

## The Cultural Connotations of Color Words in English and Chinese

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**ABSTRACT:** *The world we live in is colorful, and there is several of color words used to describe the colorful things in the world. Color is closely related to our life, it's an important field for us to understand the world. Color not only has physical properties, but also has rich cultural connotation. Although the quantity of the color words in different languages is not the same, the color words are almost the components of vocabularies in all the languages. English and Chinese are both abundant in basic color terms, and with the deepening of the cultural communication between China and western countries, it has been realized that basic color words are inevitable becoming a barrier in the cross-cultural communication. The corresponding color words in English and Chinese are endowed with different cultural connotations, which increase the difficulty for cross-cultural communication. This thesis mainly through the basic color words: red, yellow, green, black, white and blue to make a contrast between English and Chinese, and the thesis will exert greater efforts to explain the reasons for the differences existing in the cultural connotations of color terms in English and Chinese.*

**KEY WORDS:** *basic color words; cultural connotation; cross-cultural communication*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Color is the perception of people to the objective word, and color terms are full of emotional and cultural connotations in languages. Color words are a very special part in language vocabulary, vocabulary system in the two languages of English and Chinese color words are very rich, it cannot only express physical properties of objects, but also has a profound cultural connotation, and it's also one of the important understandings of the world. The generation, development and evolution of color words reflect the process of human cognition and social development, and reflect different cultural connotations. Although the quantity of the color words in different languages is not the same, the color words are almost the components of vocabularies in all the languages, and it has been realized that basic color words are inevitably becoming a barrier in the cross-cultural communication. Further understanding the cultural connotations of English and Chinese basic color words can deepen our understanding of different languages and cultures.

The basic color words: red, white, black, yellow, blue, green are the key study points of this thesis. The thesis is striving to analyze the type and quantity of color words in English and Chinese, and then analyze the six basic color terms in both English and Chinese to show the differences between two cultures. The thesis exerts greater efforts to explain the reasons for the differences existing in the cultural connotations of color terms in English and Chinese.

#### 1 The Type and Quantity of Color Words in English and Chinese

Generally speaking, color words usually can be divided into two categories in English and Chinese. One is the basic color words which are originally used to describe the color of things, such as red, yellow and white. Another is physical color words. These words were originally the names of some objects, and later they are gradually used to represent the color of the things, such as gold, silver and violet.

But in English and Chinese, the quantity and division of the basic color words are different. Linguists, Berlin and Kay, think there are eleven basic color words in English, including red, yellow, white, black, green, blue, purple, brown, pink, orange and grey. However, in Chinese, there are seven kinds of color words that are often mentioned, including red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, blue and purple. But Professor Wang Fengxin believes that there are nine basic color words in Chinese, white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple and grey.

In English and Chinese, the basic color words generally have corresponding words in different colors, but the physical color words are different. Because of the different objects in China and Western countries, the difference of the physical color words is more obvious. Some Chinese objects may not exist in the Western countries, so the colors they represent are difficult to find corresponding words in another culture. As Mr. Zhang Peiji said, the physical color words often have a distinctive national color. For example, Chinese used beige to describe pale yellow, because rice is our staple food. But the English people used cream and butter-yellow to

describe this kind of color, because cream and butter are their common food.

## **II. SIX CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF COLOR TERMS IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE**

In the long course of social development, human beings have endowed a number of color terms with rich emotional elements and cultural connotations. Because of the difference in the living environment, the history along the coast and other elements, the different ethnic groups have different feelings and associations to the colors. China is located on the eastern of Eurasia, but the birthplace of English is in the western part of Eurasia. Both of them are very different in geographical environment or social development, therefore, the cultural connotations of two ethnic groups will inevitably differ. In order to reveal the different cultural connotations of various colors in English and Chinese, next is to make a meticulous analysis of the most common color words, including red, yellow, green, black, white and blue.

