A Comparative Study of the Associative Meaning of English and Chinese Words

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Abstract: This study uses a documentary research method and an introspective approach, starting from Leech's theory of lexical meaning, to conduct a comparative study of the connotative, reflected meanings and emotional meaning of words in both English and Chinese languages. The study found that the main factors influencing the differences in their lexical meanings were related to the cognitive patterns behind the connotative meanings of the English, Chinese words and the culture of the speech community and the geographical and environmental information in the affective meanings of the English and Chinese words. The results have implications for intercultural communication, language teaching and the promotion of good Chinese traditional culture to the world.

1. Introduction

With the ongoing development of the global economy and the deepening of international trade, the semantic evolution of vocabulary is influenced by intensified cross-national interactions. From a sociolinguistic standpoint, language communication is essentially a process of encoding and decoding, directly reflecting intercultural communicators' ability to grasp lexical semantics across diverse cultural contexts. Empathy and cultural understanding, driven by humanistic sentiments, facilitate smoother and more successful communication. As the fundamental unit of language, vocabulary mediates communication and cultural transmission, with its semantic changes conveying distinct communicative meanings in varied contexts.

This cultural backdrop reveals the semantic disparities between English and Chinese vocabulary. Many linguists have explored the associative meanings of lexical semantics through "description" and "generation" methods. The former involves documenting and describing language structures to capture semantic shifts, while the latter deduces universal linguistic patterns through introspection and cross-cultural imagery comparisons. This research aims to elucidate the relationship between semantic evolution and national cultures, with cultural imagery serving as a unifying cultural symbol of collective wisdom and history.

2. Review of the Literature

This section provides an overview of the state of semantic research within the English-Chinese linguistic systems, focusing on the Chinese language system.

(1) Semantic research of the Chinese language system

Semantic research within the Chinese language system, as a vital subfield of linguistics, has undergone multiple developmental stages and established a systematic theoretical framework. From the 1950s to the 1990s, Chinese lexicology evolved from its nascent stage to a period of vigorous development, with a continuous expansion of research perspectives. Since the 21st century, scholars have increasingly focused on the interactive functions within lexical items, phrases, and compound units (Zhou Jian, 2006), and have deepened semantic research from multidimensional perspectives, including cognitive and sociolinguistic aspects.

In terms of semantic theory construction, structuralist linguists proposed the theory of semantic hierarchical structure, which laid the foundation for semantic research in the Chinese language. This includes core issues such as the distinction and identity of word meanings, semantic units, and combinatorial relationships. Guo Rui (2007) redefined Chinese word classes and proposed new classification methods based on large-scale lexical analysis. Tan Shunzhi (2007) explored the cultural imagery of word meanings, while Zhou Fujian and Tang Dingjun (2007) and Pu Jin-feng (2007) elucidated the mechanisms of semantic evolution from the perspectives of cognitive thinking and the interaction of internal and external factors, respectively.

In recent years, the introduction of cognitive linguistics has revitalized semantic research. Li Chunhui and Wang Dan (2015) employed metaphorical cognitive models to reveal the crucial role of metaphor in lexical semantic change. W. Bright's (2004) theory of "co-evolution of language and social structure" has also provided significant insights for research on language variation in Chinese. These studies have illuminated the complexity and dynamism of the Chinese semantic system from various perspectives, thereby advancing the depth and breadth of semantic research.

(2) Semantics of the English language system

Semantic research within the English language system, a crucial subfield of linguistics, clearly reflects the transition from traditional lexical semantics to modern semantic theory. Although the study of lexical meaning has a long history, it did not emerge as an independent discipline until the early 19th century and has garnered extensive global attention since the early 21st century. During this period, research on the English lexico-semantic system has achieved significant progress, providing substantial support for the advancement of semantic theory.

