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On the Contents of Stable Compounds in The Chinese Language

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ABSTRACT

In the process of analyzing the Chinese language from a morphological and semantic perspective, it is impossible to overlook idiomatic expressions. Therefore, the primary aim of this article is to explore Chinese idiomatic expressions and their distinctive features. Specifically, the article focuses on two types of fixed expressions, namely *chengyu* and *guanyongyu*, and advances the task of analyzing them. The traditional understanding that *chengyu* consist of four characters and *guanyongyu* consist of three characters has developed over centuries. However, this article also examines cases that either conform to or deviate from these conventions. Additionally, methods for identifying these units within fixed expressions are analyzed in detail. For instance, the possibility of determining the type of expression based on the number of characters is explored. Furthermore, the question of whether *chengyu* must solely possess historical characteristics is addressed, along with the issue of the existence of modern *chengyu*. The article examines proper nouns and terms included in fixed expressions in the Chinese language and draws conclusions about why they appear in fixed expressions but not in *shuyu* (lexical units).

In addition, similarities and differences between fixed expressions and *shuyu* are analyzed, and relevant examples for each type of fixed expression are provided. These examples include a direct translation of the expression and its corresponding equivalent, accompanied by explanations. This approach highlights that each character in Chinese idiomatic expressions has its own meaning, but collectively they convey a unified idea.

This article applies morphological and semantic analysis methods to delve deeper into the structure of fixed expressions, offering opportunities for a more thorough study. The conclusions drawn provide a framework for identifying the category to which the units within fixed expressions belong.

Keywords: Stable compounds, *chengyu*, *guanyongyu*, *xiehouyu*, proper nouns, terms, *shuyu*.

INTRODUCTION

When discussing the issue of fixed expressions in the Chinese language, their diversity becomes apparent. Linguists generally classify fixed expressions into three main categories: *chengyu*, *guanyongyu*, and *xiehouyu*. In addition, it is possible to identify other types of fixed expressions specific to both everyday spoken language and written language. Among them, it is worth mentioning proper nouns, terms, and quasi-fixatives. At the same time, terms and proper nouns are often considered to belong to

distinct sections of lexicology.

Terms are primarily special designations related to a particular scientific field or professional activity, usually used by specialists in that area. However, as society develops and science becomes more popularized, some terms begin to be recognized by wider segments of the population. For example: 直升机 (*zhíshēngfēijī*) “helicopter”, 心律不齐 (*xīnlǜbùqí*) “arrhythmia”, 工业用水 (*gōngyèyòngshuǐ*) “industrial water”, 大秋作物

(dàqiūzuòwù) “autumn crops”, 国民经济 (guómínjīngjì) “national economy”, 企业管理 (qǐyèguǎnlǐ) “corporate management”. It should be noted that many specialized terms belong exclusively to certain professional disciplines and express highly specific scientific concepts. As a result, such terms may not be widely known to the general public. For instance: 表面张力 (biǎomiànzhānglì) “surface tension”, 放料 (fàngliào) “discharge”, 自然对数 (zìrán duìshù) “natural logarithm”, 雌雄异株 (cíxíngyìzhū) “dioecious”, 遗传工程 (yíchuángōngchéng) “genetic engineering”, 绝对真理 (juéduìzhēnlǐ) “absolute truth” and so on [Luo, 1980; 225].

Proper nouns also deserve special attention. For example, 台湾海峡 (Táiwān hǎixiá) – “Taiwan Strait” or 毛泽东 (Máo Zédōng) – “Mao Zedong” can be considered lexical units. However, certain complex geographical names, such as 天津的宜兴埠 (Tiānjīn de Yíxīngbù) – “Yixingbu, Tianjin” or 河北省承德地区的仓子村 (Héběi shěng Chéngdé dìqū de Cāngzǐ cūn) – “Cangzi Village, Chengde District, Hebei Province”, are not considered part of a lexical unit [Luo, 1980; 225].

In this article, rather than focusing on the widely studied types of fixed expressions such as proper nouns and terms, we will conduct a detailed analysis of chengyu and guanyongyu, which are considered among their main components. At the conclusion of our analysis, we will attempt to formulate a clear scientific theory regarding fixed expressions in the Chinese language.

