

## Semantic Comparison Between Chinese and English Idioms Containing Color Words

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### Abstract

Idiom is the crystallization of the thought which coagulates through the long-term practice and people's cognition, reflecting their wisdom. Because of the richness of language, there are a number of idioms which contain color words in both English and Chinese. Color idiom is an important part in these two languages. This paper analyzes such idioms containing three representative color words in both English and Chinese and basing on that, it discusses their semantic similarities and differences. The purpose is to help language learners use idioms properly and improve their language communicative ability.

**Key words:** Idioms; Color words; Semantics; Similarities; Differences

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### INTRODUCTION

Our life can not be deprived from different colors, neither could our language. Many language researchers have devoted to the study of color words from the aspect of semantics to culture. For example, American anthropologist Verne F. Ray proposed that every color system aimed at putting the color word into order so as to simplify human's perception of color, and further to make the action feedback, especially the speech feedback and communication more effective (Ray, 1953). Berlin and Kay are another two famous representatives. Based on the investigation to

98 different languages, they considered that there were eleven basic colors in the world, which are black, white, red, yellow, green, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, gray (Berlin & Kay, 1969). In this paper, we choose three color words "white" "black" and "red" as our material to make a semantic comparison between Chinese and English. Even though these two nations nearly have the same understanding of the natural colors, due to the different cultural background, they view the associative meaning and implication of color words differently. The detailed factors may include: way of thinking, religious background, geographical condition, custom, national psychology, etc..

Idiom is the essence of language, which is a set term or phrase that has simple form but incisive meaning and has long been used by human beings. It is simple, popular, meaningful and lively. Idioms, no matter in what language, can vividly transfer a large amount of language and culture information and they are widely used in both Chinese and English. We can find representative works like "Practical Chinese Idioms: A Report of One Hundred Cases" in Chinese, "Oxford Idioms" in English, etc.. Effectively, the comparative study of the color idioms in these two languages means a comparative analysis of the Chinese and English cultures contained in both languages since a particular language is the best reflection of the relevant national culture.

### 1. THE FOUNDATION OF LANGUAGE COMPARISON RESEARCH

According to the famous German linguist Humboldt (Humboldt, Heath & Aarsleff, 1988), the research into comparativism must consider the relationship between language and the power of national spirit. When we carry out the study in comparativism, we must take linguistic world view into our account, which is also the philosophical basis of comparativism.

Linguistic world view recognizes that language is the sublimate of our thought. It emphasizes the counter-

effect from language to thought and the fact that different language uses different ways to know the world, which shows us in the following aspects:

1) Language reflects different conception and meaning system of different nations.

The world exists objectively, yet it appears differently in different people's eyes. For example, tomato is classified as vegetable in some languages while in others it is considered as fruit. From a certain point of view, the world only exists in the conceptual systems created by different languages.

2) Language reflects different value system of different nations.

Different nations have different value systems and different understandings towards the words in languages. For example, most nations in the world consider the word "thin" as the symbol of beauty, yet the Tongans think beautiful person should be "fat" (Pan Wenguo, 2005, p.27-31).

In brief, there is no such differences as right or wrong, advancement or backwardness among different languages. What exists is only the habit of language use.

## 2. THE CATEGORIES OF MEANING IN SEMANTICS

The subject concerning the study of meaning, especially the meaning of linguistic units, words and sentences in particular, is called semantics (George, 2000). More specifically, semantics is the study of the meaning of linguistic units, words and sentences in particular. G. Leech in a more moderate tone recognizes 7 types of meaning in his Semantics as follows:

1) Conceptual meaning: It refers to the core of word meaning. Take "The sun rises in the east" for example, the word sun here means "a heavenly body which gives off light, heat, and energy".

2) Associative meaning: It is the secondary meaning supplemented to the conceptual meaning. It is liable to the influence of such factors as culture, experience, religion, geographical region, class background, education, etc. For instance, in western culture, the bride will wear a white wedding dress. Here, white is linked with new snow, lily, which represents purity and innocence, such as a white soul, etc..

