

A Research on the Origin and the Main Characteristics of Culture-loaded Words

Jingguang Li

Faculty of Foreign Languages
Huaiyin Institute of Technology
Huai'an, China

Abstract—As a special social linguistic cultural phenomenon, culture-loaded words play a very important role in the social communication and the cultural activities, having a great influence on people's thought, behavior as well as their life styles. Therefore, carrying out some researches on culture-loaded words can not only enhance the mutual understanding and tolerance between different people from different cultural background, it will also be favorable for different people to get along well with each other. This thesis starts with the explanation on the definition and classification of culture-loaded words, then the author makes a detail analysis on the origin of culture-loaded words from the following aspects: the ecological environment; the religious belief; the social material life as well as the literature and arts. After that, an elaborate explanation has been made on the characteristics of culture-loaded words at the following different points; the words from different cultures have the similar meanings; the words with different forms have the similar meanings in different cultures; the words with the same form have different meanings in different cultures; the words from one culture don't have their equivalences in another culture. Finally, the author points out that with the carrying out of some relevant research on culture-loaded words in a deep-going way, more and more problems will be solved and some more feasible suggestions will be given in strengthening the mutual understanding between different cultures, which must be beneficial to build up a harmonious world.

Keywords—research; culture-loaded words; analysis; origin; characteristic

I. INTRODUCTION

As a special social linguistic phenomenon, there are quite a large number of culture-loaded words existing both in English and Chinese, which have had a great influence on people's thoughts, behaviors as well as their life styles. As a result, more and more linguists and cultural scholars have begun to pay more attention to such a social phenomenon, and even some of them have made a series of research on such a topic. However, up to now, according to the thesis and the material the author has looked up, most researches center about the mutual translation of Chinese and western culture-loaded words and few of them involve the origin or the main characteristics of culture-loaded words. That is the reason why the author wants to initiate such a research. This thesis starts with the explanation of the definition of culture-loaded

words, and then a detail analysis will be made on the origin or the characteristics of them in order to provide a beneficial reference for the following researchers and push forward the development of the research about culture-loaded words.

II. THE DEFINITION AND THE CLASSIFICATION OF CULTURE-LOADED WORDS

Culture is a complicated social phenomenon and it is a comprehensive summation which includes a nation's knowledge, experience, value, hierarchy, religion and the sense of time and space. Not only does it have the distinctive nationality and territoriality, it also tends to have the influence on any realm. Language, as a part of a culture, is just the carrier and the reflection of such a culture. As a result, language and culture are inseparable from each other. In addition, language is the symbolic representation of a national culture because it has been created by the people during their productive activity and the social practice. Therefore language can reflect their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as the way of their living styles and thinking patterns. Language and its cultural influence are also exemplified in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis¹, which in essence states that language is a guide to "social reality". This hypothesis implies that language is not simply a means of reporting experience, but more importantly, it is a way of defining experience. So, according to the above theories, culture-loaded words can be defined as the words which have strong emotional overtones (n. 暗示, 弦外音, 寓意) or connotations (n. 涵义, 言外之意), and which evoke strongly positive or negative reactions beyond their literal meaning. From such a definition, we can know that culture-loaded words are usually beyond their literal meaning and they tend to have a strong emotional implication. As well, culture-loaded words may have positive or negative meaning. For examples, in Chinese, "笑面虎", "铁公鸡" and "丧家犬" belong to the negative culture-loaded words whereas "老黄牛", "活雷锋" and "多面手" imply the positive meaning.

As for the classification of culture-loaded word, according to some factors which have influenced on different cultures, culture-loaded can be divided into the following four categories:

- Ecological culture-loaded words
- Social or material culture-loaded words

- Historical or religious culture-loaded words
- Literary or artistic culture-loaded words

Just like culture can be represented as different aspects in the whole social life, these different kinds of culture-loaded words just reflect different sides of colorful social culture, which constitutes the totality of culture-loaded words.

III. THE ORIGIN OF CULTURE-LOADED WORDS

When it comes to the origin of culture-loaded word, it is a little complicated. After all, during the formation of culture-loaded words, many different kinds of factors play their roles. Here some of them are chosen to make a detail explanation.