METHODS

In the process of identifying the structure of fixed expressions in Chinese and their specific characteristics, a number of linguistic research methods were employed. In particular, component analysis, distributional analysis, functional methods, as well as morphological and semantic analysis served as important tools for the study. These approaches made it possible to examine the ways in which fixed expressions are expressed, with special attention given to their semantic classification.

During the translation of fixed expressions, every effort was made to accurately convey the meaning of each character. At the same time, it was taken into account that a literal translation of a fixed expression might be incomprehensible to the reader; therefore, their Uzbek

equivalents were also provided. This approach was necessary to ensure a correct understanding of the meaning of the expression and to prevent semantic distortion.

To address these issues scientifically, we made extensive use of the following works and scholarly sources: Chang Yuzhong's Functional Roles of Fixed Expressions in Chinese Spoken Language, Lu Susian and Liu Delian's Explanatory Dictionary of Fixed Expressions in Chinese, Li Yamei's Phraseological Units Expressing Hierarchical Relations in Chinese, T. Akimov's Semantic Phraseologisms in Chinese, as well as research by many other scholars. Based on these sources and approaches, important results were achieved in the deeper study of fixed expressions in Chinese, their translation into Uzbek, and the development of their theoretical foundations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION 成语 (chengyu)

It should be recognized that chengyu form the most vivid and notable part of the system of fixed expressions in modern Chinese. They are distinctive in both form and meaning, often functioning as ready-made word combinations or even expressing a complete sentence. For this reason, chengyu are not only included among fixed expressions, but in a broader sense are also considered an integral part of phraseology. This approach reveals the connection between chengyu and proverbs, aphorisms, and other speech units.

However, the question arises: Is it possible to correctly identify and classify chengyu and other closely related fixed expressions? In order to understand chengyu scientifically, it is necessary to recognize that they constitute a special type of fixed expression. From this perspective, if we exclude elements that are not lexical units—such as certain chengyu, terms, and proper nouns—can the remaining items be considered chengyu?

Below are examples used in the classification of chengyu and other fixed expressions:

勇往直前 (yǒngwǎngzhíqián) – “to advance courageously”, 坚定不移 (jiāndìngbùyí) – “to stand firm” (lit. “cannot be moved from place”), 违法乱纪 (wéifǎluànjì) – “to violate the law and discipline”, 煞费苦心 (shàfèikǔxīn) – “to rack one's brains; to make painstaking efforts”, 前功尽弃 (qiángōngjìnqì) – “to go to waste; to be in vain”, 风和日丽 (fēnghérìlì) – “gentle

breeze and beautiful sun” (used to describe fine weather), 微不足道 (wēibùzúdào) – “insignificant”, 诸如此类 (zhūrúcǐlèi) – “and so on; and the like” [Li, 1996; 145].

小葱拌豆腐——清二白 (xiǎocōng bàn dòufu – yì qīng èr bái) “to mix scallions with tofu – clear and pure”; 黄鼠狼给鸡拜年——不怀好心 (huángshǔláng gěi jī bài nián – bù huái hǎo xīn) “a weasel paying a New Year visit to a chicken – harboring ill intentions.” Here, the weasel serves as a metaphor for a malicious person, while the chicken symbolizes someone weak and defenseless. This idiom is used to describe a person who pretends to be kind and friendly while secretly harboring bad intentions. 外甥打灯笼——照旧 (wàishēng dǎ dēnglong – zhào jiù) “a nephew holding a lantern to light up his uncle – everything remains as it was, no change at all” [Xu, 2000; 122].

不一定 (bù yíding) “not certain; not definite,” 不必 (bú bì) “not necessary,” 不堪 (bù kān) “unable to endure; unbearable,” 两回事 (liǎng huí shì) “two different matters; completely separate things” [Liu, 2018; 45].

开门见山 (kāimén jiànshān) “clear and straightforward” (with regard to speech or writing) (literal translation: “to see the mountain upon opening the door”),

刻舟求剑 (kè zhōu qiú jiàn) “ridiculously stubborn or foolish” (literal: “marking the side of a boat to later retrieve a sword dropped in the water”), 守株待兔 (shǒu zhū dài tù) “waiting idly for opportunities” (literal: “waiting by a tree stump for a rabbit”), 走后门 (zǒu hòumén) “to act illegally; to cheat” (literal: “to enter through the back door”), 穿小鞋 (chuān xiǎo xié) “to make things difficult for someone” (literal: “to wear small shoes”) [Chang, 1991; 15].

