

Challenges and Countermeasures in Cross-cultural Understanding of Contemporary Chinese Neologisms from the Perspective of International Chinese Language Education

Ming Zhao¹

¹ School of International Education, Nanning Normal University, Nanning 530001, China

¹Corresponding author. Email: zhaoming528@126.com

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Chinese neologisms, characterized by temporal sensitivity and cultural load, effectively reflect the dynamic social changes and linguistic evolution of China. In the field of International Chinese Language Education, learners encounter three major challenges in cross-cultural understanding of these neologisms: semantic, pragmatic, and cognitive. The deeper causes of these challenges include asymmetries in Sino-Western translation and communication, obstacles in cross-cultural understanding of conceptual metaphors, and the high-context cultural nature of Chinese conceptual semantics. To effectively enhance Chinese learners' cross-cultural understanding of neologisms, this paper proposes countermeasures from two perspectives: translation and communication. In terms of translation strategies, audience-centeredness and discourse construction should be adhered to; in terms of communication pathways, multi-layered narratives and two-way interaction should be promoted.

Keywords: *International Chinese language education; Contemporary Chinese neologisms; Cross-cultural understanding; Translation; Communication.*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed that the contemporary Chinese period began with the reform and opening up [1]. In this paper, contemporary Chinese neologisms refer primarily to new words, new meanings, and new usages (including old words with new meanings) that have emerged since the reform and opening up, especially in the 21st century, reflecting changes in social life and the dynamic process of language development. As a language product of the rapid development of Chinese society, these neologisms, with their temporal sensitivity and cultural load, constitute an important window for observing the socio-cultural landscape of contemporary China. New words such as "neijuan"(involution), "tangping"(lying flat), "foxi"(Buddhist-style), and "xin zhi sheng chan li"(new productivity) are not only the innovation of language expression, but also the epitome of social mentality, value concepts, and cultural identity.

With the continuous expansion of the global community of Chinese learners and the diversified development of learning needs, learners are increasingly exposed to contemporary Chinese neologisms, yet they often encounter difficulties in cross-cultural understanding. Compared with the flourishing research on neologisms as linguistic phenomena, the study of neologisms in Chinese international education remains marginalized [2]. Further investigation reveals that existing research mostly focuses on the ontological description of neologisms or the discussion of individual translation methods, with few studies addressing the cross-cultural understanding of contemporary neologisms from the perspective of International Chinese Language Education.

This paper attempts to start from the discipline of International Chinese Language Education, taking the exchange of cultural concepts in translation and communication as a guiding thread, to systematically analyze the challenges and their

causes in the cross-cultural understanding of contemporary Chinese neologisms. On this basis, it proposes actionable countermeasures and suggestions, aiming to provide theoretical references for International Chinese Language Education and teaching and cross-cultural communication practices.

2. MULTIPLE CHALLENGES IN THE CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE NEOLOGISMS

The cross-cultural understanding of contemporary Chinese neologisms is not a simple matter of vocabulary definition. It involves equivalent transformation of meaning, contextual adaptation in pragmatics, and deep alignment of cognitive frameworks, presenting multiple challenges.

2.1 Semantic and Cultural Vacancy Leading to Misunderstanding

Vacancy denotes "blankness" "nonexistence" or "absence" — a linguistic or cultural phenomenon referring primarily to linguistic units present in one language but absent in another, or to things, features, and phenomena present in one culture but not in another [3]. Semantic and cultural vacancy constitute the most intuitive and fundamental challenge in cross-cultural understanding of neologisms. Many Chinese neologisms arise from China's unique social system, cultural traditions, and lived practices, their semantic connotations deeply rooted in local cultural soil.

For example, "neijuan" (involution) originally derived from American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's description of agricultural societies. Through creative use by Chinese netizens, it gradually evolved meanings such as "irrational internal competition" and "meaningless excessive consumption". Although "involution" can serve as a literal translation in English, native English speakers would find it difficult to associate it with specific social situations such as "intensifying educational competition" or "overtime work culture in the workplace", let alone grasp the implied emotional nuances of helplessness and anxiety. Similarly, "zheng neng liang" (positive energy) blends the traditional Chinese concept of "zheng qi"(righteous energy) with the positive orientation

of contemporary political discourse, experiencing significant meaning loss in cross-cultural transfer.

