

# Translation of English Idioms about Colors from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

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**Abstract:** Color idioms are an important branch of idioms. In this paper the Chinese translation of English idioms about colors is expounded from the perspective of Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory. Under the theory, literal translation and free translation are discussed as two basic translation methods. A few typical examples are quoted and analyzed, trying to achieve functional equivalence in terms of form and content. The study on translation of color idioms is of significance to enhance the competence of intercultural communication.

## 1. Introduction

English has thousands of colorful and popular idioms. Idioms have been broadly used both in spoken and written patterns for many years. Language is the carrier of culture. Different languages reflect the attributes of different cultures and contain different national and cultural characteristics, which make idioms with distinctive national and cultural characteristics. With their cultural connotation, idioms are the results of the accumulation of daily life of ordinary people. As a cross-cultural communicative activity, translation aims to convey the information of the source language and obtain the maximum equivalent value. How to translate English idioms to better enhance the competence of intercultural communication is a topic worthy to further study.

### 1.1 The Concept of Idioms

An idiom is a phrase, construction, or expression that is recognized as a unit in the usage of a given language and either differs from the usual syntactic patterns or has a meaning that differs from the literal meaning of its parts taken together (Webster's New World College Dictionary, 1996). An idiom is a phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit (Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, 1997). Idioms are words, phrases or sentences that have fixed implied meanings. Its meaning is different from the literal meaning of the individual elements of an idiom. In other words, an idiom doesn't mean exactly what the words in it say. It is, however, used figuratively. For example, the expression "kick the bucket" means "to die" and the expression "spill the beans" means "to tell people secret information" respectively. It can be concluded that idioms are words or expressions with a hidden, figurative or connotative meaning.

### 1.2 Classifications and Features of Idioms

Idioms can be classified into different categories. Known as the first scholar who studies idioms, Smith (1925) classifies idioms into the expressions of attitudes, determinations, emotions, wishes, etc. based on the communicative functions. Later, according to the sources of idioms, he classifies idioms into animals, arts, business, educations, families, human body parts, laws, medicine, military, myths, religions, seas, sports, etc. According to Fernando (1996), idioms are divided into ideational idioms, interpersonal idioms and relational idioms on the basis of the different functions of idioms when idioms are used to describe the world, express the internal feelings and promote language communication. He also summarizes three features of idioms: compositeness, institutionalization, and semantic opacity (Fernando, 2000). Ma Guofan (1985) puts forward four features of idioms: frozen, habitual, historical, and ethical. With obvious ethical features, idioms have fixed meanings and structures. In addition, the contents derive from historical events or have

historical characteristics. Wang Rongpei (2000) classifies the idioms into the expressions of nouns, prepositions, verbs, similes, idioms with “it”, etc. By summarizing the previous idiom studies by scholars at home and abroad, three basic features of idioms are put forward by him: long-term conventionality, structural stability and semantic unity.

### **1.3 The Significance of the Study on Color Idioms**

Color is closely related to people’s life. Accordingly, color idioms are an important branch of idioms. As the name implies, color idioms are idioms in terms of colors. Within the idiom at least one color is included. For example, all cats are grey in the dark. In fact, color idioms are an indispensable part of the lexis of the oral speech of native speakers. At the same time, it represents the characteristics of its national culture. The studies on color idioms are of significance to idioms and culture. Via the study of color English idioms, the culture connotation in idioms can be deeply understood and the competence of intercultural communication can be greatly enhanced. Color idioms make a nation’s language more colorful. Color idioms are used vividly to convey rich figurative meanings as well as cultural connotations. Besides, they carry unique social customs and national features.

## **2. Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory**

As a famous American translation theorist and linguist, Eugene Nida has been honored as the “father of modern translation theory”. Functional Equivalence Theory, also well-known as Dynamic Equivalence, is an important part of Eugene Nida’s theories. Under this theory, Nida(1964) states that “no two languages are identical, either in the meanings given to corresponding symbols or in the ways in which symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages. Hence, there can be no fully exact translations.” In other words, since there are no such things as “identical equivalents” in translating, translators should try to find the “closest natural equivalent”.

### **2.1 Two Basic Orientations in Translating**

Nida identifies two basic orientations in translating based on two different types of equivalence: Formal Equivalence (F-E) and Dynamic Equivalence (D-E). F-E focuses on the message itself, in both form and content. The translator aims at reproducing the form and content of the original as literally and meaningfully as possible. By contrast, D-E aims at complete “naturalness” of expression. A D-E translation is directed mainly towards equivalence of response rather than equivalence of form (Hui Fan, 2018). Nida(1986) believes that the meaning is the most important, followed by the form.

### **2.2 Four Aspects of FET**

Under this theory, functional equivalence includes four aspects: lexical equivalence, syntactic equivalence, textual equivalence and stylistic equivalence. In terms of lexical equivalence, the meaning of a word lies in how it is used in the language. Syntactic equivalence is more complicated than lexical equivalence, for it deals with sentence structure and grammar, such as number, tense. Textual equivalence aims to achieve passage equivalence. Language is not the unique element to be considered. What matters most is how the language represents its meaning and performs its function in a specific context. With respect to the fourth aspect, different language styles represent different culture elements. Translators need good mastery of both source language and target language to achieve stylistic equivalence.

