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PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATING CHENGYU FROM CHINESE ON THE EXAMPLE OF COLOUR NOTATION

Research article

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**Abstract**

The research is devoted to the study of the features of Chinese phraseological units (chengyu) on the example of differences in the perception of colours by Chinese and Europeans. The authors examined two groups of chengyu, divided by their internal structure, the main methods and ways of translating phraseological units. The article reveals the influence of colours on the cultural aspect and the difference in their perception. During the analysis, a conclusion was made about the need for a large knowledge in Chinese history, culture and religion. The aim of the article is to identify the main problems of translating Chinese phraseological units (chengyu); to identify subjective differences in the interpretation of the main palette of colours among Europeans and Chinese, their influence on the translation process. Interrelated research tasks have been solved: 1) the main difficulties in the translation of chengyu are identified and the types of translation of phraseological units are named; 2) the reasons for the differences in the perception of colours and the differences themselves are indicated. The scientific novelty of the article is in overcoming the mentioned problems in translation. As a result, the presented theoretical conclusions are a certain contribution to linguistic didactics and improvement of intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** Chinese, phraseological units, chengyu, translation theory, colour.

ПРОБЛЕМЫ ПЕРЕВОДА ЧЭНЬЮЕВ С КИТАЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА НА ПРИМЕРЕ ЦВЕТОВЫХ  
ОБОЗНАЧЕНИЙ

Научная статья

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**Аннотация**

Работа посвящена изучению особенностей перевода китайских фразеологизмов (чэньюев) на примере различий в восприятии цветов китайцами и европейцами. В исследовании были рассмотрены две группы чэньюев, разделенных по внутренней структуре, а также основные методы и способы перевода фразеологизмов. В статье раскрывается влияние цветов на культурный аспект. В ходе анализа сделан вывод о необходимости широких знаний в сфере истории, культуры и религии Поднебесной. Цель исследования – определение основных проблем перевода китайских фразеологизмов (чэньюев); выявление субъективных различий в трактовке основной палитры цветов у европейцев и китайцев, их влияния на процесс перевода. Решены взаимосвязанные задачи исследования: 1) обозначены основные трудности при переводе чэньюев и даны виды перевода фразеологизмов; 2) указаны причины различий в восприятии цветов и сами различия. Научная новизна работы заключается в преодолении упомянутых проблем при переводе. В результате предоставленные теоретические выводы заключаются в определенном вкладе в лингводидактику и улучшении межкультурной коммуникации.

**Ключевые слова:** китайский язык, фразеологизмы, чэньюй, теория перевода, цвет.

**Introduction**

The People's Republic of China is a huge country with its unique history, culture, religions and language indeed. Chinese is one of the most ancient languages, it is rich and diverse, and differs from western languages by the presence of four tones. Beyond that, one of the most interesting and striking features is chengyu in Chinese.

Chengyu (成语, pinyin chéngyǔ, literally: "ready expression") is a stable phrase in the Chinese language, most often consisting of four characters [2, P. 296].

The use of chengyu makes speech much richer and emotionally coloured. Chengyu originates from ancient Chinese classics, historical events, myths, and legends. Therefore, chengyu can be used to reference the standards of beauty and

feelings. These four-digit phraseological units could describe a range of human emotions and experiences with an incredible depth.

In China, symbolism has a great, all-encompassing meaning. The Chinese have always been looking for a hidden meaning in everything. Even at present, symbolism has a great importance on the daily life of the Chinese. For example, in some parts of the Chinese population, there are still prejudices related to colours.

Up to the XIV<sup>th</sup> century in China it was possible to understand to which social circle a person belongs, his place in the hierarchy. For example, yellow clothes were allowed to be worn exclusively by the emperor. Otherwise, only one fate awaited a person – the death penalty. Even though in Europe the ruling family could choose their official colours, but never imposed a ban on any of their use.

Accordingly, when learning Chinese and when translating phraseological units (chengyu) from Chinese or into Chinese, you can easily make a mistake. To avoid this, you need to understand the subtleties of Chinese culture and how and with what the Chinese associate colours, since colour designations are quite common in Chinese set expressions, chengyu, and phraseological units. Also due to the differences in graphic writing, syntactic and grammatical structures, traditions [1, P. 69], etc. there are a lot of problems when translating material from English into Chinese or, conversely, from Chinese into English.

### Research methods and principles

Analyzing the problems of translating chengyu with colour symbols, first of all you need to understand their structure. According to the internal structure of chengyu, they (symbols) should be divided into two groups: parallel and non-parallel. Parallel phraseological units mainly consist of two links: 1–3 and 2–4, that is, of two semantic pairs that consist of antonyms, synonyms, analogues (words included in one associative series) [7].

