

**LINGUO-CULTURAL FEATURES OF THE USAGE
OF CHINESE XIEHOUYU (歇后语)**

**ЛІНГВОКУЛЬТУРНІ ОСОБЛИВОСТІ ВЖИВАННЯ СЕХОУЮЙ (歇后语)
У КИТАЙСЬКІЙ МОВІ**

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The article attempts to reveal the concept of one of the types of Chinese phraseological units – *xiehouyu* (two-part allegories), taking into account the linguo-cultural aspect of their occurrence and use in everyday communication situations. One of the tasks set was to determine the role of *xiehouyu* in the cultural and national enrichment of the Chinese language by means of reflecting and conceptualizing the linguistic picture of the world and the ethnic identity of the Chinese people. In the article, interpretations of the definition of the concept of Chinese two-part allegories, the system of their structural division into components, as well as the linguistic and functional features of the latter are considered. The nature of the relationship between the two components and their similarity to the relationship between the subject and the predicate in a simple sentence, where the latter complements and clarifies the meaning of the former, is established.

The study clarifies the place of *xiehouyu* in the system of phraseological units of the modern Chinese language, in particular, analyzes the similarities and differences between two-part allegories and *yanyu* (proverbs and sayings). The functional, stylistic and contextual role of *xiehouyu* in the creation of humor in Chinese is outlined, which is realized through the use of the stylistic figure of paronomasia, wordplay, pun and ambiguity of meaning.

The study and elaboration of the main issues of this article has confirmed the idea that the study of phraseological units is not only a matter of linguistics, so it should not be limited to purely traditional grammatical or semantic approaches, but instead should give preference to a comprehensive interdisciplinary view of the phenomena of phraseology by means of intercultural communication between peoples. Through the analysis of examples from classical Chinese literature and contemporary popular culture, this paper argues that *xiehouyu* remains an important and enduring form of cultural expression in modern China.

Key words: *xiehouyu*, omissions-invocations, phraseological units, language, linguo-cultural features.

У статті зроблено спробу розкрити поняття одного з типів фразеологізмів китайської мови – сехоуюй (недомовки-іносказання), з огляду на лінгвокультурний аспект їхнього виникнення та вживання в повсякденних комунікативних ситуаціях. Одним із поставлених завдань було визначення ролі сехоуюїв у культурно-національному збагаченні китайської мови, як засобів відображення та концептуалізації мовної картини світу й етнічної самобутності китайського народу. Розглянуто інтерпретації визначення поняття китайських недомовок-іносказань, систему їхнього структурного розподілу на компоненти, а також лінгвістичні та функціональні особливості останніх. Встановлено характер відносин між двома компонентами та їхню подібність до відносин між підметом і присудком у простому реченні, де другий доповнює та уточнює значення першого.

У рамках дослідження з'ясовано місце сехоуюїв у системі фразеологічних одиниць сучасної китайської мови, зокрема проаналізовано схожості та відмінності недомовок-іносказань від яньюїв (прислів'їв та приказок). Окреслено функціонально-стилістичну та контекстуальну ролі сехоуюїв у творенні гумору в китайській мові, що реалізується завдяки застосуванню стилістичної фігури паронимазії, гри слів, каламбуру та двозначності сенсу.

В результаті вивчення й опрацювання головних питань цієї статті, підтверджено думку про те, що дослідження фразеологізмів є питанням не лише лінгвістики, тож не має обмежуватися суто традиційними граматичними чи семантичними підходами, натомість перевагу варто надавати комплексному міждисциплінарному погляду на явища фразеології, як такі, що слугують засобами міжкультурної комунікації народів. Завдяки аналізу прикладів із класичної китайської літератури та сучасної популярної культури, стверджується, що сехоуюї залишаються важливою та довговічною формою культурного вираження в сучасному Китаї.

Ключові слова: сехоуюй, недомовки-іносказання, фразеологічні одиниці, мова, лінгвокультурні особливості.

Problem statement. In modern linguistics, the interconnection of language and culture is undeniable. Every language is inseparable from the

culture that defines its conceptual and meaningful aspect. At the same time, language not only reflects contemporary culture, but also records its previous

state and transmits its values through generations. One of the most striking linguistic phenomena is its phraseology. Phraseologisms or set phrases have always been an effective means of reflecting reality, especially with their axiological component, they are able to negatively or positively evaluate the element of reality surrounding a person that they reflect. This is what makes phraseological units a common stylistic tool that is widely used in both literary language and colloquial speech.

