

A Cultural Comparison of Color Terms and Their Translation^{*}

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Abstract: As culture-loaded words, color terms are rich in cultural connotation. The paper probes into both cultural similarities and differences in English and Chinese color terms. Through a proper cultural comparison, a translator should take flexible approaches in translating English and Chinese color terms and related expressions.

Key words: English and Chinese color terms cultural comparison translation

1. Introduction

Chinese and Western cultures have similarities as well as differences, which brings about a great influence upon both English and Chinese. Color terms are playing a more and more important role in human communication, especially in bilingual communication. On the one hand, as different peoples have different historical and cultural backgrounds and different social customs, the referential and pragmatic meanings of color terms may be quite different or even opposite in languages. On the other hand, different peoples have similarities in thinking and social activities, so they inevitably have similar color-term expressions. The former can be called universals in languages, and the latter characteristics in languages. Through a cultural comparison, a translator should take flexible approaches in translating English and Chinese color terms and related expressions.

2. Cultural Factors in English and Chinese Color Terms

2.1 Cultural similarities

Color terms play an important role in human life. Though different peoples have different languages and customs and also have different expressions of color terms, their thinking and social activities share a lot in common, which makes it possible for color terms to have similar uses in different languages.

Firstly, color terms offer a vivid visual image, so the naming of objects with such terms reflects the human common recognition of objective things. According to different skin colors, human beings, for example, are divided into four major races: whites (白色人种), yellows (黄色人种), blacks (黑色人种) and browns (棕色人种). Moreover, people use color terms to name countless things of the world, including animals, plants and inanimate beings, such as white ants (白蚁), green tea (绿茶), white light (白光) and black hole (黑洞).

Secondly, as different colors have different wavelengths, they act on human sensory organs differently and produce different sensations on human beings. From the aspect of visual sensation, color terms can be classified into cool and warm colors. The former ones give us a sense of peace, elegance or purity, such as white, green and blue, whereas the latter ones offer a sense of liveliness, happiness or warmth, such as red, yellow and orange. Because of this, the new theory of Kay and McDaniel shows that colors bring about various perceptions on human sensory organs, and also produce different associations, so that they provide themselves with various semantic

^{*} This is part of the JSTU research project (NO: KYY04016).

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meanings (1978: 610-646). For example, the color term white (白) can be used to express purity or elegance in both English and Chinese, and also used in a simile like “as white as snow” (白似雪).

Thirdly, color terms of similar cultural connotations are related to special historical phenomena in English and Chinese. Consider the color term “purple” (紫) for example. In English “purple” used to denote wealth or dignity as “紫” in Chinese. As a traditional English royal color, “purple” usually appears in such expressions as “to be born to (or in) purple” (出身于王室) and “to raise somebody to the purple” (升某人为红衣主教或使某人称帝). In feudal China, it was “紫服” (purple clothes) that high officials and noble lords wore. In spoken Chinese there also exist some common sayings like “红得发紫” --- (of a person) extremely popular. Actually, the proper color term to match “purple” in English is “黄” (yellow) in Chinese, which used to be called the Color of Emperor.

2.2 Cultural differences

Generally speaking, different peoples have their own fondness for color terms in different cultures. For instance, “green” means a taboo for Brazilians, “yellow” for Japanese, “red” for Belgians, “multicolor” for Turks, and “black” for Europeans and Americans. In other words, the same color term, for different peoples, almost always has somewhat different cultural connotations.

From the aspect of traditional Chinese and Western cultures, most color terms have different or even opposite cultural connotations. Though there are some similarities of the color term “red” (红) in both English and Chinese, this term, however, has more differences in both languages. In a traditional Chinese wedding, a bride usually wears in red, and a bridegroom a red cloth flower on the chest. In Western countries, a bride, however, is dressed in white to symbolize purity, which means a lot in difference from a mourner’s wearing in white at a traditional Chinese funeral. In traditional Chinese plays, there is a famous figure called “Red Face Guan Gong”. As he is honest and loyal in history (of Three Kingdoms, A.D. 220-280), the color term “red” here contains the meaning of honesty and loyalty. In English the color term “red” can refer to cruelty and bloodiness. It is said that this is related to British William II nicknamed “William Rufus”, who was very cruel and killed people like flies.

In both English and Chinese “red” (红) can be used for some expressions related to special cultural backgrounds, but the same term has different cultural meanings more often than not. In Chinese “红” symbolizes revolution or socialism in a number of expressions like “红卫兵” (the Red Guard) and “红旗” (red flag) with a commendatory meaning. “Red” in English, however, basically has a derogatory meaning of danger or violence. For example, Red means (of a person) supporting Socialism or Communism in some expressions like “fighting Red guerillas” (与赤色游击队作战). In English, “red belt” ever means the area controlled by Communists or pre-Soviet Union, which is closely related to the conflicting political systems of socialist and capitalist countries.

“Red” (红) also has other different meanings in English and Chinese. In English, “red” may have a meaning of revelry, corruption or terror, such as in the expressions “to paint the town red” (狂欢作乐), “to see red” (发怒), and “red tape in government offices” (政府机关的官僚习气), which rarely appears in the Chinese expressions with “红”. In economy and trade, “red” in English means debt in such expressions as “in /into/out of the red”, which comes from the old habit of writing down the money of the debit side in red at a meeting. As for “赤字” in Chinese, in the author’s opinion, it results from the literal translation of the related English expression with “red” above. Of course, “红” in Chinese has some semantic meanings that “red” in English doesn’t. In Chinese, “红颜薄命”, for instance, means “a beauty with an unfortunate life”. Occasionally, “红” in Chinese may have a derogatory connotation. “红眼病” in Chinese, as a pun, refers to one’s jealousy as well as an eye disease --- pink eyes. If we make use of an English color-term expression to express the connotation of jealousy, it must be

“green-eyed”.

