

A Contrastive Analysis of Chinese and English Pet Phrases from the Perspective of Sociolinguistics

Wu Jinrui and Tian Jianguo

Abstract—As terms that do not have practical meaning but can fully express the speaker's emotion and attitude, pet phrases are widely used in our daily life. While it is hard for us to realize its important role in communication due to its frequent use. As two distinct languages, pet phrases in Chinese and English have quite diverse origins. Therefore, this article will take several typical characteristics as examples and attempt to analyze the differences between Chinese and English in the use of pet phrases and the main causes of such distinctions from the perspective of sociolinguistics. The purpose of this study is to eliminate misunderstandings caused by the pet phrases between Chinese and English speakers so that both sides will gain some insights into each other's culture, avoid pragmatic failure and achieve the goal of cross-cultural communication.

Index Terms—Cross-cultural communication, pet phrases, sociolinguistic.

I. INTRODUCTION

Pet phrases originally refer to the Buddhist language, which relate to the Zen theory, and it only takes some common words of Zen monks as the embellishment of conversation. In modern China, the pet phrases were endowed with some new meaning at that time, the use of these words in many literary works had obviously gone beyond the Zen theory of Buddhism. For example, Lu Xun once wrote "Fang Xuanfu has always said 'almost' recently, which has nearly become a 'Pet Phrase'." in *Call to Arms*; the similar use also appeared in Chapter 39 of *Moment in Peking*, "At that time, democracy, fascism and communism gradually became the pet phrase of scholars." [1]. From these two cases, it is not difficult to find that the "pet phrases" had been mainly used to refer to words that are usually blurted out but have no practical meaning, and this characteristic still exists today. While "pet phrase" is also a kind of universal language phenomenon in English-speaking countries, but the usage of pet phrases is diverse as the difference in the history and culture background between Chinese and the West. Therefore, it is important to explore the characteristics and differences in pet phrases between these two languages. That is how we can promote the cross-cultural communication.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a lot of studies about pet phrase in China, and the research is mainly focus on the social, educational and political fields. Yu Yunhua's research on pet phrase has been

relatively comprehensive and systematic in China. In his opinion, there are two kind of pet phrase, one is regarded as "using the common words of Zen as an ornament of conversation", which is limited to religious fields such as Buddhism; the other is a kind of slang or idiom which is often used in daily informal speech communication [2]. Ma Guoyan took "then" and "but" as examples, and used rhetoric methods to discuss the relations between discourse markers and pet phrases. In the research, he pointed out that "pet phrases are the realization of discourse markers. It is the result of the further grammaticalization of the discourse markers driven by rhetoric intention, with the synergism of the cognitive-psychic mechanism and the language mechanism." What's more? Ma believed these two types have the common characteristics of high frequency repetition, semantic reduction and psychological representation, he further revealed the reasons for the occurrence of pet phrases from the aspects of social culture and psychological cognition [3]. Similar to the above opinions, Li Jie divided pet phrases into two categories: grammatical pet phrases and pragmatic pet phrases according to the relationship between semantics, grammar and pragmatics, at the same time, he pointed out that these two kinds have different language functions, expression forms, operating mechanisms and syntactic features [4].

As mentioned above, pet phrases own a strong relationship with Buddhism, therefore, the history of its emergence and development has a strong Chinese characteristic. As a result, there are no equivalent words or phrases in English completely. Up to now, there are numerous translation versions of "pet phrases" in English, such as cant, cliché, byword, shibboleth, theme song, tag line, pet phrase, stock phrase, conventional expression, common saying, etc., among them, "pet phrase" is the closest one, which means an informal term for an expression frequently used by an individual in speech or writing.

Although there is not a standard term in English, foreign linguists have long been concerned about the pet phrases in verbal communication. In the 1950s, Randolph Quirk, an American linguist, pointed out there are some recurrent expressions in daily conversation, such as "you know", "well", "you see" and so on, he defined them as "modifier", and said these modifiers fail to convey any actual information and do not act as grammatical elements in sentences, but they frequently appear in dramatic dialogues and people's daily communication. Therefore, Quirk believed these frequently used words have important research value [5]. While Newman expressed his concern about the overuse of "you know" in daily communication in his research, he summed up the reasons for this phenomenon in two aspects: one is that when people don't know what to say in conversation, they

Manuscript received October 27, 2021; revised December 27, 2021.

