



# Cultural Differences and Translation of Chinese and English Color Words

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## ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, the communication between countries becomes more and more frequent, and the requirements for translators become higher and higher, which requests that translators should master professional knowledge and improve their professional ability. As the color words appear more and more frequently in international communication and the meaning of color words vary due to differences in geographical location, religious belief, language habits, etc., it will be easy to cause misunderstandings if translators fail to understand the connotation of color words and apply appropriate methods. Based on this, the paper summarizes some effective translation methods by taking the common usage of six color words as the entry point and combining the differences between Chinese and English geography and religion.

## 1. Introduction

The exploration of color perception and color category has a long history, and the related philosophical speculation and explanation can be traced back to the ancient Greek times. Plato believed that the process of human color perception needs three basic conditions: light source, reflective object and eyes with reflective function. Aristotle, on the other hand, paid attention to the types of color components, and divided it into simple colors and compound colors. In the 17th century, British scientist Newton solved the mystery of color through experiments, that is, the color is caused by the reflection and refraction of light on objects. Since then, color research has embarked on the road of scientific development. Since 1958, more than 3,000 books have been written on the study of color words, which has deepened people's understanding of the color word system.

Color is people's perception of the objective world, and it is impossible for any two languages to match the words of color one by one. Color words are an indispensable part of human language. People's feelings, understandings and expressions of colors reflect distinct cultural features. Due to differences in geographical environment, religious belief, history, culture and thinking habits, there are also many differences in the translation of color words between Chinese and English. With the frequent and in-depth international communication, it is particularly important to correctly grasp and translate color words.

## 2. Literature Review

A E Moss expressed in his Basic Color Terms: Problems and Hypotheses that abstract problems had arisen for Berlin and Kay's developmental theory of basic color terms. In the paper it was proposed that a threefold dis-

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inction between linguistic, psychological and physiological levels of basicness might help to solve some of the problems.

In *Color Categories: Evidence for the Cultural Relativity Hypothesis*, based on the research that found substantial evidence of cognitive color differences between different language cultures, Debi Roberson, Jules Davidoff, Ian R L Davies, and Laura R Shapiro extended previous findings to show different cognitive organization of color to both English and another language with the five color terms. Moreover, Categorical Perception effects were found to differ even between languages with broadly similar color categories.

Luo Xiaoying summarized effective translation strategies by taking differences in red color as the entry point and combining differences in Chinese and western cultures, customs and so on in his paper *On Comparison of Chinese and English Red Connotations and Meanings and Its Translation Methods* published in 2015.

Chang Liang proposed two translation strategies of foreignization and domestication in his book *Domestication and Foreignization of Color Words in Chinese-English Translation*, and pointed out that translators could adopt literal translation, literal translation with annotations, free translation and free translation with annotations according to the actual needs of translation.

In the *Comparison of Semantics Between Chinese and English Color Words*, Shen Xiaofei points out that the meaning of words includes denotation and connotation, and the associative meaning of color words is mainly due to the differences in cultural background, perspective of observing things, special economic events, historical and geographical environment and other factors.

### **3. Four Important Reasons for the Differences between Chinese and Western Color Words**

#### **3.1 Geographic Factor**

Ancient China is located in the east of Eurasia and the west coast of the Pacific Ocean. The Chinese people adore the yellow because of the cradle of the birth of their ancestors — the Yellow River basin and the Yellow River civilization. It is said that the ancestor Nuwa, the goddess in Chinese methodology, was born in the loess, so “loess made man” symbolizes the human origin of the Han nationality, which is opposite to the “god made man” theory of the British culture. Yellow Emperor is the first emperor of the Chinese nation, so the emperor is closely related to yellow.

In the Han culture, the history of agricultural society is

long and people have been clinging to the loess for generations. They are interdependent with the land and deeply attached to it. If the Han civilization is rooted in the land moistened by rivers, then the western culture is born in the blue waves. Britain is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean, with the North Sea in the east and the English Channel in the south. The worship of blue originates from the island environment where the Anglo-Saxons live. Surrounded by the sea, the English people make a living by the sea and they developed trade and shipping industry to bring them profits. Thus, the color of the sea became an object of worship.

