

LANGUAGE MEMES IN CHINESE BLESSING TEXTED MESSAGES*

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ABSTRACT

As a form of computer-mediated communication, texting blessing messages is prevalent in the modern Chinese society. This paper analyzes a collection of Chinese blessing texted message in light of Meme Theory. It is argued that certain patterns can be recognized for the generation of these messages, both at the linguistic and at the socio-psychological level. The language memes in Chinese blessing texted messages could be classified as genotypes and phenotypes adapted to the communicators' socio-psychological motivations of humor, modernity, revering the traditional culture and emotions.

Key words: Chinese, texted messages, Meme Theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the year 2000, text messaging has become an ordinary part of people's lives around the world, taking the form of written computer-mediated communication, such as email, instant messaging, discussion forums or written communication on social networks (Crystal 2008). In China, the constant escalation of information technology in the modern era promoted the mobile phone as the "fifth media", supplementing the traditional television and radio: sending texted messages is a common means of communication among the Chinese people today. At the time of official holidays, it is common practice for Chinese individuals to send blessing messages in order to assert their relational functions (Thurlow & Brown 2003) by extending their wishes, strengthening affiliations and striving for more wholesome interpersonal relationships. In the process of sending and receiving blessing messages on holidays, many phrases and expressions inevitably gain popularity and are frequently used by masses of senders, becoming **language memes**.

The exploration of language memes in blessing texted messages and the socio-psychological motivations behind their popularity can shed light on the linguistic features of communication mediated by mobile devices and on the way in which this medium generates a written-communication register of its own (Ravid & Tolchinsky 2002). Adopting the framework

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of the **Meme Theory** developed in Dawkins (1976), this paper aims to identify the types of language memes that arise in Chinese blessing texted messages, as well as the socio-psychological motivations underlying the relevant memes frames.

2. MEME THEORY

Dawkins (1976) put forth the Meme Theory, whereby the concept of meme is based on the Ancient Greek verb *mīmēma* “something imitated”. Dawkins adapts this concept to the following definition: meme = any idea, behavior, or skill that can be transferred from one person to another by imitation: stories, fashions, inventions, recipes, songs and ways of plowing a field or throwing a baseball or making a sculpture. Brodie (1996) argues that a meme is a contagious idea which duplicates like a virus, being transmitted from mind to mind. Furthermore, Blackmore (1999) claims that just as the design of our bodies can be understood only in terms of natural selection, so the design of our minds can be understood only in terms of memetic selection.

Memes are closely related to language. As cultural genes, memes rely on various carriers for their existence, among which language is of outmost importance. The replication and transmission of memes, as well as the linguistic variations generated during this process, enrich and develop the language, since the replication of language memes is not merely a repetition of their forms and meanings but rather their re-creation by speakers, which results in variations and deviations.

In modern society, the production and proliferation of language memes is greatly facilitated by the aid of mobile technology, which is of dual traits of private and massive communication. In this asynchronous remote communication, speakers/senders can instantly and conveniently edit, revise and transfer the messages they receive to the next receiver, which renders the memes and their variations possible. This is the context in which I shall explore, in the next section, the forms of language memes in Chinese blessing texted messages.¹

3. FORMS OF LANGUAGE MEMES IN CHINESE BLESSING TEXTED MESSAGES

The constant transmission of texted messages among people results in the appearance of numerous language memes competing with each other. However, only the vigorous memes can survive and persist. He (2005) points out that there are two ways for memes to be replicated and transmitted: (i) through memetic genotype, whereby the same core content is inherited in various forms, and (ii) through memetic phenotype, whereby the same syntactic/structural pattern is filled with different lexical contents.

3.1. Genotypes

Genotype memes are mainly found in phonology and lexicon: speakers change the original words by replacing them with other homonyms to make it novel and humorous. These expressions are meant to catch the reader’s attention and thus are more likely to become strong memes.

¹ The blessing texted messages in this paper were collected from such popular Chinese websites as www.sina.com and www.sohu.com and the like.

