Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies

BOOK REVIEW

Chengyu: Caratteristiche e apprendimento delle espressioni idiomatiche del cinese

[Chengyu: Characteristics and learning of Chinese idioms]

Sergio Conti

libreriauniversitaria.it edizioni, 2019

ISBN: 9788833591469

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This review consists of a detailed description of the theoretical background and the original insights of Sergio Conti's *Chengyu: Caratteristiche e apprendimento delle espressioni idiomatiche del cinese* (Chengyu: Characteristics and learning of Chinese idioms). The monograph was published in June 2019 by the Italian publisher libreriauniversitaria.it edizioni, and is the first volume of the peer-reviewed series Studi Orientali (Oriental Studies). The series is directed by Marina Miranda, "Sapienza" University of Rome, and its scientific committee includes members affiliated to different European universities. Conti's book consists of a linguistic study on *chéngyǔ* 成语 'four-character idioms', the most renowned Chinese idiomatic expressions. The volume is published in Italian and constitutes the very first attempt in Italian to provide a comprehensive account of the topic from both the theoretical and the pedagogical standpoint.

The book is composed of four chapters. The first chapter introduces the concepts of formulaicity and idiomaticity by reviewing the relevant literature in general, cognitive and psycho-linguistics (e.g. Gibbs 1994; Wray 2002). First, the author reports the main definitions of formulaicity and introduces the relationship between formulaic and analytic language, as well as the main critiques of the Chomskyan generative model and the LAD (Language Acquisition Device). In addition, the main functions of formulaic language are described in relation to the speakers' socio-interactional needs and to the limits of human short-term memory and processability. Second, the author addresses the notion of idiomaticity by providing the reader with the most influential definitions in the literature, finally adopting the one proposed by Liu (2008) and a view that conceives idiomatic expressions as a sub-type of formulaic sequences. Following this, the main taxonomies are introduced and discussed based on the criteria adopted by the proponent(s) of each classification, and the main hypotheses concerning the comprehension and processing of the idioms are presented and explained. The last part of the chapter provides a general overview of the different types of Chinese idioms, generally contained under the umbrella label *shúyǔ* 熟语 'familiar sayings'. Starting from a few historical notes on phraseology in China, the author subsequently provides the main classifications utilised by Chinese scholars, describing the characteristics of the different types of idiomatic expressions, mainly *guànyòngyǔ* 惯用语 'habitual

expressions', *yànyǔ* 谚语 'proverbs', *xiēhòuyǔ* 歇后语 'two-part allegorical sayings' (e.g. Sun 1989; Wu 2007).

The second chapter provides a comprehensive description of *chéngyǔ* based on the different proposals elaborated by Chinese lexicologists. After a general overview of the studies produced in the last century, Conti focuses on the problematic definition of these expressions, describing those approaches adopting one single criterion to differentiate them from other sequences (e.g. Liu 1990; Yao 1998; Zhou 1997, 1998), those proposing multiple criteria (e.g. An 2016; Wu 2007) and those embracing more recent criteria such as Rosch's prototype theory and Lakoff's Idealized Cognitive Models (Hu 2015). In the following pages, *chéngyǔ* are described from the etymological, morphosyntactic and semantic perspectives. In describing the first perspective, the author takes into consideration the three elements proposed by An (2016) for the classification of the primary sources of *chéngyǔ* and exemplifies the different processes that led to their formation (Sun 1989). The second perspective focuses on the distinction between morphosyntactically analysable and non-analysable *chéngyǔ*. Several examples are carefully chosen from relevant literature (e.g. An 2016; Hu 2015; Sun 1989) to illustrate the differences between structurally different types and sub-types. Moreover, *chéngyǔ* are classified according to the word class and the syntactic function they perform in the sentence, with the identification of five main types. Lastly, the analysis focuses on the different semantic components of *chéngyǔ* and the relationship between their compositional and idiomatic meaning, which may either coincide or be connected by a metonymical or metaphorical relationship (Sun 1989).