#### **3.2 Religious Factor**

Different religious beliefs inevitably lead to different related terms. The British believe in Christianity, the Bible says that the believers who betray Jesus always wear yellow clothes, so in English, yellow usually makes people think of betrayal. In ancient Chinese philosophy, heaven was the supreme god and could dominate the world. Under the concept of respecting heaven and god, people naturally associate heaven and the emperor, because the emperor inherits the will of heaven to rule the country. Yellow Emperor is the earliest emperor in China and people respect and worship him very much, so yellow is the highest in the eyes of Chinese people. In ancient times, only emperor could wear yellow clothes. Besides, the Chinese always believe in Buddhism, and Buddhas in the buddhist temples are golden, so golden in the eyes of the Chinese people usually means noble.

#### **3.3 Thinking Modes Factor**

The ancient Chinese culture emphasizes the people-oriented, that is the human needs, human dignity and human values, to explore the moral value system. The cultural sources are Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The Chinese way of thinking is the “nature and man in one” the ethics of artistic thinking, and his whole epistemology has caused the confusion of main body and object. Combined with theory of Zen doctrine, it is easy for people to attach their subjective emotion to the nature, leading to meaning vague and rich implication, especially semantic fuzziness and versatility of the cultural words. Therefore, word has lost its original meaning, and it is given plenty of meanings by people. The understanding of the semantic meaning of cultural words depends on the comprehension of the thoughts of ancestors and the literature of past dynasties.

English culture is the philosophical thought of “two parts of the same” and the scientific epistemology of ra-

tionalism. In addition to logical derivation and abstract speculation, knowledge and experience are also taken as important approaches, and experiments and demonstration are emphasized in scientific research. In terms of the embodiment of cultural words, there is certainty and clarity.

### 3.4 Communicative Value Factor

The Chinese people seek to convey certain images with the shortest symbols, so that the recipients can develop rich association and imagination. They usually adopt personification to give subjective meanings to the objective things. In interpersonal communication, the Chinese people pay much attention to love, and do not care about personal interests, putting coordination of interpersonal relations in the first place. They often lay emphasis on the harmony of both sides in the communication process to avoid causing conflict.

While in British culture, people seek goodness and beauty on the basis of truth. Aesthetics tends to be objective, and they express in a clear and logical conceptual system, and pay more attention to objectivity rather than image. In interpersonal communication, it is often about the matter rather than about the person, and they pursue individual and individualistic values, loyal to their own hearts. They respect and trust others in an equal relationship.

## 4. The Characteristics of Word Formation of Chinese and British Color Words

### 4.1 The Characteristics of Word Formation of Chinese Color Words

As we all know, Chinese is one of the languages with the most abundant color words in the world. Its basic color words mainly include black, white, red, green, blue and yellow. The word formation of Chinese color words is flexible, diverse and extremely complex.

#### 4.1.1 Objects by Color

The characteristics of the formation of Chinese color words, such as blood red, milk white, goose yellow, are mainly reflected by the concreteness and intuition of the thinking of Chinese people. When Chinese people use words to express concepts, they are always used to make words by the concrete objects around them.

#### 4.1.2 Metaphor

One of the most important external characteristics of things is that they all have their own unique colors. The natural connection between colors and things makes them

associative, and the associative nature of color words makes them figurative in word formation. Many color words in Chinese use the method of “metaphorical objects plus color words”, such as rose red, eggplant purple, peacock green. Chinese basic color words not only need to be realized through figurative means in word formation, but also cannot be explained without figurative means. Since ancient times, the use of examples and metaphors to explain the color word is a more common method.

#### 4.1.3 Flexibility

The flexibility of Chinese basic color words is determined by the flexibility of Chinese language and the thinking habits of the Chinese people. Its flexibility is not only reflected in the way of word formation, but also in its flexible use of parts of speech. In Chinese, basic color words generally work as adjectives, which mainly plays the role of defining and describing. However, like English color words, Chinese basic color words can also be used as verbs, nouns, etc., which is obvious in Chinese literature.

### 4.2 The Characteristics of Word Formation of British Color Words

Basic color words in English refer to the words that are used to express the color of things, namely white, black, red, gray, brown, yellow, etc. Most of these are monosyllabic words, whose etymology is almost entirely Anglo-Saxon. English basic color words also include some foreign words, such as azure, auburn, and the vast majority of their etymology is Romance. However, most of these words are longer and less dynamic than the basic color words of Anglo-Saxon etymology in their usage and importance. There are two main characteristics of the word formation of English basic color words.

