

How The Numerals are Tabooed in The Chinese Language

Altanmuchir /Muqier/

Doctoral student of Foreign Linguistics, National University of Mongolia

G. Eldev-Ochir

Department of Asian Studies, National University of Mongolia

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Abstract

Taboo is an important and common phenomenon in which human beings use language consciously, and it is a form of language that people create to achieve better results in social interactions. China has historically been a country that values order.

Keywords

Chinese taboo language, numerals, euphemism, features of interaction

1. About the taboo language

Taboo language is a common phenomenon used in all languages and is directly related to human beings' consciousness to avoid entirely. It is a language phenomenon that brings positive outcomes in social interactions in some ways as a socially acceptable means of communication. Euphemism, the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive or one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant, comes from the taboo or something that is avoided or forbidden for religious, cultural, or social reasons. The word "Tapu" is a Polynesian traditional concept that denotes something to be restricted, prohibited, and distinguished and something that is "tapu" is considered inviolable or sacrosanct. (Pagva.T, 1976:101)

In the west, scientists and researchers started to study the notion of taboo or taboo language long ago, and, in the early 1780s, the word "euphemism" was first used by British scientist George Blunt. He defined it as "Euphemism is a good or favorable interpretation of a bad word". The word "euphemism" is derived from Greek where "euphemism" or the prefix 'eu-' means 'good, well'; the stem 'pheme' means 'speak'; the suffix '-ism' means 'action or result'. The word "euphe-

mism" means 'speaking well of...', 'good speech', and 'words of good omen' in English. The researchers use different terms for this concept, such as euphemism, genteelism byword, and nicelyism. In the communication process, sometimes people need to avoid saying and writing some words. In these cases, don't they try to avoid using taboo words? The words that should be avoided or unpleasant to say or write are "taboo words". The taboo words are considered to have occurred from the time language first originated. The notion of taboo has evolved based on ancient people's belief of not recognizing and understanding the natural phenomenon and considering it as mysterious gruesome sight. The notion of taboo is used for religious purposes in the late modern period of human history.

In his work "The American Language", American linguist H.L. Mencken (1936) studied how taboo originated and how it is spread. English scientist James George Frazer systematically studied euphemism and taboo language: in four chapters as language, event, phenomenon, and personal name. In 1981, English linguist Hugh Rawson summed up the reviews of studies on taboos and euphemism conducted by English and American scientists in his dictionary "A Dictionary of euphemism and other double talks". In 1983, American scientists J.S. Newman and C.C. Silver clearly defined the origin, history, development, and evolution of taboo language and euphemism in their work: "Kind words-A treasure of euphemisms".

In 1991, Allen and Burridge studied the English taboo language regarding pragmatic linguistics in their work "Euphemism and Dysphemism". Their study attracts the other scientists' interests, opening a new door to this study topic. (常敬宇, 2000:35) Currently, scientists have been studying the taboo language regarding 1. Semantic, 2. Sociolinguistic, 3. Stylistics, 4. Neuro-linguistic, 5. Pragmatic linguistic styles.

How the numerals are tabooed in the Chinese language

In China, people sell and buy the telephone numbers and vehicle license plate numbers ending with the numbers 1, 6, 8, and 9 at a relatively higher price. This demonstrates how certain numbers influence Chinese people's mindset. This phenomenon is closely and directly related to not only modern Chinese development but also the long history of Chinese culture and way of thinking. Throughout the development history of Chinese civilization, which extends back 5,000 years, the Chinese people esteem the numbers and symbolize the universal phenomenon through the numbers. In particular, the Chinese people emphasize the meaning of numbers such as three dependences of the sky, the land and a human, five elements (water, fire, earth, wood, and metal), and the number nine-nine eighty-one.

In China, the number zero or "0" means "nothing", and though it is considered not good, it is considered to have the meaning "您" or "You". In combination with other numbers, the number "0" expresses various meanings. For example, while the number "086" means "您发禄" or "You will make a fortune or You will get a pay increase", "089" means "您发久" or "You will make a fortune in the long run", "520" means "我爱你" or "I love you", and "908" means "就您发" or "Only you can make a fortune".

The number "1" symbolizes the meaning "益" (yi) or "benefit/profit". It means beneficial, economically profitable, or receiving benefits. There can be many meaning for the number "1" depending on the number order. The number "981" has the meaning "久发益" or "benefit in the long run", the number "168" has the meaning "一路发" or "build a fortune during the whole course of the period", and the number "158" means "要吾发" or "let me prosper".

The number "2" is most often considered a good number in Chinese culture. The number 2 has the meaning "good, bright, pairs". For example, the number "520" means "我爱你" or "I love you". However, it can also have some negative meanings. For instance, the number "250" is

homophonous with “二百五” or “two hundred and fifty” which is normally considered a way of calling others stupid, silly, and foolish, particularly among youngsters. The Chinese people tend to avoid this number as it has the sarcastic meaning “half bottle of vinegar” or “incomplete bottle of liquid”. For example, if a purchase at a shop costs 250 RMB, the buyer and seller may agree on a price of 249 RMB or 251 RMB. The Beijing drama words like “二把刀” (two knives), “二虎” (two tigers), “二五眼” (two five eyes) are also considered ways of calling a person weak-headed and unqualified. The word “二路货” or “2nd line goods” means goods of poor quality. The word “二房” or “2nd room” means the concubine. Currently, the Chinese term “二奶” or “second wife/mistress” has the abusive and humiliating meaning indicating a woman (other than the man’s wife) having a sexual relationship with a married man.

