

A Study of American Individualism in Proverbs from the Perspective of Sociolinguistics

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Abstract. Language is the carrier of culture, therefore, when learning American English, a deep understanding of American culture is required. Proverbs are colloquial and from the folks, and a few words of them can often capture the essence of national culture. This paper tries to explore individualism which is one of American core culture from proverbs which is an integral part of the language. While learning American proverbs, comprehending individualism, cultivating intercultural awareness and developing intercultural communication competence are needed.

Introduction

Before writing this paper, it is necessary to seek for previous study and materials concerning my theme, some papers talking about the link between culture and language are found out, especially the link between American culture and American English. Most of them have focused on American values and its embodiment in American language. On the basis of their study, the typical American social value---individualism, and the typical part of language---proverbs which deeply reflect the features of one nation's culture as the topic are mainly chosen in my paper. It will stand on previous researchers' shoulders and study this topic--- a study of American individual values in proverbs---a new study perspective.

Language and Culture

It has long been recognized language is an essential and important part of a given culture and that the impact of culture upon a given language is something intrinsic. Language is an indispensable carrier of culture. Culture finds a better representation through language use. A joint study of these two subjects will definitely broaden the horizon of human language in general and enrich the research of these sciences in particular.

In its primitive uses, language functions as a link in concerted human activity. It is a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection (Malinowski, 1923). Who speaks (or writes) what language (or what language variety) to whom and when and to what end (Fishman, 1972). Sapir-Whorf Hypotheses also suggest that there is a correlation between language, culture and thought. [1]

Language serves to maintain and enhance appropriate social status and relationships between and among members of a culture. [2] Again, this is an instance where language functions to preserve the deep structural values of a culture---be they formal or informal. In many cultures people derive a great deal of pleasure from the art of conversation and public speaking. Knowing which cultures delight in verbal play and debate can give you an important insight into how oral interaction differs from culture to culture.

Properties and Functions of Proverbs

Proverbs, vivid and incisive, are the crystallization of the wisdom of a nation, which fully embodies the values of the nation. [4]As Francis Bacon has said, the characteristics, wit, and spirit of a nation can be found from their proverbs. The same as other countries', American proverbs come from their lives and have reflected American vital core values by brief but incisive English language since the foundation of the United States of American. As a mirror of the American society and values, proverbs also enable us to understand a lot of the value orientation of American culture, people's way of thinking and code of conduct. A few words in proverbs can often capture the essence of national culture, from generation to generation, everyone speaks them. [6]

American Individualism

The core of American culture---individualism---is a typical Western capitalist politics and social philosophy which regards individuals the supremacy. It emphasizes individual initiative, independence and interests. As an individual, everyone should be independent, responsible and self-esteemed, only then they can be paid attentions and respected. [5] It is mainly represented by the life attitude and mental state of self-struggle, proactive initiative; which highlights humanity, promotes the development of freedom and equality concept, enhance the belief of self-esteem, self-love, self-help, self-reliance, self-confidence, bold innovation and forge ahead. In the history of America, individualism has brought prosperity, progress and vitality. However, individualism may lead to selfishness, slack, overweening and anarchism, resulting in alienation, isolation, lack of harmony and psychological communication among people.[7] Emphasizing too much on individualism may also lead to egoism, liberalism, and even disregard of the negative impact of the law.

Proverbs on the Perception of Independence

The suffering people cannot rely entirely on the gift of God, so they must also rely on their own efforts to get rid of suffering for becoming successful.

We must not lie down, and cry, God help us.

In the process of pursuit of liberty and freedom, Americans had to pay for that: they must rely on their own strength in order to be liberal and free. They believe that "God helps those who help themselves.", and look forward as much as possible to achieve economic independence, take care of themselves and solve their own problems. Thus "Stand on their own two feet". In their eyes, this is the only way in order to integrate into the mainstream of American culture. Any behavior relying on charity, government, or family is incapable of performance, will undermine and weaken the overall values of the United States. "Pull yourself up by your own boot straps" is the only way to achieve freedom and obtain independence.

Independence emphasizes on the protection and respect of individuals' private lives, does not allow the spying, interference and intrusion. For those who like to inquire about others' private affairs, which are considered as annoying behaviors, there are some words in the American English to describe: poke / push one's nose into other people's business, meddle in other people's affairs and so on. For such acts, American English has also expressions of protest and warning "Keep your big nose out of our business. Mind your own business. Put not your hand between the bark and the tree."

Proverbs on the Perception of Equality

In Christianity, there is only one supreme God. In addition to God, people can have no other idol, their interpersonal relationships are equal. That is to say, except the difference between God and people, on other differences exist. For example:

Six feet of earth make all men equal.