#### 4.2.1 Polycategorical Features of British Basic Color Words

When it comes to color words, people tend to think they are adjectives, which is not always the case. English basic color words can have different parts of speech, such as verbs, adverbs, etc. For example:

The leaves become yellow. (Adjective)

The leaves have yellowed. (Verb)

Yellow means that autumn is coming. (Noun)

#### 4.2.2 English Color Words Can Meet the Needs of Expression by Multiple Means

The basic color words in English can express the complicated color concepts in the following ways besides the

hyponyms of adjectives:

Words such as deep and dark are added in front of color words to indicate the intensity of a certain color; light and plain to indicate a light color; bright and rich to indicate a lively color; dull and pale to indicate a darksome color.

Suffix “-ish” can be added to a certain color word to mean that the color is light and pale. For example: reddish flowers, grayish wisps.

The English basic color word can be preceded by another color word to indicate a mixture of colors. For example: yellow green, blue green, golden silver.

## 5. Common Usage of Six Basic Color Words

### 5.1 Red

In Chinese, red is the color word with the most positive meaning, often indicating happiness, success and warmth, etc. Such as get of a good start, red list and red envelope. In the traditional Chinese wedding, the bride usually wears a red dress and a red veil. Red words of “Xi” and red candles will be affixed to the bride’s home, which not only adds to the festive atmosphere of the wedding, but also makes people think of the cheerful days after the wedding of a young couple. English is the same as the Chinese: red is often used to represent celebrations, such as red - letter day (the day of the festival), roll the red carpet for sb (welcoming someone warmly). What is different from Chinese is that in English red is often linked with blood, extension, cruel and dangerous and so on. Such as red hands (bloody hands), red ruin (fire disaster), red alert, in the red (losses, liabilities).

### 5.2 White

At the mention of white, the Chinese people will first think of the funeral. Since ancient times, if relatives deceased, the family must wear white mourning clothes, and set up a white hall. White also symbolizes failure and futility. For example, in a war, the losing side always carries white flag as a sign of surrender. Chinese people also use white to symbolize elegance and brightness, which is similar to the British people, such as white soul (pure soul), a white man (the man is loyal), a white witch (a witch who does good deeds), and white days (lucky days). Interestingly, white implies weakness and hypocrisy in English. For example, white liver/feather (coward), whited sepulcher (hypocrite). When we translate Chinese into English, we may notice that many cannot be simply translated into white. 白手起家 (poor and blank), 白费力气 (to beat in the air).

### 5.3 Black

In ancient China, black symbolizes nobleness, fortitude and impartiality, and etc. While in drama masks, black masks symbolize the characters’ upright and selfless characteristics, such as Bao Zheng and Li Kui. Black and bright opposite, so black symbolizes darkness, death, terror, insidious, such as black heart, triad, black car. In the bible, darkness symbolizes evil and evil, so in English, black mostly represents bad news, such as black news, black-letter day, to look black with anger, but not all the words used with black are derogatory, such as a business in the black profitable enterprise, black ice thin ice.

### 5.4 Yellow

Yellow was the representative color of the Chinese nation in ancient times, and yellow symbolized power and dignity. It is said that the Yellow Emperor, one of the ancestors of the Han nationality, often wore yellow clothes and crowns, so yellow became the color of emperors, and the common people were forbidden to wear yellow clothes. Contrary to the connotations of yellow color in Chinese, Judas, who betrayed Jesus, was dressed in yellow. Therefore, in English, yellow is not the color that people advocate, but has derogatory meanings, such as timid, jealousy and suspicion. For example, yellow belly (coward), a yellow dog (ignoble man), and yellow looks (sour and suspicious looks).

### 5.5 Blue

In Chinese, blue is the color of the sea and sky, giving people a feeling of peace and tranquility. But in English, blue is often extended to be sad and melancholy, for example, blue smile (woebegone smile), blue Monday (depressing Monday), feel blue (someone feels sad). Also blue is often associated with high and powerful nobles. For example, blue blood (someone comes from noble family), blue book (book that records some famous people), blue-brick universities (powerful and influential universities). What we have to know is that in spoken English, it usually has an immoral meaning, such as make a blue joke (the joke is indecent and unacceptable), blue film (the film has too many sexual scenes), blue revolution (sexual revolution).

