CHINESE COLOUR SYMBOLISM: IT'S SIGNIFICANCE TO THE IGBO

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Abstract:
Colour contains rich cultural, mythical, historical, religious, political, and linguistic connotations. In the field of human cognition, there are some differences in the selection and semantic association of colour and colour words among different nationalities. As the economic and educational co-operations keep increasing between Chinese and Igbo people, there is a great need to explore linguistic and cultural connotations of color as to help reduce misunderstanding, culture shock and thus facilitate healthy cross-cultural communication. Most of Igbo people have little or no knowledge about various significance of colors in Chinese. Particularly, they know little about the application and usage of various Chinese color word. Therefore, this paper uses observation and descriptive methodology to examine the symbolism of colour/colour words in the Chinese language and culture, from ancient and contemporary usage, pointing out its significance to Igbo people. The colours selected are: white, black, red, green, and yellow. Red signifies success, prosperity, and popularity. The original symbolism of white is bad and black is good in China，however, due to the influence of western culture，the reverse became the case. Black is now seen as omen, plague, disasters, death, evil, and crime while white is adored as purity, superior, beauty, and goodness. Green colour has a significance of the good and the bad while Yellow symbolizes power, majesty, obscene, and pornographic contents. This paper has not only presented different Chinese colour symbolism that can inspire Igbo people, but also minimized the cross-cultural communication gap between Igbo and Chinese people.

Keywords: Chinese culture, colour, Black, White, Red, Green, Yellow, Symbolism, Significance.

1.0 Introduction

Human beings have a long history of recognizing and using colours. Berlin &Kay (1969) pointed out that all languages contain two to eleven basic colours terms which includes: black, white, red, yellow, green, blue, brown, purple,

pink, orange and gray. Conway, et.al (2016) suggest that differences in colour categorization between languages are caused by differences in the overall usefulness of colour to a culture or language group. Due to the differences in cultural connotations of colour words, people from different cultural backgrounds have different feelings and understanding of the same colour words which leads to differences in colour symbolism from one nation to another. According to Minoru (2000), Colour symbolism, which exhibits an essential aspect of human cognition and imagination based upon it, plays an important role in religion, painting, poetry, literature, film, and many other fields, but has not been given due consideration in contemporary cognitive linguistics, which claims to be able to treat cultural and religious symbolism. As the influx of Igbo people to China keeps increasing due to economic and educational purposes, there is a great need to analyze colour symbolism in Chinese language, since it is an indispensable part of Chinese language and culture.

1.2 Theoretical Review

Here, we review the various theories that pertain to colour.
According to Hardin C.L. (2013), The Berlin-Kay theory of basic colour terms maintains that the world's languages share all or part of common stock of colour concepts. Berlin & Kay (1969) advanced a Theory of Cross-cultural Colour Concepts centered on the notion of a basic colour term, which is a colour word that applies to a wide class of objects reliably used by most native speakers. Allan (2009), came up with the Connotations of Color Terms Theory which investigate the connotations of color terms with particular attention to figurative uses of black, white, brown, yellow, red, green, blue, and a few others.

Based on Allan, the connotations are judged on the basis of whether the phrases in which the color terms occur are typically orthophemistic, euphemistic, or dysphemistic.

Minoru (2000) in his book titled “A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism” made a pioneering study of colour symbolism in that it is the first attempt to derive systematically the divergent meanings of colour terms as observed in such linguistic expressions. Minoru (2000) proposed a Symbolic Model Theory comprising initial meanings (IMs), derivation of symbolic senses, five principles of the study of colour symbolism and interrelationships between different symbolic meanings of a colour term. The Symbolic Model theory has been applied successfully to a large set of examples in six languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Chinese and Japanese), mode of data collected not only from various kinds of dictionaries and books but also from observation and native speakers of each language.

In Sun (2008) research on Sino-English Colour Words noted that, in cross-cultural communication, colour words, as a symbolic system, have different uses, cultural values and cultural connotations in Chinese and English. This requires the language user to truly understand the cultural traditions, values, local conditions and customs of the country where the language is spoken, and study the meaning of color words, including many subtle and specific symbolic meanings, as well as the cultural information it carries, in order to effectively carry out cross-cultural verbal communication, and constantly promote and strengthen the cultural exchange and integration between people of various countries.

This paper therefore explores the symbolism of color words Chinese language because of the cultural connotation and cognitive differences, and use of color words. Finally realizes the aim of Chinese language learning, cultivation of Igbo people's cross-cultural awareness and improving of intercultural communicative competence.