The above four groups of fixed expressions may not all be scientifically correct to classify as chengyu. Here, the structural composition and diversity of meanings expressed by these expressions are quite evident. Applying the term chengyu to all these expressions indiscriminately is a complex matter.

For example, the expressions in the second group are difficult to regard as chengyu because they resemble riddling phrases and do not fully exhibit the features typical of chengyu. The expressions in the third group also do not align with the linguistic characteristics of chengyu. Even

some expressions in the first group, although often classified as chengyu, upon deeper analysis, may only resemble them in form but differ in meaning and function. Only the fixed expressions in the fourth group can be accepted as chengyu, as they possess not only literal meanings but also function as figurative expressions.

Thus, the question of the defining features of chengyu as linguistic units in modern Chinese is of significant importance. This is a central issue encountered in identifying and studying chengyu.

Undoubtedly, a chengyu is a fixed word combination that retains stability in both structure and phonetics. Semantically, it expresses a single concept and is equivalent in function to a single word. These features are the main distinguishing factors separating chengyu from other fixed expressions.

When most people think of chengyu, they imagine a four-character expression. However, limiting chengyu to four characters is not entirely accurate. Some chengyu contain more than four characters. For example: 快刀斩乱麻 (kuài dāo zhǎn luàn má) “to resolve a problem quickly” (literal: “to cut tangled hemp with a sharp knife”), 千里送鹅毛 (qiān lǐ sòng é máo) “a humble gift given with sincere respect” (literal: “to send a goose feather from a thousand li away”), 杀鸡给猴看 (shā jī gěi hóu kàn) “to make an example of someone; to intimidate others” (literal: “to kill a chicken to show the monkey”), 迅雷不及掩耳 (xùn léi bù jí yǎn ěr) “to happen in a flash” (literal: “thunder so fast you can’t cover your ears”), 风马牛不相及 (fēng mǎ niú bù xiāng jí) “to be completely unrelated” (literal: “wind, horse, and cattle have nothing to do with each other”).

Other examples include: 不成器 (bù chéng qì) “incompetent; useless,” 跑龙套 (pǎo lóng tào) “to do menial tasks” (literal: “to run in dragon costume,” referring to minor roles in traditional Chinese opera), 煞风景 (shā fēng jǐng) “to spoil the mood” (literal: “to frown at the scenery”), 走过场 (zǒu guò chǎng) “to go through the motions” (literal: “to exit the stage”).

These expressions differ in no essential way from 开门见山 (kāimén jiànshān) “clear and straightforward” or 杯弓蛇影 (bēi gōng shé yǐng) “to mistake something harmless for danger” (literal: “to mistake the shadow of a bow in a cup for a snake”). It follows that the number of characters

cannot be used as a criterion to classify fixed expressions [Lu, 1999; 55].

Scholars such as Wang Li and Qian Xuántóng emphasize that chengyu should originate from ancient works, stories, and legends, having deep historical roots. Indeed, many chengyu with undisputed status possess this feature. However, if chengyu were evaluated solely based on this criterion, then fixed expressions with limited usage, created in recent or modern times, yet widely recognized as chengyu, could not be included in this category.

Moreover, there are fixed expressions that fully meet the requirements of such phrases but are not classified as chengyu. This situation demands deeper analysis in identifying and categorizing chengyu.

For example: 三长两短 (sān cháng liǎng duǎn) “unexpected misfortune” (literal: “three long, two short”), 七上八下 (qī shàng bā xià) “to be nervous or uneasy” (literal: “seven up, eight down”), 指桑骂槐 (zhǐ sāng mà huái) “to criticize someone indirectly” (literal: “to point at a mulberry tree while cursing a locust tree”), 指手画脚 (zhǐ shǒu huà jiǎo) “to criticize and gesticulate” (literal: “to point with hands and draw with feet”), 没头没脑 (méi tóu méi nǎo) “to speak or act without reason” (literal: “without head and brain”), 瓮中捉鳖 (wèng zhōng zhuō biē) “to catch something easily” (literal: “to catch a soft-shelled turtle in a jar”), 金蝉脱壳 (jīn chán tuō qiào) “to escape under false pretenses” (literal: “a golden cicada shedding its shell”), 借尸还魂 (jiè shī huán hún) “to revive in another form” (literal: “to return to life using another’s corpse”).

