

# Comparison of *Red* in Chinese and English

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to compare the different semantic meanings of *red* in Chinese and English with the purpose of illustrating on a very simple level the reason why Chinese and English speakers have difficulty understanding each other. The denotations of *red* in Chinese and English are listed in entries of Chinese, English, and bilingual dictionaries. Though the literal denotations are similar, the connotations of *red* in one language do not map exactly onto counterparts in the other language due to cultural and linguistic differences. In Chinese, *red* is regarded as a symbol of happiness and good luck, thereby occupying a substantial position in Chinese culture; while in English, it seems to have no similar meaning. *Red* has positive, negative, and warning connotations in both languages, but each language has distinctively different expressions to indicate the same meanings. This paper elaborates the equivalence and nonequivalence of *red* in both languages.

## Introduction

Due to the differences in culture and history, Chinese and English can express the same meaning in different ways, and it is often that the same word carries quite different connotations. This paper takes the word *red* as an example and illustrates its denotations and connotations in the two languages. In Chinese culture, the reason why Chinese people worship *red* can date back to ancient times, when people worshiped the Sun God. An ancient emperor, 炎帝 (*yan di*) [Red Emperor], claimed that he was the avatar of the Sun God. The Chinese were called the offspring of the Red Emperor. Therefore, *red* has been related to glory and carried positive connotations (Jiang, Liu, Sun, Zhu, Su, Chen, Yu, & Yuan, n. d.). In contrast, in western culture *red* is mainly related to blood (Ammer, 1992, p. 137-138) and is usually loaded with negative connotations.

## The Denotations and Connotations of *Red* in Chinese and English

### *The Denotations and Connotations of Red in Chinese*

The Chinese character for *red* is 红 (*hong*). According to the *Contemporary Modern Chinese Dictionary* (2005) and the *New Chinese-English Dictionary* (2003), it has the following meanings:

- a. The color that looks like blood: 红 (red)
- b. The red cloth to symbolize the happiness and celebration: 披红 (*pi hong*: 'wear red

- sashes or cloth as a sign of honor, festivity, etc.);
- c. To symbolize something that is successful or goes smoothly: 红运 (*hong yun*: 'good luck');
- d. To symbolize somebody that is the favorite of the leader or popular with the audience: 走红 (*zou hong*: 'become popular') (*Contemporary Modern Chinese Dictionary*, 2005, p. 563);
- e. To symbolize high consciousness in revolution and politics: 红色根据地 (*hongse genjidi*: 'red base');
- f. To denote bonus and dividend: 红利 (*hong li*: 'bonus');
- g. To refer to a surname: 红云 (*hong yun*: 'Hong, Yun') (*New Chinese-English Dictionary*, 2003, p. 567-568).

For Chinese people, it is easy to infer the connotations of *red* from its denotations. Chinese people have paid special attention to the color *red* since the ancient times due to their worship of the Sun God as mentioned earlier. They thought *red* was the color of their ancestors, and thus *red* is traditionally considered an auspicious color in Chinese culture and represents happiness and good luck, thereby playing a significant role in important celebrations, such as weddings and festivals, in common expressions and other contexts (Jiang et al., n. d.).



### *The Denotations and Connotations of Red in English*

According to the *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1993) and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (2004), red can be defined as follows:

- a. Of the color red, lit by or as if by fire: red rose/hills; b. Dyed with red or having red as a distinguishing color: the red hat, captain of the red team; c. Stained, full of or colored with blood: the red hands and sharp knives of the fishermen; d. Heated to redness: red slag from a blast furnace; e. Characterized by wrath or violence: red rage; f. Inciting or endorsing sweeping social or political reform esp. by the use of force: fighting the red guerrillas; g. Failing to show a profit: haven't had a red month in the past year (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, 1993, p. 1990); h. (1) (Of the eyes) bloodshot or surrounded by red or very pink: Her eyes were red from crying; (2) (Of the face) bright red or pink, especially because you are angry, embarrassed or ashamed: He stammered something and went very red in the face; (3) (Of hair or an animal's fur) reddish-brown in color: red deer/squirrels; i. (Informal) (sometimes disapproving, politics) having very LEFT-WING political opinion. Besides this, there are some meanings related to nouns - for example, the color of blood or fire; red cloth or clothing; a pigment or dye that colors red; a person with very LEFT-WING political opinion; red alert. (*The Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*, 2004, p. 1445)

