

Contrastive Research on the Collocative Meaning of Chinese and English Color Synonyms from Leech's Theory of Seven Meanings

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Abstract

In the comparative study of Chinese and English in China, more studies focus on the meaning of words themselves, but less study on the comparison of the pairs of synonyms. Based on the collocative meaning in Leech's seven types of meanings in semantics, this article will take the Chinese characters “红” “赤”, the English words “red” and “scarlet” as examples to analyze the differences in commendatory and derogatory meanings between Chinese and English synonyms. In this way, we can analyze the linguistic characteristics of the degree to which the Chinese and English are affected by collocative meaning.

Keywords: The study of Chinese-English comparison, collocative meaning, synonyms, Geoffrey Leech.

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INTRODUCTION

Many linguists at home and abroad have done researches in the field of synonyms in their native languages. However, the number of studies on English and Chinese synonyms from a comparative perspective is relatively small. According to the CNKI database, only 99 articles can be found on the subject of “English-Chinese synonyms”. Besides, the annual trend graph of publications also shows that the peak number of publications in that subject was in 2008, with only 10 articles.

Actually, the scope and type of synonyms cannot be explained clearly just in one article. As for the color words in languages beyond Chinese, the scope of scholars' researches is also limited to the words themselves. In a speech delivered in 1977, Mr. Lv ShuXiang proposed that “to understand the characteristics of Chinese, it is necessary to compare it with non-Chinese [1]”. Therefore, this article expands the research scope of color words in Chinese and English to the study of their synonyms, and conducts a comparative study of the characteristics of Chinese characters and English words by using the collocative meaning as an analysis method in Leech's seven types of meanings to find out their similarities and differences. Through the comparison between Chinese and English, this article intends to find out the characteristics of the Chinese characters in the

collocation of synonyms and its difference with English words.

Collocative Meaning in Leech's Seven Types of Meanings

In the field of semantics, Leech's “seven types of meanings” is widely known and recognized. Leech divides semantics into seven aspects, namely: conceptual (or logical) meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, collocative meaning and thematic meaning. Except for the inherent meaning “conceptual meaning” and “thematic meaning” that related to accent and order, the remaining meanings are collectively referred to as the associative meaning of the words [2]. Among them, collocative meaning refers to the associative meaning generated by the collocation of one word and another word. Due to the difference between Chinese and English in the distinction of “word” and “character”, there is no exact “word” in Chinese. The definitions of “word” and “morpheme” in the Indo-European linguistic system cannot be applied to Chinese, but Chinese “character” can exist and be used independently. Therefore, the “words” that we usually speak in English can correspond to the Chinese “characters”. In this case, we should change the concept of collocative meaning to “referring to the associative meaning produced when a character is used in conjunction with another character” [3]. In previous studies, the number of studies focused on associative

meanings of the corpus is large. A search with the theme of “associative meaning” in the CNKI database yielded 2136 search results. Among them, the main theme distribution map of articles related to associative meaning shows that the color words studies ranked second, accounting for 140 articles. However, there are fewer articles studying the collocative meaning of the corpus, only 460 search results can be obtained, and the high-frequency topics related to it are vocabulary teaching, cultural connotation and cultural differences, etc. Searching the Chinese CNKI database with the theme of “English and Chinese synonyms”, we can find only 2 articles under the “collocative meaning” subject in the distribution map of the secondary theme. Therefore, the research on the collocative meaning of color synonyms is still in the period of immature.

Collocation is an important feature of words. The research on the collocative meaning of words should involve the comprehensive study of the lexical meaning, associative meaning, grammatical meaning and pragmatic meaning of the word [4]. Therefore, the collocative meaning of a word or a character is actually a comprehensive analysis of its additional meaning. When analyzing the collocative meaning of a word or a character, we should also pay attention to analyzing its surface and deep semantics meanings in the context of this collocation.

An Overview of the Synonym

Synonyms can be divided into synonyms in narrow sense and broad sense. According to the standard of sememe analysis, synonyms in narrow sense should belong to the “synonymous field”. According to Leech’s “seven types of meanings”, they are only the same in the conceptual meaning, and the other additional meanings are different. Instead of those synonyms in narrow sense, synonyms in broad sense are words that “equivalent”.