### **2.1 Cultural Connotations of Red**

The color of red plays a very important role in Chinese culture. Red is the color of the sun, and the sun brings brightness to mankind makes everything grow. So the Chinese ancestors who are mainly engaged in agricultural production have kindly feelings for representing the color of the sun. Red often symbolizes the commendatory meanings like festiveness, loyalty, happiness, luck and prosperity, etc. Chinese people take red as the noble color. All the festival is decorated in red during the Spring Festival. In the traditional wedding ceremony, we have red character, red candles, and red veil. They not only bring the joyous atmosphere to the wedding, but also after marriage they predict that the days will be much better. It symbolizes smooth going and success. Besides, red is the symbol of beauty. In Chinese, beautiful woman is called "red sleeve". Red is also a symbol of revolution. For example, the armed forces of the Communist Party are called the Red Army. There are lots of words with red in Chinese like red flag, red political power and so on. In addition, the red is also a symbol of jealousy and envy.

But in Western countries, red mainly refers to the color of blood. The blood is the liquid of life flowing inside the body. If the blood runs out, the life will be over. So red mostly represents the derogatory sense in their culture which is a symbol of violence, blood, cruelty and war, which is also the same with the English culture. For example, they use "in the red" to describe the loss, use "red alert" to describe the emergency warning. There are lots of words with red in English like red-light district, red tape, red-handed and so on. In addition, red in English is a symbol of honor and glory on a few occasions. For example, roll out the red carpet for sb. is used for welcome someone warmly.

### **2.2 Cultural Connotations of Yellow**

In Chinese traditional culture, yellow is the most honorable color and it has a very important symbolic meaning, and most of the meaning of yellow is commendatory. In ancient China, the Yin-yang and Five Elements theory was very prevalent at that time and yellow is the color of the emperor which symbolizes the supreme power and status, and is a symbol of imperial majesty, so yellow is exclusive to the feudal emperors of the past dynasties, and the ordinary people could not use it freely. For example, the imperial robe was yellow; the "yellow list" is the emperor's edict. Yellow is also a symbol of lucky and auspicious. In addition, the Yellow generation refers to the Chinese nation, such as the yellow skin and the descendants of the Yellow River. In Chinese, yellow also has a derogatory cultural connotation. It has a meaning of obscenity and pornography, such as a yellow book. Yellow is also alluding to malnutrition and warning.

Yellow in western culture is associated with the color of the Jew who betrayed Jesus, so yellow has a bad symbolic meaning like cowardice and discrimination. The New York World Paper used yellow ink to print low-grade comics for sale, and people called this unhealthy journal "yellow publication". Western countries also use yellow to indicate the book without literary value. In addition, yellow is also a symbol of despicable and timid, they use yellow dog to describe the scaly person. Of course, there are some positive meanings. Yellow also represents the prize and honor of competition, such as yellow belt. Yellow in English is also used as a specific color of things. For example, the taxi in some American cities is yellow, so they use yellow instead of taxi. Yellow page has nothing to do with pornography, and it is an international fixed name for a business phone book.

### **2.3 Cultural Connotations of Green**

Green is the color of the plant like grass and leaves, so it is also the color of life. But in Chinese, there is seldom favor for green, many words with green contain derogatory meanings. In ancient China, colors were closely related to social hierarchies, which clearly marked political identities. The green color is the clothing worn by the lower officials, and it is a symbol of inferiority. In traditional Chinese concept, the green can symbolize the people who are humble and shameful. There is a terrible argument in Chinese, "green hat" meant to be a cuckold, which means one's wife with another man. This is the most intolerable thing to the Chinese people, so there's never been a green hat in the store. There are also some words with commendatory meanings. For example, green food means the healthy or ecologically beneficial food.

Green in English gives people the impression of being fresh and energetic, such as the fresh green memory and a

green old age. Green is the color of nature, the rule of plant growth is changed from green to yellow with the season, so in western countries, green also contains derogatory meanings like ignorance and inexperience. For example, they use “green as grass” to describe the people without living experience, greenhorn is used for describing a person lacking experience or a newcomer who is not familiar with local customs.

#### **2.4 Cultural Connotations of Black**

In China, black is a solemn and serious tone, and people use black as a symbol of integrity, fortitude, solemnity and selflessness. This was particularly prominent in the Chinese traditional opera mask. In traditional opera, black represents righteousness, upright and outspoken. But in modern times, black is derogatory on most occasions. For example, black market means illegal buying and selling of goods or currencies, blacklist means the list of people who are considered dangerous or who are to be punished.