Chinese phraseology has its own national originality, semantics and system structure, divergent from many foreign languages. Ignorance of certain realities leads to misunderstanding of the speaker, and most importantly, it may complicate the communication process. On the other hand, studying the rich phraseological fund of the Mandarin language reveals not only the Chinese mentality and cultural traditions but also a significant layer of the language's linguistic content. Therefore, learning the phraseological structure of the Chinese language becomes an important element of the learner's socio-cultural competence precisely because of the national originality of these linguistic units.

Literature review. The phraseological system of the Chinese language has always been of interest to scholars from all over the world. The global knowledge of this subject is based on the works of such scholars as Ma Guofan, whose classification of Chinese phraseological units is still widely used today; Qian Nairong, famous for his study of idiomatic expressions and their cultural connotations; Zhang Bingling with his research on the cultural and social uses of Chinese idioms; Wu Jingrong, Li Guoting, Chen Zhiqun and many others. However, most of the studies were mainly focused on one of the most massive and common types of Chinese phraseological units – 成语 *chengyu*: W.A.P. Martin, J. Liwei, J. DeFrancis, Н. Кулигіна, М. Шамшур, С. Цимбал, О. Шевченко. At the same time, *xiehouyu*, being also a widespread and well-studied phenomenon of the Mandarin language in China, has received insufficient attention from foreign researchers. Our study was preceded by the works of J. Chei, X. Li, D. Zeng, Ch. Wang and other linguists and orientologists, hoping to contribute to Ukrainian sinology studies, as the issue of *xiehouyu* can still be considered unresolved.

The aim of the paper is to explore the specifics of the *xiehouyu* sayings in Chinese language, examining their historical origins, linguistic features, and cultural significance.

Main findings. Phraseological units (FUs) play a significant role within the lexical level of a language

as stable, separately formed, but semantically coherent combinations of words with fully or partially redefined meanings. One of the primary functions of idioms is to fill in the gaps in the lexical system of the language, which is unable to fully name new aspects of reality. In many instances, idioms are the only names given to particular things, properties, processes, states, situations, and so on. Mandarin Chinese, like every other language, has such enduring expressions with meanings that have developed over centuries and are handed down from generation to generation.

In the two-volume edition of 现代汉语 (2006), two features of Chinese phraseological units are pointed out: the integrity of meaning and stability of structure. The authors believe that phraseology is "a kind of phrase combination fixed by tradition and fixed in the written language" that has become commonplace for native speakers [1, p. 113]. There were numerous attempts to classify the types of Chinese phraseological units, however one of the most accurate classifications is that of Chinese linguist Ma Guofan, who has distinguished 5 major categories: 成语 (idioms); 颜语 (proverbs); 歇后语 (two-part allegories); 惯用语 (phraseological combinations); 俗语 (proverbs) [2, p. 12]. Within the framework of our study, we will focus on the third type of phraseological units: stable expressions, most often jokes or rude statements, that brings the brightness, liveliness, expressiveness, imagery and wit into the Mandarin language.

歇后语 *xiehouyu*, in English often called "two-part allegories" are two-part expressions in which the first part is an allegory and the second part is its disclosure. In Mandarin their literal meaning is "expressions with a truncated ending" [3, p. 395], they are also often translated as "understatements" or "two-part allegories", however it should be noted, that those translations are considered to be explanatory ones, as this term denotes units specific to the Chinese language and culture [3, p. 396; 4, p. 74].

In terms of structure, *xiehouyu* is treated as a complete statement in the form of a sentence. In other words, it is a single phrase, divided into two parts, and expressing a specific meaning. In Chinese language the first part is called 譬喻 (allegory), and the second part is called 解答 (disclosure). The relations between them remind those between a subject and a predicate, where the second part always reveals the meaning of the first one. Allegory itself can be expressed as a simple or complex sentence, verb-object phrases, nominal attributive phrases etc. Regarding the second part of the understatement, it typically consists of phrases or ready-made

expressions, stable combinations of words with a sentence structure, which are frequently seen in spoken language, particularly common vernacular: 半路上接姑娘——从头学起 (*lit. meeting a girl halfway – starting learning from head*) – learning from scratch.

