

English-Chinese Oppositional Collocations: A Social-Semiotic Perspective

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Abstract

Oppositional collocations, such as *dead nice* in English, or *shuai dai le* (handsome dumb *le*, ‘extremely handsome’) in Chinese, are expressions that use words with emotionally contradictory senses to achieve a single positive meaning. They are not just linguistic expressions or rhetorical devices, but signs that reflect the addresser’s identity and social position. Though between English and Chinese there are distinct differences in terms of formal features, distributive properties, and emotional impacts, the use of such collocations in both languages is often associated in the speaker’s mind with contexts characterized by a desire for informality and resistance to orthodoxy. Though the base of an oppositional collocation is the structurally controlling element for the whole expression, the collocater, represented as a degree adverb in English and degree complement in Chinese, is the emotionally controlling element, which not only reinforces the positive degree on the part of the base but, with some trace of negativity, takes the addresser away from formal or serious language. This essay investigates the phenomenon through a social-semiotic perspective derived from Halliday’s (1976) anti-language and anti-society theories and Halliday & Hasan’s (1976) register theory.

Keywords: oppositional collocation, anti-language, anti-society, register, context

1. Introduction

In both English and Chinese, there is a special kind of collocation in which a positive word and a negative word are used together to mean something positive, such as *damn cool, fucking good, terribly glad* in English, or *shuai dai le* (handsome dumb *le*, ‘extremely handsome’), *ku bi le* (cool kill *le*, ‘extremely cool’), *hao de yaosi* (good *de* wanting-to-die, ‘extremely good’) in Chinese. In this paper, such collocations will be referred to as

“emotionally oppositional collocations”, or “oppositional collocations” (OC).

It is nothing strange to juxtapose two words or phrases with opposite emotional senses, as in *good or bad*, *both pleased and depressed*, or *mei yu chou* (beauty and ugliness), *ji xingfen you jinzhang* (both excited and nervous). As these are parallel structures, both key elements involved are equally important in expressing what they normally mean. In other words, no semantic content is lost in these collocations, and no information is added to them.

Different from parallel structures, paradox is a rhetorical device that involves obvious contradictory statements, such as *I hate and I love*, in which the meanings of *I hate* and *I love* are both reserved, though they contradict each other. Paradox is a device used only at the sentence level instead of the phrase level (Wales, 1989, p. 333), but we can sometimes devise a paradox and turn it into an oxymoron, such as *a loving hate* or *a hating love* (Li, 2001, p. 29), both of which are phrases that are in agreement with what we are focusing on. However, this kind of phrase is still essentially different from OCs in that, similar to paradoxes, both their positive and negative emotional senses are kept, though in a highly condensed manner. What we need to bear in mind is that OCs tend to express a single positive sense, and, what is more, the resultative positive sense is more often than not a strengthened one.

OCs are pervasive in both English and Chinese everyday interactions. Although many researchers have noticed this kind of phenomena when they study anomalous collocations (e.g., Wang & Mao, 2009; Cao, 2000), degree adverbs or degree complements (e.g., Chen, 2012; Wang, 2010), swear words (e.g., Güvendir, 2015; Culpeper, 2011), taboo words (e.g., Christie, 2013), slurs (e.g., Croom, 2013; Anderson & Lepore, 2013), etc., none of them has treated OCs as a relatively independent linguistic or rhetorical phenomenon, or conducted any comprehensive analysis, let alone a comparative study between English and Chinese. In order to explain this phenomenon, this paper tries to provide more evidence for the purpose of accounting for the structure in both English and Chinese. It adopts a data-based approach, extracting instances from on-line corpora, and concludes with an interpretation of the collocations’ social-semiotic properties and functions.

2. Agreement and OCs

Why does one word often go together with another word to form a collocation? Different scholars have different and sometimes conflicting views towards this question. According to a comprehensive review of collocations made by Seretan (2011, pp. 9-28), the views can be generally divided into two types: the purely statistical perspective and the linguistically motivated perspective. The former suggests contextualism, which can be best expounded by Firth (1957, p. 181), who asserts that “collocations of a given word are statements of the habitual and customary places of that word”, or Sinclair (1991, p. 170), who thinks that “collocation is the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text”, and it exists “more or less independently of grammatical pattern

or positional relationship”. Context is an external factor relative to the internal syntactic structures and semantic relations. In line with contextualism, many people believe that collocations are not regular productions of language, but arbitrary word usages or combinations (Seretan, 2011, p. 15).

Quite different from contextualist approaches, which ignore the structural relation between the components of a collocation, linguistic approaches take syntactic relationship as a central defining feature. According to this view, collocations are seen as “syntactically-motivated combinations; consequently, the participating words must be related syntactically” (Seretan, 2011, p. 12). The syntactic structure in a collocation is usually concerned with two items which do not have equal contributions to the overall semantics. Seretan uses the term “semantic head” to refer to the leading element, and holds that “while the meaning of the semantic head is preserved... that of the other word does not participate in a straightforward way to the meaning of the collocation” (2011, p. 24). In fact, this idea was traditionally described as a “polar” combination, in which the *base* preserves meaning and acts as head, while the *collocate* is selected by the *base* and is closely attached to it (Seretan, 2011, p. 24).