- (1) I have not seen my elderly family members for a long time and I miss them all the time. My profuse regards and wishes for them extend far. On the advent of the “Double Ninth” Festival I wish, in advance, to all the senior citizens, a happy festival and everlasting happiness.

(家里的老人好“九”不见，我心里“九九”想念，问候直上“九”霄，祝福依然“九”远。在重阳佳节即将到来之际，预祝天下老人重阳节快乐，幸福长“九”。)

Jiālǐ de lǎorén hǎo “jiǔ” bújiàn, wǒ xīnlǐ “jiǔjiǔ” xiǎngniàn, wèn hòu zhí shàng “jiǔ” yuǎn. zài Chóngyáng jié qīng lái zhī jì, yù zhù tiānxià lǎorén Chóngyáng jié kuàilè, xìnfú cháng “jiǔ”.

In the above example, the number “jiǔ” (nine “九”) is the homonym of the character “jiǔ” (for a long time, always “久”) which establishes a connection between the specific date of the Double Ninth Festival in China (traditional Chinese festival for the elderly members on the ninth of September of Lunar Calendar) and the meaning of durability of time. Hence, the language meme “jiǔ” assigns the Chinese character a special lexical connotation: both the particular date of the festival and wishes for the health and longevity of the senior members of the society.

Other genotypes are lexical memes stored in human brain in the form of “frames” (Minsky 1975; Fillmore 1982) that can be activated at any time. Senders appeal to the encyclopedic knowledge of the receiver by using household names such as celebrity names, place names or product brands familiar to the receiver. By making these proper names salient in the receiver’s mind, the sender enables these memes, which become potent and more likely to be replicated.

- (2) The New Year is coming. I would like to wish you a happy New Year in advance in case my blessings fail to be received via text-message highway since it is not as strong as a *Hummer*, as speedy as a *Benz*, as grand as a *BMW*, as elegant as an *Audi* and as imposing as a *Lincoln*.

(新年快到了，我怕我的祝福没有悍马的力度，奔驰的速度，宝马的气度，奥迪的风度，林肯的大度，挤不上短信的高速公路，所以让祝福提前上路，提前祝你新年快乐!)

Xīnnián kuài dào le, wǒ pà wǒ de zhùfú méiyǒu Hànmǎ de lìdù, Bēnchí de sùdù, Bǎomǎ de qìdù, Aodì de fēngdù, Línkǎn de dàdù, jǐ búshàng duǎnxìn de gāosù gōnglù, suǒyǐ ràng zhùfú tíqián shànglù, tíqián zhù nǐ xīnnián kuàilè!

In example (2) many familiar brands of automobiles are used, and their specific properties stick in the mind of the receiver, distinguishing them as powerful memes.

3.2. Phenotypes

Phenotypes are mainly memes produced by copying specific syntactic patterns underlying sentences or specific paragraphs. Senders may adopt one of these underlying patterns to achieve accessibility to the receiver’s mind habits, and thus ensure emphasis and salience for the new lexical contents.

- (3) Address to all national citizens in the coming New Year (of the Ox): Powerful nation and formidable motherland, on the occasion of the glorious reform I hereby compose a poem:

gently I come, just as gently as the Mouse has left / I wave my hoofs / sprinkle my wishes all over the sky! /

(《牛在新年告全国人民书》：值此改革辉煌民族坚强祖国强大之际，赋诗一首：轻轻的我来了，正如鼠轻轻的走，我挥一挥牛蹄，扬起满天祝福！)

Niú zài xīnnián gào quánguó rénmin shū: zhí cǐ gǎigé huīhuáng mínzú jiǎnqiáng zǔguó
qiángdà zhī jǐ, fùshī yìshǒu: qīngqīng de wǒ lái le, zhèngrú Shǔ qīngqīng de zǒu, wǒ
huī yīhuī niútí, yángqǐ mǎntiān zhùfú!