These are difficult to exclude from the chengyu classification, though they may have been coined and developed in spoken language rather than in antiquity.

Further examples include: 有的放矢 (yǒu dì fàng shǐ) “to aim with purpose” (literal: “to shoot an arrow where there is a target”), 戴高帽 (dài gāo mào) “to flatter” (literal: “to wear a tall hat”), 遍地开花 (biàn dì kāi huā) “to flourish everywhere” (literal: “flowers blooming everywhere”), 下马看花 (xià mǎ kàn huā) “to inspect closely” (literal: “to dismount to look at flowers”), 鸡零狗碎 (jī líng gǒu suì) “trivial matters” (literal: “scattered chicken and broken dog”), 鸡毛蒜皮 (jī máo suàn pí) “insignificant” (literal: “chicken feathers and garlic skins”), 走后门 (zǒu hòu mén)

“to act illegally; to use underhanded means” (literal: “to enter through the back door”) [Sobiriy & Badalbayev, 2017; 164].

In modern times, excluding fixed expressions that lack deep historical roots from the chengyu category remains debatable, since this approach may not fully align with the actual concept of chengyu. Furthermore, it seems unscientific to disregard modern fixed expressions that share similar features with accepted chengyu such as 开门见山 (kāimén jiànshān) “clear and straightforward” (literal: “to see the mountain upon opening the door”). Therefore, an impartial approach should be taken toward such expressions in the process of identifying and classifying chengyu.

A deeper study of the chengyu concept—particularly the reasons why certain fixed expressions are recognized as chengyu by the general public—is crucial for determining their unique characteristics. One of the essential features of chengyu is their ability to convey figurative meaning. If a fixed expression contains both a direct (surface) meaning and a hidden meaning, with the latter being its true significance, it is likely to be accepted by most people as a chengyu.

The individual characters that make up a chengyu, when considered separately, convey a certain meaning, while their combination must express an entirely different, unified meaning. For example, in the expression 开门见山 (kāiménjiànshān) — “clear; straightforward” — the characters together combine two layers of meaning: the literal and the figurative, producing an overall message. There is no doubt that such an expression qualifies as a chengyu.

However, if we examine combinations such as 勇往直前 (yǒngwǎngzhíqián) — “to advance courageously” — or 不一定 (bùyíding) — “uncertain; not definite,” we find that they possess only a single meaning, and their constituent characters directly express that meaning. Therefore, it is logical to classify such combinations as non-chengyu.

The expression 小葱拌豆腐——一清二白 (xiǎocōng bàn dòufu — yìqīngèrbái) is an allegorical phrase composed of two parts. The first part refers to “a mixture of green onions and tofu,” while the second part means “clear and pure.” The fact that green onions contain both white and green parts, and tofu is entirely white, leads to the depiction of

colors as pure and distinct. Consequently, the phrase is used metaphorically to describe a person who is clear-minded and insightful. Such expressions do not belong to the chengyu category but are classified as xiehouyu.

Similarly, 诸如此类 (zhūrúcǐlèi) — “and so on; such things” — carries only one meaning and lacks the feature of dual meaning, which distinguishes it from chengyu. It instead corresponds to another type of fixed expression — guanyongyu [Chang, 1991; 58].

Thus, the presence of both literal and figurative meanings can be recognized as a key distinguishing feature of chengyu. It is precisely this feature that allows chengyu to be differentiated from other types of fixed expressions. In particular, distinguishing chengyu from guanyongyu should be regarded as an important scholarly task in this field.

Chengyu are frequently found in written literature, whereas guanyongyu are more common in folk oral traditions. In the past, chengyu were used primarily by the nobility, officials, and the educated elite. They were often expressed in wenyan (classical Chinese). Since ordinary people did not fully understand wenyan, they had difficulty comprehending chengyu. Guanyongyu, on the other hand, were widely used in everyday life. Their concise and simple nature made them easily understood by the general public, allowing for effortless use in spoken language [Akimov, 2022; 22].