From ancient times, the Chinese people considered the number “3” to be a good number. Most people consider it one of three important stages in a person’s life. The number “1314” or “一生一世” represents “forever”. As an expression of true and loyal love, the couples bestow 1314 pieces of flowers or 1314 RMB in a red envelope on each other's birthday and Valentine’s Day. The number “3” also plays an important role in social competition. If you win the number 3, it means you are still powerful. Although, the 3rd place winner is not as powerful as the 1st and 2nd place winners, the 3rd place winner still has its value. Sometimes, the 3rd place might be considered more valuable than the 2nd place in a competition; the 3rd place winner can feel more relaxed. This is because the 2nd place finisher was defeated by the champion, but the 3rd place finisher defeated the 4th place finisher. Moreover, the number “138” means “一生发” or “fortunate throughout the life”.

Sometimes Chinese people use the number “38” when they ignore women as the woman tends to be too talkative. Because Women’s Day is celebrated in China on March 8 (3-8), the number 38 has the sarcastic meaning to represent the women who are harebrained, hasty, careless, or unmannered in terms of behavior and speech. Chinese people tend to avoid using the numbers “438” (death three eight) and “386” (three eight/unmannered woman) as they represent the meaning “uncivilized, churlish, rude person”. The word “三只手” or “third hand” is a euphemism for the word “thief, robber and a pickpocket”. The word “三寸丁” or “three-inch man” is a euphemism for a short man. The word “三角恋爱” or “love triangle” means a complicated romantic relationship involving three persons.

The number “4” is considered an unlucky number in Chinese because it is nearly homophonous with the word “death”. Thus, the Chinese people intentionally avoid the number “4”. For example, they avoid giving 400 or 4000 RMB when they present money in red envelope to their relatives and friends on wedding days and birthdays. In China, people refuse to use the telephone numbers and vehicle license plate numbers that end with the number “4”. Some hospitals in China omit room numbers containing 4. The number “148” (要逝爸、要死爸) is unlucky as it is homophonous with the word “father dies”. Also, some hotels and high buildings intentionally omit the floors and rooms containing the numbers 4 and 14, substituting them for different numbers. Such practice is especially common in the southern part of China.

The number “5” is a neither lucky nor unlucky number for the Chinese people. Mostly it has the meaning “I/me” and the Chinese people consider the number “520” as important as it has the meaning “I love you”.

The number “6” is considered a good number for the Chinese people. It represents the words “ox” or “pay/salary”. In modern times, the Chinese people consider 6 a good number in consideration of its symbolization of “牛” or “ox”, “禄” or “salary/pay, fortune, and happiness”. For example,

while the number “516” means (我要牛/禄) or “I have a higher salary and I am fortunate”, and the numbers “666” and “986” represent the meanings “make a fortune in the long run” and “fortunate and lucky”.

The number “7” is considered an unlucky number because the number “7” or “qi” is homophonous with the word “凄 qi” or “sad unhappy” and “气 qi” or “anger”. Its shape is like a sickle, having the meaning “to slash/to slab”. Everyone who plays mahjong avoids the numbers “4” and “7” as they consider them unlucky numbers.

The number “8” is viewed as an auspicious number with the meaning “发 fa” or “to prosper”. Most people like this number as they want to be prosperous and simple. This number contains a positive meaning irrespective of its position, meaning, the behind and front position of this number does not change the representation of this number. The visual resemblance of the number “8” is like two coins combined, thus containing the meaning “money”, the number “168” (一路发) means “to fortune all the way”, the number “668” (路路发) “to make fortune on every step”, the number “888” (发发发) means “prosperous”, and the number “998” (久久发) means “to be prosperous for a longer time”.

The number “9” is associated with the meaning “久/long lasting, 就/very soon, too soon, 酒/vodka, drinks”, and is the largest one-digit number. The number “169” (要禄久,一路久) means “to be paid a higher salary for a long-lasting period”, the number “189” (要发久) means “to be prosperous for a long-lasting period”, the number “689” (禄发久) means “to be fortunate and prosperous for lifetimes”, the number “889” (发发久) means “to be fortune forever”, the number “899” (发久久) means “prosperous for a longer period”, and the number “999” (久久久) has the meaning “long-lasting”

Conclusion

Among the numerals, there are several numerals that Chinese people use most. They are 1, 6, 8, and 9 as they consider, these numbers to be auspicious. However, Chinese people avoid using the numbers 2, 4, and 7 as they consider them to be unlucky.

Taboo language is a method of protecting psychology and giving a clear understanding of ourselves to others in social interactions. The correlation between the “naming” and “phenomenon” is directly and closely related to the human interior soul and the features of thinking.

The taboo words in the Chinese language originated from ancient times. The ancient books and sutras contain many taboo languages and euphemisms. These tendencies have not changed in modern times. Instead, they have still been attracting linguists and scientists in keeping with the social development tendency. Further additional and intensive study on this topic as a comparative study of taboo words in two languages might be of great significance in translation studies and the teaching of translation.

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