

## *Original Paper*

# The Translation of Chinese and English Color Words Based on Cultural Difference

Li Chunying<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The College of Post and Telecommunication of WIT, Wuhan, Hubei 430073, China

\* Li Chunying, The College of Post and Telecommunication of WIT, Wuhan, Hubei 430073, China

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### **Abstract**

*In theory the human visual impression of color is basically the same, but there are many differences of historical backgrounds in different nationalities, also include living customs, religious beliefs, moral beliefs, etc., they will give commonality and difference to the meaning of color words.*

*This paper compares the cultural connotations of color words in Chinese and English, attempts to explain their differences from the aspects of ethnic psychology, religious beliefs, emotion etc., and put forward some translation methods of color words, aiming to help more people understand Chinese and Western cultures and better carry out cultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world.*

### **Keywords**

*color words, cultural difference, translation method*

## **1. Introduction**

The British cultural anthropologist, Edward Taylor first used culture as a central concept in his book *The Primitive Culture* in 1871, and systematically elaborated its meaning as follows, "Culture is a complex body, and it includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morality, laws, customs, abilities and habits learned in other communities". Different cultures will naturally show different cultural patterns, which are reflected in language differences. It is precisely because of this that the color words produced in social culture are different because of the different soils they produce, the implication they have, and the information they carry, this creates cultural differences. Because cultural differences are also obstacles to cross-cultural communication and translation, it is important for language learners to understand their differences in culture and learn how to handle these differences in inter-cultural communication.

This paper is designed to compare the meanings of some common color words in English and Chinese, and to identify the similarities and differences among them. In order to achieve communicative purposes, we must consider the cultural factor in the translation of color words. In the current stage, the translation literature still has shortcomings and deficiencies in various aspects. However, we believe that as long as the majority of English teachers and foreign language workers fully understand the factors that affect all aspects of translation, and keep exploring and practicing, they will be able to usefully improve the people's translation skills. At the same time, it can also effectively promote the development of the translation of color words.

## **2. The Cultural Difference of Chinese and English Color Words**

### *2.1 The Difference in History*

Different historical traditions have a great influence on color. As for the British, white represents angels, God, sanctity and purity. When westerners hold their wedding, the bride will usually wear a white wedding dress. It originated in the religious story of the British country, Magi, wearing white clothes during the resurrection of Christ, so white is widely used in weddings in Western countries. But white is a sad color in China. Since ancient times, family members have to wear a white mourning, hold a white funeral, and have white flowers on the chest to express condolence and respect for dead relatives. Red, is a happy color in the traditional Chinese nation. It symbolizes good luck and reminds people of happiness and healthy. People will paste red couplets in the New Year, the bride will wear a red dress at the wedding, Red Hi words are affixed to the walls, doors, and windows, also guest gifts or elder's red envelopes must be wrapped in red paper. After getting married, people will have a baby; some places also send red eggs to friends and relatives which means festive. But in the eyes of the English-speaking British and American peoples, red means bloodshed, terror and danger, it even reminds people of sensuality and vulgar taste such as red light district.

### *2.2 The Difference in Religious Belief*

In English, the symbolic significance of colors is under the influence of religion. Different religious connotation and significance are given to colors. In the Middle Ages, the church appointed artists to use certain colors to paint pictures. For example, the robes of Mother of God are painted in blue, and Christ's clothing are painted in blue during preparation, when he is attracted because of ignorance, his clothing will be painted black, on the contrary clothing will be painted in red or white during his resurrection. The reason why people change colors so often is closely related to their religious imagination. Blue means Mother of God is from heaven, while black means Christ comes across Dark Messenger. Red and white, of course, which means the essence of God: wisdom and love.

In China, yellow is a classic of Buddhism, the cassocks of monks and Lama are yellow. But Judas, who wearing yellow clothes and was disloyal to Jesus, is a sign of rebellion, jealousy, and weakness. Due to differences in religious beliefs between English and Chinese Causes a great contrast to the view of the

same color word. This difference can sometimes result in a lack of meaning, misunderstanding or resentment.

### *2.3 The Difference in Life and Custom*

In the West, people adore and prefer purple color. The ancient Greeks, the Roman emperors, the consuls, and the generals all wore purple, purple symbolizes magnificence and dignity, symbolizes the throne and regalia, purple robe means to rise to a prominent position. And what the Chinese representative's prominent status wears is the yellow robe, it is the symbol of the emperor monarch. At the same time, there is also one of the most important factors that affect clothing custom, when people wear a white or light-colored clothing in hot weather, he or she will feel cooler because of the sunlight reflection. And wearing dark colors to absorb heat in cold weather.

