

Comparison of Chinese and western taboo culture

--from the perspective of euphemisms

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Abstract: As an important tool of cross-cultural communication, language is closely related to culture, and language itself is a kind of cultural phenomenon. Based on the development of language, this thesis discusses the similarities and differences of Chinese and western taboo culture on hierarchy, superstition and religion, social psychology and social civilization from the perspective of euphemisms, in order to avoid some possible embarrassment and trouble in cross-cultural communication.

1. Introduction

The Language taboos around the world are formed in the background of their specific society and national culture. Any carelessness might bring embarrassments, conflicts and even clashes. As a unique cultural phenomenon, the western and eastern taboos have experienced hundreds of years' development. This kind of taboo phenomenon hasn't disappeared till today, instead, a variety of euphemistic expressions have come out. And all these euphemistic expressions have formed another unique cultural phenomenon. The culture of euphemisms has developed and changed with the development of society, and with changes in social structure and social patterns. As a product of taboo culture, euphemisms have been used among people of different social classes in different fields. Using euphemisms is a crucial way to coordinate interpersonal relationship and to create harmonious social atmosphere. Therefore, euphemism phenomenon is a cultural phenomenon itself. "Euphemisms are society's basic lingua non franca. As such, they are outward and visible signs of our inward anxieties, conflicts, fears, and shames. They are like radioactive isotopes. By tracing them, it is possible to see what has been (and is) going on in our language, our minds and our culture."^[1]

Linguist Chenyuan defines euphemism as "using implicit, harmless words which are pleasant to hear or some blurry words instead of the tabooed expressions."^[2]

2. Chinese and western taboo culture with euphemism

Since ancient times, taboo culture has widely existed in all nations and classes both in China and western countries. "People protect the authority of taboos and maintain the applying of taboos consciously or unconsciously."^[3]Therefore, there are various kinds of taboos around the world. Different kinds of taboo words lead to a large number of euphemisms.

2.1. Hierarchy and taboo culture

In ancient times, there was a saying in China that "it is taboo for a son to say his father's name, and it is also taboo for a disciple to say his teacher's name." Chinese feudal society has long been influenced by the patriarchal hierarchy, and taboo culture has emerged, including taboo culture of the state, officials, and family. This kind of taboo phenomenon was especially prevalent in the Tang, Song and Qing dynasties. The name of the emperors, officials, saints, respect relatives, teachers and other people are all taboos. The reason of these taboos might be out of fear, or out of courtesy and respect. When people had to mention them, they were replaced by some other words. Such ancient Chinese euphemisms are called "qu yu". These taboos came out either voluntarily or were strictly regulated by law. It is a reflection of feudal hierarchical culture. The given name of Emperor Han

Guang is “Xiu”. So when he was in power, “Xiu Cai (means one who passed the imperial examination at the county level) ” was once called “Mao Cai”. Emperor Tang Taizong’s given name was “Shimin”, therefore “Guan Shiyin (the mercy Buddha)” was briefly called “Guan Yin”. And also “Min Bu” was changed into “Hu Bu” in order to avoid mentioning the taboo word “Min” from the emperor. “Jottings from Laoxue An” compiled by Lu You recorded a ridiculous story. In the Song dynasty, there was a state official named Tian Deng who was sensitive to his name taboo. The local people were ordered to change the word “deng (means lanterns)” for “fire”. Therefore, “Dian Deng (means to light lanterns)” had to be said as “Dian Huo (means to set fire) “. In ancient China, there is a custom of lighting lanterns in the Lantern Festival. The notice from the state government said: “The state set fire for three days according to the custom”. Then the famous ironic saying came out that “Only state officials were allowed to set fire, but the common people were not allowed to light lamps.” Compared with state taboo and official taboo, the culture of family taboo is more of a kind of respect, worship and nostalgia for the elders spontaneously. The given name of Si Maqian’s father was “Tan”. Therefore, there is no word “tan” in “the Historical Records Shih Chi”. In order to show respect to his father, the famous poet Du Fu lived in Tang Dynasty never used the word “xian” in his poems because his father’s given name was “Xian”.^[4]

In the ancient western culture, there were also taboos of the monarchs’ names. When people went to see the emperor, either out of fear of his power and majesty, or out of respect and worship, they use euphemisms of praise instead of calling his name. Such as “the Most High; the August; the Serene; Son of the Sun”.^[5] Thus it can be seen that in ancient China and the western countries, there are similarities in the taboo culture generated by the awe of the power class.

