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Article

Situation-bound utterances in Chinese

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Abstract

This article argues that, when analysing formulaic language use in Chinese, besides the three main groups, proverbs (yànyǔ 谚语), idioms (chéngyǔ 成语), and guànyòngyǔ 惯用语 compounds, we need to distinguish and pay special attention to a fourth category: situation-bound utterances (qíngjìng zhuānyòngyǔ 情境专用语). Situation-bound utterances (SBUs) constitute a unique group within idiomatic expressions because their use is tied to particular situations. SBUs fulfil social needs in conversation. People know that if they use these prefabricated expressions they are safe: nobody will misunderstand them because these phrases usually mean the same to most speakers in a speech community. The article aims to introduce SBUs as a separate category among Chinese formulaic expressions, discuss its relationship to yànyǔ, chéngyǔ, and guànyòngyǔ compounds, explain why it is important to handle it as a separate lexical category, and highlight the unique nature and use of SBUs. However, it is not the goal of the article to give a full and detailed description of the new category, which will need further research.

KEYWORDS FORMULAIC LANGUAGE, YÀNYǓ, CHÉNGYǓ, GUÀNYÒNGYǓ COMPOUNDS, SITUATION-BOUND UTTERANCES (QÍNGJÌNG ZHUĀNYÒNGYǓ)

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1. Introduction

Since the publication of my book on situation-bound utterances (SBUs) (Kecskes 2003), several studies have been written on the use of this unique group of formulaic expressions in different languages such as Russian, French, English, Chinese, German, etc. (see, for instance, Taguchi, Li, & Feng, 2013; Zhou, 2012; Warga, 2005; Bardovi-Harlig, 2009; Minakova & Gural, 2015). Although there have been two papers published on Chinese SBUs, the issue deserves further attention because the relationship of SBUs to *yànyǔ*, *chéngyǔ* and *guànyòngyǔ* compounds still needs clarification, and the unique features and culture-specificity of Chinese SBUs will also have to be investigated.

Why do SBUs deserve special attention? They are highly conventionalised, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrences are tied to standardised communicative situations (Coulmas, 1981; Fónagy, 2001; Kiefer, 1985, 1995; Kecskes, 2000, 2003). SBUs represent one of the largest groups of formulaic language in most languages, although there are differences both in numbers and frequency of use in different languages. It is for sure that English is a language in which SBUs are frequented in interpersonal interactions (e.g. Kecskes, 2003; Bardovi-Harlig, 2009). They are frequently used not only in English, but also in any language, because these expressions serve as interactional patterns and rituals that usually mean the same to all speakers of a particular speech community. For instance:

(1)

English:
Tell me about it.
Have a nice day.
You are all set.

Russian:
Gde ty propadal?
Where have you been?
Kak dela?
How is it going?

Turkish:
Yolun acik olsun.
May your way be open.
Agzindan yel alsin.
May the wind take it from your mouth.

Chinese:
Hěn gāoxìng rènshi nǐ.
Very nice to meet you.
Dào nǎlǐ qù ya?
Where are you heading?

The reason why these expressions are the focus of this article is that they are culture specific and reflect the way native speakers of a language think. One of the best ways to demonstrate that people having different first languages think differently is to analyse SBUs. Language learners often make the mistake that they think what is expressed in their language should also be expressed in the target language. Having heard an SBU in English they often say "I do not know how to translate that into my first language", or "there is no equivalent for this expression in my native tongue". I think it is appropriate to respond with a question: "Why do you think that this can or needs to be said in your language?" Reoccurring life situations (meeting people, renting a car, offering food to someone, showing happiness over someone's success, etc.) are similar no matter what language someone speaks. However, it is very different how even similar situations are worded in different languages.

Culture specificity is reflected in two ways. First, some languages find it important to use an SBU in a particular situation while others do not. So the first step of inquiry is to figure out whether the target language may, can, or needs to express something similar to that which the speaker has in mind based on his/her own language. In some cultures people generally use two strategies to build rapport: put oneself down and build the other up. This is especially important in speech communities such as Chinese, Arabic, Turkish, and Thai, where relative status is a key factor. The Turkish *estagfurullah* 'I ask pardon of God', which is a very commonly used as a rejoinder, is a good example. It serves to negate another's expression of self-abasement. If someone should say, for instance, "Oh, I am a fool", the interlocutor's response, "Estagfurullah" would mean something like 'No, that's not so' (Tietze, 1963, p. 145).

Second, culture specificity is reflected in how a particular situational function is worded in the given language. For instance, English speakers can ask "How are you doing?" when they meet friends. Chinese speakers in similar situations may use ***nǐ chī le ma?*** 'have you eaten?', which is an entirely different wording of the same function (greeting). Although Chinese culture is very different from American English culture, still both languages may require the use of some SBU in similar situations. For instance, when people gather to eat, Americans say something like *enjoy the food*, while Chinese people say ***mànman chī*** 慢慢吃, which means 'eat slowly'. It refers to the fact that Chinese people think that if you eat slowly you

will enjoy the food more. Both the American and Chinese SBUs are functional units that have a similar function in both languages but are worded differently, according to the culture of the given language.