A. *The Ecological Environment*

As is known to all, the ecological environment of a nation has a great influence on the social culture, therefore, a great number of culture-loaded words have much to do with it. For example, "the East Wind" and "the West Wind" have different meaning in Chinese and English just because of their different ecological environment. China is a country with lots of high mountains in the west and the vast ocean in the east. When the spring or summer comes, the east wind tends to bring the warmth and humid weather, which makes most Chinese feel very comfortable. As a result, most Chinese ancient poets were fond of "the east wind" so much that they left lots of poem about the east line, such as "等闲识得东风面, 万紫千红总是春", "东风送暖入屠苏", "东风夜放花千树" etc. In these poems, the east wind has become the symbol of spring, having brought the warmth and the green to the nature. Also, in 1950s-1970s, "the east wind" was endowed the special meaning in the international political fight, where the east wind stood for the countries with the socialist system just like China, the Soviet Union, North Korea and Vietnam etc. However, with the winter coming, the northwest wind from New Siberia tends to bring the severe cold to most people, making them feel chilly or frozen. Therefore, "the west wind" in the eyes of most Chinese ancient scholars represents coldness, loneliness and desolation, which we can appreciate in the poems such as "古道西风瘦马, 夕阳西下, 断肠人在天涯". As well, the west wind referred to the western countries like American and European countries from 1950s to 1970s. Different from China, Great Britain is an island country which faces toward the Atlantic Ocean, backing against the European continent. The west wind from the Atlantic Ocean make most British People feel warm and comfortable, so Shelly, the world-famous British poet looked on the west wind as the symbol of freedom, power, and hope, singing a high praise for it. However, the east wind tends to be regarded as the sign of coldness or chilliness, which can be founded as the poems of Charles Dickens like "How many winter days have I seen him, standing blue nosed in the snow and east wind."

In addition, as one of the largest continental countries, most Chinese people have mainly lived on agriculture production since the ancient time. Consequently, there are lots of culture-loaded words originating from the farming activity or having something to do with the agriculture

production such as "老黄牛", "及时雨", "风调雨顺", "五谷丰登", "挥金如土", "一分耕耘, 一分收获", "二亩耕地一头牛, 老婆孩子热炕头" etc. However, as an island country, Great Britain is surrounded by the sea and most British people make a living mainly by fishing, sailing and shipbuilding. So, there are quite a few culture-loaded words related to the voyage or fishing such as "to go with the tide", "plain sailing", "fresh fish" and "drink like a fish" etc.

What's more, because of different natural environment and climate condition, there are a lot of differences in natural products or animals, which will also have a great influence on the culture-loaded words. For example, there are lots of bamboos growing in the southern part of China, and the people living in the southern China have formed the habit of having the bamboo shoot, living in the bamboo house and sleeping on the bamboo mat, as a result, lots of culture-loaded words are relevant to bamboos such as "势如破竹", "竹篮打水一场空", "胸有成竹" and "敲竹杆" etc. However, as an island country, lots of beavers live in the river in Great Britain; therefore "eager beaver" usually refers to the person who is eager to succeed in doing something with hard work in English.

B. *The Religious Belief*

As is known to all, different nations have different religious believes, so culture-loaded words also have much to do with religions. It is well known that most westerner countries have been influenced by Greek as well as Roman culture and most Westerners believe in Christianity, therefore, there are a large number of culture-loaded words related to Greek myth or Bible stories.

For example, Achilles' heel means the critical weakness and Pandora's box refers to the origin of crime; both the two come from the Greek myth. Also, there are some other culture-loaded words relevant to Greek myths such as "Oedipus complex", "Trojan Horse" and "Sword of Damocles". As faithful Christians, most westerners ought to be very familiar with the Bible; therefore, lots of culture-loaded words relevant to the bible stories have passed from generation to generation. When it comes to "forbidden fruits", most people will think of the story of Adam and Eve. And "Judas kiss" also reminds them of Jesus' death. Some other examples include "Olive Branch", "the finger on the wall", "the salt of the earth" and "the apple of one's eyes". However, for most Chinese people, Buddhism and Taoism are the popular religion for them to trust in, as a result, a lot of culture-loaded words originate from these religions such as "放下屠刀, 立地成佛", "八仙过海, 各显神通", "菩萨心肠", "道高一尺, 魔高一丈", "平时不烧香, 平时抱佛脚" and "无事不登三宝殿" etc.