According to the contextualist perspective or the arbitrary view, all collocations are possible as long as they are repeatedly used in contexts. This implies that there might be certain collocations whose components may not be syntactically well-formed, that is, the components of a collocation may not strictly follow the well-established syntactic rules. However, if language or collocations in particular were used in that manner on a large scale, it would be difficult or even impossible for people to transmit information through language. Deviations from norms must be regarded as rare things that occur in restricted areas. So, quite naturally, what we want to emphasize here is that language, which is a means of communication, must to a great extent be established on norms, principles or rules, whether syntactic, semantic, phonological or cognitive. When the two components of a collocation observe certain formation rules which have long been considered to be conventional, they can be regarded as an agreement collocation. By agreement, it is meant that one component of a certain collocation agrees with the other one in terms of syntactic well-formedness, conventional semantic relations or other widely accepted norms.

Agreement collocations are normal or conventional collocations. In syntax, for example, it is a norm for an adverb to go with an adjective, as in *very good*, *rather difficult*, which are agreement collocations. However, if we say *very man*, or *hen nanren* (very man, ‘very manly’), *hen zhongguo* (very China, ‘very typical of China’), we are actually breaking the norm of syntax. In semantics, if positive, negative and neutral senses are used as tags for the words in a collocation that expresses certain emotional senses, the collocation usually has to observe a norm of directionality (Guo & Wang, 1991), where a positive word goes together with a positive or neutral word, and a negative word with a negative or neutral word. This also observes the agreement rule, and in doing so the emotional flow from one word to another is quite natural. However, if a positive word and a negative word were used together to form a collocation, this would cause the two

words to contradict each other. Contradiction can be one of the addresser's purposes; two opposing emotions, and even views, can form so sharp a contrast that the addressee might be very much impressed with the absorption of two sides of the matter. However, OCs express only a single view or emotion. No semantic contrast is formulated, only general emphasis is imposed on the head element. So, as long as semantics is concerned, the OC does not apply the agreement principle; it has unique features that can only be explained by non-stereotypical means.

3. Formal Features

The general features of an OC are:

$$\text{Positive Word}_{\text{base}} + \text{Negative Word}_{\text{collocate}} = \text{Positive}^+$$

When a word which has a positive sense and is used as base collocates with another word which has a negative sense and is used as collocate, the whole collocation can have a more positive sense than the one solely expressed by the positive word. As this feature description is a highly generalized one that covers both English and Chinese, there might be some variations in specific instances. For example: in the order of the positive and negative words, in the form of word (single word or a combination of words), in the addition of certain markers (which is typically represented in Chinese), etc. In spite of the possible variations, the general feature presented above is simply meant to show the most prominent traits of the OC, which serve as a basis or guideline for the subsequent analyses.

English and Chinese OCs contain a lot of formal similarities and differences, which not only suggest typological disparities but habitual or customary usages. English OCs usually take the phrasal form of *adverb+adjective*, such as *damn good*, *bloody nice*, *terribly glad*. In rare cases verb phrases can be used, as in *love somebody so bad*, *like something terribly*. As the data collected show that most English OCs belong to the first type, this paper will focus on that and explore its various features.

In English OCs, the adverb is always a degree adverb which, when used in other cases, has a strong negative sense. But in OCs this strong negative sense has been moderated through long usage, has lost some of its original negative effect and can now apply to a much wider range of contexts by acting as a general degree adverb. These kinds of degree adverbs can be classified into two categories: those with the *-ly* suffix, and those without the *-ly* suffix¹. For the former, we have the examples of *terribly*, *horribly*, *awfully*, etc., and for the latter, we can find *dead*, *bloody*, *damn*, *fucking*, etc. The *-ly* type is characterized by a general emotional perception of something rather shocking or unpleasant, and it does not point to any specific perception. The type without *-ly*, however, almost always relates to a certain negative and specific perception: *dead* means the loss of life, *bloody* suggests bleeding and cruelty, *damn* indicates the casting of a curse, and *fucking* refers to a sexual act. As these perceptions are often repulsive or disgusting, they are often regarded as taboo terms, and their usage is confined to certain contexts or

language groups.

In contrast to English, the Chinese OCs exhibit quite complex formal features. Instead of using a simple *adverb+adjective* form as is seen in English, we can find three major forms in Chinese:

First, the *adverb+adjective* form. This seems to be the same as the English counterpart, but in terms of frequency of occurrence there is a rather large gap between the two languages. While most English OCs take this form, in Chinese there seems to be only one case, that is, *zei hao* (thief good, ‘extremely good’), in which *zei* is a fixed word but *hao* can be replaced by other positive words, such as *piaoliang* (beautiful), *kaixin* (joyful), *xingfu* (happy), etc.