3) Social meaning: It refers to what is communicated of the social circumstances of language use (Leech, 1981, p.23). For example, in English the meaning of "horse" can be expressed by the words "steed, horse, nag, gee-gee", but those words bear different social style. "Steed" is often used in poem, "horse" is a general word, "nag" is a slang word while "gee-gee" is used by children.

4) Affective meaning: It shows what is communicated of the feelings and attitudes of the speaker/ writer (Leech, 1981, p.23). Take the word "dog" for example, it may have quite different affective meanings in different societies. In most western countries, "dog" is associated with "loyalty", "faithfulness", "a close companion" and all positive qualities whereas to Chinese, "dog" at best is a

useful animal. It generally generates negative associations. If a person is compared to a dog, the speaker's attitude towards the person is no more than "contemptuous".

5) Reflected meaning: It refers to what is communicated through association with another sense of the same expression (Leech, 1981, p.23). For instance, the word "鸡" in Chinese often makes listeners or readers think of the place of brothel and people there.

6) Collocative meaning: It refers to what is communicated through association with words which tend to occur in the environment of another word (Leech, 1981, p.23). For example, the word "pretty" is often collocated with "girl, woman, flower" etc..

7) Thematic meaning: It means what is communicated by the way in which the message is organized in terms of order and emphasis (Leech, 1981, p.23).

## 3. THE SEMANTIC SIMILARITIES REFLECTED IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE IDIOMS CONTAINING COLOR WORDS

### 3.1 The Color "White"

The conceptual meaning of color white in dictionary is "the perception of the color is evoked by light and with high brightness compared to the surroundings, the color of fresh snow or milk." In Chinese, there is such idiom like "白昼 (bai zhou)" which means daylight. And in English, the idiom "white coffee" refers to the coffee with milk in it. Both of the two idioms are all used in the color white's conceptual meaning. More examples are like "白米 (bai mi)" "白雪皑皑 (bai xue ai ai)" in Chinese and "white water" "white teeth" in English.

The color white makes us think of the shiny sunlight. Both the Chinese and English highly praise this color and there is no doubt that they connect the color white with virtue. A good proof can be found in the following examples. The idiom "white hand" in English means a person who is very honest and incorruptible. In Chinese the idiom "白璧无瑕 (bai bi wu xia)" can be used to refer to such person who is quite perfect without any shortcomings. Thus, the associative meaning of the color white in Chinese and English idioms are similar

The idiom "white elephant" in English means something that is useless and no longer needed, although it may have cost a lot of money. In Chinese the idiom "白吃白喝 (bai chi bai he)" shows us such a kind of person who often takes advantage of others, behaving just like a worm. These two examples show us that such collocations made from the color word "white" and other specific words bear the similar usage.

In English there is such idiom like "white flag" which refers to a sign that you accept defeat and wish to stop fighting. This idiom obviously bears a derogatory sense. The Chinese idiom "白日做梦 (bai ri zuo meng)" which means those who have the unrealistic dreams has the similar derogatory sense.

### 3.2 The Color “Black”

The conceptual meaning of color black in dictionary is “no visible light comes into the sense of sight, the very darkest color, like night or coal”, it is opposite to the color white.

The most common color black in our daily life is the color of printed material, therefore in English there is the idiom “*in black and white*” which means something written or printed and in Chinese there is the similar one “白纸黑字 (bai zhi hei zi)”. Some other examples of the color black used in its conceptual meaning in English are “*black-eyed*” (which tells that somebody whose eyes are very black) and in Chinese “黑灯瞎火 (hei deng xia huo)” (which indicates dark night without any light).