2.0 Literature Review

Taking an evaluative approach on the views of experts will occur here.
Zhang (2003) did a study on "Colour and Culture" and came up a finding that colours are objective and the same to people of different nationalities and races, but they have different meanings metaphorical and associatively in different cultures.There is great diversity in the use of colours and their associations between cultures and even within the same culture in different periods (Birren,2006). This justifies the fact that the symbolic meaning of colour words is very different in different national cultures. Due to the differences in geography, folklore, religion, and values, different ethnic groups will inevitably give different associative meanings and accumulate a lot of cultural information to the words when expressing the same concept under their unique cultural traditions. colour words do not only express the physical properties of colour itself but also express local customs, culture, humanistic thinking mode, and religious belief. According to Zhang (2008), colour words can make the language more vivid, interesting, humorous, and cordial.

Edith & Ronald (2016) noted that colour symbolism is context-dependent and influenced by changes over time. In the past some scholars have explored to study the different meanings and symbolisms associated with colors in different cultures around the world. Taking Asian countries as an example, the Japanese prefer soft tones, but think green is not auspicious. Thai people took red as taboo color, because the red pen is used to write the name of the dead on the coffin. Indians, Chinese taboo white, because it represents poverty, funeral; Mongolian taboo black, think it represents mourning, ominous, bad luck, betrayal, tyranny,

etc.; The Arab states of Western Asia consider green, dark blue and red, white as positive and pink, purple and yellow as negative. Taking African countries as another example, Egyptians like obvious colors. They think red, green, light blue and orange on white or black background are ideal colors, but they do not like purple. They also think yellow stands for burial and death. Morocco taboo white, because it represents poverty, funeral; Chadians consider white, pink and yellow to be auspicious, and black and red to be unlucky.

In Europe, Belgians also considered blue to be an unlucky symbol. Romanians rated red, white, green and yellow as positive, while black as negative. Italians prefer bold and bright colors, while purple is a negative color. In North America, the USA and Canada Black is associated with sin, evil, death, nothingness, formal, and sexy and is a popular color in clothing. White is means clean, elegant, or pure and can also signify a sanitized environment. In South American, Brazilians think brown is fierce color, they taboo tan; The Uruguayans taboo cyan, believing that cyan signifies darkness; In Argentina, yellow, green and red are in, not black, purple and purplish brown. Bright colors such as red, blue and yellow are popular in Colombia. All these show that the social members in different languages and cultural environments have obvious differences in color word preference due to their different life experiences and customs.

2.1 Symbolism and Colour Words in Chinese

This is where we take the different colours one by one and indicate their symbolic implications in Chinese.

(a) RED 红色

Since ancient times, Chinese people have worshiped red, because red can be associated with the sun and fire. The sun and fire bring Light, warmth, and hope to people, and red has become the most commonly used and favorite colour in China. In the Chinese people's minds, "red" is a symbol of auspiciousness and prosperity. For example, the Chinese paste red couplets "红对联", red blessing characters "红福字", hang red lanterns "红灯笼" to celebrate the Spring Festival and Lanterns Festival. The red letter, red candle, red cap, and the bride's red wedding dress do not only bring a happy atmosphere to the wedding, but it is also seen as a beautiful vision and blessing for the marriage. When a new baby is born, Chinese couples give their relatives red eggs "红蛋" to celebrate the birth of the baby.

Red is also a symbol of success, prosperity, and popularity. For example, if a person is successful and popular, he/she is being called Red Person "红人" or "走红". Those who are trusted and loved by their superiors are also called "red people". Those who are allocated profits from partnership operation are called Share red "分红" which means dividends, and those who have a good living are called Hot red "红红火火" which means prosperous.

Besides, red also has a strong political colour in China, symbolizing revolution, and progress. For example, the national flag of the People's Republic of China and the party flag of the Communist Party of China are both red, symbolizing the tenacious vitality and unyielding revolutionary spirit of the revolution and the proletarian cause. The initial regime of the Communist Party of China was called Red political power"红色政权" and the earliest armed force was called Red Army "红军".

In ancient China, red also symbolizes beauty. For example, it refers to women's heavy make-up as "红妆-red makeup" or "红装-red dress", and refers to women dressed up as "红袖red sleeves". It refers to women's beautiful face as "red colour-红颜". In China's Peking Opera scarves, the red facial makeup implies loyal and unyielding. However, red in Chinese is also seen as an expression of emotions such as happiness, shyness, and anger. For example, in Chinese, 脸红, or 红晕 (Blush) indicates a feeling of shame, 脸红脖子粗 or 脸红筋暴 (a red face and a thick neck) indicates impatience and anger.

b. WHITE 白色

In ancient China, white is opposite to red. Mei (2012) affirms that white is a basic taboo colour word, which reflects the abandonment, aversion, and disgust of Chinese people both in the material and spiritual world. White means disaster, an expression of exhaustion, bloodless and lifelessness, which symbolizes death, an ominous omen, and a dead end. For an instant, since ancient times, when a relative dies, his or her family members have to dress in hemp, wearing white filial piety clothes, to do a funeral "百事white affairs". There will be a white mourning hall, and white flags at the funeral.