The existence of semantic and cultural vacancy means that even if Chinese learners grasp the literal definition of a neologism, they may not truly understand its cultural connotations and contextual usage, leading to deviations in understanding. One study found that when translating popular Chinese neologisms into foreign languages, for words with large cultural vacancy between source and target languages, retention strategies are preferable to preserve the integrity of cultural information [4].

2.2 Pragmatic Differences Leading to Misinterpretation of Intent

The pragmatic functions of contemporary Chinese neologisms often carry rich evaluative stances, emotional attitudes, and communicative intentions, which are highly prone to distortion in cross-cultural transmission, resulting in misinterpretation of intent.

Many Chinese neologisms have distinct ironic or self-mocking undertones, creating a tension between literal and intended meanings. "Dagong ren"(literally "laborer") on the surface refers to office workers, but actually embodies a complex blend of class consciousness and life insights. "Fan'ersai"(Versailles) literally refers to a French palace, but as a neologism, it means "to show off in a low-key manner", requiring the reader to recognize its performative and ironic nature. Understanding such neologisms heavily depends on shared socio-cultural context and accurate grasp of the speaker's communicative intention; learners lacking these conditions are prone to misinterpret them as ordinary neutral expressions.

These pragmatic differences are also reflected in distinct modes of discursive construction. Chinese neologisms often encapsulate social commentary in highly condensed rhetorical devices, such as "jiao lü"(homophone for "anxiety", using humor to alleviate pressure) and "po fang"(originally a gaming term, extended to mean "emotional breakdown"). Their rhetorical effects rely not only on the phonological features and word-formation logic of Chinese but also on the unique humor paradigm within Chinese internet culture. From the perspective of pragmatic equivalence, studies have pointed out that effective English translation needs to achieve the coordination of context adaptation and intention transmission. Translators should reconstruct the target language context through

cultural substitution, contextual supplementation, and image adjustment, and ensure that original evaluative and emotional intentions are conveyed via speech act and communicative function [5]. However, in actual communication, such pragmatic equivalence is often difficult to achieve fully, making discursive construction differences a significant source of misinterpretation.

2.3 Cognitive Framework Differences Leading to Value Distortion

Cognitive linguistics research indicates that human understanding of the world relies on specific cognitive frameworks, and different cultural traditions shape different framework systems. When the cognitive framework implied in a Chinese neologism conflicts with the corresponding framework in the learner's native culture, value distortion can easily occur.

Take "hexie" (harmony) as an example. In Chinese culture, it is a multidimensional concept encompassing natural order, social ideals, and personal cultivation. In contrast, "harmony" in English focuses more on musical coordination or interpersonal rapport; the two cognitive frameworks do not fully overlap. Even more typical are neologisms related to "collectivism", such as "da ju yi shi"(awareness of the larger picture) and "mingyun gongtong ti"(community with a shared future). Their usage in the Chinese context often presupposes a cognitive premise of dialectical unity between individual and collective interests. Yet, in the Western individualistic cultural tradition, "collective" is easily associated with a negative frame of "restricting individual freedom", leading to value distortion.

Examining the phenomenon of cognitive blockage in the process of semantic borrowing between Chinese and foreign languages from the perspective of language contact, some scholars point out that cultural and affective meanings attached to vocabulary may experience cross-linguistic semantic blockage during transfer, due to differences in cultural backgrounds or unclear emotional meanings of words [6]. This finding reveals the linguistic mechanism behind cognitive framework differences. In the international communication of Chinese neologisms related to political concepts and development paths (e.g., "gongtong fuyu" (common prosperity), "quan guocheng renmin minzhu" (whole-process people's democracy)), ideological divergence often amplifies cognitive framework differences, further

intensifying the difficulty of cross-cultural understanding. After entering Western discourse, such terms are frequently incorporated into an authoritarian narrative model with preset negative attitudes, obscuring and distorting their original policy intentions and livelihood orientation.

3. CAUSES OF THE CHALLENGES IN CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE NEOLOGISMS

The emergence of the above challenges is not accidental. Behind them lie long-term structural factors in the pattern of Sino-Western translation and communication, universal regularities in the mechanisms of language cognition, and the high-context cultural characteristics of Chinese conceptual semantics. Scientifically revealing these deeper causes is a logical prerequisite for addressing the challenges and constructing countermeasures.