In the Bible, black is associated with devil, evil, pain and misfortune, so it is also called the color of death. In western countries, people regard “a black cat” as a bad man. If a person in the morning sees a black cat, then he suddenly senses today is a black day. Thus, it is clear that “black” often has negative symbolic meaning. In English, black news means the bad news or sad news, in black despair means in great despair. In western countries, black still has some symbolic meanings such as serious, solemn and dignified. In western countries, people traditionally wear black clothes when they go to a funeral, as a sign of sadness. Black suits and black dresses are the favorite raiment of westerners. On some formal occasions, high officials and famous social celebrity all like to be in black, members of symphony orchestra almost wear black suits to indicate dignified and solemn. Surely, black in some idioms have positive meanings. In business English, “in the black” means running a business profitably.

#### **2.5 Cultural connotations of White**

In Chinese traditional culture, the cultural connotation of white is extremely abundant, and it has multiple symbolic meanings, but it mostly is derogatory term. In the feudal society, there used to exist strict dress codes, by which plain white was the most unwelcomed color. In Chinese culture, the color white is a basic taboo color, and it is a symbol of death and old omen. At the funeral, the relatives of the deceased must wear white mourning and a white flower in the chest, set up whitemourning hall and sprinkle white paper money. The white color gives a feeling of colorless, thus the meaning of empty and nothing was derived. Some words with white has political color, such as the white army means the reactionary bourgeois troops, in China referring to the Kuomintang army during the second revolutionary Civil War. In Chinese, white is the symbol of grief, so at the funeral people wear white clothes. White can also be extended for futility, failure, apathy and so on, such as white flag. In some occasions, white also has the commendatory meaning. White is also a symbol of flawless and cleanliness.

White is the most upholding color in the west, with little derogatory meaning. It symbolizes purity, simplicity, elegance, peace, luck and so on. So at the weddings, especially at the church, brides wear white dresses, with white flowers in hand. In the dictionary there are phrases such as “a white lie”, “white magic”, it is used for the good purposes. White hat means good man, and a white day means a lucky day. For some young men in modern times, they like to wear white suits, because they think that can bring them luck.

#### **2.6 Cultural Connotations of Blue**

Blue is the color of the vast sea and the clear sky, which generally expresses tranquility, tolerance, reason and cleanliness. In commercial design, goods or enterprises which emphasize on scientific and technological content and high efficiency will choose blue as the standard color. In some formal occasions like hospital and office, blue is adopted warmly because of its tranquility and cleanliness. In Chinese traditional culture, blue was the term for the indigo plant from which the blue was extracted. There were some phrases with blue had derogatory meanings as blue coats indicates someone was born in a poor family in lowly family. But the Chinese people have a good feeling of blue now. The blue sky can inspire people’s vision of the future, and the blue sea can draw people’s infinite imagination. However, the meaning of blue in English is quite different from Chinese. In English, blue expresses sadness and depression such as in a blue mood. In addition, blue is also often associated with high social position or being aristocratic in English. Also, in American English, a blue book with the names of well-known persons, especially government officials.

### **III. REASONS FOR DIFFERENCES IN ASSOCIATIONS OF BASIC COLOR TERMS IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE**

Since English and Chinese belong to two different languages, they root in two different cultures, and the color words also receive the influence of culture. Color words have strong national cultural characteristics, and each nation has its own unique color view. So different nations about basic color words have different cultural connotations, and there are many reasons to explain this phenomenon. The main reasons including the living environment, religion and belief, traditional customs and the national cognitive style.

### **3.1 Living Environment**

China is a landlocked country. Throughout the ancient Chinese layout, the activities of the Chinese nation were mainly in the Yellow River basin, and the civilization of the Chinese people started from the Yellow River basin. There are plenty of irrigated water sources and flat land in the Yellow River basin, which provided a basis for the farming, and that's maybe the first reason why the Chinese people are so fond of yellow. As a country dominated by farming, agriculture is fundamental, and the grain harvest influences not only the farmers' lives, but also has a direct impact on the state's financial income. Therefore, as a symbol of color of the harvest, yellow becomes the lucky and the most expected color in Chinese.

