

## A Comparative Study on the Cultural Connotations of Color Words in English and Chinese

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**Abstract:** As a carrier of culture, language embodies the unique cultural traits of various ethnic groups. Both English and Chinese boast a wealth of color words, whose vastly divergent cultural connotations are prone to causing misunderstandings in comprehension and expression. This paper conducts a comparative study on the cultural connotations of color words in the two languages, aiming to facilitate effective cross-cultural verbal communication.

**Keywords:** Color Words; Cultural Connotations; Similarities; Differences; Non-Correspondence

Language is not merely a social phenomenon, but also a carrier of culture and an essential means of cultural inheritance. The American linguist Edward Sapir (1921) pointed out long ago: "Language has an environment" and "Language cannot exist apart from culture". As an integral part of language, color words, against the backdrop of different ethnic cultures, not only denote their literal color meanings but also carry distinct cultural connotations that reflect prominent ethnic cultural characteristics. Starting from the perspective of cultural connotations, this paper makes a comparative analysis of some commonly used color words in English and Chinese from three aspects: similarities, differences and non-correspondence of their cultural connotations.

### 1. Similarities in the Cultural Connotations of Color Words in English and Chinese

In the course of social production, people of all ethnic groups in the world share a common understanding of natural phenomena and universal truths. Despite their different cultural backgrounds, they still have a "common language" — that is, the similarities in cultural connotations. Therefore, a certain color is often endowed with the same or similar connotative meanings in both English and Chinese.

Red connotes joy, festivity, enthusiasm and passion in both languages, and it often brings to mind happiness and health. In China, for wedding celebrations, the bride and groom wear red wedding gowns, the bridal chamber is decorated with red Chinese character "Xi" (meaning joy), red eggs are given out to celebrate the birth of a baby, and red lanterns and candles are lit during festivals. In English, "a red-letter day" refers to an auspicious or memorable day, a saying derived from the custom of marking Christmas and other annual memorial days in red on calendars. "Red carpet" refers to the red carpet laid out for distinguished guests, and "to roll out the red carpet for sb" means to give sb a grand welcome and cordial hospitality. Red also symbolizes danger and anger. In China, fire engines, alarm lights and traffic signal lights are all red; in English, there are expressions such as "red alert" (emergency alert), "red label" (labels for flammable and explosive hazardous goods) and "red ruin" (devastating fire).

Black symbolizes darkness, illegality, sorrow and misfortune in both English and Chinese cultures. In English, there are expressions like "black list", "black-hearted", "the Black Hand" and "black market", which are akin in meaning to some Chinese expressions such as "black-hearted", "illegal inn" and "underworld". In China, people wear black armbands to express grief and mourning when their relatives or friends pass away. In Britain and the United States, people usually wear black clothes when attending funerals.

Purple represents nobility, power and auspiciousness in both cultures. In China, the imperial palace is called the "Forbidden City (Zi Jin Cheng)"; the Supreme Deity dwells in the "Purple Forbidden Palace (Zi Wei Gong)" (a constellation); and "Zi qi dong lai" (purple energy coming from the east) symbolizes an auspicious omen. Purple was also the color of the official robes worn by the nobility in ancient times. In the Spring and Autumn Period, the

royal robes of the State of Qi were purple; in the Tang Dynasty, government officials of the third rank and above wore purple robes. In English, "be born in the purple" means to be born into a royal or noble family; "raise sb to the purple" means to make sb an emperor or a cardinal; and "marry into the purple" refers to marrying into a prominent and aristocratic family.

## 2. Differences in the Cultural Connotations of Color Words in English and Chinese

The cultural connotations of words stem from people's life practices under specific cultural backgrounds. Influenced and constrained by different cultural traditions, words acquire specific meanings, arouse special associations and evoke particular reactions — namely, the differences in cultural connotations. Therefore, color words, as a part of vocabulary, inevitably carry distinct cultural connotations in English and Chinese.

### 2.1 White

In Chinese culture, white is associated with funerals and mourning. Since ancient times, a funeral has been referred to as a "white affair"; relatives of the deceased wear white mourning clothes and set up a white mourning hall. Besides, in modern Chinese, white mostly carries negative connotations, such as "white terror", "white areas (Kuomintang-controlled areas)", "do sth in vain", "give away for nothing", "hoist the white flag (surrender)" and "white face (hypocritical and insincere person)".