In the development of Western *semantics*, Leech (1974) first proposed seven types of lexical meanings in Semantics, categorizing connotative, social, affective, reflected, and collocative meanings as associative meanings. These associative meanings not only reflect the cultural imagery evoked by linguistic symbols but also capture the nuanced differences in communication among various speech communities. Ogden and Richards (1923) introduced the "semantic triangle" model in *The Meaning of Meaning*, highlighting the dynamic interplay among symbols, concepts, and references, which has become a foundational theoretical framework for semantic research. Saussure (1916) further divided semantics into three dimensions—language, sign, and system—from a structuralist perspective, laying the groundwork for modern semantic studies.

Additionally, Ward (2005) argued that linguistic variation is constrained by recognizable and precise norms, while Sapir (2003) emphasized that language, as a culturally acquired function, evolves under the profound influence of social conventions. Humboldt (1999) advocated integrating linguistic research with history, culture, and customs by highlighting the close connection between language and national spirit, offering new interdisciplinary perspectives for semantic studies.

In recent years, semantic research has expanded to analyze the types and causes of lexical semantic change. Studies indicate that lexical semantic change primarily occurs through mechanisms such as broadening, narrowing, elevation, degradation, and shift. These changes are influenced not only by internal linguistic structures but also by external factors such as society, culture, and economy. The theoretical framework of semantics has also been enriched through approaches like collocation theory, structural semantics, frame semantics, and componential

analysis, providing significant support for English vocabulary instruction and the enhancement of cross-cultural communication skills.

In summary, semantic research on the English language has made remarkable progress in both theoretical and practical dimensions. The construction and expansion of Western classical theories, coupled with in-depth applied explorations in China, have deepened the understanding of the nature of language and provided a robust theoretical foundation for language teaching and cross-cultural communication.

(3) Research gap

Despite the extensive research on English and Chinese lexical systems, comparative analyses of associative meanings in these two languages remain underexplored. Building on existing studies, this research employs a combination of literature review and introspection, based on Leech's classification, to examine the differences in connotative, reflected, and affective meanings between English and Chinese lexicons. It further investigates the mechanisms and underlying causes that drive these differences.

3. Research Method

This paper employs introspective and comparative literature approaches to investigate the semantic differences between English and Chinese vocabulary and the factors shaping these differences. The introspective method, widely used in psychological and cognitive science research, collects data through self-observation and reflection, offering insights into linguistic phenomena from a cognitive perspective. The comparative literature approach synthesizes existing research, comparing diverse viewpoints and understandings of semantic phenomena to identify commonalities and novel perspectives. Specifically, this study examines the differences in associative meanings—namely, connotative, reflected, and affective meanings—between English and Chinese words, highlighting how these meanings are perceived and understood differently across languages.

4. Results and Discussion

(1) Connotative meaning

Based on Leech's classification of lexical associative meanings, this section examines the connotative meanings of English and Chinese words, highlighting their similarities and differences, the underlying cognitive patterns, and their implications for intercultural communication.

1) Similarities and differences in connotative meanings

Connotative meaning refers to the additional emotional or evaluative associations that a word carries beyond its denotative meaning. For example, "world-famous" and "infamous" both denote great fame but differ in connotation, with the former being positive and the latter negative. Similarly, in Chinese, " 呕心沥血 " (to exert oneself to the utmost) and " 处心积虑 " (to scheme with great effort) share a similar denotative meaning but have different connotations, with the former being positive and the latter negative. Other examples include " 得意忘形 " (to be overjoyed) vs. " 兴高采烈 " (to be elated) and " 政客 " (politician) vs. " 政治家 " (statesman).

Connotative meanings often reflect cultural values and cognitive patterns. In English, connotations may be influenced by historical, social, or psychological factors. For example, the word "dog" denotes a domestic animal but connotes loyalty, companionship, or even negative traits like aggression, depending on context. In Chinese, connotations are deeply rooted in traditional cultural and philosophical values. For instance, certain natural elements carry symbolic meanings shaped by centuries of cultural heritage. Pine, bamboo, and plum blossom are

celebrated in Chinese literature as symbols of moral character and resilience. The pine represents endurance and integrity, as it remains evergreen through harsh winters; bamboo signifies grace and resilience, as it bends but does not break; and plum blossoms symbolize purity and perseverance, blooming in the snow without competing for attention in spring. These connotations reflect the ancient Chinese ideals of both active engagement in the world (e.g., loyalty, courage) and withdrawal from it (e.g., tranquility, detachment).