## **3. Translation of English Idioms from the Perspective of FET**

In Chinese translation of English idioms from the perspective of functional equivalence, translators aim at the equivalent language rather than the same language. In this sense, translators are requested to remember that the meaning of the original version is the most important thing for

idiom translation. According to Nida, all languages have their own unique forms, and behind the different forms of language are the common thoughts and emotions of human beings. Therefore, behind the transfer of meaning lies the transfer of human thoughts and emotions. At this level, “functional equivalence” can be achieved in the transfer of meaning. As far as color idioms are concerned, vivid color idioms highlight the cultural characteristics and differences between English and Chinese, and are often endowed with extended or metaphorical meanings other than color itself. Therefore, in the process of translating color idioms, we should not only accurately express the meaning of the original text, but also realize the influence of profound national cultural background on the language.

In translation practice, the following two methods may be adopted depending on the specific context.

### 3.1 Literal Translation

Nida once said that if a certain degree of translation corresponds to functional equivalence between referential and associative meaning, formal adjustment is obviously unnecessary. Nida refers to a translation that does not require adjustment of form, namely literal translation. Literal translation, also known as direct translation, is the rendering of text from one language to another “word-for-word” rather than conveying the sense of the original. The literal translation method is suitable for the corresponding color idioms in English and Chinese. Literal translation can not only retain the rhetoric and figurative images of the original text, but also retain their own language and national cultural colors, so that it is easy to understand each other’s culture without any difficulties in acceptance. The translation readers’ understanding of idioms is basically equivalent to that of the original readers, achieving functional equivalence.

Let’s have a look at some examples adopting formal corresponding, that is, literal translation method.

Take the color black as an example.

Most people are familiar with the idea behind Black Friday: It refers to the day after the Thanksgiving holiday when retailers discount the merchandise deeply to attract shoppers. That Friday is called Black Friday because it a symbol of a turning point for many retailers who’ve been operating “in-the-red” to get profit due to heavy sales on Black Friday. There is also a Chinese idiom for this day: hei se xing qi wu. They are completely correspondent.

Below are more idioms about colors can be translated adopting literal translation methods.

The phrase is in (down) black and white is an idiom that means to be written down. It completely equals Chinese idiom bai zhi hei zi.

Example:

My conditions to accept the job were in black and white in the contract.

The phrase green light is an idiom that means permission to go ahead with something such as a project, which equals Chinese idiom lv Deng.

Example:

As a result of the severe drought, the government has given the green light for importing cereals.

The phrase to run a red light is an idiom that means to continue driving through an intersection having a red traffic light without stopping. It corresponds to Chinese idiom chuang hong deng.

Example:

I was so late to work and to make matters worse I got a ticket for running a red light yesterday.

### 3.2 Free Translation

Due to the different ways of thinking and cultural backgrounds among different nationalities, most of the color idioms in the translation process cannot be completely corresponding. The implied meaning of the same color is different in two languages, and the implied meaning may be opposite. In this case, free translation method is suggested. A free translation is a translation that reproduces the general meaning of the original text. It may or may not closely follow the form or organization of the original. Free translation is adopted to convey the same connotative meaning, which also achieves the goal of equivalent translation pursued by Nida.

Here are some examples adopting free translation method.

Take the color red as the first example. The color red is often used in business to imply something unwanted is happening. For example, regulations governing businesses are often referred to as red tape (fan wen ru jie in Chinese). The idiom red ink is a euphemism for financial loss. It can be translated as chi zi, or kui sun in Chinese, which means deficit in English. Here's one sentence. There is too much red ink in the company's financial statement. The idiom a red-letter day refers to a particularly significant day, usually very positive, sometimes very negative. This idiom cannot be translated into hong xin ri. Otherwise, it is confusing for Chinese readers and easily leads to misunderstanding. The correct translation in Chinese is da xi ri zi or zhong yao ri zi. For example, Next Sunday is a red-letter day when they are going to be married.

Here are more examples using the free translation. In the sentence He was black and blue all over, the color black corresponds to qing in Chinese, and the color blue corresponds to Zi in Chinese. However, the Chinese character qing means green in English and the Chinese character zi means purple in English actually. The idiom be black and blue can be translated as qing yi kuai er, zi yi kuai er rather than hei yi kuai er, lan yi kuai er.

#### 4. Conclusion

Idioms make people's daily communication vivid and interesting. Color idioms are special parts of language, most of which have both literal and figurative meanings. From the analysis of translation of English color idioms from the perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory, it can be concluded that in terms of formal equivalence and content equivalence, while considering the literal meaning as much as possible, ethnic and cultural characteristics should also be considered. Both the literal translation and free translation are equally important methods in translating the color idioms. Only in this way can Nida's "functional equivalence" theory be realized, that is, the degree of translation recipient's understanding of translation is basically equal to that of original recipient's understanding of original text. Accurate and vivid translation of color idioms helps people understand a nation's culture, so as to better achieve the goal of intercultural communication.

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