It also symbolizes decadence, reactionary, and backwardness. For instance, "白专道路special white road" means failure, pedantic, and no gain. During the war, the defeated party always displays the "白旗white flag" to show surrender. An idiot or person with low intelligence is called "白痴white imbecile".

White in ancient china also signifies cunning, insidious, shallow knowledge, no fame, and without self-discipline, such as "白脸white faced" which means insidious and treacherous person. Commoners are referred to as "白丁white man", “白衣 White clothes" and “白身white body". Those literati who are lacking in exercise and experience are called "白面书生white faced scholars". They can also refer to people with poor health conditions as ”脸色苍白pale complexion". “白色恐怖white terror" and "白色政权white regime" refer to reactionary forces. Some other symbolism of white colour words in Chinese includes;

i. Completely failed to accomplish a task 交白卷
ii. In vain/ for nothing 白白
iii. Idiot/ idiocy 白痴
iv. Waste白白浪费
v. Busy doing nothing 白忙活
vi. Useless 白搭
vii. Live off others 白吃
viii. Start from scratch 白手起家
ix. Be poor一穷二白
x. Waste your mind 白费心思
xi. Give away白送。

However, in recent times, largely due to the influence of western culture and ideology, the colour significance of white in Chinese society has changed from abandonment, omen, disgust, disaster, exhaustion, lifelessness, etc., to pure, clean, fair，justice and flawless. The bride now wears a white wedding gown for her wedding, which they now believe is the embodiment of purity, beauty, and goodness. Beauty standards for females as now changed to "白富美- white skin, rich, and beautiful". That is to say, the whiter the skin colour, the more beautiful and attractive they are, and the chances of being noticed，admired, and getting married becomes very high.

a. BLACK 黑色

In ancient times, the black colour in China was regarded as “天玄heavenly profound”. Black is believed to be the colour of the sky and the Lord of all colours. The period of monochrome worship, black was worshiped the longest in Chinese history.

According to Zhao (2014), Black is the strongest neutral colour. It is usually associated with strength, grace, and formality.it symbolizes seriousness and justice, such as the "黑脸 black-faced" Bao Gong in folklore， the black facial makeup of Zhang Fei, Li Kui, and others in traditional Peking Opera.

Mei (2012) agrees that “the original meaning of black in China is good, but because it is affected by the western culture，a bad meaning is added in it”. Black is now seen as darkness and symbolizes evil, reactionary, sinister, terror, crime, illegal activities， banditry, fear, death, and other derogatory meanings. For example, sinister and vicious people are now called "黑心肠black heart", the members of the reactionary group or criminal gang are called ”黑帮black gangs" and "黑手black hand". Shop where people rob goods and engage in illegal activities is called "black shop 黑店". illegal trading of goods is "黑货 black goods" and "黑市black market". Money obtained by taking bribes and other illegal means is called "black money黑钱". Criminal, unregistered resident, or person in hiding because he or she has violated the law is called (黑人 black person).

b. GREEN 绿色

In Chinese traditional culture, green has two characteristics: the good and the bad. This means that green in ancient Chinese culture is not only the symbol of the Hero, it also means wild and evil. So green is seen as a double-edged sword. This is because in the Middle Ages, human beings rely on green vegetation to protect themselves and survive since green is the colour of plants and symbolizes life; but at the same time, green also protects and shield human natural enemies and other fierce cannibals which attack humans. Outlaws who gather in the mountains and rob the rich to give to the poor are called "绿林好汉 greenwood heroes ". Those highway robbers who block the road to rob and harass people are called "绿林green wood".

According to the Five Elements of Chinese culture, green was considered a cheap colour, so only people at the bottom of society would wear green scarfs to distinguish them from the aristocrats. For example, the servants of the Han Dynasty were green. After the Yuan Dynasty, all prostitutes were given green headscarf to show their low status. Their husbands were disgraced and made inferior because of their wives' affairs. Thus, they were asked to put "戴绿帽 green hats" to their husbands. Therefore, up till now in China, If a man's wife cheats, the husband is called "戴绿帽 worn a green hat" by the wife.