However, there are various preferences and customs in different countries. For example, Chinese people prefer to wear white or light-colored clothes than black clothes in hot weather. In York City, women will wear different clothes to respond to man's proposal, if they wear yellow clothes, which means there is half hope, and green clothe means agreement, red means disagreement.

### *2.4 The Difference in Emotional Color*

People have a certain emotional inclination to color. People's emotional colors are divided into commendatory, neutrality and derogatory. In a variety of languages, it is not uncommon for words to contain different emotions, and color words are no exception. For example, Chinese people often have a good impression of blue. The blue sky often can stimulate people's yearning for the future, and the blue ocean can often bring people to unlimited imagination. In English, blue usually expresses displeasure as in the blues (gloomy), blue Monday (depressive Monday). From this, it can be seen that the emotional colors of color words are diverse, whether in English or Chinese, and sometimes the understanding of the same color words is in a world of difference. Only by correctly understanding their emotional colors, can we appreciate the distinctive cultures of English and Chinese languages.

## **3. Translation Strategies of Chinese and English Color Words**

Although color is a natural phenomenon, it should be noted that in a real translation task, it is not possible to understand and translate the contextual context alone. It is essential to understand the meaning of the original color words, and the text should be handled flexibly in order to avoid mistranslated or mechanical translation. Generally speaking, the translation of color words roughly has the following four methods.

### *3.1 Literal Translation*

English and Chinese are two different language families. Each language has its own independent and unique system. There are great differences in morphology, syntax, grammar and structure between the two languages. However, there are also some similarities. For example, the order of subject-predicate words is consistent with that of moving objects. It is precisely because both English and Chinese

languages have similarities and differences. Literal translation is a method of translation and also a translation that reserves the original text. Free translation, is a method of translation or translation that reserves only the original content and does not reserve the original form.

### 3.1.1 Pure Color

Phrases:

White House 白宫	date red 枣红	lemon yellow 柠檬黄
green tea 绿茶	blue collar 蓝领	rose violet 玫瑰紫
silver gray 银灰色	ivory white 象牙白	black list 黑名单
white list 白名单	green light 绿灯	black market 黑市

Sentences:

(1) The very dust was scorched brown, and something quivered in the atmosphere as if the air itself was panting.

连那尘土都被炙烤成褐色；大气中似乎也有什么东西在颤抖，仿佛空气本身也在气喘吁吁。

(2) His arms and legs were thickly smeared with calamine lotion dried to a chalky white.

他四肢上涂得厚厚的炉甘石液已干成粉白色。

### 3.1.2 Change Color

Phrases:

black tea 红茶	brown sugar 红糖	black wood 红木
black gold 石油	white money 银币	grey hair 白头发

Sentences:

(1) The floor was covered with ochre-colored sawdust, trampled here and there into mud.

地上全是黄褐色的木屑，到处都给踩成泥乎乎的了。

(2) His face became blue with cold.

他的脸冻得发青。

(3) She dressed in a very short creamy skirt that day.

那天她穿着一条很短的米色裙子。

### 3.2 *Literal Translation with Notes*

If using the literal translation method to translate color words but can't reproduce the original text clearly, accurately, and completely, the original text can be supplemented and translated by adding annotations. This method is called literal translation with notes.

For example, 黑色星期二: Black Tuesday [Tuesday, October 29, 1987, Wall Street's bankrupt in the United States] When translating the phrase, translate it first as literally "Black Tuesday", and then add a note to illustrate it, which can make the reader know its source.

Here is a sentence in the first chapter of *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，单单剩下一块未用，弃在青埂峰下。

When the goddess Nv 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 (homophone for “roots of love”). Readers who have read *Dream of Red Mansions* know that at the beginning of the book, the author explained to the readers that there was a stone abandoned under the peak of Qing Geng and planted the roots of the sentiment. Therefore, in the translation, the translator has added an annotation to Qing Geng peak, which homophone for “roots of love”. This helps foreign readers who are not familiar with the background of *Dream of Red Mansions* to gain an accurate understanding of the original book.

### 3.3 Amplification Translation

Because of the differences between English and Chinese cultures, translation cannot be performed literally in translation. Otherwise, the original thinking cannot be expressed, and misunderstandings can easily be caused. Therefore, in order to make the translation more faithful to the original text, appropriate color words can be sometimes added to the translation.