With the development of society, many taboo cultures have disappeared in the long river of history. Due to the emphasis on seniority and social etiquette in traditional Chinese culture, there is a strong sense of hierarchy. Some taboo cultures are still inherited today. It is taboo for the younger to call the name of the elder, also it is taboo for the student to call the name of the teacher, and people of lower rank to call the name of the superior. Otherwise it would be regarded as an unfilial, uneducated and abrupt behavior. People are discreet in their daily dealings to avoid umbrage from the superiors. So the job title is often followed by the leader’s surname as a sign of respect. But the western culture emphasizes freedom and equality. People can call each other’s name directly regardless of their position or age. Therefore, it is not strange that people of lower rank call the name of the leader directly. The son can call his father’s name or the grandson can call his grandfather’s name. Even the son and grandson can have the same name as his father or grandfather.

2.2. Superstition and religious taboo culture

Influenced by superstition or religious culture, there are many taboos in eastern and western nationalities. Due to the backward social production and insufficient understanding of the nature, ancient people associated language with disasters and blessings, therefore many language taboos came out. Primitive superstitions and taboos led to the proliferation of religious or other kind of euphemisms. The number “4” and “7” are taboos for many Chinese. Because “4” has similar pronunciation with “Si (means death)” in Chinese. So it was believed to be ominous. In order to avoid saying the number “4”, some waiters or waitresses might say “Rice, two bowls, plus two bowls”. What’s more, the taboo of “7” comes from the superstition that Chinese people hold a memorial ceremony for the dead for 7 days. Similarly, 13 is a taboo word for westerners. Therefore, important activities should not be arranged on the day of 13th. And there is no 13th floor or room 13 in some hotels. The taboo of 13 comes from the bible. Because Judas, who betrayed Jesus, was the 13th guest at the last supper.

In western culture, it is taboo to speak devil directly. People believe that “speak of the devil, it is sure to appear”. So they euphemized “Satan” as “the Evil One, the Prince of Darkness, the Prince of the World” and so on.^[5]

The euphemisms mentioned above are the products of religion or superstition. With the development of society and technology, “People’s superstitions are greatly reduced. But their

religious and political beliefs, values, cultural traditions and social customs still maintain the existence of taboos. Only in different times, content and form have changed".^[3] Therefore, religious taboos should be respected in cross-cultural communications, but it is unwise to be blind superstitious.

2.3. Taboo culture involving psychological factors

It is taboo to talk about words like "fat, thin, ugly, birth, old, sick, death" both in China and western countries. However, the extent and forms of these kind of taboos are different because of different cultural backgrounds. Everyone longs for beauty. For example, if somebody looks ugly, people often use "common" or "general" to describe him in Chinese. In English, people usually use "ordinary" or "plain" to avoid hurting others' self-esteem. In fact, both in Chinese and Western culture, people use some mild words to reduce the semantic sharpness of "ugly". In Chinese, it is a taboo to use "Fei (with the same meaning as fat)" to describe people because this word should be only used to describe animals. Instead, they use "chubby" or "strong". In English, people use "stout, heavyset, plump" instead of using "fat". And also use "slim, slender" instead of using "skinny". In "The Big Bang Theory", Penny described the fat female doctor to be "very safe".

People always mind other mentioning their physical defects. Words like "cripple, deaf, and blind" are taboos. In Chinese, people might say "there's something wrong with his eyes, or ears. Or there is inconvenience for his legs." In English, instead of using "deaf" and "blind", people use "slow/ hard of hearing, visually retarded".