C. *The Social Material Life*

Now that culture is the summation of the social life style which has reflected all the aspects of people's material life such as people's daily communication, social customs and even dieting habits etc. Therefore, lots of culture-loaded words are closely connected with people's social material life. Taking the color words for examples, these words imply different meanings in different cultures, and even the same

color words have different meanings in different cultures. "Red" is the auspicious color word in Chinese just because "red" stands for happiness, fervency and prosperity in most cases in Chinese daily life. Consequently, when the Spring Festival comes, every family tend to hang red lanterns and people would like to send or receive red packets on the mobile phones to establish a happy festival atmosphere; when the young couples got married in the ancient time, the bride used to take red sedans with a red covering on her head on the wedding day. Arriving at the bridegroom's house, there is still a custom for the bride to jump over the basin with the red fire burning in it to implying their flourishing life after the marriage. However, "red" means violence and bloodlines in the western culture. Therefore, people try to avoid making use of the red color in their daily life or at the wedding. Conversely, "white" is an unlucky color word in the Chinese cultures, which denotes failure, foolishness and reactionary. And when the old people die, people tend to wear the white clothes to express their mourning or sorrows for the dead. But in the western culture, "white" represents purity and grace because it is the color of the new snow, fresh milk and lily. Thus, it is not surprising for most westerners to be fond of the white color signifying pureness and innocence as the symbol of integrity or honesty. In the Western countries it is common for the young couples to wear the white wedding dresses and the location is usually decorated by the white flowers when the wedding is held in the open air. When it comes to some animals words, they also reflect different cultural implication. Taking the word "dog" for an example, in the western culture "dog" is the loyal friend of the human being and the lovable pet in most families. Therefore, the words related to dogs usually have the positive meanings such as a lucky dog (幸运儿); an old dog (老手); Every dog has its day (凡人皆有得意); He works like a dog (他工作很努力); Love me, love my dog (爱屋及乌). In China dogs are insulting languages, meaning being despicable and hateful, so the words related to dogs usually have negative meanings, such as 走狗, 丧家犬, 看门狗, 狗急跳墙, 狗仗人势, 狼心狗肺, 鸡鸣狗盗 and 蝇营狗苟. In addition, the numbers also have different meanings in different cultures. Most Chinese people are popular with these numbers like "three", "six" "eight" and "nine" because in their eyes these numbers will bring them a good luck or lots of money. But most Chinese people don't like "four" because its Chinese pronunciation has the partial tone with the character "死". For most Westerners, thirteen is regarded as the unlucky number which is related with the story of the Jesus' death. If it is 13th on Friday, it is called the Black Friday, meaning the most unfortunate day. As well as the above culture-loaded words, there are some words closely related to the dietary habit. As we know, westerners manly feed on bread and cheese, consequently there are a lots of culture-loaded words having something to do with these food such as "earn one's bread", "take the bread out of someone's mouth" "whole cheese" and "hard cheese" etc. And there are also a great number culture-loaded words relevant to the daily diet in Chinese such as "吃醋", "吃豆腐", "打酱油", "炒鱿鱼" "闭门羹" "柴米油盐" and "酸甜苦辣" etc.