Conti's third chapter moves from linguistic description to the perspective of acquisition and learning, mainly referring to cognitive linguistics, psycho-linguistic and applied linguistics studies conducted on Indo-European languages. First, the author provides a critical discussion of the flourishing contributions on the comprehension and processing of formulaic language in the field of second language acquisition, pointing out the implications that their specific features bear for second language learning and teaching. Second, the contributions on idiomatic language are reviewed, addressing both the psycho-linguistic advances in describing how they are comprehended and processed by native and non-native speakers, and their learning and teaching in second

and foreign languages. As the author cogently argues, different experimental studies have shown that native speakers' and learners' comprehension and processing of formulae and idioms are substantially different, since they are conditioned by different factors – such as a different composition of their mental lexicon – which also have an impact on the way these expressions are learned. After reporting the main results obtained on the topic in applied linguistics (e.g. Boers 2001; Zyzik 2011), the last paragraph of the chapter focuses on the strategies and techniques that have been specifically proposed for idiomatic expressions, among which are included both macro-strategies such as raising learners' awareness of idioms and implementing forms of discovery-learning, and micro-strategies such as the L1-L2 comparison and interpretation and comprehension techniques such as the etymological elaboration, etc. (Liu 2008).

Lastly, the fourth chapter addresses the issue of *chéngyǔ* teaching and learning in Chinese as a foreign language. The first section of this chapter is devoted to describing the current state of *chéngyǔ* teaching by taking into consideration reference syllabuses, teaching materials, and teaching methods. According to the author, many of the shortcomings emerging from this section can be attributed to the discrepancy between the importance of the *chéngyǔ* on the one hand and the low attention received in teaching on the other hand, due to the general perception of *chéngyǔ* being difficult to learn and to teach (Guo 2017). The second section focuses on the contributions produced in the field of Error Analysis, one of the most prolific lines of research in *chéngyǔ* teaching. The different types of errors reported in the literature – including formal, semantic, syntactic and pragmatic – are discussed together with examples of learners' actual productions (Shi 2008). The last section of the chapter addresses the two main issues that have emerged from the analyses of learners' errors and the causes of these errors: i) the problematic task of defining the degree of difficulty of *chéngyǔ* and their subsequent selection for inclusion in the teaching materials in order to guarantee the graduality and incrementality of the learning process (Zhang 2012); ii) the debate on the effectiveness of methods, techniques, and strategies for *chéngyǔ* teaching (Zhou & Wang 2009). Citing Guo (2017), the author suggests that although a rich literature has been produced in recent years on the topic of idiomatic expressions, much remains

to be done both in terms of the methods employed and the theoretical models adopted. More specifically, it is claimed that research in *chéngyŭ* teaching should shift from a purely descriptive to an experimental stage, so as to determine how to teach *chéngyŭ* effectively in a guided-learning context.

The volume offers a valuable contribution to the fields of Chinese theoretical lexicology and applied linguistics. The main merit is that of collecting and systematising the large and fragmentary body of existing research on Chinese phraseology, at the same time integrating it into the wider context of formulaicity and idiomaticity in natural languages. By doing this, the author evidences the specificities of Chinese language, while also relating them to universal phenomena which characterise human language. Although there is no lack of works published on the topic of *chéngyŭ*, both in Chinese and in European languages, very few have succeeded in the task of crossing the boundaries set by the traditional lexicological approach and applying theoretical models and categories specifically elaborated to account for non-Sinitic languages.

Another major achievement of the study is highlighting the challenges in *chéngyŭ* learning and the main shortcomings in the existing studies in Chinese pedagogy, offering interesting insights for future research, especially concerning the graduality and incrementality of acquisition as well as the importance of the empirical validation of different teaching techniques. The amount of materials consulted and reviewed by the authors is conspicuous, encompassing both Chinese and European sources sensibly organised and positioned in the volume to allow for a mutual enrichment of theoretical and applied linguistics, research activities and teaching practices.

In sum, this enlightening and fascinating volume wisely assembles the existing pieces of a puzzle in order to shed light on a phenomenon such as Chinese idiomatic expressions – deeply rooted in the culture, tradition and collective imaginary of a country – availing itself of the tools created both locally and globally. The result is a bigger picture wherein the specific features of a single language are interwoven within and intersect with the formal structures and cognitive processes that universally shape human language. Specifically, this study is particularly suited to satisfy both the interest of lexicologists in Chinese idiomatic language and the needs of the applied linguists seeking suggestions on the acquisition and teaching of *chéngyŭ*.

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