3.1 Asymmetry in Sino-Western Translation and Communication

Viewed from a macro-historical perspective, translation and communication between Chinese and Western languages have long been characterized by asymmetry. This asymmetry is particularly evident in the domain of lexical translation. English occupies an absolutely dominant position in Chinese-English lexical translation and information exchange. The number of Chinese loanwords entering English is not only small, but also the proportion of words with negative information is very high. The sounds, forms, and meanings of Chinese loanwords are highly non-standardized, which to some extent reflects the attitude and value orientation of the English-speaking world when absorbing Chinese words [7]. This unequal cultural flow has dual consequences: on the one hand, Western audiences lack sufficient cognitive reserve regarding Chinese cultural concepts, and their cultural schemas lack the background knowledge needed to process Chinese neologisms; on the other hand, when translating and introducing Chinese neologisms, some Western media selectively highlight their exotic or controversial aspects, reinforcing stereotypes in cross-cultural understanding.

Beyond the quantitative asymmetry in vocabulary flow, asymmetry also exists in

translation standards and discourse power. In the process of English translation of contemporary Chinese neologisms, the establishment of specific translations is often constrained by the agenda-setting of English-language media, while the translations actively provided by Chinese parties have limited dissemination. This unbalanced situation has long kept Chinese neologisms in a state of "being defined", making it difficult to acquire an autonomous position of expression in international discourse space. The pragmatic conventions and cognitive set patterns thus formed further increase the difficulty of cross-cultural understanding.

3.2 *Obstacles to Cross-cultural Understanding of Conceptual Metaphors*

From a cognitive perspective, the semantic construction of neologisms often relies on conceptual metaphors, which are significantly culture-specific. Conceptual metaphor theory in cognitive linguistics holds that humans tend to understand abstract, unfamiliar conceptual domains through concrete, familiar domains of experience. This cross-domain mapping constitutes the cognitive basis for many new word meanings. However, different cultures differ in their selection of source domains and mapping methods, thereby creating obstacles for the cross-cultural understanding of contemporary Chinese neologisms.

When Chinese learners lack the cultural source domain knowledge required to construct a given metaphor, literal translation fails to activate the intended semantic associations, and understanding remains superficial and incomplete. Take the Chinese term "tangping" (lying flat) as an example. This word uses the physical posture of "body lying flat" to metaphorize the social mentality of "abandoning excessive competition and pursuing a low-desire life". To understand this metaphorical logic, one needs to be aware of the public discussion in recent years about "excessive involution" in Chinese society; otherwise, cross-cultural understanding obstacles at the level of conceptual metaphor arise.

3.3 *High-context Cultural Characteristics of Chinese Conceptual Semantics*

Chinese culture belongs to a high-context cultural type, where the transmission of communicative information relies heavily on

context rather than explicit linguistic encoding. This cultural characteristic is particularly evident in the meaning construction of contemporary Chinese neologisms. The meanings of many neologisms are not generated through dictionary definition pathways but rather coalesce gradually through interactions around specific social events, internet incidents, or public discussions. Their conceptual semantics exhibit notable context-dependence and dynamic evolution.

For example, "chigua qunzhong"(onlookers, literally "melon-eating masses") — without understanding the entertainment-oriented context of "spectating" and "watching the excitement" in Chinese internet culture, it is difficult to grasp its meaning accurately. Similarly, "hou lang"(rear waves) — if divorced from the Bilibili speech video "Rear Waves" and the subsequent intergenerational discussions it triggered, it is challenging to convey its complex, ambivalent semantics. Such context-dependent neologisms face a double difficulty in cross-cultural understanding: first, the context is hard to reconstruct — it is difficult to transfer the complete socio-cultural context behind the words into the target language through translation and teaching; second, semantics are dynamic — the boundaries of meaning of neologisms are often unclear, presenting different semantic facets in different contexts, which complicates accurate understanding for learners.

4. SOLUTIONS IN THE TRANSLATION AND COMMUNICATION OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE NEOLOGISMS

In view of the above challenges and their causes, in order to better improve the effect of cross-cultural understanding of contemporary Chinese neologisms, it is necessary to build solutions from the two dimensions of translation strategies and communication paths.