According to this classification method, what we are studying today is narrow synonyms. For the research on the concept of “synonyms”, domestic scholars have done a lot of discussion and research on it. Mr. Chi summarized the history of the synonym standards in China in the *Overview of the Research Focus on Chinese Synonyms in Fifty Years*. He believes that there are four formulations for the standards of synonyms. The first is the theory of “meaning identity and proximity”, the second is the theory of “conceptual identity”, the third is the theory of “object identity”, and the fourth is the theory of “semantic identity” [4]. Among them, the theory “semantic identity” is the concept of synonyms under sememe analysis. These formulations are actually the cyclic combination from semantics to pragmatics, and then from pragmatics to semantics. The definition criteria of synonyms are changed from abstract to concrete, and then to the level of combining abstract and concrete. In addition, Mr. Chi also mentioned Liu’s criteria for defining synonyms

from mathematical concepts, that is, extracting the “greatest common divisor” in synonymous relations [4], which is also an attempt to combine textual concepts with mathematical models. This article adopts the synonym standard of Mr. Chi’s first theory.

The Chinese and English synonyms included in this article are all selected according to their original color meaning, that is, a pair of words expressing the same or similar color meanings; this is a pair of synonyms. In the process of comparison, the meaning as a noun is ignored. The most common and widely used words or characters will be selected as the main reference object for comparison, such as “红” and “red”. By this way it can show the contrast in an obvious and clear view. Compared with other color words, “红” and “red” in both Chinese and English languages have richer meanings, and the meanings expressed by their synonyms are relatively more. In that case, the corpus will be richer and significant if they were selected as research objects.

Contrastive Study of Chinese Color Synonyms

“红” has five meanings in Chinese, namely: 1) like the color of blood; 2) a red cloth symbolizing festivity; 3) symbolizing success or being valued and welcomed by others, such as “开门红”, “红运”, “唱歌唱红了”; 4) symbolizing high revolutionary or political consciousness, such as “红军” and “红色老区”; 5) dividends, such as “红利”; 6) last name [6]. In Chinese, the most common synonym of “红” is “赤”. “赤” in Chinese includes eight meanings, namely: 1) a color slightly lighter than vermilion; 2) generally refers to red; 3) symbolizing revolution and fighting for freedom with blood, such as “赤卫队”; 4) loyalty, such as “赤诚”; 5) naked; exposed (body), such as “赤脚”; 6) empty, such as “赤手空拳”; 7) refers to red gold; 8) last name [6].

In order to remove the meaning without research significance, we omit the color meaning and name meaning expressed by two characters. Through comparison, we can find that “红” and “赤” have the same meaning of “symbolizing revolution”, that’s because Chinese people believe that “红” is the color as blood, and it represents “revolution” or “uprising”. In the collocation of the character “红”, it will also express the relationship with the CPC or the state Government, such as “红头文件” because China’s revolution is related to the CPC. It will also express the positive meaning of “loyalty” in the meaning of “赤”. For example, “又红又专” is often used to describe a person who will always maintain the united front and the same level with the CPC and excellent spirit of Chinese revolutionary ancestors.

In addition to the same meanings, we can find that “红” usually plays positive and auspicious roles in

words collocation, such as “红光满面”, “红人” and “红领巾” (referring to the young people who join the Young Pioneer, who are the glorious representatives); In terms of economic meaning, it also expresses positive meaning, such as “红股” and “红利”. This is because “红” in the traditional sense means good things and festive events in China. Every festival or festive event, Chinese people will take “红” as the theme for activities, such as pasting red spring festival couplets, setting off red firecrackers, pasting red window paper-cuts, scattering red petals, etc. Only in a few phrases, the meaning of “红” is negative, for example, “红” in “红灯区” means “forbidden and erotic”; “红” in “红牌” means “foul and warning”.

On the contrary, “赤” usually shows negative meanings. For example, “赤膊” and “赤脚” show a sense of unruly or shabby, “赤贫” means scarcity in fortune. In some southern China dialects, “小赤佬” is regarded as a vulgar language. “赤佬” is the extended meaning of “naked and exposed” of “赤”, which means obscene and inferior people. In the economic sense, “赤” in “赤字” means expenditure exceeding revenue in economic activities, which is because the numbers written in bookkeeping are written with red handwriting [6]. However, in terms of collocation, we never use the word “红” to express the idea that payments barely cover the expenses.