D. Literature and Arts

As is known to all, literature and art are very important parts to constitute the whole social culture. Therefore there is a close relationship between culture-loaded words and literature as well as arts, which can be verified by lots of culture-loads words from some literature or artistic works both in China and in the western countries. For example, The Fables of Aesop, compiled in the sixth century is one of the most representative literature works in the ancient Greece, which have had a great influence on the later Western culture. As a result, lots of culture-loaded words in the western culture have much to do with The Fables of Aesop, such as cry wolf (狼来了), a wolf in sheep's clothing (披着羊皮的狼), sour grapes (酸葡萄), and lion's share (狮子的份额) and kill the goose that lays the golden eggs (杀鹅取卵). And, as one of the greatest playwrights in the world, Shakespeare occupies a very important status in the history of the western literature, whose works have had great influence on the western culture, so it is not surprising for lots of culture-loaded words to be from Shakespeare's dramas such as "die in harness", "one's pound of flesh", "hit the mark" and "hoist with one's own petard". In China, when it comes to the world-famous literature works, most of people can't help thinking about four major classical novels in the history of Chinese literature, which have had a great influence on all sides of people's daily life. For example, "Sun Wukong" has become the embodiment of cleverness or bravery and "Zhuge Liang" refers to the persons with the wisdom and lots of resources; when people talk about a girl with the slim figure and the sensitive character, people tend to call her "Lin Daiyu" and "Pan Jinlian" is usually used to stand for the woman who are unfaithful to her husband and easier to be tempted in our daily life. As well as the close relationship between literature and culture-loaded words, there are a large number of culture-loaded words having a close connection with the artistic performance. It is well known that the traditional operas including Beijing Opera have gone through about 200 years in China and these traditional operas have had such a large influence on most Chinese people during the past two hundred years that some stage characters and some jargons have walked into people's daily life earlier, being popularized widely among the ordinary people such as "包公", "陈世美", "花木兰", "叫板", "唱对台戏", "打退堂鼓", "一个唱红脸, 一个唱黑脸", "有板有眼", "荒唐走板", "台柱子", "打下手" and "压轴戏" etc.

IV. THE REPRESENTING CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE-LOADED WORDS

A. The Words from Two Different Cultures Have the Similar Meanings

The first characteristic is the equivalence of the word meaning, which can be founded in lots of culture-loaded words form different languages. Specific speaking, culture-loaded words in one language have their equivalence in another language. That's because the human being, whether they are Chinese or English, have the same psychological organ — the brain to be used for perceiving the world. As well, both Chinese and the Westerners have the common physiological features and the similar living experience,

which decides the common association between cultural contexts. For example, all the people in the world have the same perception on the things in the nature such as the sun, the moon, the sea as well as the land, and all of them have the common concept of perpendicularity just because of the earth's gravitation. And the thinking similarity of the human being results in the similar meaning of the culture-loaded words from different languages, which can be verified in the following culture-loaded words such as applause like thunders (掌声如雷), as light as a feather (轻如鸿毛), as white as the snow (洁白如雪), as busy as a bee (像蜜蜂一样忙碌), to parrot what other people say (鹦鹉学舌) and as cunning as a fox (像狐狸一样狡猾).

In addition, both Chinese and the westerners have the similar understanding on the implication of some colors or other things. For examples, black stands for being vicious or evil, and "black market" and "black-hearted" have the same meaning both in Chinese and in English. Similarly, green symbolizes the following things such as the young, the peaceful and the environmental, so when it comes to the green color, both Chinese and the westerners have the same understanding. In addition, there are some other examples which can reflect the same cognition of the human being on the objective world despite from different cultural backgrounds. When talking about the sun, people will think of the warmth; swans symbolize purity; the spring makes people feel exuberant; back bone stands for the nucleus power and sleeping means death.

B. The Words with Different Forms Have the Similar Meanings in Different Cultures

As is known to all, different nations have different thinking styles and methods to observe the world. As a result, while talking about the same thing, they tend to make use of different expressive ways integrated with their own cultural characteristics and values. That is the reason why we can find lots of culture-loaded words with different forms in different languages share the similar meaning. For example, when we talk about a thin person, the Westerners tend to say that he is as thin as a shadow, however most Chinese usually say that he is as thin as a monkey. As well, both English and Chinese make use of different color words to convey the same meaning such as black tea (红茶), black sugar (红糖), green-eyed (红眼病), blue film (黄色电影), brown bread (黑面包), blue sky (青天) and black cloth (青布) etc.

What's more, there are some other culture-loaded words to share the similar meaning with different forms in two languages such as "Don't teach the fish to swim (莫要班门弄斧)", "Kill two birds with one stone (一箭双雕)", "like a duck to water (如鱼得水)", "as timid as a rabbit/chicken (胆小如鼠)", "a drowned rat (落汤鸡)", "to spring up like mushrooms (象雨后春笋般涌现)", "lion in the way (拦路虎)", "a black sleep (害群之马)", "fishing in the air (水中捞月)" and "to put fifth wheel to the coach (画蛇添足)" etc.

