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硕 士 学 位 论 文

原型理论视角下的古汉语基本颜色词  
Prototypical Analysis of Basic Color Terms in Ancient  
Chinese

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## Abstract

Recently, an increasing number of people turn their attention to the inheritance and development of ancient Chinese culture. Some deputies that attend the National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference advocate that Beijing opera and traditional handicraft art should be taught at primary and secondary schools, which have been approved by authorities concerned. The thesis makes an analysis of the basic color terms in ancient Chinese, as an effort to play its due in the cause of revitalizing the brilliant Chinese culture.

Literature reviews on color terms suggest that the majority of the researches on ancient Chinese color terms are carried out by scholars majoring in Chinese and ancient Chinese. Scholars majoring in English conduct contrastive studies on the differences between Chinese color terms and English color terms, followed by the explorations of the reasons for those differences. As a consequence, few interdisciplinary researches are conducted on color terms in ancient Chinese. In other words, few researches on ancient Chinese color terms are carried out by English majors and English experts; likewise, few researches are conducted by Chinese philologists. For those reasons, the thesis tries to make up the gap by applying the prototype theory to the studies of the basic color terms in ancient Chinese. There are two reasons for the choice of prototype theory as the theoretical framework and the basic color terms in ancient Chinese as the research object: firstly, prototype is a new concept in cognitive science, which is in itself one of the most popular research projects during recent years. Therefore, the employment of prototype theory endows the thesis with a hint of novelty. Secondly, mandarin fever is spreading over the world nowadays. In addition, the more a society develops, the more eager people are to preserve the traditional culture. However, there are only a few detailed researches on ancient Chinese guided by prototype theory, let alone the color terms in the system. The conflict is prominent between the increasing demand of Chinese learning and the insufficiency in Chinese teaching as a second language. With the purpose of

alleviating the conflict, the thesis peers into ancient Chinese through prototype theory to see what academic sparks are evoked from the combination.

The thesis conducts researches on the basic color terms in ancient Chinese, taking as its theoretical framework the prototype theory by Rosch and the theory of basic color terms by Berlin & Kay. The thesis aims to verify the validity of prototype theory and the theory of basic color terms.

There are two points that need to be clarified, the first point is how the five basic color terms in ancient Chinese are determined and selected; the second point is what the defining features of prototype and basic color terms are.

As to the first issue, the selection of the five basic color terms is the result of combining the theory of basic color terms with the features of ancient Chinese. According to Berlin & Kay, there are a total number of eleven basic color terms in man languages, and they are distributed at seven stages of the evolutionary chain of basic color terms, which is shown in the following diagram: black/white→red→green/yellow→yellow/green→blue→brown→purple/orange/pink/grey. The more civilized a society, the larger the number of the basic color terms in a language. The evolution of basic color terms follows the order strictly. In other words, if a language has only two color terms, they must be black and white; if a language has three color terms, the third one must be red, and so forth. In addition, the selection of the five basic color terms can be traced back to the Theory of Five Elements in ancient China, which claims that the east is of cyan, the south is of red, the west is of white, the north is of black and the earth is of yellow. Therefore, it can be inferred that the five basic color terms in ancient Chinese are cyan, red, white, black and yellow. All of the color terms except cyan have their counterparts in the evolutionary chain mapped out by Berlin & Kay. Cyan denotes a color of what is analogous to blue, green and black in the color system of modern Chinese. Therefore, the five basic color terms in ancient Chinese follow the first five stages in the evolutionary chain of basic color terms, which is as same as what the first six color terms do in the model of Berlin & Kay.

As to the second issue, the thesis draws out four features concerning prototype

and basic color terms, based on the researches and reviews of previous studies. The four features are: firstly, the determination of basic color terms is not arbitrary, but motivated; secondly, the members of a color category are not equal; thirdly, the status of the members in a color category is not stable; fourthly, the boundary between color categories is fuzzy.

The thesis is defective in three aspects: firstly, the source of the data is not completely reliable; secondly, the paraphrases of ancient Chinese prose are subjective; thirdly, the perspective for analysis is not all-inclusive.

Therefore, it is hoped that subsequent researchers spare no effort to improve on those flaws. In other words, data should be collected from more reliable sources, which are analyzed with a more objective attitude and from a more complete perspective. Anyway, subsequent researchers are expected to furnish the extant theories on prototype and basic color terms.

**Key words:** prototype theory; basic color terms; ancient Chinese

## 摘要

近来,越来越多的人开始关注中国古代文化的继承和发扬,两会代表提出应在中小学中开设京剧和传统手工艺等课程,部分提案已经获得了相关部门的批准。然而,本文作者在检索有关颜色词的文献时发现,大多数对古汉语颜色词的研究来自汉语和古汉语专业的学者,英语专业的学者则将研究的重点放在中英颜色词的对比上,很少有人对颜色词进行交叉式的跨学科研究。本文利用 Rosch 的原型理论探究古汉语中的五大基本颜色词。选择这一课题的原因有两个:首先,原型理论是认知科学中一个相对较新的理论,而认知科学又是近年来备受关注的一门学科。因此,将原型理论作为论文的理论框架有助于突显论文的新意。其次,在当今社会,汉语热正在世界范围内蔓延,外国人学习汉语的热情越来越高;而且社会越进步,大家保护传统文化的意识越强。然而,利用原型理论对古汉语进行细致分析的例子却是少之又少。这就导致了对语言需求的增长和对外汉语教学机制的不健全之间的矛盾日益凸显。为了缓和这一矛盾,本文试图将古汉语和原型理论相结合,看看究竟能碰撞出怎样的火花。

