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A Comparative Analysis of Cultural Connotation Words in English and Chinese

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Abstract:
Language reflects a nation's culture and is profoundly influenced by it. Rooted in different cultural backgrounds, the English and Chinese languages inevitably exhibit significant cultural differences. This paper compares and analyzes cultural connotation words in English and Chinese from the perspectives of geographical environment, religious beliefs, value systems, customs and habits, literary works, and political systems. The aim is to enable language learners to appreciate the differences manifested at the lexical level and, ultimately, to cultivate and enhance their cross-cultural communicative competence.

Keywords:
cultural connotation words; cultural differences; contrast of linguistic and cultural factors

1 The Significance of Teaching Cultural Connotation Words

"Today's culture is no longer the culture of a specific region, but the culture of an era, an all-encompassing culture of our time" [1] This necessitates that everyone learns and understands foreign cultures. Foreign language learners, in particular, must familiarize themselves with the culture of the country whose language they are studying and understand its customs and practices. Otherwise, cross-cultural communication will inevitably encounter obstacles, leading to misunderstandings and even friction.

Words are the basic structural units of sentences and essential factors for communication. Vocabulary is also the most dynamic component of language and bears the heaviest cultural load. Many students encounter obstacles in understanding the target language not due to a lack of linguistic knowledge but stemming from cultural differences. Therefore, vocabulary teaching should not be conducted merely for the sake of teaching words; cultural differences constitute a crucial part of vocabulary instruction. Only by strengthening the comparison of linguistic and cultural factors in vocabulary teaching, and by comparing the differences between Chinese and English cultures, can students truly grasp the connotations of words during the learning process and correctly use the vocabulary they have learned for communication, thereby achieving the true purpose of vocabulary teaching.

Cultural connotation words primarily refer to words carrying specific cultural meanings within a given linguistic context. They include common words, proverbs, idioms, etc. "Culture is always national, and language is one component of culture. The meanings of words are invariably endowed with national cultural character-

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istics, which remain hidden without comparison. Isolating national cultural elements within a single language is as difficult as trying to distinguish the fragrance of orchids after long exposure to them." [2] Therefore, the following analysis compares and analyzes the formation and different connotations of cultural connotation words in English and Chinese by examining the geographical environments, religious beliefs, value systems, customs and habits, and literary works of the respective cultures.

2 Factors Influencing the Cultural Connotations of Vocabulary

2.1 Vocabulary and Geographical Environment

Due to the different geographical locations of various ethnic groups, the connotations of certain words vary across cultures. Some words denoting natural phenomena exist in both English and Chinese, but their associative meanings differ.

When Chinese people refer to " 西风 " (west wind), they associate it with desolation and bleakness, as the west wind blows in late autumn or winter, bringing cold weather and withering vegetation. Hence, depictions like Ma Zhiyuan's " 古道西风瘦马，夕阳西下，断肠人在天涯 " (Ancient path, west wind, a lean horse; / The sun sinking in the west, / And a heartbroken traveler far from home), Li Bai's " 咸阳古道音尘绝 …… 西风残照 ……" (On Xianyang's ancient road, sound and dust are cut off... / The west wind and the setting sun's afterglow...), and Yan Shu's " 昨夜西风凋碧树，独上高楼，望断天涯路 " (Last night the west wind withered the green-clad trees; / Alone I climb the lofty tower, / Gazing at the road that disappears at the skyline), all evoke scenes of bleakness and desolation. Conversely, for the British, the "west wind" is a warm wind blowing from the North Atlantic, vastly different from the Chinese connotation. The famous British poet Shelley's Ode to the West Wind is a widely known masterpiece. John Masefield's line, "It's a warm wind, the west wind, full of birds' cries," serves as further evidence.

2.2 Vocabulary and Religious Beliefs

Chinese and Western cultures have different origins. Religious culture has permeated every corner of our lives, subtly influencing our everyday vocabulary. For example, Friday in English is "Friday." Many British and Americans are Christians, and the day of Jesus' crucifixion was a Friday. Hence, expressions like "Friday face," meaning "a gloomy or sad expression," and "Black Friday," meaning "a day of disaster," emerged. "Sunday" evokes thoughts of Jesus' resurrection, worship, and holidays, often carrying connotations of holiness and joy. Thus, people refer to their best clothes as their "Sunday best" or "Sunday clothes." The Chinese terms " 星期五 " (Friday) or " 星期日 " (Sunday), lacking this cultural background, do not carry these meanings.

When teaching Lesson 1 of *Contemporary College English Book 1*, the phrase "the creation of the universe" appears. Chinese students might think of the Chinese legend of " 盘古开天辟地 " (Pangu separating heaven and earth), whereas the text refers to the Christian creation myth. In *College English Book 3*, there is a sentence: "Being a teacher is being present at the creation, when the clay begins to breathe." Many are confused by "creation" and "clay." According to the Bible, God created humans from clay and gave them life. Therefore, in English, "creation" often refers to "God's act of creation," and "clay" often symbolizes "humans

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created by God." The author uses this phrase to imply the sacredness of the teaching profession, likening it to God's creation of humans; teachers shape students' character or personality. Understanding these cultural connotations, the sentence can be interpreted as: "A teacher is a witness to creation, observing the breath and growth of life."

2.3 Vocabulary and Value Systems

Value systems typically stem from broader philosophical questions and are part of the cultural environment. These values are normative; members of the culture know what is good and evil, right and wrong, true and false, positive and negative, etc. Values are learned, not universal. Different cultures possess different value systems (Samovar et al., 1981). In the Chinese value system, collectivism is the cornerstone, and subordinating personal interests to collective interests is a virtue that everyone should learn. However, individualism, a pillar of Western culture, is often unacceptable in China, even viewed negatively. These values are directly reflected in vocabulary. For instance, the Chinese term " 个人主义 " (individualism) often carries a negative connotation, whereas "individualism" in English can be neutral or positive, emphasizing self-reliance and personal freedom.