Here are examples of parallel chengyu:

**一日千里 (yī rì qiān lǐ)** “to go by leaps and bounds”, here the semantic pair will consist of numbers **一 (yī)** “one” and **千 (qiān)** “thousand”;

**饮水思源 (yǐn shuǐ sī yuán)** “when drinking water think of its source”, semantic couple **水 (shuǐ)** “water” and **源 (yuán)** “source”;

**长枪大炮 (cháng qiāng dà pào)** “weapon”, (literally: long pike, big cannon), a semantic pair of **长 (cháng)** “long” and **大 (dà)** “large”.

Such parallel constructions are a kind of markers in the text for the translator, which allow them to be quickly identified among other things and translated taking into account the context.

Chengyu non-parallel constructions are more numerous and include only a part of morphemes that are parallel, and their arrangement can be either symmetrical or asymmetric [8, P. 701].

Examples of non-parallel construction are the following chengyu:

**置若罔闻 (zhì ruò wǎng wén)** “ignore it”;

**青出于蓝 (qīng chū yú lán)** “surpass your teacher”, here are parallel morphemes **青 (blue)** “green” and **蓝 (blue)** “light blue”.

In addition to the translation of chengyu parallel and non-parallel constructions, five additional types of translation should be distinguished in the matter of comparative correlation of their meaning (direct and figurative). Identification and knowledge of the structure of phraseological units are necessary for correct translation.

The first type includes chengyu, in the translation of which the figurative basis and the figurative meaning coincide. For example:

**风云变幻 (fēng yún biàn huàn)** “change quickly, like clouds driven by the wind”.

In this translation, the method of phraseological equivalent is used. Here the figurative meanings coincide.

The second type is chengyu, in which the figurative meaning does not change when the figurative basis is replaced:

**对牛弹琴 (duì niú tán qín)** “to cast pearls before swine” (literally: “playing qin in front of buffaloes”) [9, P. 239].

In the example, when translated into English, the figurative basis changes (buffalo – swine; pearls – qin (a stringed musical instrument common in China)).

In this case, the method of phraseological analogue is used, where it is necessary to choose an expression that has a similar meaning and emotional colouring in the translation language.

The third type is the translation of chengyu without a figurative basis by phraseology with a figurative basis in the translation language. For example:

**一无所获 (yī wú suǒ huò)** “don’t drink salt” (lit. “to get nothing”), where: **一 无** “there is nothing, nothing”, **所** “everything”, **获** “to receive, to achieve”. There is no figurative basis in this phrase, but it is present in translation.

The fourth type is a descriptive translation in the absence of an analogue of chengyu in the translation language.

**井底之蛙 (jǐng dǐ zhī wā)** – “to have a narrow outlook or a limited circle of communication” (lit. “frog at the bottom of the well”, where **井** “well”, **底** “bottom”, **之** – service word of the Chinese language separating the previous definition from the subsequent defined word”, **蛙** “frog”). This chengyu is used when it is important to emphasize a person’s ignorance in any field of knowledge.

English translation differs from the Chinese version, firstly, by the presence of a figurative basis (“frog” and “well”), and secondly, by the absence of an analogue translation in English.

Another example is: **东施效颦 (dōng shī xiào pín)** “to disfigure oneself with inept imitation” (an ugly woman tries to copy the painful grimaces of a beauty).

It is important to know the history of its origin in order to convey the meaning of the chengyu. It is based on the legend of how the beautiful Sishi was ill, frowned, but this made her even more beautiful. In the same place an ugly woman Dongshi lived, who, imitating Sishi, on the contrary, became more and more ugly.

There are a lot of such examples in Chinese phraseological units, which require knowledge about their history origin.

In situations where the phraseology has no analogue in the target language, the translator can use the descriptive translation or make a footnote with a comment.

However, such a translation is less bright and colourful and deprives chengyu of its figurative and associative properties.

The last, fifth type is the translation of paired constructions according to the type of chengyu by word combinations or simple words of the translation language. For example:

浩浩荡荡 (hào hào dàng dàng) grandiose, huge, powerful, gigantic (lit. “full-flowing and extensive”);

无声无息 (wú shēng wú xī) silence, quiet, silent, wordless, inconspicuous (literally “soundless and breathless”) [4, P. 1355].

Such retelling method, is used if there are phraseological units of the Chinese in chengyu, which have no analogue or equivalent in English. They are not subject to translation, and a descriptive translation will not be exact.

### Discussion: Colour designations

If we talk about colour designations, then in China there is a “theory of five elements” (五行 wǔxíng), according to which the colour palette corresponds to the five natural elements. According to this theory, everything in the world refers to the elements of wood, water, fire, metal, and earth. From this, five main colours appear: 白色 báisè (white), 黑色 hēisè (black), 红色 hóngsè (red), 青色 qīngsè (blue-green), 黄色 huángsè (yellow) [5, P. 50].