*Red* in the western culture does not seem so joyous compared to that in Chinese. It is mainly associated with heat, disapproval, loss of money and anger. *Red heat* refers to high temperature causing certain substances to glow red; *red-faced* refers to a face turning red because of feeling of anger or embarrassment; *red-haired* is associated with deceitfulness. *To be caught red-handed* is a term for being cap-

tured in the act of committing a crime. In addition to these collocations, *red* is related to passion, love, and beauty. Red roses are commonly considered a symbol of love. Women wearing red clothes or lipstick are thought more attractive.

### **Comparing the Meaning of Red in Chinese and English**

In both languages, the core meaning of *red* refers to a color. *Red's* prototypical meaning as a warning comes from our biological make-up; humans have similar physical mechanisms of the eye and brain to perceive information around us, and *red* is a color which may excite anxiety in the brain. Other physiological activities, such as menstruation, blushing, and sex, result in another meaning of *red*. Although *red* has many nonequivalent meanings in Chinese and English, they still share certain characteristics because of their shared prototypicality (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 43). The senses of *red* in Chinese correspond to many of the senses of *red* in English.

### *Positive Connotations of Red in Chinese and English*

At one level, *red* has positive connotations in both Chinese and English. As explained earlier, because *red* is so important in Chinese culture, it is associated with many positive meanings. When people celebrate the most important festival in China -- the Spring Festival, they often stick red couplets (two pieces of red paper with good luck words written on them) on the two sides of the gate, hang red lanterns outside and set off red firecrackers<sup>1</sup> to express a sense of celebration. Usually, grandparents and parents give children "lucky money" in red envelopes as New Year's gifts. Some people even wear a red belt or red underwear on lunar New Year's Day for good luck. In addition to this festival, red items are widely used during other celebrations. For instance, on National Day, the Lantern Festival, and Labor Day, streets and town squares are usually decorated with red flags and different kinds of red flowers to bring about a joyous environment (Jiang et al., n. d.).

Another important occasion is the wedding, a vital moment in one's life. Chinese people often call it the "red wedding ceremony." The bride always wears red clothes from top to bottom: a red cheongsam, (a traditional Chinese gown), red socks and red shoes in order to get good luck. Before meeting the bride, the groom wears a red tie and decorates the wedding car with red roses. Inside the groom's pockets are red packets that are for children and guests to share their pleasure and good luck.

*Red* is also widely used in Chinese expressions. When it comes to talking about someone with good luck, he is described as 红运高照 (*hong yun gao zhao*) [red fortune high shine]. A business, for example a restaurant which has a good start, is always said to 开门红 (*kai men hong*) [open door red].

Some idiomatic expressions also convey some positive meanings related to *red*. For example, Chinese use 红光满面 (*hong guan man mian*) [red light all over face] to say somebody is energetic. 红角 (*hong jue*) [red star] to show an actor/actress is popular with audiences. In Chinese, the honor roll is 红榜 (*hong bang*) [red roll]; enjoying great popularity is 红得发紫 (*hong de fa zi*) [red become purple]; jewels and jades were referred to as *red* as 红货 (*hong huo*) [red goods] in the old times; having a loyal heart means 红心 (*hong xin*) [red heart]; calling the earth 红土地 (*hong tu di*) [red earth] expresses passion for it. All of these examples given above start with the Chinese character for *red*, 红 (*hong*) (*New Chinese – English Dictionary*, 2003).

In English also, there are some cases reflecting the connections between *red* and special, ceremonial meanings. They have "red-letter days" on their calendar to show special days and lay out "the red carpet" to welcome honorable or important guests (Bennet, 1988, p. 60). *To paint the town red* is an expression for celebration or someone getting excited. When Christmas day is approaching, Santa Claus is a man wearing a red hat and red clothes to give children gifts. Red socks and red Christmas flowers are often used to decorate for the season. On Valentine's Day, red hearts are common symbols appearing on

cards and gifts of Valentine's Day. *A red-blooded American* means a true and brave American who is energetic. *Red hot* can be used to describe something that is extremely popular or full of enthusiasm and energy in English. The pope's hat and the cardinals' vestments embody their authoritative position in the Catholic Church.

