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 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. 情感, 情緒) or connotations (n. 意義, 含義), 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 “老黄牛” belong to the negative culture-loaded words whereas “老黄牛”，“铁公鸡” and “多雨千” 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
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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 poet were fond of "the east wind" so much that they left lots of poem about the east line, such as "东风夜放花千树", "春色满园关不住", "故人西辞黄鹤楼", 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 "西风胡虏马, 夕阳西下", "人人各自保, 世事总相违" 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 a quite 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 "竹篮打水", "竹篮打水一场空", "胸有成竹", "敲竹杆", "竹篮打水", "敲竹节", "竹篮打水", 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 Christeninety, 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 Pandor'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", "生公说法", "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
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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 (猴来了), a wolf in sheep's clothing (切着羊皮的狼), sour grapes (酸葡萄), and lion's share (狮子的份额) and kill the goose that lays the golden eggs (鸠占鹊巢). 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", "打通堂做", "一个唱红脸", "一个唱黑脸", "有板有眼", "压轴戏", "打下手", "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)", "like a duck to water (如鱼得水)", "as timid as a rabbit (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 (夜半伸腰)", "fishing in the air (水中捞月)", and "to put fifth wheel to the coach (鸡肋添肉)", 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 元帅, 龙床, 龙袍, 龙体, 龙颜, 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 "凤梨". 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.

REFERENCES