4.1 *Translation Strategies: Adhering to Audience-centeredness and Discourse Construction*

The translation of contemporary Chinese neologisms should not blindly pursue formal word-for-word correspondence. The key is to make them understandable and accurately comprehensible to target language audiences. "Audience-centeredness" means adjusting translation methods

based on the cognitive characteristics, reading habits, and cultural expectations of the target population, striving for a balance among semantic, pragmatic, and cultural levels. In practical operation, for neologisms with large cultural vacancy and almost no corresponding concepts in the target language, source-oriented strategies are appropriate — using transliteration or literal translation with annotations to preserve source-language cultural information while supplementing background knowledge through annotations. For neologisms with smaller cultural vacancy where partial correspondences can be found in the target language, target-oriented strategies can be flexibly adopted — using free translation or adaptation to find the closest possible expression within the target language's cognitive framework. Moreover, different communication scenarios call for different emphases: academic translation prioritizes accuracy, media translation balances readability with communication effectiveness, and pedagogical translation emphasizes layered and accessible explication on the basis of accuracy.

The optimal translation strategies for Contemporary Chinese neologisms are not only technical activities, but also related to the active shaping of Chinese discourse power. Translation should not always follow the norms of the target language passively, but also promote the target language audience to gradually expand their cognitive schema, so as to better accept the concepts and expressions in Chinese culture. Successful examples have emerged in recent years, such as "taikonaut" (Chinese astronaut) being formally included in English dictionaries, and "gelivable" (from Chinese "geili", meaning "awesome" or "empowering") once entering English internet slang as a cultural phenomenon. This shows that successful translation is itself a form of cross-cultural construction.

4.2 Communication Pathways: Advancing Multi-layered Narratives and Two-Way Interaction

The international communication of contemporary Chinese neologisms cannot rely solely on traditional pathways of external publicity translation. It should integrate multi-layered narratives to form a three-dimensional communication landscape. "Multi-layered narratives" refer to situating the communication of neologisms across macro, meso, and micro levels, so that audiences from different cultural

backgrounds can find entry points for understanding at different cognitive levels. At the macro level, neologisms should be contextualized within national development strategies and policy discourses, clearly explaining the historical background and developmental logic that produced them, helping audiences build a macro framework for understanding. For instance, "gongtong fuyu" (common prosperity) needs to be communicated alongside macro content such as poverty alleviation achievements and coordinated regional development, presenting both institutional logic and concrete policy facts. At the meso level, the focus should be on in-depth interpretation of socio-cultural phenomena through formats such as long-form journalism, documentaries, and cultural commentary, presenting the rich social dimensions behind neologisms and providing sufficient situational information for semantic construction. At the micro level, the personal experiences and emotional stories of ordinary Chinese people can be leveraged to showcase, from an individual perspective, the social sentiments and life experiences condensed in neologisms.

Contemporary mobile social media provide unprecedented conditions for the multi-channel, real-time dissemination of Chinese neologisms. The popularity of expressions like "City bu City" (a Chinese-English hybrid meaning "stylish or not") can be attributed to the fact that Chinese and foreign netizens collectively participated in meaning negotiation and cultural empathy on social media. This indicates that the international communication of neologisms should make good use of new media forms such as short videos and social interaction, transforming one-way broadcasting into two-way dialogue and interaction, turning foreign audiences from passive recipients into active participants.

5. CONCLUSION

The cross-cultural understanding of contemporary Chinese neologisms is both a practical challenge in International Chinese Language Education and a theoretical issue in the study of linguistic and cultural international communication. From the disciplinary perspective of International Chinese Language Education, this paper systematically reveals three major challenges in the cross-cultural understanding of neologisms: semantic and cultural vacancy leading to misunderstanding, pragmatic differences leading to misinterpretation of intent, and cognitive

framework differences leading to value distortion. The deeper causes of these challenges include structural factors such as the unequal cultural flow in the Sino-Western translation and communication landscape, as well as obstacles in cross-cultural conceptual metaphors and the high-context cultural characteristics of the Chinese language. In response to these issues, to enhance the effectiveness of cross-cultural understanding of neologisms, this paper proposes countermeasures from two dimensions: translation and communication — adhering to both audience-centeredness and discourse construction in translation, and promoting both multi-layered narratives and two-way interaction in communication.

In the future, the research in this area can be further developed in the following directions: first, strengthening empirical research on the effectiveness of cross-cultural understanding of contemporary Chinese neologisms through methods such as questionnaires and in-depth interviews, providing a scientific basis for the precise implementation of teaching strategies in International Chinese Language Education; second, paying attention to the application potential of artificial intelligence technologies, especially large language models, in the translation and explanation of neologisms, exploring new pathways for technology-enabled cross-cultural understanding; third, expanding the research perspective from the English-speaking world to multilingual and multi-centric contexts, enriching the comparative dimensions of cross-cultural understanding of neologisms.

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