Furthermore, when we analyze their internal structural patterns, we find that the construction of chengyu in modern Chinese also has distinctive features. First, most chengyu were formed in ancient times, and as lexical units of that era, they have gradually become less compatible with modern linguistic requirements. Some have retained their original structure unchanged over time, resulting in forms that are no longer used in contemporary Chinese and appear archaic. Consequently, many chengyu are perceived today as unusual constructions. Examples include: 草管人命 (cǎoguǎnrénmìng) — “to be careless” (literally: “to manage with grass”), 信口雌黄 (xìnkǒucíhuáng) — “to speak recklessly” (literally: “to put yellow pigment into one’s mouth”), 首鼠两端 (shǒushǔliǎngduān) — “to be indecisive” (literally: “one mouse, two tails”), 讳莫如深 (huìmòrúshēn) — “to keep a secret” (literally: “to bury the secret deep”), 脍炙人口 (kuàijiǔrénkǒu) — “to please everyone” (literally:

“medicine suitable for everyone”), and others. The structure of these chengyu is based on ancient linguistic principles.

Second, chengyu are usually composed of several syllables, forming compact and concise expressions. Their meaning often encapsulates events, stories, or complex phenomena, which requires the most succinct form possible. For this reason, auxiliary words are generally omitted, resulting in structures that were distinctive even in antiquity. Examples include: 功败垂成 (gōngbàichuíchéng) — “to fail at the last moment” (literally: “success ruined when it is nearly achieved”), 邯郸学步 (hándānxuébù) — “to lose one’s own abilities while imitating others,” 汗马功劳 (hànmǎgōngláo) — “to render great service” (literally: “to sweat on horseback”), 沧海桑田 (cānghǎisāngtián) — “drastic changes over time” (literally: “the blue sea turns into mulberry fields”), 杯水车薪 (bēishuǐ chēxīn) — “a drop in the bucket” (literally: “a cup of water against a cartload of firewood”), 车水马龙 (chēshuǐmǎlóng) — “heavy traffic; bustling streets” (literally: “a stream of carts and a dragon of horses”), 十年寒窗 (shíniánhánchuāng) — “to study diligently for years” (literally: “ten years by a cold window”), and others. In these examples, numerous auxiliary words are omitted — a phenomenon rarely encountered even in ancient written texts [Liu, 1995; 74].

However, among the many chengyu inherited from ancient times, there are also numerous cases in which no structural difference exists between ancient and modern chengyu. The syntactic patterns employed in these idioms are still present in modern Chinese, which explains their continued widespread use. Furthermore, when examining chengyu formed in the modern era, one can identify structural patterns that reflect contemporary linguistic forms.

Guanyongyu (惯用语) Within the category of fixed expressions, guanyongyu are units that have a definite structure, lack dual meaning, and usually express only one concept. Below, we examine several examples of fixed expressions. On the basis of these examples, it is possible to determine the system of fixed expressions that have one or two meanings and to distinguish guanyongyu from them.

少见多怪 (shǎojiànduōguài) — “unaccustomed; inexperienced” (literally: “seeing little, one finds much strange”), 不自量力 (búzìliànglì) — “to overestimate

oneself,” 直截了当 (zhíjiéliǎodàng) — “straightforward; frank” [Li, 1996; 200]

与虎谋皮 (yǔhǔmóupí) — “to attempt the impossible” (literally: “to ask a tiger for its skin”), 蜀犬吠日 (shǔquǎnfèirì) — “to be surprised by the obvious” (literally: “the Sichuan dog barks at the sun” — because in Sichuan the sun is often hidden by mountains and clouds), 开门见山 (kāiménjiànshān) — “to get straight to the point” (literally: “open the door and see the mountain”) [Li, 1996; 111]

老鸱屁股上插孔雀毛—充洋像 (lǎoquē pìgushàng chā kǒngquémáo – chōngyángxiàng) — “an old magpie with peacock feathers — pretending to be exotic,” 水仙花不开—装蒜 (shuǐxiānhuā bùkāi – zhuāngsuàn) — “daffodils don’t bloom — playing the fool” (literally: “disguising oneself as garlic when daffodils don’t bloom”) [Xu, 2000; 101]

塔里木盆地 (tǎlīmù péndì) — “Tarim Basin,” 珠江三角洲 (Zhūjiāng sānjiǎozhōu) — “Pearl River Delta,” 南京路 (Nánjīng Lù) — “Nanjing Road” [Luo, 1980; 197]