The color black is the color of night. In dark night, people can't see anything around them, in such situation, no matter whom you are, you will feel afraid and sad. So people all over the world wear black clothes to show their condolence to the dead. Besides, people use the color black to indicate such derogatory sense as gloomy, angry, dark, difficult, etc. For instance, in English, the idiom “*a black day*” means an awful day and in Chinese the idiom “月黑风高 (yue hei feng gao)” (which emphasizes the situation that some villains kill other people in dark night) is the similar use in its affective meaning.

Take the idiom “*black sheep*” (which means a person who is different from the rest of his family members or another group and who is considered bad or embarrassing) in English for example, its meaning clearly comes from the collocation of the two set words “black” and “sheep”. The similar use can be found in Chinese idiom “粉白黛黑 (fen bai dai hei)”, the face powder used by women since the Spring and Autumn Period can only be described by the color white while the black pigment used to paint their eyebrows can only be shown by the color black.

When we use the color black to describe a person, we surely think there are certain shortcomings with him. In English there is the idiom “*Every bean has its black.*” which means nobody is perfect while a similar one in Chinese is “近朱者赤，近墨者黑 (jin zhu zhe chi, jin mo zhe hei)” which means “Good companions have good influence while bad ones have bad influence.”

### 3.3 The Color “Red”

The conceptual meaning of the color red is the part of long wavelength in electromagnetic wave's visible light, similar to the color of blood, it is one of the RGB (Red-Green-Blue) and psychological primary colors.

Seeing color red, we'll immediately think of blood which is the most important thing for human beings because only when we have enough blood can we become energetic. The conceptual meaning of the color red in Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary is “the color of blood or fire”. Therefore, there are certain idioms in both English and Chinese containing the color red which reflect people's mental condition. For example, the idiom “*red-blooded*” in English refers to those who are very energetic and active, while the Chinese idiom “白发红颜 (bai fa hong yan)” is a real portraiture of old persons' good health.

The idiom “灯红酒绿(的生活) (deng hong jiu lv de sheng huo)” often appeared in many Chinese literary works, there the color red refers to an extravagant life, while in English there are also such similar idioms as “*red-light district*” which refers to the brothel District in cities and towns. Those idioms in both English and Chinese bear derogatory sense.

When spring festival comes, every family in China hangs red lanterns and puts up red couplets to create a happy circumstance. While in America, many women over seventy years old like wearing red clothes to show their richness and youth. The favorite color for most Americans are bright red and green when they celebrate Christmas because the color red indicates joy and green symbolizes life. The red flannel uniform worn by British Royal Lifeguard proves that Englishmen also like the color red very much. In the above scenes, the connotations of the color red are the same. Thus, there are such examples: the Chinese idiom “红红火火 (hong hong huo huo)” shows people's good wish to others while the English idiom “*a red-letter day*” widely refers to any festivals and memorial days. It is thus clear that the color red in both English and Chinese, when collocated with special words or phrases, can bear commendatory and derogatory sense.

In addition, when we want to express somebody who does something wrong, we often use the color red to describe his face. So there is such idiom “*become red-faced*” in English and “面红耳赤 (mian hong er chi)” in Chinese.

Through the analysis of the idioms containing the color white, black and red in both English and Chinese, we can easily figure out the sameness of the three color words' usage in their conceptual, affective, collocative and associative meanings.

## 4. THE SEMANTIC DIFFERENCES REFLECTED IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE IDIOMS CONTAINING COLOR WORDS

There are certainly many things in common among different nations because of human beings' intercommunity and cultural integration. Yet there are still many different things among the nations. Language is no exception. Similarities and differences exist in different languages.

### 4.1 The Color “White”

The color white, when it is used in western social situations, can often make people feel happy because it brings people's mind to the beautiful pictures like the wedding veil on the wedding ceremony and the angels who have a pair of pure white wings according to the Bible. A typical example is the idiom “*a white soul*” which is used to refer to somebody who has a pure mind and kind. While if the situation changes to China, it will arouse people's fear because the color white is often associated with the funeral. Typical examples are “红白喜事 (hong bai xi shi)”, “素车白马 (su che bai ma)” etc..