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would use “you know” to muddle through; the other reason is caused by the history of its emergence. At the beginning pet phrases were widely used by African Americans, who have low status, poor education level and lack of expression ability. The purpose of using “you know” in a conversation is to make listener understand more easily [6]. From the perspective of relevance theory, Jucker made an investigation and pragmatic analysis of “well”, he found out this pet phrase can be used as a marker of insufficiency, face-threat mitigator, frame marker and delay device [7]. Macaulay discussed the influencing factors of the generation of “you know” from the perspective of sociolinguistics, and analyzed the influence from gender, age, social class and other factors on the frequency and location of “you know” through quantitative statistics [8].

Through these existing studies we found that the researches about pet phrases are relatively rare, and many of the results is now out of date. What’s more, a large number of comparative studies on Chinese and English pet phrases urge to be conducted, that’s because the analysis of the use of pet phrases plays an important role to deepen the understanding between East and West and promote the exchange.

III. MISCOMMUNICATION CAUSED BY EASTERN AND WESTERN PET PHRASES

Chinese belongs to Sino-Tibetan language family while English belongs to Indo-European language family, therefore, there are great differences between them. Pet phrases, which used widely in daily life, can better reflect the differences between Chinese and English, while due to its frequent use, we usually ignore its existence, and this neglect will lead to miscommunication.

Some Chinese people would like to say “那个 (na ge)” subconsciously when they are nervous, as time goes by, this word has become a pet phrase of them. Yue Yao believed that “那个” has one basic function, to help identify the signified, and three extended functions, including introducing the topic, listing the enumeration and filling dialogue pause. Among them, the function of filling dialogue pause is most frequently used [9]. However, “那个” has a similar pronunciation to “nigger” in English, which is a derogatory term used to insult African-American, hence the two sides of the conversation may have a dispute due to mis-communication.

Swearwords, as a kind of pet phrases, are often used in people’s daily dialogue. As a special language phenomenon, this kind of phrases are not mainly used to convey information, but to express emotions, such as, love, hatred, happiness, anger, sadness and happiness. Among men who have a good relationship with each other, they often use swearwords to carry out dialogue. What’s more, they often use them as pet phrases in their daily life. Among those phrases, the most frequently used one is “他妈的 (ta ma de)” [10]. When Yao Min played basketball in NBA as a rookie, he was more used to speaking Chinese on the court. Whenever he scored a goal, “他妈的” would blurt out from his mouth to express his joy and excitement. While for his teammates who didn’t know Chinese heard this phrase, they would refer it to the word “tomato” with similar pronunciation, which confused many foreigners, why does Yao always talk about

“tomato” in celebration.

From the above examples, it is not difficult to find that the pet phrases which are ignored by us play an important role in cross-cultural communication. The differences in the use of pet phrases caused by language barrier will also lead to miscommunication. Therefore, the author believes that it is necessary to make a comparative analysis of the differences between Eastern and Western pet phrases.

IV. DIFFERENT CHARACTERISTICS OF EASTERN AND WESTERN PET PHRASES

Pet phrases, as a kind of special linguistic phenomenon in today’s society, play an important role in sociolinguistic study. People use different phrases in different occasions. The use of the phrases can not only reflect the identity, age and character of the speakers, which also contain some extra-verbal meanings. Out of the speaker’s psychology, values and social outlook, many other differences still exist in the use of the pet phrases between East and West, which including religion, region, occupation and gender.

A. Religious Characteristics

Religion is a social, historical and cultural phenomenon with the widest distribution, the longest duration and the deepest influence. Language, as the carrier of culture, is closely related to religion. Therefore, it is not surprising to use some terms about religion as pet phrases in both English and Chinese.