白色 (white). Europeans traditionally associate black with mourning. In contrast, in China, the colour of death, betrayal, cold, mourning, but at the same time purity, is white [3].

The character “白” is used in quite a large number of figurative expressions. At first glance, “白白” can be translated as “white-white” and this would be a mistake, since this phraseology means “in vain, in vain”. 白开水 consists of three hieroglyphs – 白 white; 开 open, start; 水 water; and is translated as “empty boiling water (without welding)”, i.e. pure, without impurities.

There is such a thing as a 白包 bái bāo (“white envelope”). When someone dies, money is put into a white envelope as a support for his family. This is the opposite of the festive red envelope (红包 hóng bāo). Funerals in Chinese – 白白 (“white matter”).

In Russia and Europe, this colour has a mostly positive meaning. White is “justice, innocence, peace, eternity, light”. It is widely used in religion and it is traditional for wedding dresses and jewelry [6], [10], [11].

Under the influence of Western culture, new expressions began to appear in China, for example, the English word “Whitecollarworker” in Chinese would sound like “白领工人” (bái lǐng gōng rén).

If we analyze the definition of “white” in Chinese and English dictionaries, we can see that in Chinese the most popular association with white is “snow or frost”, and the least frequent is “milk”. In English, the most frequently association will also be “snow”, but unlike Chinese, “milk”, and “chalk” are in second place [14], [16], [19], [20].

黑色 (black). As mentioned above, in Russia and the European countries, the association of “mourning, sorrow, evil, and grief” is held with black. We often say “black forces” meaning “evil”, or “black envy”. Sometimes the term is used in opposition to “white envy”, but not very often. Everything black is bad and gloomy.

On the other hand, the Chinese consider black to be a symbol of “the sky, winter, everything mystical and secret”, sometimes even “death”. In China, the relation towards this colour is completely different. This happened due to the widespread use of calligraphy, which is an integral part of Chinese culture. Therefore, one of the most popular associations with black is “ink”.

Despite this, sometimes black colour in China also has a negative meaning. 黑社会 – mafia, 做黑活 – to commit a secret murder, 吃黑枣儿 – to die from bullet wounds, literally “eat a black date”, “吃了煤炭 – 黑了心了” – “ate coal – turned gut black”, “harbor black thoughts” [13].

For example, in Russian black and white, light and darkness are opposites of each other [15, P. 66]. There is a similarity in Chinese pair (red and white). “红白事” (red and white event) – “wedding and funeral”.

红色 (red). From ancient times to the present, “red” in China has a beautiful meaning, symbolizing “good luck, happiness, prosperity, and loyalty” – mostly positive feelings and emotions. While “black” represents the North, “red” represents the South, which has always been associated in China with the riot of life. For example, there are such expressions as: 大红大紫 (dàhóng dàzǐ) – colourful, bright, lush, succeed, become famous, dizzying success. The expression consists of four hieroglyphs: large red and large purple, which, when it is translated, does not make any literally sense. 红旗报捷 (hóng qí bào jié) – Hongqi, Red Banner, CPC Central Committee monthly. 大红盖头 (dàhóng gàitou) – the ceremony of covering the head of a newlywed.

If we consider traditional Russian culture, then here you can find similarities with the Chinese interpretation of “red” (red sun, ruddy cheeks, red kokoshniks, and sundresses). Nevertheless, over time, there was a rapprochement with European culture

and now the red colour is a symbol of danger, anger, or embarrassment. This colour simultaneously refers to life (ruddy cheeks as a sign of health) and death (the colour of blood).

“Red” is traditionally used for decorations for the Chinese lunar New Year; brides wear red dresses for their celebrations. For the New Year, wishes for happiness and wealth are written on red paper. In ancient China, red was the colour of fire, which in turn was not perceived to be harmful.

It should be noted that it is not possible to literally translate Chinese expressions, idioms and chengyu in all cases. For example, there is such a saying: 红红火火 (hóng hóng huǒ huǒ), literally meaning “red, red, fire, fire”. Only knowing that in China the element of fire was considered good, it will be possible to understand the real meaning of this expression. It means that someone’s life is in full swing, goes uphill, shines like flames. The meaning of the verb 火了 (on fire) is built according to a similar principle. In a figurative sense, it is translated as “gain popularity”.

青色 (blue-green). The designation of the colour scale in this case does not coincide with the one accepted in the European languages. It is very common to notice that the colour qing 青 is translated as blue, despite the fact that the word 蓝色 is the equivalent of blue. However, it cannot be translated as unambiguously green, because the Chinese language already has 绿色 too.

In fact, this colour conveys many more shades: dark blue, bright blue, bright green, in some cases even black. However, the truth is most likely somewhere in the middle of all this. Qing is probably blue-green or bluish-green. Blue can also be mixed with this colour. Different variations are acceptable.