2.4 Vocabulary and Customs & Habits

Due to differences in customs and habits, the connotations and usages of English and Chinese vocabulary vary significantly. Many words fall into this category. Their differences manifest in two aspects: first, the connotative meaning of some words is broader or narrower in Western culture compared to Chinese culture; second, the connotative meanings are completely opposite in the two cultures. Therefore, these words require particular attention from learners; otherwise, communication barriers may arise.

For example, the word " 红 " (red). In Chinese culture, red symbolizes happiness, celebration, auspiciousness, joy, prosperity, and success. During the Chinese New Year, red couplets are pasted on doorways, and red " 福 " (fortune) characters are affixed to doors. A wedding is called a " 红喜事 " (red happy event); the bride wears red dresses; the 新房 (bridal chamber) is decorated with red " 喜 " (double happiness) characters and lit with red candles. Although English also has the phrase "red-letter day" (a special or joyful occasion), "red" more commonly symbolizes intensity, excitement, stimulation, or anger ("red with anger"). In Europe and America, for a first wedding, the bride's dress is traditionally white, symbolizing purity.

2.5 Literary Works and Vocabulary

2.5.1 Culturally Connotative Personal and Place Names

Culturally connotative personal or place names are products of literary works. Characters' names in literature may reveal their image, hint at their personality, imply their fate; some embed meaning in sound, prompting reflection on meaning based on sound; others convey implication in the name, allowing understanding through the name itself; still others derive from allusions, evoking allusion-based interpretations. Lu Xun's character "Ah Q" has evolved into the specific term "Ah Q spirit," denoting traits like "self-deception" and "self-consolation." "Hamlet" is the protagonist of Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*. Hamlet, pondering revenge for his father's murder, is plagued by hesitation, fearing leaked secrets, a false ghost, and falling into

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a trap, leading to constant anxiety, melancholy, and feigned madness. Today, "Hamlet" is used metaphorically to refer to "an indecisive, hesitant person or behavior." "Shylock" from *The Merchant of Venice* is no longer just that specific character; in real life, he has become representative of usurious merchants who are mercenary, calculative, and insatiably greedy. For instance, Time magazine once published: "Many took to gambling and got in over their heads, borrowing from Shylocks to pay their debts." Due to Napoleon's decisive defeat at Waterloo in 1815, which changed the entire war situation, the phrase "to meet one's Waterloo" acquired the meaning of "to suffer a decisive defeat." In 1940, after the British army's retreat from Dunkirk following defeat by Germany, "Dunkirk" came to mean "a hasty retreat" or "a difficult situation."

2.5.2 Culturally Connotative Allusions

Allusions can be divided into historical and literary allusions. The former are mostly linked to real historical events, while the latter originate from literary works. English has numerous allusions from Greek and Roman mythology, such as "Achilles' heel" referring to a fatal weakness, and "Pandora's box" signifying that once a certain process begins, it brings unforeseen and unsolvable difficulties. Chinese allusions are also abundant, e.g., " 掩耳盗铃 " (plugging one's ears while stealing a bell—self-deception), " 心猿意马 " (a heart like a capering monkey and a mind like a galloping horse—restless), " 叶公好龙 " (Lord Ye's love of dragons—professed love of what one really fears), " 望梅止渴 " (quenching thirst by thinking of plums—illusory comfort), " 完璧归赵 " (returning the jade intact to Zhao—returning something intact), " 毛遂自荐 " (Mao Sui recommending himself—volunteering one's services), and many more.

2.6 Vocabulary and Political Systems

Due to differences in Chinese and Western political systems, the meanings of certain culturally connotative words with political color also differ. Beginner Chinese students of English often translate the English word "politician" as " 政 治 家 " (statesman). However, in American English, "politician" often carries a strong derogatory connotation, eliciting contempt. It refers to someone engaged in politics for personal gain or scheming; it can also mean "a shrewd and tactful person," indicating someone who acts and speaks with great confidence and sophistication. Conversely, how should the Chinese term " 政治家 " be translated into English? Some students translate it as "politician," which is inappropriate. The Chinese term " 政治家 " should be translated as "statesman," which is fitting in both British and American English. "Statesman" primarily denotes a wise person skilled in governing a nation; it is commonly used for respected high-ranking government officials. Similar examples include: "community" and " 社团 " (organization/community—note: 'community' in English often has broader social connotations), "propaganda" and " 宣传 " (propagation/publicity—note: 'propaganda' in English often carries negative connotations of biased or misleading information).

3 Conclusion

"Cultural connotation words" are ideological crystals refined through practice and the process of understanding the world. They are like mirrors, most clearly reflecting a nation's cultural characteristics. The process of teaching English vocabulary is also a process of teaching the culture of English-speaking countries. The purpose of teaching cultural connotation words is to help Chinese students learning English as a second language accurately understand word meanings and appropriately use vocabulary, fully leveraging the "pos-

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itive transfer" of their native languag to improve the quality of English vocabulary acquisition. "Comparing the cultural differences between English and Chinese not only helps us find reference points from our native language and culture but also aids in our correct understanding and use of English." [3] In English teaching, emphasizing Chinese-Western cultural differences can deepen our understanding of the English and Chinese languages, enhance our sensitivity to both native and foreign cultures, thereby enriching cultural knowledge and strengthening cross-cultural awareness.

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