Second, the *adjective+complement* form. Quite a lot of instances belong to this type, such as *shuai dai le²* (handsome dumb *le*, ‘extremely handsome’), *ku bi le* (cool kill *le*, ‘extremely cool’), *le_i feng le_j* (glad crazy *le_j*, ‘extremely glad’), *le_i sha le_j* (happy stupid *le_j*, ‘extremely happy’), *xiang si le* (fragrant die *le*, ‘extremely fragrant’), etc. Different from their English counterparts, the Chinese OCs place the adjective in the left position and the other element in the right position. While the collocate in English collocations is very often a degree adverb, the Chinese counterpart can be taken by a verb, an adverb, an adjective or a word whose class is hard to determine (Cai, 2011, p. 13). Let’s see some examples. In *le_i feng le_j* and *le_i sha le_j*, both *feng* (crazy) and *sha* (stupid) are often regarded as adjectives (Cai, 2011, p. 13), but it seems more reasonable to take the two words as verbs, because the ending perfective aspect marker *le* can rather naturally go with a verb to indicate the completion of an action. And in another example of *xiang si le*, *si* (die) is regarded as a verb in Liu & Pan (2001, pp. 607-612), but an adverb in Cai (2011, p. 13). So, in order to avoid uncertainties or ambiguities in determining the word class of the collocate, some scholars (Zhao, 2001; Tang & Chen, 2011; Zhou, 2015) opt for a more general cover word, i.e., “degree complement”, or “complement” in short. As the Chinese degree complements can be taken by different classes of words, they enjoy greater advantage or flexibility in the choice of degree words than can be found in English.

Third, the *adjective+de+complement* form. In the second form, *le* as a perfective aspect marker must be used following the *adjective+complement* combination, but in the third form the use of *le* is optional. By optional, it is meant that for some instances *le* is usually not used, such as in *hao de yaoming* (good *de* wanting-to-kill, ‘extremely good’), but for some others the use of *le* is up to the addresser for possibly habitual or regionally dialectal reasons, such as in *shuai de meizhi (le)* (handsome *de* unable-to-recover (*le*), ‘extremely handsome’). The use of *le* is something that can not be found in English, but compared with the second form the most conspicuous feature of the third form is the use of *de*, which is regarded as “the most frequently and widely used degree complement marker in modern Chinese” (Zhao, 2001, p. 46). That is the reason why we can find this usage in Mandarin as well as in many Chinese dialects³.

With a preliminary comparison of some major formal features between English and Chinese, we can see that English takes relatively simpler and more regular forms, while

Chinese is more flexible in the choice of different forms. English does not need to mark the degree adverb with any separate symbol for the simple fact that the degree adverb itself together with the structural relation is enough to signify the role of expressing degree. But in Chinese, complements usually have to be marked; otherwise the meaning can be totally different.

4. OCs in Contexts

It is not a rare thing to see OCs in major public media, but in most cases the use of this special kind of collocation is restricted. Simply speaking, this construction is concerned with HOW, WHERE and WHO issues. HOW issues regard how frequently the collocations are used in actual situations. To answer this question, we adopt a corpus-based approach to collect data, in which both the frequency of the OCs and the collocations of the degree word with the other words will be examined and compared so as to get a good sense of the status of the OCs among all usages of the degree word. WHERE issues are the situational contexts where the OCs are used. It is evident that the OC is not only a serious deviation from formation norms but a frequent adoption of casual and even taboo terms, and calls for an appropriate situation to ensure the effective functioning of these expressions. The issue of WHO is closely related to WHERE in that whenever an expression is used in a certain context, an addresser must be involved, and the typical features of the context must be in agreement with the identities of the addresser.

4.1 The status of OCs in degree adverb/complement+adjective structure

In order to have a more specific and in-depth analysis, Table 1 contains data for only two typical degree adverbs or complements from English and Chinese respectively, which are: *dead* and *bloody*, and *si* (die) and *yaoming* (wanting-to-kill), to see how they are used in the expression of OCs. The reason why these two pairs of words are chosen is that they are most frequently, thus typically, used degree expressions and have been touched upon in a lot of literature concerning OCs. With two items for each language selected for research, diversities can be demonstrated. In the two pairs, the meaning of *dead* is purposefully focused, not only because of its high frequency of use but, more importantly, in so doing we can examine more closely how the meaning of *dead* is expressed as equivalents in the two languages.

The data about *dead* and *bloody* are collected from BYU-BNC (Brigham Young University—British National Corpus) at <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc>, which contains 100 million words, covering the 1980s through 1993.

Table 1. Adjectives following *dead* and *bloody*

Adv.	Adj.	Freq.	Adv.	Adj.	Freq.
dead	easy =	33	bloody	good +	119
	right =	23		awful -	76
	white =	19		great +	72
	funny -	16		stupid -	48
	set =	16		big =	30
	boring -	15		old =	28
	living =	15		whole =	23
	keen =	14		marvelous +	22
	straight =	14		silly -	20
	good +	13		ridiculous -	18
	grateful +	13		useless -	18
	lucky +	13		buggering -	16
	certain =	12		hard -	16
	drunk -	11		long =	14
	long =	11		lucky +	14
	tired -	11		poor -	14
	calm +	10		likely =	13
	German =	10		sure =	12
	poor -	10		civil =	11
	simple =	9		disgusting -	11
Total		288	Total		595