Sentences:

(1) And over all these, set close against the golden hair and burning cheek of lady and knight is that untroubled and sacred sky.

在这一切之上，同贵夫人和骑士金色头发和红润面颊相映衬的是一片蔚蓝的天空。

(2) He didn't try in vain.

他没有白干。

(3) Her eyes became moist.

她眼圈红了。

(4) It is like a windfall, like a Godsend, like an unexpected piece of luck.

它像飞来的吉庆，像天降洪福，像意外红运。

### 3.4 Free Translation

Free translation refers to translation based on the original meaning of the original text, not translated verbatim. It is usually used when translating sentences or phrases. when the original language and the translated language reflect a huge cultural difference, Free translation method is mainly used. From the point of view of cross-cultural language communication and cultural exchange, free translation emphasizes the relative independence of the cultural system of the target language and the culture system of the original language. A large number of examples show that the use of free translation reflects the diversity of different languages in ecological culture, language and culture, religious culture, material culture, and social culture. Free translation can better reflect the ethnic characteristics of one nation.

Phrases:

wedding and funerals 红白喜事

match-maker 红娘

emperor's robe long 黄袍

green thumb 园艺技能

blue blood 贵族出身

green house 温室

Sentences:

You look blue today. What's wrong with you?

你今天看起来闷闷不乐，出了什么事？

He is green with jealousy.

他醋意大发。

He is a blue-blooded man.

他出生贵族。

Her story immediately reminded me of a Chinese saying, The young beautiful lady will always be star-crossed.

听了有关她的故事，我立刻想到中国的一句俗语“红颜薄命”。

Colors play a very important part in culture and customs, so the translation of color words should be accurate. Only based on the specific language environment and social-cultural factors, translation is the most accurate. The colors of words not only represent color, but also represent economic, social, political, historical, and profound cultural backgrounds. Translators should take care not to comprehend it too literally, and to understand them from the independent cultural connotations under the language, in order to obtain two versions of the same feeling and understanding. In a word, the meaning of color words in different cultures is not completely coincident. Therefore, in the process of English-Chinese translation, the first thing is that understand the meaning of color words correctly, namely the cultural background of color words or the cultural information contained in them. Then the translator should use the appropriate translation way based on the language and cultural characteristics of English and Chinese, and use a language to accurately and completely express the thoughts to be expressed in another language. If the translation process encounters inequalities in form and meaning, then only the use of the rounded form to take meaning. Only in terms of cultural equivalence, the translated content and ideas can be aptly shown.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The expression and translation of color words depends on cultural differences between the Chinese and English languages. The different connotations embodied in such words are closely related to the country's social culture. When we compare Chinese and English language, which is actually a comparison of the similarities and differences between the two languages according to their expression and language habits. Therefore, the translator must understand the social and cultural connotations of different nationalities in the article in the process of translating color words and make full sense of the unique cultural meanings as well as language features of color words, reproduce the cultural meanings of the original color words without breaching the original language expressions, only in this way can realize the purpose of faithful original text, and try to keep the original language style form and artistic features. Color words are rich and complicated, and the non-correspondence of English and Chinese

color words are also multitudinous. The symbolic meaning of color is not a single one, but multilevel. Some are similar, some are discordant, and some are even the opposite. Therefore, the translation of color words often causes translators to be confused, so when we do translations, we must be carefully considered and carefully handled. In short, regardless of the fact that the color words have the same conceptual meaning and need to be literally translated, the situation in which color words are literally translated is relatively small, and methods for removing, converting, and supplementing color words are more commonly used. However, no matter what method is used, its purpose is to be faithful to the original intentions, but also to express vividness, in line with the expression of the expression language, which is the basic principle in translation. The use of color words in Chinese and English is quite extensive, and because of the differences in English and Chinese cultural backgrounds, the meaning of these color words is not the same.

Through the study of these color words, it is obvious that the fundamental difference between the two cultures is from the point of view of English and Chinese languages. We all know that as for the translation of color words, it is not only the direct conversion of two languages but also two cultures. In particular, whether the translation of a color word is correct or not has a significant influence on many industries involved in color. For example, in the current international trade, the color of the decoration of a commodity is very particular, like Japanese dislike yellow and Billy people bogey blue, Europe countries and the United States avoid black, Thai people don't like red, etc. If you do not understand this and do not respect the customs and habits of these countries, you cannot sell goods in these countries and earn money. Therefore, we should carefully study and use these knowledge about the use of color words so that they can be properly applied to real life.

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