歇后语 can also be used in a shortened form, including only the first part. However, this only demonstrates their expressive function and does not result in the creation of a new phraseological unit. The first part of *xiehouyu* typically plays with words and conveys an understated tone, while the second exemplifies the phraseological unit. Since it demonstrates a desire to conceal one's opinion, this expression also reflects a national character trait.

From the linguistic perspective, a clear division into parts is believed to be the most distinctive formal feature of a two-part allegory. In oral speech, this division is expressed by means of intonation: the first part (譬喻) is pronounced with an intonation of completeness, the second part (解答) is separated by a pause from the first and is pronounced in accordance with the intonation of the statement in which the omission is used. In writing, this division of *xiehouyu* is emphasized by punctuation: 譬喻 is separated from 解答 by a dash, a comma, and less often by a colon and quotation marks.

Thus the first part of the allegory is simple, common, and usually well understood, and therefore the main meaning of the second part can be guessed. *Xiehouyu* is also sometimes called a pun or mockery, and can be considered an understatement and a kind of paronomasia – a stylistic figure of speech, a figurative convergence of words that sound similar with a partial morphemic composition, used in speech in a punny way [5, p. 381].

Due to the fact that *xiehouyu* was primarily used in oral speech, the use of these phraseological units in written sources was extremely rare, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact date of its creation. Some sources claim that *xiehouyu* first appeared in writing during the Ming Dynasty, specifically in classical novels where the characters' direct speech is stylized as informal: 千里送鹅毛，礼经情意重 – A goose feather sent from a thousand miles away. This figurative expression means "the gift itself is not as precious as the attention," and was often used as a way to politely characterize one's modest gift. According to other sources, the first mention of 歇后 dates back to the Tang Dynasty. They were mentioned in the *Ju Tang Shu*, compiled by Liu Xu in 945, as a kind of linguistic form or category or even as a type of poetry.

Thus, as may be obvious, the starting points of different *xiehouyu* can be followed back to both

society craftsmanship and abstract wellsprings of various periods. These Chinese colloquialisms have undergone significant modifications, as have the peculiarities of their usage, due to the extensive formation process that they have undergone throughout their history.

Two-part allegories are still used in people's speech to this day. However, modern *xiehouyu* is not the same as ancient *xiehouyu* because it was used as phraseology or a shorter form of a sentence in those days. In his book "Fundamentals of Style", well-known Chinese scholar, teacher, and linguist Chen Wandao referred to *xiehouyu* as 藏词, and noted that in the later period they replaced stylistic figures of speech. Later on, the structure of *xiehouyu* changed and began to look like a figurative expression, a metaphor of explanation or explication.

The specificity of two-part allegories lies in the fact that the relations that connect the members of the undercut within their own context do not fit into the framework of the logical and grammatical relations that are inherent in other two-part proverbs comparable in form to undercuts.

As mentioned above, the members of an understatement as if they were solving a riddle (allusion-disclosure and allusion). If we compare these expressions as a whole rather than piecemeal, the distinction between an understatement and a riddle is functional: 老鼠爬进书箱里——咬文嚼字 (*lit. A rat got into a bookcase – swallowing and gnawing characters and text*) – to study hard. A riddle does not serve the purpose of communication and is not among the communicative means of language, unlike sayings, proverbs and understatements. However, in the case of understatements, unlike sayings and proverbs, where the communicative value of an expression is determined by the entire composition of the expression, it still lies in the second member. That is, omissions are used in the language in the communicative sense of the second member rather than in their own context [3, p. 398].

Despite their similarity to proverbs in structure, *xiehouyu* can be used as a separate member in a straightforward sentence, in contrast to proverbs. Speaking about the connection of *xiehouyu* with proverbs and sayings of the Chinese language, we argue that an important characteristic feature of the understatement is that 歇后语 are quite similar to 颜语 (stable folk sayings, proverbs) in terms of its structure, but it can be used as a *chengyu* phrase combination: it can become part of a simple sentence as a separate member of it [6, p. 53].