Due to people's increasing attention to the environment and ecology, green hasbecome a very active colour word, symbolizing clean and healthy, in China since the mid-1980s, and many new words related to green were formed such as;

i. Green peace绿色和平
ii. Green energy 绿色能源
iii. Green Olympics绿色奥运
iv. green food（Unpolluted, healthy food）绿色食品
v. Green environment绿色环抱
vi. Green revolution绿色革命
vii. Green package绿色包装
viii. Green home绿色家园。

e. YELLOW 黄色

Yellow is a kind of development and variation of red in Chinese culture. For example, in the old days, people called the days suitable for doing great and auspicious things as "黄道吉日yellow day". Yellow was also more representative of power and majesty. In the ancient five aspects, five elements, and five colours, the most central one happened to be yellow, so yellow was unique and exclusively owned by feudal emperors and the royal families in all dynasties, it also symbolized the political power and territory of the central government and ordinary people were not allowed to wear yellow casually. For example, "黄袍Yellow robe" is Emperor's "Dragon Robe". "黄马褂yellow jacket" is the official uniform bestowed by the Qing Emperor on civil and military officials. Recently, yellow is associated with sex, decadence, obscene, dirty and pornographic contents. Unhealthy publications is called "黄书yellow

publication ” or “黄色新闻 yellow journalism”, pornographic movie is called “ 黄片yellow movie”, and decadent music is “黄书音乐 yellow music”.

3.0 Analysis of Data

This section is for weighing the points seen in the literature review**.**

3.1 The Significance of Chinese Colour Symbolism to Igbo People.

Here, we bring out how the Igbo and their culture and social life will benefit from this study.

a) **Interpretation/ Translation.** As Chinese language continues so expand throughout Nigeria, Igbo students who have got good amount of Chinese language proficiency easily benefit from Chinese translation and interpretation jobs in Nigeria. Therefore, when dealing with Chinese color words, they should not only pay attention to their basic significance but also pay attention to their profound symbolic significance. In the process of understanding and translating colour words, it is necessary to make a comprehensive analysis based on the underlying meanings beyond their physical attributes.

b) **Effective cross-cultural communication.** This paper exposes both linguistic and cultural knowledge of color in Chinese language. During the process of cross cultural communication, if one does not know a particular ethnic cultural factors, he/she can not initiate an effective and smooth communication. Therefore there is need to combine language knowledge and cultural knowledge to communicate smoothly. The vocabulary of color words in Chinese is constantly being enriched. Understanding the background knowledge Chinese culture and mastering the deep meaning of color words in Chinese can facilitate more effective and smooth communication.

c) **Avoid being ridiculed.** Generally speaking, each color word constitutes a connotative meaning. There is a funny situation that happened in a Chinese language class, when a teacher asked to make a sentence with the word " 绿green", a foreign student said: "我喜欢戴绿帽子I like to wear a green hat." This made the teacher laugh so hard. The student didn't actually know that in Chinese, "绿green" not only symbolizes vitality and vigor, but also means "humiliating the husband because of his wife's infidelity". The reason why the foreign student made such a sentence was because of his lack of understanding of Chinese traditional culture. In China, people avoid wearing of green cap/hat. Therefore Igbo people going to China for business or study should pay attention to that in order to avoid being ridiculed.

d) **Reference in foreign exchange activities.** Although in the field of systematic cognition, people's way of thinking is basically the same, but for people with different languages, different countries, different customs and different ways of thinking, the cultural category like colour meaning, is sometimes comprehended differently. By studying and understanding the color symbolism in Chinese Language, Igbo people can have a deeper understanding of a Chinese culture and use it for reference in future foreign exchange activities.

e) Value orientation. Due to the different value orientation of Chinese and Igbo culture, there are great differences in the understanding of color. China's worship of red originates from the worship of the sun god, so red is often used as a commendatory term. There are many commendatory words related to red in Chinese which has to do with the respect and celebration in Chinese culture. Therefore color symbolism in Chinese will assist Igbo people in understanding of Chinese values. Chinese people have different values for different colors.

4.0 Summary and Conclusion

In cross-cultural communication, colour words have different uses, cultural values, and cultural connotations. Under the influence of different historical backgrounds and cultural atmosphere in China, Chinese colour words have their profound connotations and different symbolic meanings. Although the development of Chinese social culture is greatly affected by globalization and the influence of western culture, and thus, some colour significance in the language have been going through semantic changes. However, the purpose of learning a foreign language is to better cross-cultural communication. Igbo people should not only pay attention to the accumulation of language knowledge but also pay attention to the learning of cultural knowledge. Only in this way can they avoid pragmatic failure and improve communication efficiency

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