

# The Analysis of Cultural Connotation in English-Chinese Translation

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**Abstract.** Language is an important and prominent component of culture. Rich cultural connotation conveys endless cultural information. English and Chinese are the languages that have distinguishing features and exist differences in their expressions and customs. Translation can exchange politics, economy and culture of different countries and nations, so the culture of a country can be shared and used by other countries to promote national cultural prosperity and innovation. By knowing the connection between language and culture, this article delves into the cultural connotation of the two languages from color words, customs, religious belief and idioms which reflect the key cultural factors in language and the similarities and differences between cultures in translation. This helps us understand the commonality of human culture and discern their individuality, therefore, we can not only achieve the equivalent of the linguistic meaning, but also achieve the equivalent in the true cultural sense.

**Keywords:** Cultural connotation, language, translation

## 1 The Connection between Language and Culture

Any language can be regarded as a symbolic system that reflects a specific culture and is a manifestation of the subjective and objective world of the culture. This nature of language determines the inextricable link between the language we use and the culture we have. This connection is particularly close to those linguistic phenomena that embody the unique characteristics of a culture. The structure and meaning of language are based on the cultural experience of language users.

Broadly speaking, culture is a combination of material wealth and spiritual wealth created in the historical development of human society, which includes history, geography, literature, art, music, architecture, technology and philosophy. The elements of “Big C” culture refer to achievement culture such as art, literature, music, architecture, heritage of civilization and thought (Lussier, 2011). In a narrow sense, culture is a way of life, an environment in which we live, think, feel and connect with others, and is also the glue that binds people together. It is a national behavior pattern, customs, lifestyle, and behavior. “Little c” culture refers to behavior culture, and culturally-influenced beliefs and perceptions, or ideas (Lussier, 2011).

Language and culture are interrelated and mutually restrictive. Culture creates a rich language, but also produces huge differences between languages. These differences are not only reflected in the structure of the language itself, but also in its embedded semantics. The variety of different language vocabularies is caused by their distinct cultural backgrounds. It is also noted that vocabulary is a mirror reflecting culture. For example, a country's political economy, customs and habits are reflected in vocabulary, and many words have specific cultural information and rich cultural connotations. Language is also the carrier of culture. Its rich cultural connotation and cultural load convey endless cultural information. Language is a part of culture and plays an important role in culture. Rocher, an anthropologist, believes that “Culture is a connection of ideas and feelings accepted by the majority of people in a society” (Mahadi, 2002). Without language, there is no culture; from another perspective, language is influenced by culture, reflecting culture.

Language can reflect the characteristics of a nation. It not only contains the historical and cultural background of a nation, but also represents a nation's view of life, and way of life. National culture is formed historically in the course of survival and development of each nation. It condenses the

achievements of understanding and reforming the world under natural and social conditions in which the nation has been living for generations. All national cultures in human society are integral parts of development, and represent the uniqueness of the history, social system, lifestyle, and geographical environment. Those are the biggest challenge in translation. The difficulty and ease of translation is not much related to language, but rather mainly related to culture. Therefore, we should pay full attention to cultural factors in language and the similarities and differences between cultures in translation. This helps us understand the commonality of human culture and discern their individuality, therefore, we can not only achieve the equivalent of the linguistic meaning, but also achieve the equivalent in the true cultural sense.

In another word, language is not self-contained and does not exist in isolation. It is rooted in the soil of the national culture which it belongs to. Language is also a social phenomenon. A certain language represents and reflects a certain social culture. In order to master a language, one must understand the underlying culture.

## 2 The Cultural Connotation Reflected by Color Words

English and Chinese have different linguistic habits and customs. The methods and words used to express color are also different, which means that the understanding and use of the same color can also be different. With the continuous development of human civilization, the vocabulary of expressing color has been enriched accordingly, and its meaning has also derived many new connotations from the original expression of a certain color, thus better illustrated human language to make it more vivid, rich and colorful.

In China, everything that is related to auspiciousness, prosperity, and excitement would prefer to use 红(red) to express, such as 红利 (bonus), 红火 (prosperous), 红包 (red envelope). When it is said to be smooth and successful, it is also indicated by red, such as 披红 (dress red), 开门红 (open door red), and 满堂红 (full house red). In Chinese New Year, the Spring Festival couplets are written in red paper, red lanterns which are hung in front of the door, and red wedding papers are used to sculpt the words 'happiness'. In English, red means extremely dangerous, urgent, angry, such as red alarm of emergency alert, red light at intersection, see red and waving red flag when irritating.