In Western culture, "white" is a commendatory term, symbolizing purity, beauty, luck and auspiciousness. Ralph Waldo Emerson had a famous saying: "The grey past, the white future". At weddings, brides wear pure white wedding dresses, and such a wedding is called a "white wedding". Other examples include "white day" (auspicious day), "a white spirit" (pure soul), "fair-haired boy" (favourite), "a white lie" (harmless lie told to avoid hurting others), "white hand" (honesty and integrity) and "white moments of life" (the prosperous and successful times in one's life).

### 2.2 Yellow

In Chinese culture, yellow has two completely different associative meanings. In ancient times, it symbolized sacredness, imperial power, nobility, sublimity and solemnity, and was a symbol of imperial authority. For instance, the

"yellow robe" was the emperor's exclusive garment, the "yellow battle axe" the emperor's ceremonial weapon, the "yellow notice" the emperor's imperial edict, and the "yellow mandarin jacket" the official robe bestowed by the emperors of the Qing Dynasty on meritorious civil and military officials. In modern Chinese, however, yellow has taken on the meanings of obscenity and pornography, as in "yellow movies" and "yellow books and periodicals".

In English, "yellow" has no such pornographic connotations. Instead, it describes a person who is cowardly and timid — for example, "a yellow dog" means a coward or a contemptible person. "Yellow journalism" refers to a style of newspaper editing that uses unscrupulous exaggeration and sensationalism to attract readers. A "yellow book/Yellow Pages" is a commercial and professional classified telephone directory printed on yellow paper, commonly found in American shops and households.

### 2.3 Blue

In Chinese, blue is mostly used in its literal sense, such as "blue sky" and "azure sea", and it represents peace, tranquility and calmness.

In English, "blue" has a much wider range of cultural connotations. It is the color of melancholy and sorrow, as in "blue music" (melancholic, slow and soothing music), "a bolt from the blue" (a sudden and unexpected disaster) and "in a blue mood" (in a low or depressed mood). "Blue" also denotes nobility and noble birth, such as "blue blood" (of noble birth) and "blue ribbon" (the blue ribbon awarded to competition winners, representing the highest honor). Additionally, "blue" is associated with obscenity, for example, "blue movie" (pornographic movie), "blue joke" (dirty joke) and "a blue gown" (prostitute). Furthermore, "blue stocking" is a term used to refer to an educated and talented woman; "blue-pencil" is used as a verb meaning to revise or censor a text; "once in a blue moon" means a very rare event; and "drink till all's blue" means to get dead drunk.

## 3. Non-Correspondence in the Cultural Connotations of Color Words in English and Chinese

Leonard Bloomfield, the famous American linguist, once said: "The meaning of any word or sentence in a foreign language is always

different from that of an approximate corresponding word or sentence in one's native language. " This is what we call the non-correspondence of cultural connotations, which is an important cause of misunderstandings in cultural meanings and confusion in pragmatic meanings. For example, "Hong Niang (Matchmaker)" was the maid of Cui Yingying, the heroine of the *Romance of the Western Chamber*, who facilitated the happy union between Yingying and the hero Zhang Sheng. Later, in Chinese folk culture, a person who enthusiastically helps others find a marriage partner is called a "Hong Niang", which should be translated into English as "go-between" or "match-maker". If Westerners are unfamiliar with this cultural connotation of the Chinese nation and take "Hong Niang" merely as a young woman in red, it will lead to a ridiculous misunderstanding. Literally, "black sheep" means a black sheep, but in fact, it refers to a black sheep of the family or a worthless person. the expression derives from an ancient British superstitious belief. In the past, the British thought that a black lamb was the incarnation of the devil, so shepherds always considered a black sheep among a flock of white sheep inauspicious. Black wool was also worthless and regarded as a useless thing. Thus, "black sheep" has evolved to mean a useless person or a black sheep of the family, equivalent to the Chinese expression "a black sheep that spoils the whole flock".

#### 4. Conclusion

Culture is the soil on which language survives and develops, and the accumulation of Chinese and Western cultures has endowed color words with vivid and distinct cultural connotations. These connotations share certain similarities, yet also differ vastly due to cultural disparities, and there exist non-correspondences in many aspects. Therefore, when learning a foreign language, we must never interpret words literally. Instead, we should learn and understand the different cultural information carried by different languages, so as to achieve effective cross-cultural verbal communication.

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