

Abstract

This dissertation explores the robust confluence of syntactic and cultural factors involved in the structure and content of *chéngyǔ*. It unpacks a number of structural tendencies in the data sample, and illuminates selected underlying cultural themes. The presence of syntactic and semantic parallelism within *chéngyǔ* in the dataset, as an expression of the correlative Chinese philosophy of the *wǔxíng* (五行 'Five Phases' or 'Five Elements' of the universe), is a recurring point. Syntactic parallelism is demonstrated via *chéngyǔ* with invertible elements and by the overwhelming preference for syntactic parallelism, in particular the # N # N structure. Semantic parallelism is demonstrated via content words with related semantic fields or separable content words. The Chinese philosophical concepts of *yīn* and *yáng* are shown to have a clear impact on the use of numbers within *chéngyǔ*. *Yīn* and *yáng* are preferably arranged in balance with each other. If only one is present, however, then *yáng* is considered to be preferable over *yīn*. The interaction between the numbers within *chéngyǔ* has several pragmatic effects. For example, the combination of the numbers *qī* (七 'seven') and *bā* (八 'eight') is used to suggest disorder, untidiness or physical or emotional disturbance (Pellatt 2007:96). *Bàn* (半 'half') may be used in *chéngyǔ* to denote the meaning of 'a proportion.' It also may be used together with *yī* (一 'one') to indicate 'any at all' as well as a cluster of closely related concepts generally indicating 'the existence of a small amount.' Numbers also often have the effect of highlighting the contrast between two content words. Some *chéngyǔ* have a clearcut syntactic analysis, others do not. This is due to their highly elliptical and idiomatic nature, the fact that many lexemes can fall into more than one word class, and the fact that *chéngyǔ* are frozen expressions that often preserve some grammatical structures from Classical Chinese. Additionally, *chéngyǔ* do include conceptual metaphors, from the standpoint of the conceptual theory of metaphor launched with Lakoff and Johnson (1980).