扩大再生产 (kuòdà zàishēngchǎn) — “expanded reproduction,” 针刺麻醉 (zhēncì mázuì) — “acupuncture anesthesia,” 光合作用 (guānghé zuòyòng) — “photosynthesis,” 万有引力 (wànyǒu yǐnlì) — “universal gravitation”

一瞥 (yìpiē) — “a glance,” 不消说 (bùxiāoshuō) — “it goes without saying,” 不一定 (bùyíding) — “uncertain; not definite,” 不堪 (bùkān) — “cannot bear; unbearable” [Liu, 1995; 104]

The expressions in the second row are chengyu, as they exhibit dual meaning. The expressions in the first row are guanyongyu, which do not possess dual meaning and thus differ from those in the second row. The expressions in the third row are xiehouyu, in which only one part contains dual meaning. The expressions in the fourth row are proper nouns, primarily used to denote the names of physical entities.

The units in the first row convey meaning based on the semantics of the characters, which makes it possible to distinguish them from the units in the third row. The units in the fifth row are terms that belong to specific scientific,

technical, or professional fields. The units in the sixth row are relatively less fixed, and their components can be replaced with other units. When comparing the units in the first row with those in the sixth row, we find that it is possible to replace the elements of the sixth-row units; however, such substitutions are not applied to the units in the first row.

Analyzing the above examples, we can observe that in modern Chinese, guanyongyu expressions are not actively being formed. As components of fixed expressions, guanyongyu display their unique features with difficulty. Their distinctive characteristics are also rarely visible in practice, and the ability to clearly distinguish them from other fixed expressions remains limited.

Guanyongyu are a mirror of a nation’s culture, reflecting its worldview and spiritual state. By studying the meaning of guanyongyu, we can gain insight into the worldview and spiritual condition of that nation. As mentioned above, guanyongyu are a branch of phraseology and are considered one of the most important linguistic units of modern Chinese. They are deeply embedded in the daily life of the Chinese people, occupying an irreplaceable place in their everyday speech. One of the most important features of Chinese guanyongyu is their ability to convey profound meanings with only a few words. In addition to being vivid and expressive, guanyongyu often carry underlying meanings, sometimes with humorous overtones. [Sobiriy & Badalbayev, 2017, p. 5]

At first glance, guanyongyu possess unique, singular, and identifiable features as a type of unit within fixed expressions. This characteristic is regarded as a general property. However, not every feature within a guanyongyu may be interpreted as unique; some may also appear in other fixed expressions. Nevertheless, all such features manifest themselves within the guanyongyu system.

The broad scope of guanyongyu features and the objective presence of similar characteristics across different categories of fixed expressions form the basis for classifying guanyongyu as a distinct type of fixed expression. At the same time, this helps to identify both the similarities and differences between guanyongyu and other fixed expressions.

It is necessary to study the features of guanyongyu more deeply. On the surface, their uniqueness makes it possible to classify them into types. Although conventional

methods are useful, in practice this process can sometimes present difficulties.

When speaking of *guanyongyu*, it is impossible not to mention the scholarly work of Li Yamei. *Guanyongyu* are one of the most interesting and complex components of the Chinese lexicon. Their appeal lies in the fact that each phrase consists of several characters and conveys a deep meaning; their complexity lies in the difficulty of finding equivalent forms during translation into foreign languages. [Li Yamei, 2011, p. 13]

Regarding the distinction between *guanyongyu* and *chengyu* in Chinese, the common view that *chengyu* are composed of four characters and *guanyongyu* are relatively more dynamic may not be entirely correct. As noted above, for an expression to qualify as a *chengyu*, it must have been historically formed, possess a fixed structure, and consist of four characters (for example: 破釜沉舟 (*pòfǔchénzhōu*, “to fight to the end”), 鹤立鸡群 (*hèlìjīqún*, “to stand out from others”), 刻舟求剑 (*kèzhōuqiújiàn*, “to take the wrong approach”). However, there are also expressions with more than four characters, such as 出淤泥而不染 (*chūyūníérbùrǎn*, “to emerge unstained from the mud”). Considering their quantitative increase, can such expressions be classified as *guanyongyu*?

The boundary between *chengyu* and *guanyongyu* is not entirely clear. As a result of historical development, if we classify four-character expressions as *chengyu*, would it be justified to exclude multi-character fixed expressions with dual meanings from *chengyu* without reason? The ability to distinguish two-meaning *chengyu* from *guanyongyu* is more apparent when looking at the number of characters, which also highlights their differing features. Thus, when identifying the distinction between *guanyongyu* and *chengyu*, it is necessary to consider the number of characters, meaning, and historical development.