A distinctive characteristic of a *xiehouyu* is its capacity to function as a specific member of a

complex sentence when included in it. The omission frequently serves as a complement. This intends that albeit the linguistic type of an interference is a finished sentence, it tends to be acknowledged in discourse as a phraseological unit that has the construction of an expression, for example: 反正从已打算纷纷, 他就黄鼠狼与鸡拜年, 没安好心, 光想看咱们笑话 [7, p. 243] – Anyway, right after the decision to regroup, he behaved as if he were our best friend, but in fact, you can't expect any good from him, he only thinks about how to laugh at us. Here we use the adverbs 鼠狼与鸡拜年, 没安好心 – "don't expect any good", "nothing good will come of it", which function as a circumstance of the mode of action in a complex sentence.

These omissions stand out not only for their unique structure, which sets *xiehouyu* apart from other two-part phraseological units, but also for their practical application. In contrast to the majority of other types of phraseology, *xiehouyu* is frequently regarded as a component of comic discourse in Chinese.

As expressions in folklore, *xiehouyu* are distinguished by their vernacular because their primary source is spoken language and people's life in general. The predominant absence of conjunctions and prepositions mostly exemplifies this vernacularity in the grammatical aspect. However, the vernacular nature of the omissions is especially evident in the lexical aspect. The lexical items in some of the *xiehouyu* are colloquialisms, so they rarely appear in dictionaries. Therefore, it is frequently challenging for native speakers as well as Chinese learners to comprehend the meaning of two-part allegories. This present circumstance essentially happens when the exclusion contains dialectisms: 瘸子赛跑——笃定老莫 (*lit. The lame one in the running competition will probably be the last*) – to always be the last. In two-part allegory, the dialect word 笃定 corresponds to 确定 in Putonghua, and 老莫 corresponds to the noun 最后.

Analyzing the folk character of the studied proverbs, we cannot ignore their other linguistic and cultural features. The national peculiarity of the worldview of a particular ethno-cultural community is rooted in the way of life and psyche of the people, reflected in the semantic structure of language signs.

In addition, the FUs play a special role in creating a linguistic picture of the world because the symbolic nature of their holistic meaning is closely related to the background knowledge of native speakers, their practical life experience, and cultural and historical

traditions. Given such a significant role in creating a linguistic picture of the world of a nation, phraseology becomes an object of linguistic and cultural analysis.

Phraseology, as a linguistic unit that actively participates in the creation of such a picture of the world of the people, is of particular interest within the framework of linguistic and cultural studies.

Specifically, FUs are socially checked etymological signs, since their importance is confounded by different social implications, so the linguistic and cultural analysis of these linguistic units should be aimed at identifying these connotations. Cultural connotation involves the interpretation of denotative, quasi-denotative or figuratively motivated aspects of the meaning of a phraseology in the categories of culture [2, p. 57].

The foundation of the FUs is typically the national and culturally specific images that are most important to native speakers. As a result, stereotypical phraseological units convey the moral, ethical, and life attitudes of the ethnic group.

Conclusions. Since phraseology contains a national and cultural component in its semantics, it has a country-specific and cultural value. Chinese *xiehouyu*, similar to many phraseological units, appeared tens or hundreds of years ago and have survived to this day unchanged, with their help one can understand cultural customs, the wisdom of the time, humor, sarcasm or instructive content characteristic of a given time period. In order to fully understand the origins of phraseological expressions, one should turn to the sources of classical and folk Chinese literature: philosophical treatises and parables, historical chronicles, fiction, legends and myths, catchphrases and expressions, borrowings from other languages, etc.

If we study two-part allegories from their cultural perspective, we should consider their phonetic side, lexical composition, grammatical structure, and stylistic aspects. Each of these aspects of a phraseological unit equally has a rich cultural connotation. If we analyze *xiehouyu* through the prism of grammar, the key point will be the general idea of ancient Chinese grammar, which shows the peculiarity of Chinese "grammatical thought". It should be added that the issue of distinguishing between phraseological units with a phrase structure, on the one hand, and compound words, on the other hand, is still one of the most controversial and topical issues in Chinese phraseology, which is, in turn, related to the general linguistic problem of distinguishing between a phrase and a word.

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