Chinese people usually connect 白 (white) with funeral, decay and futility, and other things, symbolizing painful sorrow, decaying reactionary, worthless. White has more derogatory meaning. For example, people usually talked about 白日梦 (daydreaming), 白丁 (minster), 白卷 (blank sheet of paper), 白干 (useless work), and 一穷二白 (economically poor and culturally blank). However, in English-speaking countries, white is associated with purity, innocence, wholeness and completion. It also contains derogatory meaning such as white marriage, white war, white lies, white spirit, days marked with a white stone.

In Chinese, the association of 蓝(blue)is beautiful and peaceful, like 蓝天 (blue sky), and 蓝色海洋 (blue sea). But in English, blue symbolizes loyalty, wisdom, intelligence, faith and heaven, such as, in a blue mood, having the blues, and a blue Monday. Blue is also often used to indicate social status, power or origin. For example, "he is a real blue blood" means "he is a real noble". In American English, blue book is a book that publishes celebrities, especially government officials. Blue room refers to the reception room where the President of the White House meets his friends and relatives.

## 3 The Cultural Connotation Reflected by Different Customs

In ancient China, 龙 (dragons) were used as auspicious objects, and they were able to swallow the clouds and spit the clouds, and overturn the clouds and rain. In the ancient myths, Chinese ancestors were mostly characterized by dragons. The emperors in Qin and Han dynasties mostly regarded themselves as dragon species, since then, dragon and the feudal dynasty had formed an indissoluble bond. People undertook dragon as the embodiment of the festive auspicious and the god of cloud rain and the dragon-shaped pattern symbolized dignity and solemnity. It can be seen that the dragon is everywhere in Chinese culture. It is a symbol of authority, strength, auspiciousness, and its associative meaning is derogatory such as 龙颜 (noble face), 望子成龙 (hope children to have a bright future), 乘龙快婿 (a handsome son-in-law), 龙凤呈祥 (good luck and happiness). The dragon is a specialty of

Chinese culture and a cultural personality. In the Greek and Roman mythology, the dragon is a huge lizard with long tails and scales, fire in the mouth, and wings. It is a brutal monster with four feet. It is often used to protect the treasures of property. In English, although the dragon also gives people the association of power, its metaphor is derogatory, which gives people the intention to associate with fierce, cruel beasts and often reminds people of Western ancient legends, and mythical guards.

For example: She was guarded by a woman obviously her mother, who tried to stare Hagan down with a cold arrogance that made him want to punch her in the face. The angel child and the dragon mother, Hagan thought, returning the mother's cold stare.

"Dragon" in the sentence is compared with "angel", which creates two distinct implications. This further strengthens the angel child, while the mother is vicious and also implies the child is a valuable asset to her mother and her mother has an obligation to guard her treasure. Therefore, this animal image, dragon, plays an irreplaceable role in the original text. In Chinese translation, on one hand, we can use simile to maintain the animal image of the original text, on the other hand, emotional words can be added to point out the difference between English and Chinese dragon. Western people think that dragons are evil representatives, and a kind of ferocious, strange beast with devil's incarnation. The differences between Chinese and English give the same animal different implications. The images that are brought to two cultural mindsets are divergent. If people want to introduce the term "dragon" to Westerners, it will be less confusing to use the phrase "the Chinese dragon" instead of "the dragon." (Shi, 2015)

#### **4 The Cultural Connotation Reflected by Different Religious Beliefs**

Religion is a social historical phenomenon, which is a form of human social consciousness. It is a self-consciousness or self-feeling of people who cannot grasp their own destiny in the face of nature, society and life. Therefore, they seek some kind of transcendence as fate relying on spirituality.

In Western religions, there is an absolute authority, such as Jesus in Christianity, God Jehovah in Catholicism, whose words and deeds are guidelines for the life of the believers. Bible records the words and deeds of God and Jesus, and the actions of believers under their guidance. Westerners believe in religions and think that the world is created by God and all arrangements in the world are God's will. The power of the church is often above the king and the monarch. The concept of God has a strong Christian color and is the characteristic of European and American culture. Related idioms are proposed, such as god bless me, my god, god helps those who help themselves; for Christ's sake; as poor as the church mouse; go to heaven. In China, Buddhism has been introduced for more than a thousand years. People believe that Buddha is the dominant factor in the world. There are many idioms related to it, such as offering Buddha by flowers, holding Buddha's feet temporarily, Buddha's blessings.