3. Three Translation Approaches

3.1 Literal translation

Literal translation, also called equivalent translation, means a direct transfer of the source language to the target language. This translation is based on the semantic equivalence and the similar hidden cultural connotation between languages. Take the color term “white” (白) for example. Here are some expressions of literal translation, such as “white flag” (白旗), “white-faced” (脸色苍白), “white of an egg” (蛋白), “to turn up the whites of one’s eyes” (翻白眼) and “to make black white or to turn black into white” (颠倒黑白). Wang Anshi, a famous poet of the Song Dynasty, ever wrote such well-known lines --- 春风又绿江南岸，明月何时照我还? The color term “绿” (green) has been highly evaluated for its magic power in conveying the poet’s feelings. On the one hand, the term vividly depicts a sense of kinesthesia while spring wind is blowing; on the other hand, it visually portrays a sunlit and enchanting scene of early spring in the South. In this way, the poet’s deep and eager homesickness is revealed forcefully. The following is Burton Watson’s translation.

Spring wind of itself turns the south shore green,
But what bright moon will light me home?

In the above, Chinese “绿” (green) serves as a verb and here is literally translated into the English “turn... green”, which is not only faithful to the image of the source language but also suitable for the Westerners’ aesthetic conceptions. The famous English poet Byron ever wrote “Vernal breezes green the Thames with a kiss” (春风一吻泰河绿), of which the image, as it happens, is almost the same as that of the Chinese above.

3.2 Liberal translation

Liberal translation refers to an approach to master the spirit of the source language by means of penetrating its superficial denotation so as to reveal and express its deep connotation in the target language. This translation is well-founded on the cultural differences (including cultural gaps) of two languages. Similarly, take the color term “white” (白) for example. Here are some expressions of liberal translation, such as “white coffee” (加奶咖啡), “white hope” (有希望的人), “white day” (吉日), “white lie” (善意的谎言) and “white moments of one’s life” (人生得意之时). In the first chapter of the Chinese classic *A Dream of Red Mansions*, there appears such a sentence.

贾爷.....也曾留下话与和尚转达老爷，说：“读书人不在‘黄道’，‘黑道’，总以事理为要。”

Here is the Yangs’ translation:

Mr Jia... asked the monk to tell that scholars are not superstitious about lucky or unlucky days but like to act according to reason.

(Xianyi, Yang & Gladys Yang, 2003)

In the light of the ancient Chinese superstition, “黄道” means “吉日” (auspicious days), and “黑道” refers to “凶日” (inauspicious days). In traditional Chinese culture, the color “黄” (yellow) is considered as a symbol of dignity or power; and the nether world is full of darkness and cruelty, so “黑” (black) is used to symbolize evilness, ominousness or death (唐振华, 1997). Evidently, the connotative meanings of “黄” and “黑” in Chinese are quite different from those of “yellow” and “black” in English.

3.3 Annotation translation

Annotation translation, also called literal translation with a proper note, means a method of combining a literal transfer of the source language to the target language with a necessary note to elaborate the rich cultural

connotation of the source language. At present, the Chinese version “牛奶路” of “the Milky Way” in English has been re-evaluated positively, for what we need to do here is only add a note to such a Chinese version. What’s more, we can in this way reveal and spread its cultural connotation of Greek mythology better. In English “white hat” is often liberally translated into the Chinese “好人”. By annotation translation, this English phrase may have its literal Chinese version “戴白帽的(人)” and then be added with a note to explain that the meaning --- “a good person” of the phrase “white hat” comes from a good figure’s hat being always in white in American western movies. Here is also a sentence in the first chapter of *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

却说那女娲氏炼石补天之时.....只用了三万六千五百块，单单只剩下一块未用，弃在青埂峰下。

At the very beginning of the novel, the writer mentions that a block of stone is deserted at the foot of the Peak, but why is the Peak named “青埂峰” not “黄埂峰” or “红埂峰”? Even a Chinese reader will not understand the expression if he fails to perceive its connotative meaning, let alone a foreign reader. In this case, the Yangs provide a note explaining that “青埂峰” is a “homophone for ‘roots of love’ ” (情根) so as to highlight Jia Baoyu --- a love maniac in the source language (Xianyi, Yang & Gladys, Yang, 2003; 唐振华, 1997). The Yangs’ translation is as follows.

When the goddess Nü Wa melted down rocks to repair the sky, she used only thirty-six thousand five hundred of these and threw the remaining block down at the foot of Blue Ridge Peak.

(Xianyi, Yang & Gladys Yang, 2003)

4. Conclusion

Translation is a transfer between languages based on linguistic comparative studies. Only by a lot of comparative studies on the similarities and differences of color terms, are we able to discover their deep and rich cultural connotations and exactly understand and faithfully express them. As for English and Chinese color terms, literal translation is a basic approach to translation, which is predicated on the cultural constants. Liberal translation means a further development of literal translation, which is determined by the cultural differences. So annotation translation denotes a comprehensive practice of literal and liberal translations for the purpose of cultural spreading and transplantation. These three approaches are never absolute or isolated but relative and connective in translation. While translating English and Chinese color terms and related color-term expressions, we should make a flexible use of the three to achieve a satisfactory result.

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(Edited by Jessica, Doris and Wendy)