C. The Words with the Same Form Have the Different Meanings in Different Cultures

Because of the cultural difference, sometimes, the words in two different languages that appear to refer to the same thing on the surface, but actually refer to quite different things or have different connotations. The English phrase "red-blooded" does not mean "红血的", rather, it is another way of saying that someone or his behavior is confident or energetic. The Chinese equivalent "红眼" means at least two things: having red eyes, also denoting being jealous of others; however, in the western culture, it refers to the night flight. There are some other examples such as "老黄牛" (a hard-working person), "吃豆腐" (take advantage of), 母老虎 (a grey mare), one hundred one thanks (千恩万谢), a big fish (大人物) and a white day (吉祥日), which also belong to such a situation.

Also when it comes to the animal word, such a situation still exists. Dragon in the Chinese culture is a totem with many royal associations, such as 龙颜, 龙床, 龙袍, 龙体, 龙榻, 龙心大喜 and 龙颜大怒. And all the Chinese people call themselves to be the offspring of the dragon. In the English culture, dragon refers to a giant horrible animal like the lizard, meaning being terrible or disgusting. Therefore, in the west a person like a dragon usually implies that he is horrible, vicious and disgusting. In China, phoenix refers to an auspicious bird, implying that peace reigns in the world. Also it refers to the queen or the princess, so there are such words as "凤冠", and "凤辇". In English, it refers to a kind of bird which has been burnt to death, regenerating from the ashes. Therefore, phoenix means reviving or regenerating in the western culture. Peacock in China is an auspicious bird, so the peacock spreading its tail represents auspiciousness, prosperity and peace. However, in English, peacock usually means being pleased with oneself or showing off oneself. Therefore, a person like a peacock suggests that he is as proud as a peacock. In China, Magpie is the symbol of auspiciousness and happiness. When it comes to magpie, people always think of the love story of Niulang and Zhinyu. However, in the western country, magpie is regarded as the symbol of being talkative such as "chatter like a magpie".

D. The Words From One Culture Don't Have Their Equivalence in Another Culture

Sometimes, it is very likely that some culture-loaded words in one language couldn't find their corresponding equivalence in another language because of the cultural or linguistic difference. Such a language phenomenon can also be called the lexical vacancy. And the reasons for such a vacancy to come out can be divided into the following five situations: the difference in living environment or living experience; the difference in social customs; the difference in religious belief; the difference in cognition on the objective world; the difference in some linguistic or non-linguistic factors. For examples, some foods, social customs and artistic forms are unique in China, and people can't find them in any other culture. Therefore, the word related to the above listed items can't find their equivalence in another language. Even if people sometimes translate some words into another language, however, these words can't be conveyed accurately

and completely. These culture-loaded words include the followings such as "油条", "年糕", "粽子", "豆腐脑", "窝窝头", "饺子", "磕头", "插柳", "拜月", "赏菊", "京剧", "琵琶", "单弦", "皮影" and "木偶" etc.

Naturally, on account of the distinction in life style and cultural background, there are also some culture-loaded words in English that can't be found their equivalent ones in Chinese such as Aunt Jemima (黑人厨娘), bloody Mary (血玛丽酒), Yuppies (雅皮士), Dutch Uncle (严厉而直率的批评者), Lazy Susan (餐桌上的圆转盘), Half House (康复医院), blue box (蓝盒装置), Pink Lady (红粉佳人鸡尾酒), Green Power (金钱的力量), Jesus (耶稣), Thanksgiving Day (感恩节), Kentucky (肯德基) and Hollywood (好莱坞) etc.

V. CONCLUSION

Culture-loaded words are very important constituent part to the whole social culture realm. It is very helpful or beneficial to promote the social communication between different people from different cultural background and avoid some unnecessary misunderstanding or conflict by making a further research about them and solving some related problems. It is believable that the relevant research about culture-loaded word must be pushed forward to make a great contribution for helping different people to get along well with each other and establishing a harmonious society with the efforts from all sides.

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