Notes: =: neutral; +: positive; -: negative

These are the top 20 most frequently used collocations, which are enough to reveal the overall features of the collocations. The left column for *dead* shows that, as a negative degree adverb, it is more likely to be used with neutral and negative adjectives, which is in accordance with the agreement rule. There are only four OCs: *dead good*, *dead grateful*, *dead lucky* and *dead calm*, with altogether 49 occurrences, accounting for 17% among the total occurrences of 288. Another noticeable fact is that the first positive adjective, i.e., *good*, is tenth on the list; much lower than the neutral and negative adjectives. This suggests a tendency for the *dead+adjective* collocation to call for non-positive adjectives. However, for the *bloody+adjective* collocations, things are quite different. The positive adjective *good* ranks high on the list, and, with an extraordinary 119 occurrences, leaves the second most frequently used adjective *awful*, a negative word, far behind. When the occurrences of *good*, *great*, *marvelous*, and *lucky* are put together, the rate of frequency comes to 38% (out of 595 occurrences), much higher than 17% for *dead* in the same situation. This shows a disparity in the use of OCs when different degree adverbs are involved.

Table 1 shows us a general picture or context in which OCs appear, but context is

a rather complex concept that can be interpreted from varied perspectives. In the latter part of this section, we focus on OCs only, interpreting them from two social-semiotic perspectives.

Now, let's examine the situation with Chinese. In what follows, two typical complements are examined: *si le* and *de yaoming*. As the Chinese corpus BCC (Beijing Language and Culture University Chinese Corpus at <http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn>) is quite different from the English corpus BYU-BNC in search settings, and the Chinese collocational structures are unique compared with the English ones, the table below has to be set in a different manner. BCC is composed of 15 billion Chinese characters, including 2 billion for newspapers and magazines, 3 billion for literature, 3 billion for micro-blogs, 3 billion for science and technology, 1 billion for integrated areas, and 2 billion for ancient Chinese.

Table 2. Adjectives collocating with *si le* and *de yaoming*

Adj.	Freq.	Comp.	Adj.	Freq.	Comp.
<i>keai</i> (lovely) +	8		<i>tong/teng</i> (painful) -	15	
<i>wuliao</i> (boring) -	8		<i>leng</i> (cold) =	12	
<i>fan</i> (bored) -	8		<i>nanshou</i> (afflicting) -	5	
<i>exin</i> (disgusting) -	7		<i>lei</i> (tired) -	5	
<i>toutong</i> (head-aching) -	6		<i>gui</i> (expensive) =	4	
<i>nanshou</i> (afflicting) -	6		<i>fan</i> (bored) -	3	
<i>kaixin</i> (glad) +	5		<i>wuliao</i> (boring) -	3	
<i>nanguo</i> (unhappy) -	4		<i>bao</i> (full) =	2	
<i>chou</i> (smelly) -	3		<i>yang</i> (itching) -	2	
<i>suan</i> (sour) =	3		<i>duo</i> (many) =	2	
<i>haochi</i> (delicious) +	2		<i>toutong</i> (head-aching) -	2	
<i>ben</i> (stupid, awkward) -	2		<i>zhun</i> (precise) =	2	
<i>shangxin</i> (heartbreaking) -	2	<i>si le</i>	<i>xingfen</i> (excited) =	2	<i>de yaoming</i>
<i>re</i> (hot) =	2		<i>suan</i> (sour) =	2	
<i>shuai</i> (handsome) +	2		<i>kaixin</i> (glad) +	2	
<i>yang</i> (itching) =	2		<i>keai</i> (lovely) +	2	
<i>mei</i> (beautiful) +	1		<i>gaoxing</i> (happy) +	2	
<i>tong</i> (painful) -	1		<i>mang</i> (busy) =	1	
<i>qiong</i> (poor) -	1		<i>hao</i> (good) +	1	
<i>chun</i> (foolish) -	1		<i>haoting</i> (melodious) +	1	
<i>huaji</i> (humorous) =	1		<i>xintong</i> (heart-breaking)-	1	
<i>gui</i> (expensive) =	1		<i>xingyun</i> (lucky) +	1	
<i>shenmi</i> (mysterious) =	1		<i>ke</i> (thirsty) =	1	
<i>xiee</i> (evil) -	1		<i>tianmei</i> (sweet) +	1	
<i>nanting</i> (scrannel) -	1		<i>kun</i> (sleepy) =	1	