It is not entirely correct to include newly formed four-character fixed expressions in the category of *guanyongyu*. Classifying fixed expressions with more than four characters as *guanyongyu* based solely on formal characteristics—regardless of their significant two-layered ideographic properties—can be misleading. Such expressions are often composed of three-character structures, which, according to some, should be classified as *guanyongyu*. These expressions are considered part of *guanyongyu* because they have a relatively short historical background, unlike *chengyu*. However, this view may not

be entirely accurate. In fact, in modern spoken Chinese, three-character expressions are used more frequently than four-character ones. In written Chinese, however, there are specific norms for using such units. The oral or written form of a fixed expression should not be the sole factor in its classification. It is also important to consider that expressions formed in the present may, over time, become part of the classical lexicon.

The claim that fixed expressions naturally transform into *chengyu* over the course of years and centuries does not have a solid scientific basis. In determining the difference between *chengyu* and *guanyongyu*, it is not only the factors of time or their emergence among the people that matter, but also their structure, historical development, and semantic layers.

Chengyu are generally classified as fixed expressions consisting of four characters, often ancient, with a long history, bound to a specific structure and traditional meaning. In this regard, modern fixed expressions such as 走后门 (*zǒuhòumén*, “illegal; underhanded”), 敲竹杠 (*qiāozhúgàng*, “to cheat; to swindle”), as well as 三天打鱼两天晒网 (*sāntiān dǎyú liǎngtiān shàiwǎng*, “to work one day and rest two”), and 牵一发而动全身 (*qiānyīfà ér dòng quánshēn*, “pull one hair and the whole body trembles”), due to their meanings and the process of their formation, can be classified as *guanyongyu*.

Although these expressions may be considered *guanyongyu* due to their widespread usage and presence in modern spoken language, they do not yet possess sufficient historical grounding to be classified as *chengyu*. The fact that they do not consist of four characters, or that they originated among the people, is not itself a sufficient basis for classification as *guanyongyu*. When determining the difference between *chengyu* and *guanyongyu*, one must conduct a deeper analysis of their historical development, formation process, structure, and traditional usage. At the same time, there is also the possibility that such units may in the future be classified as *chengyu*. Therefore, classifying modern fixed expressions as *guanyongyu* or *chengyu* solely based on their structure is not correct; rather, their historical and semantic development should be taken into account [Liu, 1995; 115].

It should be acknowledged that *guanyongyu* do not possess any uniquely distinctive positive features within the category of fixed expressions. Their meanings, structures, and syllabic patterns may not differ significantly from

those of *chengyu*. In contrast, *chengyu* often carry polysemy, layered meanings, and features of terms or proper names, which distinguish them from *guanyongyu*.

If we remove the distinctive features of fixed expressions, the remainder can be classified as *guanyongyu*. They not only conform to linguistic principles and have a specific scope of use, but also fit into communicative processes. In understanding the difference between *guanyongyu* and *chengyu*, many regard them as the core of fixed expressions.

In fact, in modern China, a large portion of *guanyongyu* were formed in ancient times and have been in use since then. Since most of them appear in classical texts, they can be regarded as having a classical character. At the same time, the use of *guanyongyu* in a modern context—based on their adaptable and flexible nature—facilitates their classification.

Examples include: 后生可畏 (*hòushēng kěwèi*, “the younger generation may surpass the older”) — from Lunyu Zihan. 明哲保身 (*míngzhé bǎoshēn*, “to protect oneself wisely”) — from Shijing. 厉兵秣马 (*lìbīng zhūmǎ*, “full military preparedness”) — from Zuochuan – Sigong, Year Thirty-Three. 井井有条 (*jǐngjǐng yǒu tiáo*, “orderly”) — literally “wells in neat rows,” from Sunzi’s Confucianism. 开宗明义 (*kāizōng míngyì*, “to state the main point at the outset”) — from Xiaojing. 千虑一得 (*qiān lǜ yī dé*, “even a fool may occasionally be right”) — literally “one gain in a thousand thoughts,” from Sima Qian’s Historical Records. 气息奄奄 (*qìxī yǎnyǎn*, “at death’s door”) — from Limin’s Chengyi Table.