Table 4.1:The Connotative Meaning of Objective Things in China

Things	Conceptual Meaning	Connotative Meaning
Pine	The pine tree is whorl-branched and has long, thin bundles of needles. Its canopy looks canopied and uncompact, and the pine tree is strong and very long-lived	It is a symbol of the noble character of jade and ice, standing proudly in the frost and snow, and on the other hand, it is also seen as a symbol of immortality and vitality.
Bamboo	Bamboo is a perennial evergreen plant with a cylindrical, nodding, hollow stem, which can be used for construction and as a raw material for paper.	
Plum	The plum is a deciduous tree of many varieties, hardy and blooming in the waxing months of the year.	
Lotus	The lotus is an alias for the lotus flower, which is characterised by its emergence from the mud	A symbol of elegance and quality of ice and purity
Dragon	The dragon is a divine creature of ancient Chinese legend and a symbol of the sacredness of the Chinese nation.	The dragon is a symbol of power, nobility and respect in traditional Chinese culture, and a sign of luck and success.

In contrast, these symbols do not carry the same connotations in Western cultures, where they may lack specific cultural imagery or even have contrasting meanings. For example, the lotus, another significant symbol in Chinese culture, represents purity and enlightenment due to its ability to bloom in muddy waters. In Western cultures, however, the lotus does not have a widely recognized symbolic meaning and is often simply appreciated for its aesthetic beauty.

Despite cultural differences, some symbols share similar connotations across cultures. For example, the rose is widely associated with romance and love in both Chinese and Western cultures. Similarly, the concept of "home" universally conveys warmth, happiness, and a sense of belonging. These shared meanings highlight the universality of certain emotional and social values.

2) Cognitive patterns behind the connotative meanings of English and Chinese words

Cultural imagery, as a form of cultural symbol, encapsulates the wisdom and historical experiences of different peoples. Understanding these symbols is essential for facilitating effective cross-cultural communication. One notable example of cultural differences in perception is the "lexical gap," which highlights the challenges in translating culturally specific terms between English and Chinese.

① Lexical gap and its implications

The "lexical gap" refers to the difficulty in finding equivalent words in the target language during intercultural communication. This gap arises due to the distinct cultural environments in which English and Chinese evolved, leading to significant differences in their lexicons. Lexical gaps can be categorized into "form gaps" and "content gaps." Form Gaps occur when a concept is so deeply embedded in one culture that no equivalent form or symbol exists in the other language. For example, " 麻婆豆腐 " is phonetically transliterated as "Mapo Tofu" in English, while "tea" originates from the Fujian dialect and is used globally. Similarly, " 桥牌 " is translated as "Bridge," and the Western term "talk show" is rendered as " 脱口秀 " in Chinese. In such cases, the "borrowing" method is often employed to translate, paraphrase, or adapt meanings. Content Gaps arise from historical and cultural factors that have not been previously considered

or deemed cognitively necessary. For instance, there is no direct equivalent in English for terms like " 师母 " (a male teacher's wife) or culturally specific honorifics in Chinese such as " 吾 " (I, formal), " 鄙 人 " (I, humble), or " 朕 " (I, imperial). These gaps reflect the differences in cultural cognition, where the necessity to recognize or differentiate certain concepts depends on their relevance to political, economic, social, and cultural development.

② Cultural cognition and lexical differences

The cognitive patterns behind connotative meanings are shaped by cultural contexts. Chinese culture, with its rich historical and social background, has developed unique terms and concepts that may not have direct equivalents in Western cultures, which prioritize liberal and egalitarian values. For example, terms like "　" (my humble abode) reflect a cultural emphasis on modesty and humility that may not be directly translatable or necessary in Western contexts. This divergence in cognitive necessity further highlights the differences in cultural perception and understanding.