Adj.	Freq.	Comp.	Adj.	Freq.	Comp.
<i>xingfu</i> (happy) +	1		<i>chou</i> (smelly) -	1	
<i>haixiu</i> (shy) =	1		<i>exin</i> (disgusting) -	1	
<i>la</i> (pungent) =	1		<i>yinleng</i> (damp and cold) -	1	
<i>daomei</i> (hapless) -	1		<i>xian</i> (salty) =	1	
<i>kexiao</i> (ridiculous) -	1		<i>cha</i> (bad) -	1	
<i>aojiao</i> (proud) +	1		<i>nuoruo</i> (coward) -	1	
<i>meili</i> (beautiful) +	1		<i>sha</i> (silly) -	1	
<i>qiaocui</i> (haggard) -	1		<i>weiqu</i> (feeling wronged) -	1	
<i>gudu</i> (lonely) -	1		<i>jiuxin</i> (worried) -	1	
<i>zang</i> (dirty) -	1		<i>keqi</i> (courteous) +	1	
<i>liangkuai</i> (cool) +	1		<i>tieqie</i> (appropriate) +	1	
<i>guiyi</i> (strange) -	1		<i>anjing</i> (quiet) =	1	
<i>mang</i> (busy) =	1	<i>si le</i>	<i>mei</i> (beautiful) +	1	<i>de yaoming</i>
<i>cha</i> (bad) -	1		<i>zang</i> (dirty) -	1	
<i>men</i> (suffocating) -	1		<i>chan</i> (greedy) =	1	
<i>hei</i> (dark) =	1		<i>huang</i> (restless) -	1	
<i>yumen</i> (depressed) -	1		<i>haokan</i> (good-looking) +	1	
<i>fanzao</i> (agitated) -	1		<i>fanzao</i> (agitated) -	1	
<i>tian</i> (sweet) =	1		<i>fawei</i> (boring) -	1	
<i>huanle</i> (happy) +	1		<i>guai</i> (tamed) =	1	
<i>nen</i> (tender) =	1		<i>xiao</i> (small) =	1	
			<i>kunnan</i> (difficulty) -	1	
			<i>qingxing</i> (sober) =	1	
			<i>jing</i> (quiet) =	1	
			<i>ji</i> (anxious) =	1	
Total	100		Total	100	

As BCC has more content than BYU-BNC, there is a greater variety of adjectives used in the collocations of *si le* and *de yaoming*. The first 100 instances have been chosen for further examination. As some collocations are repeated in different instances of the corpus, they are put together and marked with a number for frequency.

Compared with Table 1, the most striking feature of Table 2 is that many more different adjectives can be used in each collocation. This shows both *si le* and *de yaoming* can be very easily and naturally used with an adjective. In terms of the mode of the adjectives, we find that, similar to the English counterparts, all three modes can be used, with 10 positive adjectives used for *si le*, accounting for 22% of this category, and 11 positive adjectives for *de yaoming*, accounting for 14%. Either of the two percentages is less than one third of its own category, suggesting the OCs in *si le* and *de yaoming* are less popular than collocations involving negative or neutral adjectives. The same is true

for *dead* in Table 1, where the percentage is 17%. But *bloody* gets a higher percentage, reaching 38%, more than one third of the total, indicating a slight preference for modifying positive adjectives.

If an instance appears only once, this can be regarded as a strong indication of a random usage or *ad hoc* collocation. If more occurrences are observed with a particular collocation, say, *bloody good*, *bloody great*, *keai si le*, etc., the internal tie between components becomes so fixed that they should be treated as a single unit, to be learned or produced as a whole. However, data in both Table 1 and Table 2 show that most oppositional collocations are not *ad hoc*. In other words, degree adverbs or complements containing a negative sense have a higher probability of collocation in line with the agreement principle.

4.2 Atypical anti-language

Anti-language is a term first proposed by M.A.K. Halliday in the article “Anti-Languages” to refer to “the language of an anti-society”. “An anti-society is a society that is set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it. It is a mode of resistance, resistance which may take the form either of passive symbiosis or of active hostility and even destruction” (1976, p. 570).

Halliday gives several examples to show what an anti-society is and what social-semiotic features it possesses (vagabonds in Elizabethan England, Calcutta’s underworld, Polish prisons and reform schools, etc.). These anti-societies developed their own jargons or anti-languages, which were closely tied to the social structure or the individual psyche. One typical feature of anti-language is relexicalization, which is the case when new meanings are added to contemporary words. It is worth noting it is not that the anti-language as a whole that has been relexicalized: “typically this relexicalization is partial, not total” (Halliday, 1976, p. 571). In the process of relexicalization, a principle must be observed, that is, “same grammar, different vocabulary; but different vocabulary only in certain areas, typically those that are central to the activities of the subculture and that set it off most sharply from the established society” (Halliday, 1976, p. 571). Besides relexicalization, there is also overlexicalization, which is the use of many new words for a single phenomenon. For example, Halliday quotes Mallik’s account of the Calcutta underworld language in that there are 21 words for “bomb” and 41 words for “police” (1976, p. 571). This is one major technique of the anti-society to keep secrets among peers.

Another typical feature of anti-language is metaphoricity. According to Halliday, “much of everyday language is metaphorical in origin... What distinguishes an anti-language is that it is itself a metaphorical entity, and hence metaphorical modes of expression are the norm” (1976, p. 579). The use of metaphorical expressions is an effective way of keeping secrets and maintaining a distance from mainstream society.