Apart from such units with written sources, most other *guanyongyu* created in ancient times and still in use today originated in spoken language. This corresponds exactly to what we have just discussed. The fixed expressions used in particular regions and times have, over time, naturally become classics, retaining their relevance while blending into modern language.

From a historical perspective, fixed expressions are often products of the organic processes of cultural and linguistic development. Thus, *guanyongyu*—especially those without or with few appearances in written sources—are typically the product of oral speech. These units evolve over time, adapting to new stages of the language, and also assist in classifying fixed expressions taken from classical

texts.

Examples: 睹物思人 (*dǔwù sīrén*, “to be reminded of someone upon seeing an object”), 恩将仇报 (*ēn jiāng chóubào*, “to repay kindness with enmity”), 多此一举 (*duō cǐ yì jǔ*, “to take unnecessary action”), 耳闻目睹 (*ěr wén mù dǔ*, “to hear with one’s ears and see with one’s eyes”), 反复无常 (*fǎnfù wúcháng*, “capricious; unpredictable”), 措手不及 (*cuòshǒu bùjí*, “to be caught unprepared”), 丰功伟绩 (*fēnggōng wěijì*, “great achievements”), 扶老携幼 (*fú lǎo xié yòu*, “to assist the elderly and care for the young”), 改朝换代 (*gǎi cháo huàn dài*, “a change of dynasty or regime”), 感激零涕 (*gǎnjī língtì*, “to be deeply moved; in tears”), 更深人静 (*gèng shēn rén jìng*, “in the dead of night”), 功德无量 (*gōngdé wúliàng*, “immeasurable merit”), 两败俱伤 (*liǎng bài jù shāng*, “mutual destruction”) [Lu, 1999; 98].

From ancient times to the present, just as *chengyu* have been continuously formed, *guanyongyu* have also been created without interruption over the centuries. In modern Chinese, the number of *guanyongyu* formed is significantly greater than in the classical period. The main reason may be that, unlike *chengyu*, *guanyongyu* lack polysemy and deep metaphor, are relatively simple, and adapt more easily in society. With their clear and straightforward structure, *guanyongyu* are widely used in various contexts, allowing them to enter modern language more quickly and easily.

Some examples of modern local *guanyongyu*, which are widely used in contemporary language and have a simple structure yet distinctive meaning, effectively serving in daily communication: 自由恋爱 (*zìyóu liàn'ài*, “free love”), 粗制滥造 (*cūzhì lànzào*, “sloppily made”), 南征北战 (*nán zhēng běi zhàn*, “to fight in all directions”), 缺吃少穿 (*quē chī shǎo chuān*, “poverty; lacking food and clothing”), 丰富多彩 (*fēngfù duōcǎi*, “rich and colorful”), 只字不提 (*zhīzì bù tí*, “not to mention a single word”), 风雨不透 (*fēngyǔ bù tòu*, “air can’t pass through; overcrowded”), 言论自由 (*yánlùn zìyóu*, “freedom of speech”), 按劳分配 (*àn láo fēnpèi*, “distribution according to labor”), 经济特区 (*jīngjì tèqū*, “special economic zone”), 精神文明 (*jīngshén wénmíng*, “spiritual civilization”) [Lu, 1999; 98].

CONCLUSION

Fixed expressions are among the complex components of the Chinese language. Studying and researching them is one of the main tasks facing linguists. We have provided enough examples above to determine which unit belongs to which type of fixed expression. Thus, the notion that “if it consists of four characters, it is chengyu, if three, it is guanyongyu” does not always hold in practice. We have analyzed chengyu consisting of more than four characters, as well as guanyongyu made up of more than three characters.

When encountering chengyu and guanyongyu in texts, how can we distinguish between them? Chengyu can sometimes represent an entire sentence, and in some cases, the speaker may use only the chengyu itself. However, even if an expression consists of four characters, it cannot be recognized as chengyu if it does not meet chengyu criteria. Guanyongyu, by contrast, are distinguished by their dual meaning. In cases where their literal meaning does not match the sentence context, they can be identified as guanyongyu.

Therefore, based on the above characteristics, we must further strengthen our research in this area of linguistics. Such scholarly investigations are crucial for a deeper understanding of the language and for analyzing its processes of development.

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