3) Application of connotative meanings in Cross-Cultural communication

Effective cross-cultural communication requires an awareness of linguistic and cultural differences. Due to the distinct cultural backgrounds of English and Chinese speakers, concepts that are easily expressed in one language may not be readily understood in the other. Therefore, it is crucial to approach intercultural interactions with strong cultural awareness, mutual respect, and the principle of "harmony and difference."

The principle of "harmony and difference" (和而不同) is rooted in traditional Chinese culture and emphasizes the following:

1.Inclusion and Integration: Different cultures, whether English-speaking or Chinese-speaking, each have unique contributions to global cultural diversity. This principle advocates for mutual learning and the coexistence of diverse cultural practices. 2.Seeking Common Ground While Reserving Differences: Cultural differences should be acknowledged and respected, as they can enrich our understanding and promote cultural development. The exchange and interaction between different cultures can foster mutual growth and vitality. 3.Discernment and Prudence: When encountering foreign or different cultural elements, it is important to maintain one's own judgment and seek objective evidence. This approach ensures that cultural exchanges are meaningful and beneficial.

For example, the existence of Chinatowns in the US reflects America's tolerance of traditional Chinese culture through celebrations of Chinese festivals, cuisine, and traditional attire. Similarly, the global establishment of Confucius Institutes demonstrates the world's acceptance of Chinese Confucianism. In addition, The rapid adoption of Western fast food (e.g., KFC) in China and the integration of Western musical instruments like the violin and piano into traditional Chinese performing arts (e.g., classical dance, Beijing opera) exemplify China's tolerance and adaptation of Western culture.

(2) Reflected meaning

Reflected meanings in English and Chinese words highlight the intricate relationship between language and culture. Understanding these associations is essential for effective communication and cultural exchange, and promoting Chinese culture globally can enhance cross-cultural awareness and mutual understanding.

1) Reflected meaning in communication

Reflected meaning arises through associations with other meanings within the same context. For example, the English word "comforter" evokes associations with "comfort," while "seahorse" is linked to "hippocamp." In traditional Chinese culture, reflected meanings are often embedded in numerical and color symbolism. For instance, the numbers 101 and 1001 are associated with " 百里挑一 " (one in a hundred) and " 万里挑一 " (one in ten thousand), respectively, reflecting cultural ideals of selection and excellence. Similarly, colors like black signify mourning and evil in both English and Chinese cultures, while red denotes good fortune in Chinese culture and purity in Western

contexts. These associations reflect cultural imagery and shape communicative behaviors.

2) Reflected meaning and cultural contexts

Cultural differences in reflected meanings are rooted in distinct philosophical and cognitive patterns. Ji Xianlin noted that Western thinking is analytical, objective, and materialistic, while Eastern thinking is holistic, subjective, and spiritual. As a high-context culture, China relies heavily on contextual cues and implicit communication, which can lead to misunderstandings when interacting with low-context cultures like those in Europe and the United States. For example, certain symbols (e.g., white flowers in Chinese funerals) or taboos (e.g., gifting clocks) carry specific cultural meanings that may be misinterpreted by outsiders. Understanding these semantic nuances is crucial for effective cross-cultural communication.

3) Reflected meaning and the globalization of Chinese culture

In intercultural exchanges, promoting Chinese culture involves disseminating its unique linguistic and cultural symbols. Efforts such as establishing Confucius Institutes and organizing cultural exchanges aim to familiarize global audiences with traditional Chinese values and practices. Reflected meanings, particularly in color, number, and object symbolism, offer a window into Chinese cultural psychology and thought patterns. By sharing these linguistic and cultural nuances, China can foster greater understanding and acceptance of its cultural heritage, contributing to the diversity and prosperity of global culture.

(3) The emotional meaning

Further deepening the comparative understanding of the similarities and differences in affective meanings between English and Chinese lexicons is conducive to providing more targeted and effective theoretical support and practical guidance for language instruction.

1) Differences in emotional meaning

Emotional meaning refers to the feelings or attitudes conveyed by words. For example, "I'm going to cut him off!" expresses dislike or disgust, while "I love to make friends very much" conveys enthusiasm. Metaphorical expressions also carry emotional nuances. For instance, "An encyclopedia is a gold mine" juxtaposes two unrelated concepts to evoke positive connotations of richness and value. Conversely, semantic conflicts arise when metaphors clash, such as using "fire" to express urgency in one context versus a "burning question" in another. These differences highlight the complexity of emotional meanings across languages.

