Viewing the Culture Difference between China and the West Based on Phrases and Idioms

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Keywords: Phrase, Culture Difference, Religious Culture, Mythology, Humane Ideas.

Abstract. Phrases are the essence of one culture representing the subtracted culture. It is a window to see different cultures. Phrase is a group of fixed words with tightly connected meaning, harmonious pronunciation. It is a unique unit of vocabulary including idiom, proverb and usage. Through comparison of historical origin, religious culture, regional culture, mythology and humane ideas, we can see some difference of the thought between the East and the West.

Introduction

American linguistician Edward Sapir says “Vocabulary of a language truly reflects its cultural context at certain extent. The linguistic history and cultural history are developing in parallel.” As languages with long history, both Chinese and English contain plenty of idiomatic phrases which not only connote featured folk cultures, but also imply deeper meanings of ethnic culture. To reveal the connotations of idiomatic phrases in Chinese and English is to unfold a scroll painting of ethnic history and culture, to display the ethnic customs of the two different types of cultures with different languages and the imprints from history and culture on the two languages.

As seen from cultural perspective, human beings are common in some aspects. That means people with different cultural background could have same cognition and understanding to same things or conducts. People from different regions and nations may share general characters in linguistic expression and mode of thinking. They are three aspects in this regard: 1) reflection of the unique region, customs and culture of a nation; 2) shared views of two nations with different cultural context for things; 3) reflection of the values, ethics and view of life of a nation.

As Wu Tieping said the associated meanings of some idiomatic phrases may be well recognized by people for their noticeable features, thus form a kind of orientation gradually and become consensuses in one or several linguistic groups. For example, in 49 BC, when Caesar leads the army across the Rubicon River, he burned their boats to say the determination of win. That’s the story of “burn one’s boat”. The same story happened in 209 BC, a Chinese general named Xiangyu, he leaded troops across Zhang river, and scuttled the boats means they cannot fail.

Definition of Chinese Phrases and English Idioms

Phrase is a fixed combination of conventional words characterized as semantic combination and phonetic harmony it is an independent use of lexical units, including idioms, proverbs, and sayings. Idioms generally have two characteristics: integrity of its meaning and structural stability.

Chinese idioms are fixed phrases formed by people from the long-term use and exercise in the process. It is greater than the words and the grammatical function is identical with the words of the language unit. Most of them are made up of four words. The specific structure is relatively fixed, meaning with integrity, time and space of idiomatic spread, historical formation, content and form of nationalism. It comes from historical stories, myths and legends, language legends, classical literary works. The so-called proverbs are a kind of phrase. Concise and popular and meaningful statement, it mostly reflects the people’s life and struggle experience.
Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (1994) gave a comprehensive definition of English idiom: (1) an expression whose meaning is not predictable from the usual meanings of its constituent elements, (2) a language, dialect, or style of speaking peculiar to a people, (3) a construction or expression of one language whose parts correspond to elements in another language but whose total structure or meaning is not matched in the same way in the second language.

From the definition of English idiom can we see its characteristics: 1) idiom is a word with multiple meanings, can be expressed by means of expression, the unique dialect, special figures’ special language; 2) idiom stressed the structure and significance of the overall.

Comparison of the Differences Between the Chinese Idioms and English Idioms

English idioms and Chinese idioms in their respective areas show their cultural excellences. However, due to the western countries cultural background, customs and habits, the English and Chinese idioms in translation meet a certain degree of difficulty. In the process of translation, there are some phenomena which can deserve further study and thought. We can see the national characteristics of the two languages in Chinese and English by way of the comparison.

Origin Difference of History

Culture exists in the long history, different countries have different historical background to create a variety of language and culture, historical events and figures are an important source of Idioms. “To meet Waterloo” should be translated into “the bad luck, a devastating blow, crowning calamity”. Literal translation should be avoided such as “meet someone at the place of Waterloo”. This idiom comes from a story of Napoleon who was severely defeated at the place of Waterloo during a war. So people now use “to meet Waterloo” to describe a person with unexpected consequences. Many Chinese idioms show the same way where the idioms derive. “众口铄金” “Public clamor can melt metals” is an idiom from 《国语》. It is one of the earliest works in China. It is written according to a certain order in the country with emphasis on the content of the historical figures of speech. At the same time, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and other academic schools also influenced the Chinese traditional culture greatly, and they became another important source of Chinese idioms. Such as “人之将死, 其言也善” People will die, his words are good, from 《论语》 “The Analects of Confucius”, “千里之行始于足下”, Every journey begins with the first step, from 《老子》 Lao Zi.