In addition, there are many euphemisms related to sickness. In Chinese, people often say "they are not well" or "they don't feel comfortable". In English, people say "under the weather" instead of "sick". "Big C", "social disease", "mental health center" are used to refer to "cancer", "Venereal diseases", "madhouse" respectively.

All these kind of euphemisms are used to avoid hurting others and to reduce the extent of psychological harm.

The word "death" is a taboo for every nation. The euphemisms of "death" are different depends on the differences of values and religious culture. In China, the death of the emperor is called "Jia beng"; the death of a monk is called "Parinirvana"; one's death for the country is called "lay down one's life for one's country". For some people who believes in Buddhism or Chinese Taoism, his death is called "going to western Paradise", "ascending to heaven and become immortal" or just "becoming immortal". However, Christian culture holds that all men are sinful, and emphasizes the redemption. So People need to pray for god's blessing, to let the soul be saved. Then one can go to heaven and live with god after death. Therefore, they often say "to be with God", or "to go to heaven".

There are differences of the taboo related to "getting old" between Chinese and western culture. China has a tradition of respecting the old and caring for the young. Being old stands for maturity and rich experience. So Chinese people often use commendatory terms like "old but vigorous", "old master". Old people in China will not be offended by being called "old people". On the contrary, they regard it as a respectful attitude.

While western culture emphasizes the value of individualism. It emphasizes the development of individual potential and hard work. So being young is a huge advantage. And being old means being dull, stubborn, rigid and useless. Therefore, being old means losing the ability to compete with others. And being old will be eliminated by the society. Old people cannot get enough respect. For this reason, westerners avoid talking about old age. It is impolite to ask other's age. To avoid the using of "old", in English, "old age" is replaced by "golden years". People use "senior citizen", or "the longer living to refer to "ole people".

2.4. Taboo culture related to social civilization

In a civilized society, Excreta and acts of human excretion (these are euphemistic terms themselves) are to be avoided in polite conversation. In English, if they must be mentioned, then the terms should be euphemistic ones. The history of lavatory language is actually the historical evolution of language civilization.^[5] Therefore, there are so many euphemisms concerning

excretion. Such as: cloakroom, toilet, water closet, powder room, restroom, comfort station, loo, men's/women's room, and so on. If you want to go to the toilet, you can say "do my business; do my duty; to ease myself, to go to bathroom" or "will you excuse me for a few minutes?" "Can I add some powder?" "Powder my nose, wash my hands" and so on. Therefore, if your hostess asks you that whether you want to "powder your nose" or "wash your hands", you will not make stupid mistakes. What is more, to piss is euphemized as "to pee, to pass water" etc. No doubt, the civilized way to refer to such embarrassing things is to use euphemisms. Therefore, we must be cautious to use euphemisms in cross-cultural communication and must understand the real meaning if others use euphemisms. In Chinese, There are also such kind of euphemisms. Expressions like "Chugong (means to go to the lavatory)", "Gengyi (means to change one's clothes)", "Jieshou (means to go to the toilet)", and "Fangbian (means to be convenient) have once been used. Some of them are still used today. Therefore, there are similarities in taboo culture related to social civilization between China and western countries.

3. Conclusion

Language is not a static, fixed, uniform system. With the development of culture, language is also in the process of dying out and being born. Euphemisms generated in different cultural backgrounds reflect different cultural connotations and values of national taboo. And euphemisms generated in different cultural backgrounds have experienced continuous development, which reflects that the taboo culture in China and western countries have been experiencing constant development and changes. Nowadays, some of the old taboos no longer need to be avoided. However, with the development of social life and civilization, new taboos appear in some other fields. Some old euphemisms may die out with the developments and changes of taboo culture, or be replaced by some new euphemisms. What's more, some former euphemized words may be enlarged or narrowed in meaning and in the scope of use. The development trend of euphemisms in China and western countries reflects a new development trend of Chinese and western taboo culture. Therefore, in the cross-cultural communications, we need to pay close attention to the differences in taboo culture and the development trend of euphemisms.

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