本文主要运用 Rosch 的原型理论和 Berlin & Kay 的基本颜色词理论,对古代汉语五大基本颜色词进行了定性分析和对比分析,目的是证实原型和基本颜色词的典型特征同样体现在古汉语五大基本颜色词中。

两个问题需要先进行一下简单的说明。第一,古汉语中的基本颜色词是如何选择的;第二,典型特征是如何定义的。

就第一个问题而言,古汉语五大基本颜色词的选择是基本颜色词理论和古汉语特征相结合的产物。在 Berlin & Kay 看来,人类语言中共有 11 个基本颜色词,分别处于七个不同的阶段,公式表明如下:黑/白→红→绿/黄→黄/绿→蓝→褐→紫/橘/粉/灰。社会的文明程度越高,其语言中基本颜色词的数量就越多。基本颜色词的进化严格遵守以上顺序,但凡有颜色词的语言必有黑白两种颜色;而如果一种语言有三个基本颜色词,那么第三个颜色词一定是红色。中国古代五行金木水火土衍生了五色红白黄黑青,即古汉语五大基本颜色词。赤、白、黑、黄分别和上述模型中的红、白、黑、黄对应,而青的释义则涵盖了现代汉语中的蓝、绿、黑三色。因此,古代汉语五大基本颜色词和上述模型中的前六个基本颜色词

一样对应颜色词发展的最初五个阶段。

关于第二个问题，本文在案例分析的基础上并结合前人的研究成果，得出了四个结论。第一，基本颜色词的选取不是随意的，而是有理据的；第二，同一范畴内部的成员，其地位并不相同，有中心与边缘之分；第三，范畴内各成员的地位并非一成不变；第四，范畴的边界是模糊的。

当然，本文也有其局限性，主要表现在三个方面：第一，数据的来源不完全可靠、科学；第二，对古汉语词句的翻译存在很大的主观性；第三，分析的角度不够全面。希望随后的科研能进一步完善研究方法，使结论更有说服力。

**关键词：**原型理论 基本颜色词 古汉语



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## Chapter One Introduction

### 1.1 Object of the study

The thesis takes as its object the five basic color terms in ancient Chinese—cyan, red, white, black and yellow. There is not a word-to-word relationship between Chinese color terms and English color terms, because the grammatical rules of the two languages are different, Chinese is a paratactic language and English is a grammatical language. Red has several counterparts in ancient Chinese, such as 朱(zhu, bright red), 赤(chi, the color of fire), 丹(dan, vermilion), 彤(tong, red), 紫(zi, color mixture of blue and red) and 红(hong, pink). According to the shades of redness, the six color words rank as follows: 朱(zhu, bright red), 赤(chi, the color of fire), 红(hong, pink), 丹(dan, vermilion), 彤(tong, red) and 紫(zi, color mixture of blue and red), with 朱(zhu, bright red) denoting the deepest redness and 紫(zi, color mixture of blue and red) denoting the lightest redness. In order to include all the members carrying the attribute of red, the group headed by red is given the name of redness.

Likewise, black has several counterparts in ancient Chinese, such as: 黝(you, swart), 黑(hei, black), 玄(xuan, dark black), 乌(wu, pitch black), 焦(jiao, burned black), 铁(tie, iron black), 皂(zao, soap black), 青(qing, blue black) and 苍(cang, verdant black). For the purpose of including all the members carrying the attribute of black, the group headed by black is given the name of blackness.

It is the same with white whose counterparts in ancient Chinese include 白(bai, white), 素(su, the color of kiginu), 银(yin, silver), 纨(wan, the color of white gauze), 縞(gao, the color of white stripe), 玉(yu, the color of white jade), 冰(bing, the color of ice), 雪(xue, the color of white snow), 霜(shuang, the color of frost) and 鹤(he, the color of white crane). For the sake of including all the members carrying the attribute of white, the group headed by white is given the name of whiteness.

The same illustration is applicable to cyan, which has three counterparts—藍(lan, blue), 黑(hei, black) and 绿(lv, green) in Chinese. The slight differences between cyan and the other four color terms which are mentioned above are that the counterparts of cyan are readily expressed in English, while the word cyan is transliterated. The reason is that the three counterparts of cyan are common color terms in modern Chinese, while most of the counterparts of red, white and black in ancient Chinese are not common color terms in modern Chinese.

However, things are different to yellow. There is only one counterpart for yellow in ancient Chinese—黄(huang, yellow). Therefore, there is neither such a group as headed by yellow nor the category of yellowness. The focus of the section is the comparison of the denotations of yellow in ancient Chinese and in modern Chinese, as well as the prototypical analysis of the denotation transitions.

## 1.2 Rationale of the study

On the discrepancies between category and categorization, examples of vegetable and fruit given by Croft & Cruse(2004: 78) are cited to show what category is and what categorization is. The conclusion is that categorization is the process of classifying the objects in nature and man's mind, and category is the final result of the process.

On the significance of differentiating category and categorization, Croft & Cruse(2004: 74) are cited again. According to them, the functions of categorization may be summarized in the following four words: learning, planning, communication and economy. Besides, Lakoff(1987) is cited to strengthen the significance of differentiating the two terms, according to Lakoff(1987): "There is nothing more basic than categorization to our thought, perception, action and speech."

On the classical model of category, Aristotle(1936) is cited to illustrate how category is determined. According to Aristotle(1936), category is jointly defined by necessary and sufficient features. The term necessary means that "no entity that does not possess the full set is a member of the category", and the term sufficient means that "in possession of all the features guarantees membership".



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