### 5.6 Green

Like other countries in the world, China uses green as a symbol of peace and hope, and green light as a signal of safe passage. Green means friendly, peaceful and tranquil, and it also symbolizes the harmony of nature and the vig-



or of youth. For example, Green Peace (an organization advocating green and peace), green belt, green house. In English, green sometimes also means inexperienced and jealous, such as green hand (inexperienced man), green from school (not long after graduating), and green-eyed (jealousy). There are also some other meanings of green color, for example, green room (restroom for actor or actress), a green winter (the winter is not cold).

## 6. Four common translation methods of color words

### 6.1 Literal Translation

Sometimes some Chinese color words that represent the characteristics of things can find their corresponding words or phrases in English. In other words, some English color words are equivalent to the cultural meaning of Chinese, and there are cultural commonalities between the source language and the target language. In this case, literal translation can be adopted. The so-called literal translation means that under the permission of the language of the target text, the content of the source text should be faithful while the structure of the source text should be maintained, such as metaphor and national characteristics. The translation strategy of literal translation is particularly suitable in the context of cultural equivalence between China and the west, because literal translation can faithfully express the content of the original text, and reflect the cultural and vivid image of the source language, enabling readers of different languages to deeply understand the cultural characteristics of the source language, and promote cultural exchanges between China and the west. For example: green light, White House, black list, black market.

### 6.2 Free Translation

Both Chinese and English have their own traditional customs and they express the concept of color in their own ways, which leads to the non-correspondence between the expression of English and Chinese color words and their translation. In the process of translation, if translators simply use literal translation, they will inevitably produce many mistakes or even misunderstanding. Therefore, free translation is the best choice. The so-called free translation, starting from the meaning, is not limited by the words of the original text, and not rigidly adheres to the original sentence structure, but still requires the translation to correctly express the content of the original text, and achieve natural fluency. Free translation requires us to have a deep understanding of the cultural background

of the source language and the target language, and to express the information contained in the source language in words that can be understood by the target language readers. For example: “红白喜事” can't be translated into “red and white happy things”, it will make foreign readers feel confused, in fact from what we understand in our daily life, it can be translated as weddings and funerals, and we translate “红茶” into black tea rather than “red tea”. These examples indicate that the translator have to understand the different culture of two countries.

### 6.3 Adding Color Words

When the color words in the source language express a metaphorical meaning, literal translation cannot express the complete meaning of the source language. At this time, adding one or two color words according to the expression habit of the target language can achieve the same or similar meaning with the source language, thus making the translation more accurate. For example, “He likes to climb to the top of the mountain on a sunny evening to see the sunset” is translated into “He likes to climb to the top of the hill to enjoy the red sky on sunny evening”. “We should drink more boiled water” is translated into “We should drink more plain boiled water in our daily life”, here we have added “plain”, which is mainly used to distinguish boiled water from other colorful drinks and so on.

### 6.4 Zero Translation

Zero translation is a strategy adopted to overcome the insurmountable barriers between languages and guarantee the authenticity of translation. It means that we translate the words of source language without using the target language, but only from the pronunciation rather than the literal meaning. It can be used to translate some people's or geographical names. For example: Tsinghai (name of a province in China), Nv'er Hong (name of liquor). This translation method retains the flavor of the source language, but we find that it is only suitable for the translation of some specific names of people or places, because they belong to the distinctive national culture.

## 7. Conclusion

Color words have always been the focus of philosophers and linguists, as well as one of the frontier topics in contemporary linguistics. The study of color words, especially the study of color words in different languages, needs to involve the local aspects of the attributes of color words, such as grammatical attributes, semantic attributes, pragmatic attributes and so on. More importantly, it needs to unify all aspects of the study.

Color words are a mirror reflecting language and culture. By learning and analyzing the color words in different cultural backgrounds, and adopting the methods of literal translation, free translation and changing color words flexibly in translation, people can better understand the text, thus effectively conducting cross-cultural communication and promoting the cultural communication between English and Chinese. For Chinese and western people, most colors have the same visual effect, but as we know, in many literary works or real life, there are many deviations or even misunderstandings in literal translation. Therefore, it is very important to clarify the connotation of color words in source language and target language.

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