

A Contrastive Analysis of English and Chinese Idioms About Color Words & Their Cultural Connotations

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There are many idioms related to color words in English and Chinese. The use of color words in idioms adds beauty and vividness to the language. Due to the cultural differences, “color idioms” have gained different cultural connotations with the development of English and Chinese languages. It is of great significance to accurately understand and grasp the meanings and differences of color-related idioms in Chinese and English. This paper intends to analyze and expound the cultural connotations of English and Chinese idioms related to several widely used basic color words with the aim of helping English learners know and use the idioms about color words better.

Keywords: idioms about color words, cultural connotation, contrastive analysis

Introduction

Color words refer to words that describe various colors in the world. The compound words or idioms composed of color words and other words are collectively called “color idioms”. Human’s cognition of color is the most basic and direct, while color words or color idioms are the clearest, most intuitive, and most vivid image schema for human cognition. However, due to the different cultural factors, such as geographical environment, customs, religious beliefs, etc., the frequency of using color words is different and some usages even contradict each other, which fully reflects the different values and aesthetic ideas of English-speaking and Chinese-speaking people. Because of cultural factors, there may be differences in the classification of colors among different ethnic groups, but their views on colors tend to be consistent (Shao, 2013). This paper intends to analyze and expound the cultural connotations of English and Chinese idioms related to several commonly used basic color words (red, black, white, green, blue, and yellow).

Idioms Related to Red

In English, red symbolizes happiness, auspiciousness, joy, jubilation, and enthusiasm. But most Americans do not like red. They think red is boring, because it means stop. In addition, red is often associated with “fire and blood” in English, which symbolizes cruelty and bloodshed. More examples of different categories are listed:

1. Red indicating celebration: e.g., red-letter days (i.e., happy days), to pull/roll out the red carpet (i.e., to warmly welcome someone), and to paint the town red (i.e., to have fun, drink and make mischief).

2. Red indicating danger, deficit, sexual desire, anger, profiteering, excitement, failure, etc.: e.g., raise a red flag (the red flag is the signal of possible danger), be in the red (i.e., be in the debt), red flag to a bull's (i.e., the red cloth that stimulates the cow's anger or something that irritates someone), red-light district (i.e., a part of a town where there are many prostitutes), red alert (i.e., emergency alarm), red revenge (i.e., bloody revenge), and be red-blooded (i.e., having strong sexual desire and vitality).

3. Red meaning to divert attention or to be related to the custom in a specific event: e.g., draw a red herring across the track/path/trail (i.e., draw away hounds by using smoked herring to stop them from following the prey), and red tape (i.e., being bureaucratic).

In Chinese, red mainly symbolizes happiness, smoothness, success, attention, or welcome. For example, on festive days, red lanterns should be hung, red couplets and red Chinese character “福 (fu)” (“fu”: means happiness and blessings) should be posted; people who are favored by their bosses and superiors are called “红人” (i.e., people who are popular), and people's favorable situations are called “走红” (i.e., be gaining popularity). In Chinese, red symbolizes revolution and progress. For example, “红色政权 (the red regime)”, “红军 (the Red Army)”, and “又红又专 (those people who are politically ambitious and work/study hard in their own field are usually called as “being both socialist-minded and professionally competent)”. Red also symbolizes beauty, such as “红妆 (red makeup)” referring to “women's full makeup”, and “红颜 (red appearance)” referring to “women's glamorous appearance”.

Idioms Related to Black

Among all the color words, black is the one with the worst meaning, and black is usually regarded as “the color of death” in English-speaking countries. Both black and white have been symbols of darkness and light since ancient times. Black symbolizes gloom, anger, evil, death, etc.: e.g., “to be in a black mood” (i.e., to be depressed), “to look black at sb.” (i.e., to glare at sb. with fury), “to be dressed in black” (i.e., to be in black for a funeral), “a black market” (i.e., an illegal market), and “be black in the face” (i.e., be blue and very angry). In addition, “Black Friday” in English refers to “the Friday when Jesus suffered before Easter”, which is a sad day. “A black dog” in English refers to “a sad or depressed person”, and “a black future” is usually used to describe a bleak prospect.

In Chinese culture, black can be both commendatory and derogatory. In ancient times, “black” carried a heavy sense of mystery in Chinese culture. It was a noble, resolute, and solemn color. Because black is similar to the color of iron, ancient Chinese often used black to symbolize the positive qualities, such as straightforwardness, perseverance, solemnity, and selflessness. Therefore, in traditional Chinese operas, “black” is often used for the historical figures with the noble qualities of integrity and selflessness. For example, “black” facial makeup is used for Bao Zheng¹. In Chinese, “black” can also symbolizes evil, death, secrets, corruption, etc., such as “黑帮 (gangsters)”, “黑店 (black shops)”, “黑手 (black hands)”, “黑幕 (shady deals)”, “黑话 (slangs or jargon)”, “官场黑暗 (dark officialdom)”, and so on.

¹ Bao Zheng (960-1127), better known for his vernacular title of “Lord Bao” or “Justice Bao”, was a historical figure and government official who lived in the Northern Song Dynasty and was famous for being impartial and incorruptible (Zhang, 2020).