In the above example, the underlying structural frame comes from the famous poem Saying Goodbye to Cambridge Again by the modern Chinese poet Xu Zhimo. The popularity of the original verses ensure a productive phenotype meme. The event captured in the original poem is that the poet leaves Cambridge University to return to China. That is replaced here by the lapse of the Mouse Year and the coming of the Ox Year in Chinese calendar, which could actually be re-adjusted (re-worded) to suit the advent of every New Year. It also gives a poetic touch to the message and creates a lasting impression on each ordinary Chinese by activating the literary knowledge stored in their mind.

Apart from the sentence pattern, senders also replicate the whole format of poems, advertisements, or even political documents to bring certain pragmatic effects.

- (4) The Analects on the New Year: Aren't we happy to pay New Year visits just by texting messages?/Is there any gentleman to whom you do not give a red packet as a gift? /Are there any good friends who miss each other and do not send regards to each other? /Confucius said: A ringing cell phone is more precious than gold. With my best wishes.

(新春《论语》：短信拜年，不亦乐乎？不送红包，不亦君子乎？情谊时习之，问候常达之，不亦挚友乎？子曰：手机一响，胜过黄金万两，此致敬礼！)

Xīnchūn Lùnyǔ: duǎnxīn bàinián, búyì lè hū? Búsòng hóngbāo, búyì jūnzǐ hū? Qīngyì
shí xí zhī, wèn hòu cháng dázhī, búyì zhìyǒu hū? Zǐ yuē: shǒujī yì xiǎng, shèngguò
huángjīn wànlǎng, cǐ zhì jǐnlǐ!

- (5) Think of me, do not neglect me. Care about me, do not ignore me. Compliment me, do not criticize me. Treat me to dinners, do not take advantage of me. Always keep the doctrine “Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces” in mind. Happy New Year!

(以想念我为荣，以忽略我为耻；以关心我为荣，以不理我为耻；以赞美我为荣，以批评我为耻；以请我吃饭为荣，以占我便宜为耻。谨记八荣八耻，元旦快乐！)

Yǐ xiǎngniàn wǒ wéi róng, yǐ hūlùè wǒ wéi chǐ; Yǐ guānxīn wǒ wéi róng, yǐ bùyǐ wǒ wéi chǐ; yǐ zǎnměi wǒ wéi róng, yǐ pīpīng wǒ wéi chǐ; yǐ qīngwǒ chīfàn wéi róng, yǐ zhàn wǒ piányi wéi chǐ. Jǐn jì “bāróng bāchǐ”, yuándàn kuàilè!

Example (4) borrows the layout of Confucius' classic Analects, and example (5) adopts the whole format of the political document “Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces” issued by the Chinese government to advocate the morality in modern Chinese society. The familiar structural organization of these two texts provides a sharp contrast between their original serious academic or political contents and the casual and merry New Year wishes, which thus yield a humorous effect. This is particularly obvious when senders replicate the blue-prints of well-known addressing formulae, with their distinctive linguistic features. For example:

- (6) Dear, the Dragon Year is coming! You could have all the commodities in our shop for free! Dear, what you can get from our shop includes coziness and contentment, happiness and health, constant success as well as enormous wealth! All the commodities have already been dispatched to you, dear, please check and receive your package. And all of them were sent to you without an extra delivery charge. Dear! Please give us the five stars and favorable comments in your online evaluation of our service!
 (亲, 到龙年了哦! 本店所有商品一律免费送你哦! 亲, 本店赠送您的有温馨与如意, 有快乐和健康, 有步步高升、财源滚滚哦! 货已经发给你了哦, 亲, 请注意查收哦! 既可收藏, 也可转发哦, 一律免费且包邮哦, 亲! 全5分哦! 给好评哦!)
 Qīn, dào Lóng nián le o! Běndiàn suǒyǒu shāngpǐn yīlǜ miǎnfèi sòng nǐ o! Qīn, běndiàn zèngsòng nǐde yǒu wēnxīn yǔ rúyì, yǒu kuàilè hé jiànkāng, yǒu bùbù gāoshēng cáiyuán gǔngǔn o! Huò yǐjīng fā gěinǐ le o, qīn, zhùyì cháchōu o! Jì kě shōucáng, yě kě zhuǎnfā o, yīlǜ miǎnfèi qiě bāoyóu o, qīn! Quán 5 fēn o! Gěi hǎopíng o!