Jack is as good as his master.

Under the domination of equality, of course, the imperial power will be defied. This is also reflected in proverbs

A cat may look at a King.

A King without learning is but a crowned ass.

In the United States, "All men are created equal." This creed has long been popular, meanwhile, which is another important reason having attracted many immigrants to settle in the United States, equality is another important value. At the beginning of American founding, the abolition of aristocracy creates strong political conditions for the equality of all. However, what needs to be emphasized is that equality in the eyes of all Americans is not traditional "everyone is equal or be treated equally", here the so-called equality is more precisely meaning that everyone has equal opportunities and rights to be successful. No one is born to be noble or humble; and has no more chance of success than others. "Remember the roots of your family tree, but you are known by your fruit not by your root." Americans often compare life to a contest towards success, so equality is the principle of competition, and everyone is at the same starting line on "fair play."

Proverbs on the Perception of Liberty and Freedom

Everyman is the architect of his own fortune. Americans believe "they design their own fates; everyone is a designer of their own destiny." American so-called liberty and freedom is that everyone can be the master of their own destiny without outside interference, which is an important part of the American dream. Whether for the early settlers who want to get rid of all the constraints of ancient Europe, or later resisters in order to break away from the British colonial rule, "liberty and freedom" have become an unshakable faith in the hearts of every American. "A man's home is his castle." United States respects and protects the privacy of individuals and believes that everyone should have the space belonging to their own without being disturbed by outsiders. In addition, "the separation of powers, the separation of church and state, and the abolition of aristocracy" in the American political system in a sense has blocked the possibility of ruling class existence, to some extent; has protected individual liberty and freedom from violating.

In a capitalist society, the development of free love is transferring to love first, and even universal love, in order to obtain love anything can be done. The morality of modern capitalism is also reflected in proverbs.

Love is free.

All stratagems are fair in love.

Love is lawless.

Proverbs on the Perception of Self-centre

Western humanitarians focus on "self" just like throwing stones into the river, stone is self, provoking layers of waves with outward expansion is another social level, that is, starting from the self, and then benefiting to the family, collective, and nation. That's long been criticized egoism, individualism. English has a lot of proverbs about focusing on self-centre and even promoting egoism. Here are these proverbs.

Every man is nearest himself.

Look after number one.

"Number one" is "oneself", meaning that no matter what happens, we must consider our own interests and being self-centered.

Self-preservation is the first law of nature.

Everyone for himself and let the devil take the hindmost.

In American culture, individual interests always surpass all the other interests, and compared with oneself, friends are secondary, under the worst circumstances, even the last.

Love your friend, but look after yourself.

Friends are thieves of time.

Proverbs on the Perception of Success

Americans put their money as the measure of their success, for many individuals, success mainly means materialism, especially money and they always pursue the wealth of life. Therefore, in some sense, Americans think success is money. So they have the proverb "A man without money is no man at all". Such utilitarianism determines that money for them is the world's most important thing. Such proverbs as "Money is the key that opens all doors", "Money talks", "All things are obedient to money". Even "Money can buy the devil himself", so people have money just as they have everything. Conversely, poverty means losing everything, even the self-esteem, "A light purse makes a heavy heart. Empty sacks cannot stand upright".

Despite the fierce competition in the United States, in order to be more successful, people have to pay the unimaginable hard labor. However, "Great gain makes work easy." Driven by this kind of value, people will feel their hard work worthwhile. In their opinions, "Riches are the pillar of the world." Of course, riches are the pillar of success. Americans obtain the passion and power of hard work from their accumulated wealth and good living conditions. It's neither the president nor the quiet dedicated librarian that are universal idols, but the self-made president of Microsoft Bill Gates who is the world's richest man, and self-improved NBA basketball superstar Michael Jordan.

Summary

Proverbs is an indispensable part in American English. These simple and easy-to-remember fixed statements contain a nation's conventional wisdom, religious precepts, ethical virtues and philosophy, which is an important carrier of American national language culture. A person who learns proverbs with no doubt has to learn the country's culture. [3]Through concise, vivid and timeless proverbs, we have seen the American nation's cultural orientation, their way of thinking and life experience, and we also have explored various manifestations of American mainstream culture on the values.

For American English learners, they can become more conscious to develop their cultural awareness and achieve the true cross-cultural communication. American English learners should improve intercultural communication sensitivity of individualism, and consciously eliminate the negative transfer US brought by cultural differences between China and America, neither fawning on foreign powers nor excluding them. Finally, they should let two kinds of values coexist and conduct intercultural communication in harmony.

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