Difference of Religion

Idioms associated with religious beliefs are also heavily appearing in English and Chinese. English native speakers are mostly Christian, the Bible is the canon of Christianity, western culture is the spiritual pillar, with the passage of time, the religious value in the Bible gradually fade out, the story is widely accepted by the people of the world. “In the seventh heaven” for example should be translated in very happy and joyful. But to Chinese culture, heaven is surely related to death. In western religion, God and the angels live in heaven. Actually, one can be the same height in heaven together with God, it is a luck and happy blessing. Therefore, the translation of idioms is from the meaning of “happy”, “overwhelmed with joy.” The westerners believe in God who created and dominated the mankind and everything around us. So we often read the idioms as “Heaven is above all”, “God is where he was”.

China is one of the important sources of Buddhism. Buddhism values punitive justice. So Chinese idioms such as “善有善报”, “恶有恶报” Good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil.

Difference of Regional Culture

Every ethnic group lives in a fixed geographic range and the characteristics of geographical location determine the way of life, the form of social existence, which is the birth cradle of culture.
Early Chinese people lived in the inland, lives depended on farming. So some idioms are related to labor, such as: 刀耕火种、五谷丰登、春华秋实 slash-and-burn cultivation, produce good harvests, progression of seasons. And there is such an idiom in the United Kingdom: “carry coals to Newcastle”, Non English-speaking learners often literally translates the idiom into “Send the coal to Newcastle”, but the real meaning says, “send something to a place where there is no need for such a thing” because Newcastle is rich in coal.

Difference of Mythology

In English idioms, “between Scylla and Charybdis” is an idiom which shows us a mythology: Scylla originally is not a monster, but a beautiful and kind-hearted fairy. Greek hero Glauicus fell in love with her, but the witch Circe also loves with Glauicus. Out of jealousy, witch casted Hex will on Syrah which has turned her into a ferocious monster, lived in the rock, then Scylla lost Glauicus. And not far away from its Strait lived another monster who often made whirlpool, called Charybdis. Sailors tended to avoid one of the hazards, and fell into another disaster. So this idiom is used to describe a person who is out of danger in two equally dangerous things, and falls into the other.

Chinese ancient myths and legends have distinct characteristics. First of all, these myths and legends are rooted in the deep soil of real life, mostly related to labor. They sing praises of human labor, embodies the creation of human labor ability and cleverness. And second, that they all eulogize ideals and a kind of spirit of human and heroic devotion and a kind of indomitable spirit of struggle to face the difficulty and enemy. These spirits will always inspire people to fight for truth. Such as “女娲补天”, “大禹治水” “the goddess patching the sky”, “changer”, “King Yu combating the flood”.

Difference of Humanism

Humanism advocates promoting human glory, humanism theory advocates that people as the center, but because of the different views of people, problems about people involve many aspects, so humanism in China’s development and the development in the West are not the same. During the renaissance, humanism re-held in the west, emphasizing the value of human existence, the meaning of the existence of human freedom. Some English idioms express as the human status of the intelligent part of the universe: Man is the soul of the universe.” Man is the soul of the universe.” In English, there are some idioms of the self and self interest: “Everyone fastens where there is gain”. In China’s Confucianism, the individual is only a pawn of the big board. It is necessary to sacrifice personal interests for the overall interests. “严于律己，宽以待人” “Strict with oneself, broad-minded toward others.” Some proverbs also emphasize the importance of the collective. “众人拾柴火焰高”, “Great things may be done by mass effort”.

Conclusion

As stated by Cui Xiliang, “from the angle of linguistics, idiomatic phrases contain the richest cultural connotations, reflect the most wonderful cultural world, imply the most profound philosophy of dealing with the world, and mirror the most honest popular feeling. Idiomatic phrases are governing our behavior, influence our judgment and culture. The associated meanings of some idiomatic phrases may be well recognized by people for their noticeable features, thus form a kind of orientation gradually and become consensuses in one or several linguistic groups.”

Idioms, as a form of language, its unique charm is that it is the essence of national culture, which reflects the commonness of a nation's culture reflects the personality -- by the nation's history, religion, regional culture, mythology and the idea of humanism and the influence. Different nationalities gave birth to the unique culture in the long historical process. Through the comparison
of Chinese and Western idioms, we can make a better and more comprehensive understanding of the western world from the other point of view, which will play a positive and important role in the communication between Chinese and Western cultures.

References