Most people in the West believe in Christianity, so in their view, God is their idol. Everything in the world is created by God. All matters in the world are arranged by God’s will. Christians regard “God” as the lord of the world. Therefore, in English, “God” or “Jesus” is always used by people. And there are many kinds of related pet phrases, such as: “Oh My God”, “Oh Dear God”, “My Goddess”, and “Jesus Christ”, which are widely used in daily communication. Among them, “God”, “My God”, “Oh My God!”, “Jesus!” and “Christ!” are often used by English-speakers to express surprise, fear or excitement; the use of “(May) God bless you!” shows blessing to others, which frequently heard after people sneeze and is regarded as a blessing to dispel the ill omen; “God damn!” and “God damn you” used for curse; “by God” has a similar meaning to “苍天在上” in Chinese, using in swearing to show sincerity; “Please God” expresses a strong desire; “God know” emphasizes that the answer is unknown and difficult to figure out.

There is Christianity in the West while Buddhism and Taoism in the East, many Buddhist and Taoist terms have been widely used in Chinese, some of them appear frequently in people’s daily life, and then evolve into a kind of pet phrases. “天” in Chinese plays a similar role as “God” in English in the pet phrases. “我的天”, “我的天哪”, “我的天爷” and “老天爷” can be heard frequently in Chinese dialogue; words with strong Buddhist characteristics like “阿弥陀佛” and “菩萨保佑” are usually convey the meaning of gratitude, confession, praise or blessing.

B. Regional Characteristics

Dialect is considered as a language means to express

strong feelings. Due to the influence of regional language and culture, pet phrases also show slight regional differences. This regional difference is particularly prominent in Chinese. Residents living in Northeast China often use the pet phrase, “哎呀妈呀”, when they are chatting. As a common pet phrase in the northeast dialect, it is an extended form of “哎呀”, which usually be used to exclaim that things are unexpected or surprised, and can also express such emotions as fright, panic as well as fear [11]. In addition, pet phrases like “拉倒吧”, “必须的”, “啥玩意儿” and “二大爷” are also very popular among people living in Northeast China. The frequent use of “老子” in the pet phrases of Sichuan and Chongqing, which contains three usages: The self-claim of the speaker shows his strong conceit in conversation; in the name of listener’s father to show the speaker’s anger or contempt and insult to the listener; use this word as a synonym for “I”, and blurt it out in daily life regardless of the situation. Moreover, “你知道吧” seems to be a favorite pet phrase of people who live in Beijing, which reveals the unconscious superiority and the arrogance of residents living in the capital. Cantonese’s “有没有搞错” which shows a little bit of skepticism. “不好意思” and “拜托” of the Taiwanese reflect their inherent contradiction between uneasiness and elegant. Besides, some pet phrases with dialect features are becoming popular in other parts of China because of the mass migration movements and the popularization of the internet. Of course, this regional feature also exists in English speaking countries. For example, “boy”, which is used to express excitement, annoyance or disappointment, is mostly used in American; “hey”, “bosh” and “chop chop”, which means hurry up, are mostly used in British; and “eh” is mainly used in Canadian.

C. Occupational Characteristic

Occupation is one of the important factors affecting language use. There are also remain significant differences in the use of pet phrases among different occupations. With the continuous refinement of social division of labor, the occupational differentiation is becoming bigger and bigger. As the result, There are wide variations in the way of thinking, cognitive characteristics, psychological mechanism and other aspects of the groups engaged in different occupations, and these differences is also reflected on their speech acts, which makes people of different occupations have unique rules of diction and sentence making. For example, among the people engaged in a common occupation, because they have the same or close professional knowledge background and familiar discussion topics, their discourse communication usually presents some distinctive professional language features [12]. This feature is also reflected in their use of pet phrases.

“Ahoy” is a professional pet phrase unique to British and American sailor. This phrase, in fact, is a simulation of shouting. Due to the characteristics of the crew working at sea, it is necessary to have a loud voice and spread it far away so that people can hear it and pay attention. It is economical and can replace a syntactic structure to produce a concise and comprehensive effect. Besides, the common pet phrase in American English, such as “whoa”, were originally used by American cowboys to slow down their horses. The most

well-known one in English pet phrase may be “copy that” and “roger that”, which are derived from one of the most commonly used wireless terms in the US military. And now, they are also used in daily life to express the meaning of “received”, meanwhile “got it” also contains the meaning of understanding. It is important to note that “Copy that” and “Roger that” are generally subordinate’s response to the superior, but “got it” is relatively casual and does not pay much attention to the identity of the interlocutors.

