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## Creative *chengyu*: How semantic compositionality and structural productivity facilitate idiom wordplay in Chinese

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When Chinese snowboarder Su Yiming won gold at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Chinese news headlines used a homophone pun of a well-known *chengyu* 成语 (‘Chinese idiom’) to creatively express how the Olympian had ‘amazed the world with a single brilliant feat’. Yet wordplay in China is not always so playful. In the face of a sophisticated censorship apparatus, linguistic creativity is also essential for online expression.

Chinese online wordplay is characterised by its homophone substitutions, colloquialisms, loanwords and archaic Chinese characters (Wei & Lee, 2021). While homophone wordplay has been studied extensively, creativity with *chengyu* has received little attention. *Chengyu* are four-character expressions that behave as one phrasal construction. Chinese readers have implicit knowledge of common *chengyu* structures such as ‘—N<sub>1</sub>—N<sub>2</sub>’. Knowledge of *chengyu* structures not only helps people infer the meaning of unfamiliar expressions but also facilitates the creation of new *chengyu* (Lu et al., 2021). *Chengyu* therefore present a fascinating case for exploring how meaning can be creatively enriched within and by a language system.

In this presentation I explore how creative *chengyu* meanings emerge from contextual influences, mechanisms of compositionality, and alterations of established elements of compositional meaning. I analyse a selection of novel *chengyu* collected from online sources and show how each *chengyu*’s intended meaning can be inferred by integrating linguistic, cultural and contextual knowledge. Based on this analysis, I argue that *chengyu* creativity exploits the semantically compositional and structurally productive nature of the Chinese writing system to generate new expressions which are nevertheless recognisable as ‘*chengyu*’. My presentation concludes by drawing attention to the possibilities of meaning creativity beyond alphabetic limits.

**References:** • Lu, C., Tsai, I.-N., Su, I.-W., & Liu, T.-H. (2021). From repetition to continuation: Construction meaning of Mandarin AXAY four-character idioms. In J.-F. Hong, Y. Zhang, & P. Liu (Eds.), *Chinese lexical semantics. CLSW 2020* (pp. 201–210). Springer. • Wei, L., & Lee, T. K. (2021). Language play in and with Chinese: Traditional genres and contemporary developments. *Global Chinese*, 7(2), 125–142.