#### **5 The Cultural Connotation Reflected by Different Idioms**

Idioms have strong cultural characteristics and are the core and essence of language. Both Chinese and English have a large number of idioms, proverbs and metaphors. Their structure, semantics and usage are largely restricted by the specific cultural environment. Therefore, they can generally reflect culture and difference in language. English is a perfect language for all people to learn and the culture of English nation is a melting pot for all ethnic groups in the West. The British and Americans seem to have a special preference for proverbs. Francis Bacon said, "The genius, wisdom and spirit of a nation can be found in its proverbs." Therefore, it is necessary to learn English language in order to understand English nation.

For example: From clogs to clogs is only three generations.

If you don't understand its historical background, this proverb can only be literally translated as "There are only three generations from wooden to wooden", and its fables are undoubtedly hidden.

From clogs to clogs is only three generations, from proverbial saying, in late 19th century, said to be a Lancashire proverb. The clog, a shoe with a thick wooden sole, was worn by manual workers in the north of England. The implication is that the energy and ability required to raise a person's material status from poverty is often not continued to the third generation, and that the success is therefore not sustained (The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, 2006). After clarifying this historical background,

this sentence can be translated as "There are only three generations from poverty to poverty" or "If they do nothing, the third generation will become poor."

The incomprehensibility of the different ethnic groups in English language is mainly reflected in the pattern of It / he is + adj. + n. + that-clause. This sentence pattern is ubiquitous in English proverbs, such as "It is a good horse that never stumbles; It is a silly goose that comes to the fox's sermon." English and American people think positively in such sentences, but they should think negatively in translation, i.e. using the method of reverse translation, saying the opposite in the right way. The original text of that-clause in the sentence is affirmative to be translated as a negation. For example, the above two sentences should be translated as "The best horse will also lose its hoof" and "The stupid goose will not go to the fox to preach." Another example is an old Chinese saying, which is called "A wise father knows his child". There is also a similar English idiom, "It is a wise father that knows his child." At first glance, the two idioms have the same meaning, but their meanings are opposite. Chinese idiom emphasizes that fathers know children best; while English idiom means that even fathers don't necessarily know children. If we do not pay attention to the differences of thinking modes in culture, it is difficult to interpret them properly.

Using movement as a metaphor to represent certain qualities of a character is a common phenomenon among languages. However, the cultural environment formed by these metaphors is very different, so animals used to refer to people's qualities are different in different languages. Being familiar with these cultural and linguistic differences can help us avoid the hard copy when translating such metaphors. In order to balance the cultural and linguistic habits of both the original and the translated language, we have to abandon the consistency of the form and pursue the equivalent of meaning. For example, there is an expression of "as timid as a rabbit" in English. There is also an animal image associated with "timid" in Chinese, which is not a rabbit but a rat. There is a saying in Chinese that "the tiger's butt is untouchable", and the corresponding English says "Don't beard the lion or don't tease the lion". Lions and tigers are used to compare fierceness. Chinese often uses ox as a metaphor, while English uses horse as a metaphor. For example, when it means reluctance, the Chinese say "The ox does not drink water and press the head", while in English, it says "You can take a horse to the water, but you cannot make it drink."

The biggest danger in translation comprehension is the fake friends between the original language and the translated language. Their referential meanings are the same, but the pragmatic meaning (mainly metaphorical) is completely different, even the opposite. "Pull one's leg" is not equal to "pull one's leg back"; "eat one's words" means retracting what one has said, especially in a humiliated way; "wash one's hands of" is not equal to "wash hands"; To say that a person is "walking away from the dead" means that he is emptiness and arbitrarily squandering his life. He said that a person is "a walking skeleton", but he only refers to the body, regardless of the spirit, meaning that he is skinny.

## 6 Conclusion

Language is an important tool for communication in human society, and it is also an important and prominent component of culture. Language vocabulary is the most obvious tool for carrying cultural information and reflecting human social life. The cultural connotation of English and Chinese is extremely rich. It is noted that each language has its unique language system and construction. Each nation has its own living habits, ways of thinking, language psychology, norms of behavior, and value. Each nation's unique concepts and cultural traditions determine certain characteristics of the national language, and carry out some special cultural meaning. If people in a certain nation do not understand the cultural factors of a particular ethnic group, it is difficult to conduct effective and smooth communication. We can correctly understand and accurately grasp and use this language only by understanding the background knowledge of English and Chinese culture. In order to carry out more effective and smooth communication, it is necessary to master the deep connotation of vocabulary in the two languages.

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