In both Chinese and English, a *red* ribbon is regarded as the symbol of solidarity showing our care for affected AIDS patients, our passion for life, and our desire for equality.

### *Negative Connotations of Red in Chinese and English*

#### **Red Related to Warning**

Although *red* has positive meanings, it also connotes warning in both English and Chinese. This is because *red* is a distinctive color "that stands out well in most everyday settings and consequently is admirably suited to warning people of danger" (Bennett, 1988, p. 61) so that it has the connotation of warning in both Chinese and English. Fire engines used to be painted red in the U.S. and they are still red in China. When a disaster is coming or predicted, governments announce a red alert. The red flag is used to indicate dangerous or problematic situations. The red traffic light shows we should stop. And in soccer, the referee shows red cards as the most severe penalty to warn those who violate rules. A sea-going vessel with a red navigation light is warning other vessels approaching to avoid an accident, and it is the same with brake lights on a car.

#### **Red with Negative Connotations**

A warning tries to prevent something bad to happen, but *red* also connotes something negative that has already happened. Both Chinese and English use *red* for situations such as anger (Examples 1 and 2) or prostitution (Examples 3 and 4).

- (1) 他 从来 没有 和  
He always not have and  
别人 红 过 脸。  
other persons red (past tense) face  
“He never gets angry with others.”
- (2) John went red in the face when he saw  
the damaged antique.
- (3) 她 过 去 是 一 个 红  
she past go is a red  
尘 女 子。  
dirt lady  
“She used to be a lady of the night.”
- (4) The red-light district is on the street that  
runs along the harbor.

In sentences (1) and (2), we can see that *red* expresses the emotion of anger. The state of anger makes the heart pump hard and blood is driven to produce a red face. The English phrase “to see red” also expresses the same meaning. *Red* in the last two sentences refers to prostitution, which is considered a vice or sin, and therefore negative, in both cultures.

#### *The Non-Equivalences of Red in Chinese and English*

Although the senses of one word in one language correspond to many of the meanings of its counterpart in another language, there are often senses that do not correspond (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 37). The word *red* is not an exception.

#### **Partially Overlapped Meaning**

In Chinese and English, there are some meanings of *red* that overlap to some extent but not completely.

- (5) 他的账 面上 出现 赤字。  
his account face on appear red word  
“His account was recorded in the red.”
- (6) The company has plunged 37 million  
dollars into the red.
- (7) 这家小 店的 生意  
this small store’s business  
越 做 越 火 了。  
more do more red (past tense)  
“The business of this store became successful and the owner made more money.”

- (8) I didn’t get a red cent for all my work.

The Chinese sentence (5) means that he has spent more than what he has earned, and the English expression “into the red” in (6) means one owes money to the bank for he has spent more than he has in his account (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary*, 2004). Thus, sentences (5) and (6) express similar meanings. The Chinese sentence in (7) indicates the owner had a prosperous business<sup>2</sup> and the English sentence in (8) refers to making money. In essence, *red* in sentences (7) and (8) generally expresses the same meaning.

Despite these apparent equivalences, however, people in Chinese say 红帐 (*hong zhang*) [red account] to mean a positive balance of the budget, but in English, a red balance is negative<sup>3</sup> while the positive balance is referred to as *in the black* (as in *Black Friday* in America, the day following Thanksgiving Day, when many people shop for the upcoming holiday, thus retailers are making a profit and putting the stores’ balance out of the red and back into the black).

#### **Meaning Non-Equivalence**

In Chinese and English, sometimes similar meanings are expressed by different color words, or the same color expresses different meanings. These differences also involve the word *red*.

- (9) He is green with envy because of my  
new car.
- (10) 他 眼 红 我 的 新 车。  
he eyes red my new car  
“He is jealous of my new car.”