2) Geographical and cultural influences on emotional meaning

Semantic variations in English and Chinese are influenced by geographical and cultural contexts. China's linguistic diversity, with 56 ethnic languages and eight major dialects, exemplifies how regional differences shape word meanings. For example, in the Lanzhou dialect, "Where did he go?" is expressed as " 他去哪儿浪了 ?" Here, " 浪 " (frivolous) replaces "hang out," potentially causing misunderstandings for those unfamiliar with the dialect. Similarly, differences between British and American English, such as "rubbish" vs. "trash" or "biscuit" vs. "cookie," reflect distinct cultural and geographical influences (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2:The Same Things symboled by different word between UK and US

Things	United Kingdom	United States
Rubbish	Rubbish	Trash
Pavement	Pavement	Sidewalk
Biscuits	Biscuit	Cookies
Football	Football	Soccer

Cultural differences also manifest in word choices and connotations. For example, "dog" symbolizes loyalty in Western cultures but carries derogatory connotations in traditional Chinese contexts. Additionally, language

conventions vary significantly: Chinese requests often begin with polite forms like "Hello, please...," which may be misinterpreted in Western contexts where "Excuse me..." is more appropriate. These examples illustrate how geographical and cultural factors shape emotional meanings and can lead to misunderstandings.

3) Emotional meaning in language teaching

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is a system of symbols used for communication, and its emotional meanings reflect cultural values and social contexts. Effective language teaching must address these nuances to foster intercultural competence. Emotional meanings in English and Chinese vocabulary often reflect cultural psychology, aesthetic sensibilities, and social values. For instance, "red" signifies energy in both cultures but carries more aggressive connotations in Western contexts (e.g., "red battle") compared to its auspicious connotations in Chinese culture.

Language teachers should integrate cultural contexts into vocabulary instruction, emphasizing the relationship between emotional meanings and cultural backgrounds. Misunderstandings often arise not from language structure but from a lack of cultural awareness. For example, Westerners unfamiliar with Chinese cultural values may misinterpret expressions like " 望子成龙，望女成凤 " (hoping children succeed), leading to communication failures. Similarly, Chinese learners may misuse words like "look" versus "despise" or "look down upon," which carry different emotional connotations.

To improve language teaching, teachers must:1. Recognize the inseparability of language and culture.2. Integrate sociocultural contexts into vocabulary instruction.3. Emphasize the changing emotional meanings of words.4. Highlight the relationship between context and emotional nuance.

By adopting these strategies, language teaching can move beyond mere symbol conversion to foster deeper cultural understanding and effective communication.

5. Conclusion

Language evolves in tandem with society, serving as a symbolic record of social and historical development. As the fundamental unit of language, vocabulary mediates communication and cultural heritage transmission. The contextual variability of word meanings is a critical aspect of linguistic research, as it influences communicative outcomes and can lead to misunderstandings or semantic conflicts, especially across different cultural backgrounds.

This study employs introspective and literature-based approaches to explore the connotative, reflected and emotional meanings of English and Chinese words. The study found that the main factors influencing the differences in their lexical meanings were related to the cognitive patterns behind the connotative meanings of the English, Chinese words and the culture of the speech community and the geographical and environmental information in the affective meanings of the English and Chinese words.

The study's findings offer practical guidance across multiple domains: for educational institutions, tracking semantic changes enhances cognitive development and social adaptability, fostering effective communication and integration; for diplomatic administration, monitoring semantic shifts enables diplomats to better grasp cultural imagery, facilitating smoother interactions and successful outcomes; for primary and secondary school teachers, contextual vocabulary instruction improves students' comprehension and memory skills, enhancing teaching quality and supporting sustainable educational development; and for learners, understanding semantic nuances within context expands lexicons and fosters cultural awareness, equipping them to become competent intercultural communicators and promoting cultural continuity.

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