Here the color white is a symbol of being exhausted and pale and it is often considered as taboo in China. This is the English and Chinese difference of the color white in the aspect of social meaning.

The color white in western culture symbolizes beauty, hope, happiness and joy. A good example is “*Snow White*”, even though it is just an imagined person’s name, still when people mention this idiom they will immediately think of such girls who are very smart, beautiful and kind. While in ancient China, the color white often symbolizes somebody who is very poor, with a lower social status. The idiom “白屋 (bai wu)” means the house of a non-scholar and “白丁 (bai ding)” “白身 (bai shen)” refer to the people who do not get a scholarship or a position in government offices. Those are the symbolic differences between Chinese and English idioms containing the color white.

#### 4.2 The Color “Black”

There are many idioms in both English and Chinese which reflect the relationship between the color black and the meanings such as “not good”, “bad”, “evil”, etc. For example, the idioms “黑白颠倒 (hei bai dian dao)” (which refers to those who treated something good as bad, wrong as right), “背黑锅 (bei hei guo)” (which means be unjustly treated) in Chinese and the idioms “*blacklist*” and “*black-hearted*” in English.

Nevertheless, in Chinese traditional culture, the color black is still used to indicate somebody who is very serious and just. Zhang Fei and Li Kui who are appeared in black facial makeup in Peking Opera are all good examples. While if the color black is used in English to describe a person’s face, it means the person’s face turns livid or that person is playing as a Black.

In business English, the color black bears good meaning. For instance, the idiom “*in the black*” means “to have money”. The following sentence “*Since he was made manager, the company has been running in the black.*” is a good explanation. That meaning originated from the color of the ink which was used when people keep accounts in business activities—the color black showed profit while the color red indicated loss.

The color black in modern Chinese is associated with the meaning of “reactionary” and “counterrevolutionary” in the mainland of China. Thus the idiom “黑帮 (hei bang)” should be translated as “reactionary gang” not “black gang” because in English the color black doesn’t bear the meaning of “reactionary”.

#### 4.3 The Color “Red”

Through the above discussion, we have known that the color red both in English and Chinese culture bear the meaning of happiness and joy. But when used in different social backgrounds, there are certain differences. Such example can be found in the translation of the name of 《红楼梦》. Yang Xianyi from China translated it as *A Dream of Red Mansions* while British Sinologist Hawkes’ translation is *A Story of the Stone* (Xu, 2008). One of the reasons is because the color red in western countries makes

people think of the color of blood and fire. To explain the color red, westerners emphasizes on its derogatory sense such as war, bleeding, violence, loss, debt, etc.. The deep reason lies in their national psychology, religion, daily activities (e.g. the use of red cloth in bullfight), view of seeing things, etc, which can be found in idiom translation. A typical example is the Chinese “红茶 (hong cha)” which is translated as “*black tea*” in English. Whereas the social meaning of the color red in Chinese puts emphasis on its symbol as progress and awareness. A good example is the idiom “又红又专 (you hong you zhuan)”.

In Chinese, there is the idiom “红宝书 (hong bao shu)” which refers to *Quotations from Chairman Mao* during Cultural Revolution. Similarly, there is the idiom “*red book*” in English, which means the important documents or reports on crisis warning published by certain government or parliament.

From the above discussion, we can clearly find that the semantic differences of the three colors are mainly reflected in their social and symbolic meanings. In another way, we can say that it is different social environment, cultural background and historical period that give those color idioms different meanings.

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## CONCLUSION

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In the comprehension of English and Chinese idioms that contain color words, there are similarities among different nations. But differences still exist due to the different cultural traditions, historical backgrounds and views of seeing things. Therefore, it is important for language learners to make clear the semantic reflections of such similarities and differences, which can intensify their understanding of the two languages, thus a more effective intercultural communication can be realized.

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