Ever since the anti-language concept was put forward, many scholars (see brief review in Li & Pang, 2010, p. 29) have tried to apply it to the analyses of various sub-societies and social dialects. However, subsequent research seems to be deviating from the typical

cases of anti-society and anti-language as found in Halliday (1976). For example, CMC (computer-mediated communication, including BBS, net chatting, etc.) has been regarded as a form of anti-language, because its lexical and grammatical features share a lot of commonalities with a typical anti-language, and internet language also has the function of social reality construction (Li & Pan, 2010). What is even more special is the study of childhood secret language by Giblett (1991), which regards fictive languages devised by adult writers for child characters as anti-language. It is true that both internet language and childhood secret language exhibit some features in common with the anti-languages found in prisons and underworlds, but the latter two are “professional jargon” (Halliday, 1976, p. 571) or “extreme case[s] of a dialect” (Giblett, 1991, p. 3), while the former two are marginal cases, with only a small number of features like those of a typical anti-language. On this point, this paper agrees with Ding (2010, p. 82), who asserts that anti-language, similar to many linguistic categories, is not an absolute concept, and between anti-language and language is a representation of a cline, i.e., a continuous variation in form between members. Inside the cline are a lot of “semi-anti-languages”, which in this paper will be called atypical anti-languages.

The OC is an atypical anti-language in that the major features that exist in typical anti-languages can also be found, though are not rather systematically represented and restricted to a certain clearly-specified social group.

First of all, OCs in both English and Chinese constitute a language system that is formed in a sub-group of society. According to the data collected from the corpuses, if we examine the context where each instance is used, we can find that a considerably large proportion of instances are used in informal situations, such as casual conversations, direct or indirect speeches in literature, micro-blogs, BBS, etc. These are mostly spoken contexts; when written, the instances are used to express the writers’ strong emotions. Especially when taboo words are involved, such as in *fucking great*, *bloody good*, *damn nice*, etc., the group of people who use them or the contexts in which these expressions are used are very much restricted. Arnold (1986, p. 237) calls the taboo words in OCs “emotional words”, which were considered “unprintable in the 19th century and dashes were used to indicate the corresponding omissions in oaths”. When talking about swearwords, a major category of taboo words, Stapleton (2010, p. 291) says:

In most languages, swearing is strongly linked to the vernacular, thereby carrying connotations of “working class culture” and lower socioeconomic groupings... In terms of social judgments, this means that the use of expletives is often associated with lower levels of education and/or socioeconomic standing...

A similar view is held by Jay (2009, p. 154), though phrased more specifically: “Swearing has been documented in the lexica of many social groups: soldiers, police, high school and college students, drug users, athletes, laborers, juvenile delinquents, psychiatric patients, and prisoners”, and because of the vulgar or disgusting nature of

taboo words, they are much more frequently used by men instead of women (Güvendir, 2015; Christie, 2013).

Even with the non-taboo degree adverbs or complements, such as *terribly*, *horribly*, *awfully* or *dai* (dumb), *sha* (stupid), etc., as they also try to achieve emphatic effect by employing semantically contradictory or bizarre collocations, one notices that they are not absorbed by major public media, and only stay with those who aspire to break the chains of various social norms. Thus, both taboo and non-taboo words have a lot of overlaps.

Secondly, OCs involve lexicalization and overlexicalization. To emphasize the positive degree of an adjective, we have multiple routine options. We can use ordinary degree adverbs, such as *so*, *very*, *rather*, *extremely*, or *hen* (very), *feichang* (very), *xiangdang* (rather), *jiqi* (extremely), etc., or repeat these words (e.g. *very very...*, *feichang feichang...*) or prolong these words phonologically to reinforce the degree. We can also employ other lexical means by providing more detailed information. However, OCs employ a different, novel strategy by forming a sharp contrast between negative and positive perceptions to achieve a culturally high-sounding positive effect. The collocates, i.e., negative degree adverbs or complements which normally contain strong derogatory senses, are now used as “new” words that contain less or no negative sense but maintain strong emotional impact. Besides, as can be seen in the data, to reinforce the degree of, say, *good*, we can say *dead good*, *bloody good*, *fucking good*, *damn good*, *awfully good*, *terribly good*, and so on. A variety of degree adverbs can be used to achieve the same effect. Also in Chinese: *hao*, the counterpart of *good*, can be strengthened by using a variety of complements, such as *hao si le* (good die le), *hao de yaosi* (good de wanting-to-die), *hao de yaoming* (good de wanting-to-kill), *hao de meizhi le* (good de unable-to-recover), etc., all of which mean more or less the same.

Thirdly, all degree adverbs or complements are used metaphorically. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) have convincingly demonstrated that metaphor is not just a figure of speech but a general way of thinking, and it is pervasive in everyday language. But “what distinguishes an anti-language is that it is itself a metaphorical entity, and hence metaphorical modes of expression are the norm” (Halliday, 1976, p. 579). That is to say, for ordinary language, non-metaphoricity is the norm, while for anti-language, metaphoricity is the norm, and is used in various ways in the relexicalization process to construct different “signifiers” (Ding, 2010, p. 78; Li & Pang, 2010, p. 31). When the goodness of *good* is strengthened by *dead*, *bloody*, *fucking*, *damn*, *awfully*, *terribly*, and so on, these varied forms of degree adverbs, or “signifiers”, metaphorically refer to a single “signified”, a general sense of reinforcing the degree of an adjective. This particular “signified” is distinct from those when the adverbs or their class variants are used in other contexts. For example, *dead* usually means the loss of life, and *bloody* suggests the bleeding of an animate being. When the original or conventional senses are no longer used or have greatly diminished, a new sense arises as a result of a grammatical metaphor process. Even for such general emotional words as *awfully* or *terribly*, when they are used in OCs, their original sense of fear has to a great extent been lost, together with their

functions being transformed from relating to passive things or experience to reinforcing something positive.