Contrastive Study of English Color Synonyms

In English, “red” has two different parts of speech, so it has two meanings: 1), having the color of blood or fire; 2), bloodshot (with thin lines of blood in them) or surrounded by red or very pink skin; 3), (of the face) bright red or pink, especially because you are angry, embarrassed or ashamed; 4), (of hair or an animal’s fur) reddish-brown in color; 5), (sometimes disapproving, politics) having very LEFT-WING political opinions radical [7].

Different from Chinese, “red” often has a negative meaning in collocation. “Red” is the same color as blood, it is often associated with “anger” and “bleeding and sacrifice”. For example, “red ruin” means conflagration, “red battle” means “bloody battle”, and “red neck” is extended from “hillbilly” just like the character “赤” in Chinese. In economic field, “red” also means “loss” in the collocation of financial words, such as “red figure”, “red ink” and “in the red”. They all mean “deficit” and “debt”. In addition, “red” also has the same meaning of “warning” and “danger” as “红” in Chinese, for example, “red alert” is an emergency alarm, and “red card” is a warning of foul play.

The synonym of “red”, “scarlet” means “bright red in color” [7]. “Scarlet” is often paired with female figure, which is also negative. “Scarlet woman” means “slut” which is a highly insulting word. The origin of

the word “scarlet” is related to the *The Scarlet Letter* written by Hawthorne, an American writer. In this book, the “scarlet letter” A on Mrs. Hester Prynne’s chest is the symbol of adultery. However, this usage is out of date in modern society.

Among this pair of synonyms, “red” and “scarlet” have little difference in collocative meaning. The emotional tendency of the both of them in many phrases is negative, and the synonyms representing the meaning “red”, such as “crimson”; “maroon”, “ruby” and so on is only different from “red” in degree of color. Apart from the meaning of color, the synonyms of “red” have no other additional collocative meaning. At this point, the collocative meaning distinction of color synonyms in English is relatively lacking.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the above comparison, it can be seen that there are great differences in the collocative meaning of color synonyms in English and Chinese. Color synonyms in Chinese have very little distinction in color meaning, but have great differences in collocative meaning. While in English, color synonyms have obvious distinction in color meaning, mainly in color degree in the same large range. In collocation, the difference between synonyms is small and will not show polar tones as Chinese.

In Chinese, the conceptual meaning of “红” and its synonym “赤” is similar even above the expression of color differentiation. Both of them express the same color with little difference. Moreover, the two words are usually related to the CPC, expressing the meaning of high political awareness and loyalty to the party. However, the two are quite different in collocation. In lexical collocation, the phrases related to “red” usually express positive meaning, symbolizing festivity and good situation. Only a few express the meaning of “prohibition”. Therefore, on the whole, the collocative meaning of “red” is positive. “赤” is the opposite to “红”. The phrases related to “赤” usually express negative meanings, and usually express the meaning of lack of wealth at the material or spiritual level. In the Chinese context, such words usually have ironic and derogatory meanings. Generally speaking, the collocative meaning of “赤” is negative.

In English, the differences between “red” and its synonyms such as “scarlet” mainly focus on the degree of color difference. In English, there are detailed descriptions and explanations for the colors expressed by the two words. In the sense of collocation, the two words show negative meanings with different angles. The collocation of the word “red” usually with the meaning of violence and non-compliance with rules, and in the collocation, it is similar to the derogatory meaning of the Chinese “赤”, expressing the meaning

of “barren”, while “scarlet” is usually matched with female figures to express the meaning of moral infidelity and derogatory in the context. It is influenced by modern feminism movements; this usage is no longer commonly used.

Generally speaking, the collocative meanings of color characters or words in Chinese and English word-formation are quite different, which is mainly reflected in the commendatory and derogatory meanings in the context. In terms of the corpus studied in this article, the collocative meanings of Chinese color synonyms are quite different; while in English, the color synonyms are more derogatory, and the difference is relatively small.

CONCLUSION

By studying the collocative meaning of Chinese and English Color synonyms and listing the meanings of Chinese and English words expressing the color “red”, this article draws the following conclusions: there are obvious differences between Chinese and English Color synonyms in different contexts and collocations. From the color synonyms analyzed in this article, the meaning of Chinese characters is more likely to be affected by collocation than that of English words.

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