In example (6) Qin ‘Dear’ is the general form of address to the buyer, while ‘five stars’ is the sellers’ request for the customer’s favorable online evaluation of their service. Over the last two decades, online shopping became a wide spread option in China, especially with “Taobao”, one of the most popular online shopping websites. Example (6) replicates their sales pitch for promoting their commodities, which enhances the receivers’ experience of shopping online and hence quickly becomes a meme in communication.

To conclude, in Chinese, a language meme arises from manipulations in the area of homophony (at phonological and/or lexical level), homography (writing sign) or as a parody of widely circulated literary productions or political discourse, by filling their syntactic frames with novel lexical contents.

4. SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATIONS

The production of a language meme does not guarantee its survival. As a factor of replication, the existence of linguistic memes conforms to the principle of natural selection in which memes compete with one another, and those more adapted to the psychological demands of the receivers will be copied and spread. In this section the socio-psychological motivations behind the strong memes in Chinese blessing texted messages will be explored.

4.1. Humor

The fast pace of living in modern China makes people more and more vulnerable to the pressure of industrialization and modernization, which involves a stressful lifestyle. Thus, a good selling point for a language meme is to address the people’s need for relaxation, especially on holidays, through humorous remarks that ease the pressure in various aspects of life. Hence, the linguistic tools mentioned in the previous section must be combined with humorous ideas, as in Example (7) and (8).

- (7) Here is the Imperial Edict for you. In compliance with Heaven’s decree, the Emperor said: in the forthcoming autumn with its crispy air and clear sky, I hereby send you, my dear

Subordinate, a message wishing you in advance a healthy, carefree, and happy day every day, for this this autumn full of osmanthus scent! - By the emperor himself.

(圣旨到, 奉天承运, 皇帝诏曰: 秋天来到, 气爽天高, 特赐发短信一条, 预祝爱卿在丹桂飘香的日子里身体康健, 烦恼全消, 每天保持乐陶陶! 钦此!)

Shèngzhǐ dào, fèngtiān chéngyùn, huángdìzhào yuē: qiūtiān láidào, qìshuǎng tiāngāo, tècǐ fā duǎnxìn yìtiáo, yùzhù àiqīn zài dānguīpiāoxiāng de rìzì lìshēntǐ kāngjiàn, fǎnnǎo quánxiāo, měitiān bǎochí lètáotáo! Qīncǐ!

- (8) Robbery! Freeze! Hands up! We don't need your money or women. Give us all your troubles. Don't cry! Keep quiet! Leave all your grief and agony. You know our intention: we need you to be happy and laugh every day.

(打劫, 不许动, 举起手来! 不劫财, 不劫色, 烦恼通通拿过来; 不许喊, 不许叫, 悲伤痛苦留下来。我的用意你明白, 目的就是要你天天乐开怀。)

Dǎjié, bùxǔ dòng, jǔqǐ shǒu lái! Bù jiécái, bù jiésè, fǎnnǎo tōngtōng ná guò lái; Bùxǔ hǎn, bùxǔ jiào, bēishāng tòngkǔ liú xià lái. Wǒde yòngyì nǐ míngbai, mùdì jiùshì yào nǐ tiāntiān lè kāihuái.

Example (7) replicates the underlying structure of an imperial edict from feudal China but inserts with the sender's wishes in it. It violates the maxim of quality yet the receiver will not be offended by the condescending tone of the sender. In example (8) the sender adopts the tone of a hijacker with the illocutionary force of wishing. The memes combine two contrasted speech acts to create the humorous effect of dispelling the receivers' troubles and annoyance in their lives.

4.2. Modernity

Gao & Yuan (2005) argued that the use of Chinese internet language results not only in serving the purpose of information in communication, but also, perhaps more importantly, in constructing a modern identity. In today's China, festivals are more and more westernized, due to the internet, and many holidays that are usually celebrated in the west are now very popular among the Chinese, particularly the members of the young generation, who want to establish their identities as more modernized and socially open-minded. For example, young people try to make their messages more westernized by integrating English letters or words, numbers, symbols and graphics seen on the internet.