In English sentence (9), the word *green* expresses the meaning of jealousy or envy—which embodies a similar connotation with 眼红 (*yan hong*) [eye red] in Chinese. In other cases, *greenback* is used to refer to the American banknote while Chinese bills are red. In the stock market, the color *red* is used to indicate the decreasing and increasing of the stock in opposite directions in the two languages. When the market is going up, the numbers are described as red in Chinese but in English, the color red indicates falling. The famous novel, *the Scarlet Letter*, told the story of a

woman who wore a red letter “A” stitched to the front of her dress to show humiliation for adultery (Hawthorne, 2004). In Chinese, instead, people always gossip that a woman’s husband wears a green hat if she is convicted of adultery. In England, the postal car is *red*, while in China, the mail cars have been painted green. The most popular Chinese classic novel 红楼梦 (*hong lou meng*) [red chamber dream] describes a story happening in glorious mansions. However, when the British translator, David Hawkes (1974), translated it into English, 怡红公子 (*yi hong gong zǐ*) [happy red boy] was translated into Green Boy, and 怡红院 (*yi hong yuan*) [happy red yard] as *the Court of Green*. Chinese 红糖 (*hong tang*) [red sugar] is called *brown sugar* in English. 红茶 (*hong cha*) [red tea] in Chinese is the name for black tea in English.

Although many expressions for *red* in Chinese have an equivalent expression in English, sometimes the word for *red* is translated with words that have no relationship with colors in the two languages. For instance, sweet potatoes in English are called 红薯 (*hong shu*) [red potato] in Chinese whether or not they have red skins; while *red* potatoes in English are called 土豆 (*tu dou*) [earth bean] in Chinese no matter what color the skin is.

To see another difference between the two languages concerning the word *red*, consider this sentence:

(11) He is the English teacher’s pet.

Chinese speakers may wonder what the meaning of the word “pet” really is. As a matter of fact, the Chinese word 红人 (*hong ren*) [red person] is usually used to express the favorite person of the teacher. Chinese speakers sometimes use the word *red* to describe the money given away as a bribe, but English speakers may call it *bribe money*, which has nothing to do with *red*. Hawkes (1974) did not use the word *red* in the title of Chinese classic novel 红楼梦 (*hong lou meng*) [red chamber dream],

because he thought an exact translation “is somewhat misleading” invoking a highly suggestive image “full of charm and mystery” and sex which “was not what the Chinese implies” (p. 19). Instead, he translated it as *The Story of The Stone*. Although *The Story of The Stone* was praised as one of the best translations by *The Times Literary Supplement* and gained Hawkes fame, I think it is really a shame that the word *red* is lost in the translation, as with it, some original cultural elements inherent in the novel are lost as well.

Finally, *red* has connotations of donations in English. Red Nose Day refers to a day on which people wear plastic red noses to make an appeal for donations in England. In Canada, people use red poppy flowers in memory of war heroes and collect money at the same time. In Chinese, however, there are no such connotations.

## Conclusion

This paper explores the denotations and connotations for *red* in Chinese and English. Because of distinctively different cultural backgrounds, the core meaning of *red* leads to different abstract meanings in each language. Chinese people used to think they were descendants of the Sun God and *red* is the color of the Sun God, so the original worship endows festival meanings of *red* in Chinese culture. *Red* in English is mostly related to negative connotations, such as anger, guilt and sin, and the main reason may be the correlation with blood. However, apart from different core denotations and connotations of *red* in both Chinese and English, both languages have similar connotations for positive, negative and warning. This paper takes *red* as an example to illustrate that semantic differences between languages have a close relationship with cultural differences. This exploration is just a small step in an effort to assist the integration of the language and culture in second language acquisition.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Firecrackers have been recently banned in China and this tradition was discontinued.

<sup>2</sup> 赤 (*chì*) [red] in (5) and 火 (*huǒ*) [red fire] in (7) are synonymous with 红 (*hóng*) [red], in Chinese.

<sup>3</sup> In English red ink derives its meaning from “the bookkeeping practice of marking debits in red pencil or ink and credits in black” (Ammer, 1992, p. 160).

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