Therefore, colour is translated differently depending on the context: 青既非绿又非蓝 (qīng jì fēi lǜ yòu fēi lán) – the colour of qing is neither green nor blue; 不分青红皂白 (bù fēn qīng hóng zào bái) – is literally translated as “do not distinguish blue from red (black from white)”, means to act without understanding what’s going on; not to delve into the essence of the matter [17].

The colour comes from the idea of plant sprouting, something young, spring, vitality.

This hieroglyph is included in such expressions as 青年 (qīng nián) – youth, young; 青少年 (qīng shào nián) – teenager. Both of them mean the younger generation. Sometimes idioms with a negative meaning are also found: 青面獠牙 (qīng miàn liáo yá) can literally be translated as “blue muzzle, protruding fangs” or “devil with a green face and long fangs” and is used in the meaning of “evil, ferocious, creepy” [13].

黄色 (yellow). This colour has always symbolized the imperial power and the centre of the world, which is China itself. Yellow skin, yellow earth, so countless people since ancient times considered yellow to be China’s own colour, and this colour was once used to denote oneself as an individual.

There is the fact that during the heyday of feudalism in China, yellow represented the highest imperial power and honor, and it was used only by the imperial family. Clothes of yellow colour were forbidden to be worn by everyone except the emperor. 黄袍加身 (huáng páo jiā shēn) – to wear a yellow robe. This expression means that someone was proclaimed the emperor and ascended the throne.

In the European culture despite the fact that yellow is the colour of autumn and the sun; at the same time, it is also the colour of betrayal or a long separation. It is important to know that in the Western countries, due to the influence of religious beliefs, yellow symbolizes cowardice and meanness. According to the Bible, Judas, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, wore a yellow robe at the Last Supper and betrayed Jesus for 300 pieces of silver. Therefore, in Western thinking, yellow has a very bad meaning. This is also reflected in everyday speech. For example, a yellow dog means a despicable person – 卑鄙的人 (bēi bǐ de rén), a yellow streak means shyness 胆怯 (dǎn qiè).

Nevertheless, over the time, when China began to actively establish ties with the West, yellow began to lose its original meaning. Now this colour has many other meanings. For example, images, books or films for adults and is translated as: 黄图 (huáng tú), 黄书 (huáng shū), 黄片 (huáng piàn). Therefore, you need to be careful when translating [3], [12].

The colour palette is used extensively in the Beijing Theater to represent the character or role of a character in a play. This is similar to the “speaking surnames” technique used by Russian writers. The main colours are used in comparison with their meanings in Chinese and English (tabl. 1) [18].

Table 1 - Differences in the interpretation of the colour palette in Chinese and English

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颜色	红	黄	蓝	白	黑
汉语	忠贞	显贵	阴险	奸诈	正义
英语	暴躁	胆怯	沮丧	清白	邪恶
Colour	Red	Yellow	Blue	White	Black
Chinese	Loyalty, dedication	Powerful man	Hypocritical, two-faced	Insidious, treacherous	Justice
English	Violent temper, quick temper	Cowardice, pusillanimity	Sad, dejected	Clean, tidy	Vice, evil, vileness

**Research findings**

Specialized dictionaries of Chengyu are constantly being published or republished in China, in which one can find comments on their meanings, and the primary sources are sure to be cited.

Chengyu are diverse in structure, therefore, for their correct translation, a large store of knowledge is required concerning the history, culture, religion of China and the Chinese people. Knowledge of the structure of phraseological units will help the translator to highlight them in the text and translate them correctly.

Comparing the most common associations it is extremely important to find correct phrases and phraseological units, in distinguishing similar and different features in the perception of the colour palette, which certainly helps in translation. So in Chinese, “white” is the colour of sorrow and emptiness, while among Russians and Europeans, sorrow is symbolized by “black”, which is also the colour of evil and vice. “Red” is a festive colour in China, but it is anger and embarrassment, danger. The most difficult thing in translation will be the “qing” colour (between green and blue), since there is no such colour designation anywhere except in the Chinese. “Yellow”, “green”, “gold” – cultural differences slip through the perception of these and many other colours. This is not surprising, because language and culture are highly interconnected.

**Conclusion**

To sum all up, we can say that since the Europeans and the Chinese have a rather large cultural difference, it will be problematic and most likely mistaken to translate without delving into the culture of the country under the study. In Chinese almost every word contains a hidden meaning, which must be deciphered during translation and not lose the “character” and “spirit” of the translated text. Colour designations are often found in chengyu (Chinese idioms) and do not denote colours by themselves, but convey any feelings or emotions.

**Конфликт интересов**

Не указан.

**Рецензия**

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**Conflict of Interest**

None declared.

**Review**

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