- (9) My wishes for you: a pocket full of money, a happy mood at all times, a sunny day every day, childish joy, a life full of luck. Happy New Year!

(祝你: 兜儿里装满 money, 心情总是 happy, 每天都很 sunny, 快乐得像个 baby, 一生一世都那么 lucky, 新年快乐!)

Zhùní: dōu' er lǐ zhuānmǎn money, xīnqíng zǒng shì happy, měitiān dōu hěn sunny, kuàilè de xiàng gè baby, yìshēng yìshì dōu nàme lucky, xīnnián kuàilè!

- (10) (---) you will get wrinkles when angry, (^_^) you will be younger when happy, (#-#) your health will suffer if you work overnight, (-o -) sufficient sleep will make you vigorous. So don't forget to have a good rest after work!

((~)) 生气会长皱纹, (^_^) 开心才会变年轻, (#-#) 熬夜工作很伤身, (-.-) 充足睡眠一身轻, 愿你工作之余, 不忘好好休息!)

((~)) Shēnqì huì zhǎng zhòuwén, (^_^) kāixīn cái huì biàn niánqīng, (#-#) áoyè gōngzuò hěn shāngshēn, (-.-) chōngzú shuimián yìshēn qīng, yuàn nǐ gōngzuò zhī yú, búwàng hǎohǎo xiūxi!

With the westernization of Chinese society code-mixing of Chinese and English languages is prevalent in blessing texted messages especially among youngsters illiterate of English to establish their image as modern individuals, as in example (9). In example (10) there are emoticons from internet that compensate for the lack of language communication, especially for use in text messaging. By adopting these symbols and graphics, the senders intend to construct their identity as a capable internet user.

4.3. Revering the traditional culture

According to Blackmore (1999), in memetic theory, culture is an aggregate of many different meme sets or memplexes shared by the majority of a population. The copying and spread of memes related to cultural elements contribute to its transmission and preservation. In China the new tendency for reviving the traditional culture constitutes another mindset for replicating the language memes in texting messages during traditional festivals, which constitute an integral part of Chinese culture.

- (11) Sunlight streams on the New Year Day / From high above, happiness hanging above us/The river steadily plunges/three thousand feet of sparkling water / Happiness pouring down from heaven // Looking from infront it looks like health / Looking from behind it looks like security / And from any angle it looks like luck / You could not understand what the New Year is about / unless you receive my message---Happy New Year!

(日照元旦生紫烟, 遥看幸福挂前方, 飞流直下三千尺, 疑是快乐落九天。横看健康竖平安, 远近高低各好运, 不识元旦真面目, 只缘未收我短信。元旦快乐!)

Rì zhào Yuándàn shēng zǐyān/yáokàn xìngfú guà qiánfāng/fēiliú zhíxià sānqiān chī/yí shì kuàilè luò jiǔtiān/héngkàn jiànkāng shù píng' ān/yuánjì n gāodī gè hǎoyùn/bùshí Yuándàn zhēn miànmù/zhī yuán wèi shōu wǒ duǎnxìn/Yuándàn kuàilè!

- (12) I stole the nectar from the Heavenly Queen, I embezzled the abundantriches from the God of Wealth, I abducted a long life from the God of Longevity and I stole happiness and health from Buddha to bake in all sincerity a rare moon cake for all my dear clients and to wish them a happy Mid-Autumn Festival!

(偷得王母的玉液琼浆, 盗来财神的财源兴旺, 拐得寿星老的万寿无疆, 劫来菩萨的幸福安康, 用真诚烘焙成稀世月饼, 送予敬爱的客户朋友, 愿中秋节快乐。)

Tōudé Wángmǔ de yùyè qióngjiāng, dào lái Cáishén de cáiyuán xīngwàng, guō dé Shòuxīnglǎo de wànshòuwújiāng, jié lái Púsa de xìngfú ānkāng, yòng zhēnchéng hōngbèi chéng xīshì yuèbǐng, sòngyǔ jìng' ài de kèhù péngyǒu, yuàn Zhōngqiūjié kuàilè.)