In Chinese, “痛不痛”, “疼不疼” and “哪里不舒服”, which are used by doctor when he inquiries about the patient’s condition; “对不对”, “懂不懂” and “是不是”, can be heard when teacher want to learn about students’ study situation; when businessmen are talking to each other, we often heard “赚不赚” and “亏不亏”. Such pet phrases have obvious label of industry discourse, which has become the subjective basis for people to judge different occupations or identities in society.

D. Gender Characteristics

Gender, as a very important social factor, has been widely researched in the academic field. There are also significant differences in language use between men and women. Men and women are believed to use different words and belong to different worlds [13]. Maltz and Borker also pointed out that men and women have different social subcultural circles, so they carry out communication according to the rules of their own gender [14]. This cross-cultural difference makes men and women have different speech characteristics. As a common phenomenon in verbal communication, pet phrases would be used differently by men and women.

Previous studies on gender differences in language show that men are more inclined to use language variants that social disagrees in verbal communication, while women are more conventional, and they tend to use language variants that are widely accepted. Although the educational level and social status of women is generally lower than that of men, the language forms used by women are closer to the standard language with higher authority [15]. As an abnormal form of language expression, pet phrases are often attached to the speaker’s output discourse. They have the characteristics of high frequency recurrence, semantic expression dilution, weakening and generalization. Besides, they are far from the standard forms which are generally accepted by the society and expression, the standard forms are considered to be authoritative and normative, while pet phrases have always been regarded as a meaningless embellishment of language.

For women, they are more inclined to adhere to the principle of not saying pet phrases frequently, and adhere to the use of standard language forms in daily life; Men, on the other hand, have a strong rebellious spirit. In the use of language, men tend to challenge the authority of traditional forms of expression, meanwhile they usually have a distinct orientation of seeking innovation and change. Therefore, they have no taboo to use the pet phrases which have been denounced in communication. Secondly, compared with men, women are more cautious and calm in their words and deeds, they are more sensitive and self-conscious to their own speech acts, and they are better at controlling the output of catchwords; On the whole, men are more forthright and impatient, lacking a calm mind in daily communication, pet

phrases always slip out without thinking. Therefore, in Chinese, men often use “嗨! 嗨! 嘿!” which sound loud; women often use “呀! 嗨! 咦!” which sound soft. In English, “oh dear”, “dear me”, “my goodness” are used more by women to express surprise, admiration, impatience and sadness, while “O Lord”, “good Lord”, “good heavens”, “god damn it” which to express surprise and unhappiness are used more by men.

V. CONCLUSION

In the two different language systems of English and Chinese, their respective pet phrases have many similarities in structural, semantic and syntactic features. While there are also many differences in their phonetic and syntactic features. Understanding these differences will help us better understand the rules of the use of pet phrases in these two languages, further master their pragmatic connotation and promote the cross-culture communication. At the same time, we should also see the influence of cultural factors as well as the changes and development of the times on the pet phrases, so as to have a more comprehensive understanding of them, correctly understand their pragmatic connotation, and make us use pet phrases more accurately and appropriately.

Learning a language is not only to learn its vocabulary or grammar, but also to learn the culture factors behind different languages. Pet phrases as a form of expression that can fully reflect the characteristics of different nationalities play an important role in cross-culture communication. However, people usually regard them as useless nonsense or redundant information, which has been criticized in daily dialogue. Meanwhile, research in this field has not been given its due attention.

Therefore, based on the analysis of Eastern and Western religions, regions, occupations and gender, this paper discusses the acquisition and application of pet phrases in East and West. The authors hope to help the public understand pet phrases correctly, avoid pragmatic failure and facilitate cross-cultural communication in daily life.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This article was researched, analyzed and written by the authors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to thank to Professor Tian Jianguo in Northwestern Polytechnical University for his valuable commentary on the initial manuscript. Moreover, it was after learning Professor Tian's Sociolinguistics course that the author was inspired to write this article.

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