Degree adverbs and complements are used to express strong emotions, so they can be called “expressive terms”, and are not in the literal sense that important. Potts suggests that “expressive content is not propositional, that it is distinct from the meanings we typically assign to sentences”, and that expressives in general manifest descriptive ineffability or general lack of descriptive content (2007, pp. 176-177).

So, the system of OCs is not a typical anti-language as is found in outlaw groupings or the underworlds, but it does contain some major features similar to anti-language. Parallel to an anti-language, an anti-society is usually composed of a group of people detached in an obvious way from normal society, whereas those using OCs are not a clearly-defined or highly idiosyncratic group of people, but cover a large range of professions and backgrounds. Thus, the system of OCs is an atypical anti-language.

4.3 Register

Anti-language is a social dialect that relates to a particular anti-society. Through the use of “anti-”, the social-semiotic property of resistance to the situational context in general is highlighted, and specialties instead of commonalities are emphasized. As has been analyzed above, an anti-language perspective can uncover some unique features of OCs, but it also has the danger of treating this phenomenon as something considerably detached from normal expressions. OCs are not abnormal at all, and they are so widespread that any person, when an appropriate context comes up, can readily use them. So, it is probably a more rational attitude to reexamine them on the basis of a general contextual theory.

Although context is a term that has been widely used for both linguistic and non-linguistic purposes, no consensus has ever been reached on its precise definition (Hu, 2002). In order to conduct sensible research, the choice of actual context(s) must be made by focusing on most, if not all, determining factors that contribute to the linguistic phenomenon in question. As far as OCs are concerned, they are not just collocations existing independently; they are actually expressions embedded in various contexts which involve most strikingly such constituents as situational contexts, social roles of participants, and the media the expressions usually take. All of these are consistent with the composition of a register.

According to Halliday & Hasan, “the register is the set of meanings, the configuration of semantic patterns, that are typically drawn upon under the specified conditions, along with the words and structures that are used in the realization of these meanings” (1976, p. 23). Specifically, a register is composed of field, tenor and mode, which collectively define the context of a text, constraining the speaker’s choice of lexical words and semantic structures (Hu et al., 2005, p. 275). Though different scholars define these terms in quite different and sometimes even contradictory ways, Halliday & Hasan’s definition has been most widely adopted. They assert:

The FIELD is the total event, in which the text is functioning, together with the purposive activity of the speaker or writer; it thus includes the subject-matter as one element in it; The MODE is the function of the text in the event, including therefore both the channel taken by the language—spoken or written, extempore or prepared—and its genre, or rhetorical mode, as narrative, didactic, persuasive, ‘phatic communion’ and so on. The TENOR refers to the type of role interaction, the set of relevant social relations, permanent and temporary, among the participants involved. (1976, p. 22)

Drawing upon Giblett’s (1991) study of childhood secret language as an anti-language and a register, we find that OCs analogically reveal “all the principal controlling variables of a register such as field, ‘the institutional setting in which a piece of language occurs,’ tenor, ‘the relationship between participants,’ and mode, ‘the channel of communication adopted’” (Giblett, 1991, p. 3). Giblett’s comments on field, tenor and mode, as well as some of the components discussed by Halliday & Hasan in the above quotation, such as subject-matter in field, can also apply to the OCs. Thus, the following analysis expands upon Giblett’s account:

Firstly, the variable of field. OCs cover a limitless number of subject-matters; what they have in common is that they deserve the speaker’s comment and can usually arouse his emotional reactions. In other words, these subject-matters are expressive in nature and can be rated in terms of a scale of degree or change. The scale of the subject-matter calls for graded revaluations, which are represented by both the base and the collocate of the OCs. *Dead* or *si* does not simply suggest a state of the end of life, but also a process of change, where the life span comes to an ultimate end. And in *dead good* or *hao si le*, either *good* or *hao* implicitly reveals a range of goodness, which makes it possible for this word to go semantically as well as cognitively with a collocate *dead* or *si le*, and further modify the subject-matter. Among subject-matter, base and collocate, it is the subject-matter that controls the selection of base and collocate.

In terms of the institutional setting, or the context of situation as we often loosely call it, informality is always a norm. Politics-oriented media and media attempting to cover social issues from an objective perspective have tended to eschew OC expressions; when we do find them, they are without exception used in either direct or indirect speech. Two main factors contribute to this informality: the first one is the frequent use of taboo words or words with strong negative senses, which are usually deemed as impolite or even offensive. The second factor is the semantic contradiction that produces a single positive sense. This is similar to the informal use of double negatives to mean something negative, such as in *It don’t mean nothing*, which actually means *It doesn’t mean anything* or *It means nothing*. This is slang or bad English; popular among the uneducated, though it may be used by anyone in moments of high emotion. OCs, however, tend not to have a “bad” meaning, in that the negative sense attached to the degree adverb or complement does to a varied extent diminish, so a wider range of people tend to employ this kind of expression in their interactions.