Example (11) brings the combined memes of two Chinese poems: Waterfall at Lushan Mountain by Li Bai and Inscription on the Wall of Xilin Temple by Su Shi. These ancient seven-character poems are characterized by antithesis and tonal rhymes, which exalt the joyous atmosphere of the traditional festival. In example (12), the mythological figures in Chinese folk culture are mentioned to highlight how special the moon cake is, therefore, how special the clients are, thus ensuring the effectiveness of the sender's wishes of wealth and prosperity.

4.4. Emotions

Heath (2001) argues that the reason why some memes get replicated is that they elicit common emotional reactions in people. This is especially true for a typical oriental culture where the relations between the members of society are largely dependent on emotional bonds. In China, one major aim for sending messages during festivals is to convey the sender's feelings and establish harmonious interpersonal relationships. Thus the patterns and phrasing that manage to most effectively arouse the receiver's emotions and strengthen their ties with the sender prevail and survive by being transferred from one speaker to another. See the examples below:

- (13) I'm sending you a dish especially made for you. Ingredients: sincerity, yearning, and happiness. Nutrients: sweetness and benevolence. Manufacturer: your friend. Date of expiration: your whole life. Wish you all the best!

(送你一份特制美食，成分：真心、思念、快乐。营养：温馨、幸福。制造商：你的朋友。有效期：一生。祝你万事如意！)

Sòng nǐ yí fèn tè zhì měi shí, chéng fèn: zhēn xīn, sī niàn, kuài lè. Yíng yǎng: wēn xīn, xìng fú. Zhì zào shāng: nǐ de péng yǒu. Yǒu xiào qī: yì shēng. Zhù nǐ wàn shì rú yì!

- (14) My heartfelt wishes for you: please accept my sincerest wishes for leisure every day. I wish you the brightest future. A toast for you! How long can the signboards last in the weather-beaten street? How many beloved old songs can still be remembered by people? Well, from all my acquaintances, you are still my dearest friend for life...

(衷心的祝福你：就在那不经意的每一天里，请接受我最真诚的祝贺，并祝福你前途似锦。为你干杯！风雨的街头，招牌能够挂多久，爱过的老歌，如今记得的有几首，交过的朋友在我生命中，知心的人有你……)

Zhōng xīn de zhù fú nǐ: jiù zài nà bù jīng yì de měi yì tiān lǐ, qǐng jiē shòu wǒ zuì zhēn chéng de zhù fú. Wèi nǐ gān bēi! Fēng yǔ de jiē tóu, zhào pái néng guà duō jiǔ, ài guò de lǎ gē, rú jīn jì dé de yǒu jǐ shǒu, jiāo guò de péng yǒu zài wǒ shēng mìng zhōng, zhī xīn de rén yǒu nǐ……

The phrasing of example (13) ensures a strong meme since it is based on food allegory. Example (14) replicates the words of an old popular song, which builds a nostalgic ambience and strikes a chord in the receiver's mind, enhancing the feeling of being important and cared for by the sender.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to apply the Meme Theory to Chinese blessing texted messages in order to point out the most common language tools resorted to for their composition, as well as the most common socio-psychological values they contain. The conclusion is that the most successful language memes in Chinese rely on playing with homophony, homography and discursive/structural patterns established in literary production or political discourse. Contentwise, the most successful language memes target the promotion of modernity and westernization in the youth, the appeal to traditional values for the more conservative population, and, overall, appeal to the receivers' need for affection and attention.

It is undeniable that many of the successful language memes become gradually bleached and ineffective, as they are replicated too many times, and the originality wears off. That means their replacement, and the continuation of language meme creation. Thus, the compiler/creator of the texted messages becomes an active participant involved in this process that enhances the creativity of the communicators, which ultimately contributes to language change.

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