass one another under a yellow flag. Yellow was also the color of the New Party in the Republic of China (Taiwan), which supports Chinese reunification.

Blue: Blue is commonly used in the Western hemisphere to symbolize the male gender in contrast to pink used for females. Blue is also often associated with high social position or being aristocratic. For example, blue blood means aristocratic lineage, as in “They boasted a lineage of pure blue blood”. Also, in American English blue book is not a book with a blue cover, rather it is a book with names of well-known persons, especially government officials. Blue may also have some pleasant associations. For example, a blue ribbon is a badge indicating the first prize in a competition, as in his entry at the state fair won a blue ribbon. And a bluestocking is a pedant female intellectual, as in “She is a veritable bluestocking, her nose always stuck in a book and her interests devoid of womanly pursuits”. The blue-collar jobs are manual work, or skilled, semiskilled or unskilled labor, as in “Boys from
blue-collar homes are still 4 times less likely to get to university than the children of parents in non-manual work.”

Purple: Purple is royalty. A mysterious color, purple is associated with both nobility and spirituality. The opposites of hot red and cool blue combine to create this intriguing color. Purple has a special, almost sacred place in nature: lavender, orchid, lilac, and violet flowers are often delicate and considered precious. The use of purple in familiar phrases can help a designer see how their color of choice might be perceived by others, both the positive and negative aspects. Good purple: purple cow-something remarkable, eye-catching, unusual, purple prose-exaggeration, highly imaginative writing (also has negative connotations). Bad purple: purple speech-profanity, raunchy language, Purple prose - exaggeration, colorful lies, purple haze-state of confusion or euphoria, possibly drug-induced, specific type of potent cannabis (marijuana), specific type of LSD.

Pink: Clothing: Pink (Victoria's Secret) is a line of loungewear clothing. In the United Kingdom, wearing a pink shirt is often an indicator of far-right political affiliation, worn by members of the National Front (United Kingdom) or the British National Party. Cosmetics: Mary Kay in 1968, Mary Kay Ash, purchased the first Pink Cadillac, which eventually became the trademark of her company. Economics: Pink Money refers to the financial power of the LGBT community. Education: At the Mira Loma Elementary School in San Francisco, California, on September 6, 2007, the principal, Ron Machado, got a pink Mohawk haircut, as he had agreed to do if the students raised the school’s Academic Performance Index by at least 55 points. They raised it by 67 points. Employment: When one gets laid off or fired from one's job, in the United States, it is called getting a pink slip. Finance: Since 1893 the London Financial Times newspaper has used a distinctive salmon pink color for its newsprint, mainly as a way to distinguish itself from competitors. In other countries, the salmon press identifies economic newspapers or economics sections in “white” newspapers. Gender: The color pink is often used to represent women or young girls. Health: In the pink is an English idiomatic expression for in good condition or in good health. Pink is the official color for Breast Cancer awareness.

Orange: It is rarely attached to cultural events in both cultures. And it is mainly used for color indication.

Strategies for Color Words’ Translations

Literal Translation

We use literal translation for translation of color words when both source and target languages share the same or nearly the same semantic imagination in the color word or words.

Literal Translation with Explanatory Notes

For some color words, it is hard to understand after literal translation, in this case, we have to give explanatory notes.

Free Translation

Due to cultural differences, color words in Chinese sometimes arouse different semantic imaginations than those in English, so dose on the contrary. And it is when literal translation or even with notes fail to cope with.

Cultural Equivalence

Cultural equivalence means color words in source language bear basic meanings, while in the target language they are replaced by other non-color words.
Functional Equivalence

It means in some cases we cannot resort to literal translations for some culturally distinctive color words or set phrases with color words so we translate them into words with identical semantics but without cultural features.

Conclusion

Color words, in the long-term evolution of human histories, have been infused into abundant cultural connotations, thus, they are not merely tools for color indication or description, but also have developed into cultural phenomena. So, if we want to do better translation of color words, we have to learn more about both cultures, and in the process of translation, we have the impression that literal translation is not always satisfactory, and for most cases a combination of different translation solutions is a better choice, so we usually blend literal translation, free translation, and literal translation with explanatory notes to make our translation authentic and acceptable.

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References