It's well known that England is an island country surrounded by sea, so English culture is marine business culture. Early English ancestors lived mainly in offshore areas, mainly in fishing and navigation, and the color of the sea is blue and naturally it becomes an important color in English people's daily life. Thus, blue which represents ocean color is most closely related to their lives, and becomes their favorite color.

### **3.2 Religion and Belief**

Chinese people believe that their ancestors made up with yellow earth, so the yellow earth was a symbol of the blood of the Chinese nation, and yellow was accepted warmly. The Five Line Theory held that the loess land is the center of the earth, so yellow that represents the central plain was regarded as the central color and be respected. The fire is not only mysterious but also powerful for the Chinese ethnic people of the primitive society. With the fire, mankind would get out of the original age. Because of the fire, Chinese people welcomed red which symbolizes the color of fire warmly, and they thought it would bring good luck. The sun symbolizes the light and brings life to the earth. The Chinese nation had a long history of worship of the sun god, and the color of the red sun makes Chinese people very fond of red and then red had a bright meaning. Without the sun, there are no life and plants. Red in the heart of the Chinese nation, like the sun, symbolizes life and hope.

Western countries are different from China, they regard yellow as a taboo color, Because Jews were attracted by money and betrayed Jesus, they were dressed in yellow robes, so yellow was considered to be taboo in Christianity, which means low and mean. In Christianity, purple is the honorable color, representing the power of the supreme Holy Spirit.

### **3.3 Traditional Customs**

Different connotations have different traditions customs, consequently, the same color in different countries or nations may have different cultural connotations and contain a certain feeling of one's emotion. Traditional customs have been formed in a long social and historical environment. They include many aspects of society like food, festival, marriage and so on. Thus, each nation or country has a special feeling of its own traditional customs. There's a typical example to explain the different cultural connotations of the same color words between English and Chinese. At the wedding, a Chinese bride usually dresses in red while bride in western countries often wears a white dress. Because in Chinese traditional custom, the color of red symbolizes auspiciousness and happiness, and they believe it can bring them good luck, just like the white in western countries. At the funeral, color also reflects the cultural differences between China and the west. Chinese people dress in white while in western countries people wear in black. This phenomenon is also the influence of traditional customs.

### **3.4 National Cognitive Style**

The Chinese nation has a long history of color worship and superstition. People believe that color symbolizes supernatural power. But on the other hand, in the long history of feudal society, color was used to represent different social status. For example, yellow represents the royal family, purple represents the senior official, and green represents the lower rank official. The color words in Chinese tend to have more symbolic meaning. Unlike the Chinese, Westerners are exploratory thinking, and they always try to explore the unknown world. In addition to their emphasis on individuality and strong religion belief, Westerners do not have so much superstition and color worship. In addition, the English and Chinese people may have different ways of dealing with the same color word, which is one of the reasons causing the different cultural connotations.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

The generation and development of color words in different languages have their similarities and differences. But the different cultural connotations of color words in English and Chinese are far greater than the similarities. The development of color words is from simple to complex, from less to more, and it has certain rules. Two ancient languages of English and Chinese contain rich cultural connotations in their long social development. They have unique meanings and express different emotions. Although each person sees the same color, but because of the different understanding and perception of color words in different languages, and the special associative meaning of color words caused by national cultural differences, people of different nationalities will

have different opinions when they see the same color. The cultural connotations of the English and Chinese color words reveal the cultural traditions and characteristics of their country. It can be said that color words have become the respective cultural determinant of the two nations, reflecting their own cultural psychology and aesthetic interest. In recent years, with the development of the times, in the interaction of cultural communications, English and Chinese have gradually merged and developed in terms of vocabulary. Color words are also constantly enriched and developed, and many color words have also derived new meanings. The study of the color words' symbolic meanings and cultural meanings in different cultural backgrounds has a profound influence on understanding cultural differences, conducting effective cross cultural communication and avoiding communication barrier. Therefore, only by grasping the cultural connotations of English and Chinese color words, can we understand the differences between English and Chinese and ethnic cultures, so as to carry out cross-cultural communication better.

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