Secondly, the variable of tenor, a type of role interaction among interlocutors. Scholars outside Systemic-Functional Linguistics increasingly prefer the term “style” in place of tenor to refer to the “varieties of language viewed from the point of formality” (Trudgill, 1992). Because OCs are mainly a verbal phenomenon, informality is the most prominent style, especially when taboo terms are involved. It seems that in English OCs, taboo terms are much more widely and frequently used, and can mark varied personal relations. Supporting evidences can be found. First, if it is not a very formal or serious occasion, English native speakers of varied social backgrounds may casually use taboo terms in their speech, while similar Chinese speakers on similar occasions tend to be more self-conscious, fearing that the use of vulgar terms may be perceived as a lack of education. Second, in Chinese OCs there are few, if any, highly taboo degree adverbs or complements. For example, while English can use *fucking*, *damn*, *bloody*, etc. to form OCs, the Chinese counterparts actually do not exist at all. It seems *damn* and *yaosi* or *yaoming* are identical in meaning, but in fact they are not. *Damn* is a widely used expletive, denoting divine punishment or torment, an element which is totally absent in Chinese.

Hu et al. point out that “the more intimate personal relations are, the more informal the use of language” (2005, p. 274). So, since OCs are mainly used in informal situations, does it naturally lead to the conclusion that participants of a discourse including OCs are on closer terms? The answer is both yes and no. Within more intimate personal relationships, participants are freer to choose what they want to say, which includes the use of taboo terms. But the important point when considering OCs is that taboo as well as other negative degree adverbs or complements have already to a large extent lost their original negative sense, and what is equally significant is that the use of taboo or negative terms does not aim at any particular addressee. In other words, nobody is targeted, and nobody offended. So, although OCs are often used among close friends or acquaintances, they can also appear before unfamiliar persons in a variety of ways: the speaker may be unaware of the presence of unfamiliar persons or may use OCs in an improper situation out of habit.

Finally, the variant of mode, which normally refers to channel and genre. Although the channel of OCs is essentially spoken, in reality the spoken and written channels are not completely independent from each other. The spoken channel can take the form of the written channel with direct or indirect speeches, or monologues. As long as the general context is informal or casual, there is room for OCs to appear. Another component of channel mentioned by Halliday & Hasan (1976, p. 22) is whether the speech is extempore or prepared. Since we have asserted that OCs are essentially spoken, the use of them is more likely to be extempore. If we consider the data in Table 1 and Table 2, we can see that the relatively limited number of collocations and higher occurrences make them look more like prefabricated linguistic chunks, which suggests that these collocations do not need to be formed at the moment of interaction, but that they are ready-made structures; memorized as a whole and reproduced as a whole. On the contrary, the more varied use

of Chinese OCs forcefully indicates flexible formations of the components; an act of choice subject to various specific contexts. As for the generic or rhetorical mode, it is inappropriate to set a tone on the basis of a single phrase, or even the entire system of such phrases, simply because a phrase is embedded in the larger context of a sentence, which is embedded in much larger linguistic and situational contexts. Only when the genre of the whole text is considered, can we get a glimpse of the role of the genre of a particular phrase. As this is a task some distance away from our current focus, we have to suspend it here and now, leaving it for other follow-up researches.

5. Concluding Remarks

OCs are a special rhetorical device that achieves a positive sense by combining emotionally contradictory senses. Though between English and Chinese there are distinct differences in terms of the collocations' formal features, distributive properties, and emotional impacts for certain sub-categories, the use of OCs in both languages is associated in the addresser's mind with particular contexts, which tend to be characterized by informality and resistance to orthodox society. Though the base of an OC is the structurally controlling element for the whole collocation, the collocate, represented as a degree adverb in English and degree complement in Chinese, is the emotionally controlling element, which not only reinforces the positive degree on the part of the base but, with some trace of negativity, sets the addresser away from formal or serious language users. It is overstatement to regard the system of OCs as an anti-language, parallel to an anti-society, but it does demonstrate some major features that can be found in the so-called typical anti-language or anti-society. It is a small tunnel, through which a certain group of people with degraded professions or backgrounds, or people who act in occasional informal situational contexts can come collectively to the spotlight. So OCs are not just linguistic expressions, and not just a rhetorical device for releasing emotions of a certain degree, but more significantly are reliable signs to show one's identities and mark one's social positions.

Notes

- 1 http://www.grammar-quizzes.com/adv_degree.html
- 2 *le* is a perfective aspect marker which follows a verb to indicate the completion of an action.
- 3 *de* is not the only degree complement marker in Chinese. In old Chinese or in some dialects, there are many alternates for that word, for example, *lai* (来), *delai* (得来), *qu* (去), *dao* (到), etc. (Zhao, 2001, pp. 46-48) Despite the different forms, they play more or less the same role in collocations.

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