Idioms Related to White

White is often used to express purity and beauty in English. For example, the bride wears a white wedding dress at a western wedding, which symbolizes the purity and beauty of love. However, white has little to do with the color itself in some English idioms, e.g., “white lies” (i.e., lies with good intention), “white nights” (i.e., sleepless nights), “white wars” (i.e., wars without smoke of gunpowder, often referring to economic wars), “white hands” (i.e., people who are impartial and incorruptible), “the white way” (i.e., the brightly lit business district in the city), “white goods” (i.e., household electric appliances with large sizes), “white money” (i.e., silver coins), white sale (i.e., be on sale), and “white elephants” (i.e., expensive but useless objects or things that the owner does not need but cannot dispose of).

In Chinese, the meaning of white is mostly derogatory because of the influence of China’s Five Elements Theory or China’s Wuxing Theory. For example, after the death of a loved one, family members should wear “white mourning clothes” (白孝服), “practice the funeral ceremony” (办白事), “set up a white mourning hall” (设白色灵堂), and “hold white banners” (打白幡) at the funeral. In the old days, the white tiger was regarded as a fierce god, and the woman who brought bad luck to men was called “the white tiger demon” (白虎精). In Chinese, white also represents the counter-revolutionary side in political concepts, such as “white terror” (白色恐怖).

Idioms Related to Green

Green has many connotations in English. Green can mean jealousy and envy. It is said that jealousy, unhappiness, or disease will result in the excessive secretion of yellow bile in human body and one of its symptoms is the blue or pale face or eyes, so there is an idiom “green with envy” in English. In Shakespeare’s famous tragedy *Othello*, there is the green-eyed monster, which means jealousy. In English, green also means being inexperienced, a lack of training, etc. Both “green hand” and “as green as grass” mean being naive, inexperienced. In addition, in western culture, green not only symbolizes youth and vitality, such as “in the green” and “a green old age”, but also shows freshness, such as “keep the memory green” (i.e., will never forget).

In Chinese, green symbolizes vitality and youthful vigor, as well as positive praise, e.g., “红男绿女 (gaudily dressed men and women)” refers to “young men and women full of youthful vigor”; “桃红柳绿 (peach trees are in blossom and willows turn green)” describes colorful spring scenes, and “绿林好汉 (outlaws)” refers to “people who gather in the mountains to rob the rich and help the poor”. In addition, green also has the derogatory meaning in Chinese, symbolizing inferiority. For example, in ancient times, people from the lower class wore green clothes. If the wife has an affair with another man and makes her husband look disgraced, her husband will be thought as a man who is wearing a “绿帽子 (green hat)”, which means her husband is a cuckold.

Idioms Related to Blue

When it comes to blue, it is natural for people to think of the sky and the sea. The color of blue makes people feel extremely cool, pleasant, and calm. Blue has less connotations in Chinese, while blue is a color word with rich meanings in English. It can symbolize nobility and power. For instance, “blue blood” implies a noble family, and “the blue book” is a book about celebrities. In some competitive activities, “the blue ribbon” is a symbol of honor. For instance, a kind of beer was named as “Blue Ribbon Beer” with the implication of “the best beer”. Blue also symbolizes melancholy and depression, such as “to be/fall in the blue” (i.e., listless), “love is blue”

(i.e., love is sad). In addition, blue also symbolizes vulgarity, such as “blue films” (i.e., pornographic movies), “to make a blue joke”, and “the blue revolution”. More idioms related to blue are provided, such as “blue milk” (i.e., milk mixed with water), “blue stocking” (i.e., a female pedant or scholar who ignores female charm and decoration), and “true blue” (i.e., sincere care or love for a person or an organization).

Idioms Related to Yellow

In English, yellow generally implies something negative and has bad connotations. Yellow means timidity, cowardliness, and despicableness, e.g., “a yellow-livered coward”.

In Chinese, yellow is an honorable color and used exclusively by the feudal emperors, so yellow has the connotation of being sublime, noble, and brilliant, e.g., “黄袍 (the imperial robe)”, “黄榜 (an imperial edict, i.e. the edict from the emperor)”, and “黄马褂 (the yellow jacket”, i.e., the official uniform given by the emperor to the civil and military loyal officials). In addition, in modern Chinese, the Chinese character “黄” (yellow) often appears in some derogatory terms, which means “being obscene and depraved”, e.g., “黄色电影、黄色书刊 (pornographic movies, pornographic books and periodicals)” and “黄赌毒 (pornography, gambling, drug abuse and trafficking)”. While in English, yellow does not mean obscenity and pornography, e.g., “yellow journalism” refers to “newspapers and news that attract readers with words of vulgar taste and lurid reports”. However, yellow symbolizes “decline, sadness, and death” and is associated with diseases and warnings in both English and Chinese. For example, “面黄肌瘦 (being emaciated with sallow complexion)” in Chinese means “poor health”, while “yellow blight” in English refers to “a kind of disease often seen among crops”, and “yellow flag” is a yellow flag hung by the crew on the seagoing vessel to indicate an epidemic.

Conclusion

In a word, the usage of idioms about colors in English and Chinese shares both similarities and differences. Idioms are like mirrors, reflecting the customs and cultural background of different countries. Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, to accurately understand color idioms and use them properly, it is necessary to understand the cultural background and traditional customs behind the idioms about color words.

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