Before we analyse the place of SBUs as a category in the system of Chinese formulaic language, we will need to discuss the main characteristics and distinctive features of SBUs in general, based mainly on English examples.

2. Characteristics of situation-bound utterances

As mentioned above, SBUs represent a relatively frequent group within what we call formulaic language. The category of formulaic language is constituted by multi-word expressions that tend to convey holistic meanings that are either more than the sum of the individual parts or else diverge significantly from a literal, or word-for-word, meaning and operate as a single semantic unit (Gairns & Redman, 1986). There are serious debates about what exactly can be considered formulaic language. Fillmore found that "an enormously large amount of natural language is formulaic, automatic and rehearsed, rather than propositional, creative or freely generated" (Fillmore, 1976, p. 24). Altenberg (1998) argued that 80% of our language production can be considered formulaic. Wray's definition of formula is very broad: "a formulaic sequence [is] a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar" (Wray, 2002, p. 9). Based on this definition, much of human language is formulaic rather than freely generated.

I have argued (Kecskes, 2007, 2013) that only those prefabricated sequences should be considered formulaic that have psychological saliency as a coherent unit for the L1 speakers and are usually motivated and allow relatively few structural changes, such as fixed semantic units, speech formulas, phrasal verbs, idioms, and situation-bound utterances, for instance, *to be frank*, *as a matter of fact*, *got you*, *be my guest*, *you are all set*, *no strings attached*, *kick the bucket*, etc. I ignored collocations such as *if you say…*, *this is good…*, *I have been…*, etc., which are frequent collocations in any corpora but hardly have any psychological saliency in the mind of an L1 speaker. According to this view, SBUs can certainly be considered formulaic. But it is still important to clarify the relation of SBUs to "conversational routines" (cf. Coulmas, 1981; Aijmer, 1996), on the one hand, and to idioms, on the other hand. *Semantic idioms* (*make both ends meet*, *kick the bucket*) do have psychological reality as coherent units. They are stored as unanalysed chunks in memory, just like words, and are retrieved as a whole. They are not tied to particular situations and can occur in any phase of a conversation

where speakers find their use appropriate. *Pragmatic idioms* are different. They can be split into two groups: conversational routines and situation-bound utterances. The difference between them is socio-cultural rather than linguistic.

Conversational routines (CR) have an inclusive relation to SBUs. CRs constitute a much broader category than SBUs. Conversational routines include speech formulas (*you know*, *I see*, *no problem*), discourse markers (see Fraser, 1999), and SBUs. All SBUs are CRs, but this is not so conversely, because not all expressions labelled as CRs are SBUs. For instance, *you know*, *I see*, and *no problem* can be considered conversational routines but they are not SBUs. Aijmer argued that conversational routines are expressions which, as a result of recurrence, have become specialised or "entrenched" for a discourse function that predominates over or replaces the literal referential meaning (Aijmer, 1996, p. 11). It is not easy to draw the dividing line between CRs and SBUs, but there are some features that distinguish them. *CRs are function-bound rather than situation-bound.* They can express one and the same particular function in any situation, while SBUs frequently receive their charge from the situation itself. For instance, *after all* or *to tell you the truth* are CRs rather than SBUs. They can be uttered in any situation where they sound appropriate. However, expressions such as *how do you do?*, upon acquaintance, or *welcome aboard*, as a greeting to a new employee, make sense only in particular well-definable situations (see Kecskes, 2013).

The tie of SBUs to a particular situation that charges their particular meaning may become so dominant that the functional-situational meaning may take over as the most salient meaning of the expression, for instance, *piece of cake*, *help yourself*, *give me a hand*. CRs tend to have discourse functions rather than situation-bound functions, for instance, *as a matter of fact*, *suffice it to say*, *to tell the truth*, and others. Discourse functions are not necessarily tied to particular situations. They can be expressed by conversational routines including not only SBUs, but also expressions of turn-taking, internal and external modifiers, discourse markers, connectors, and others.

SBUs differ from idioms in origin, purpose, and use. The likelihood of occurrence of lexico-semantic idioms is usually unpredictable, while the use of SBUs is generally tied to particular social contexts. Idioms, just like metaphors, arise from a creative act. They are used to represent complex content in a tangible way that can hardly be analysed conceptually. SBUs are repetitive expressions whose use saves mental energy. Idioms are like lexemes, while SBUs are more like pragmatic markers. SBUs fulfil social needs. People know that if they use these prefabricated expressions they are safe: nobody will misunderstand them because these phrases usually mean the same to most speakers of a speech community. However, there is a price for repetitiveness. SBUs often lose their composition meaning and become pure functional units denoting greetings, address-

ing, opening, etc. This is where we can draw the dividing line between semantic idioms (*spill the beans*, *kick the bucket*, *pull one's leg*, etc.) and SBUs (*see you later*, *it's been a pleasure meeting you*, *say hello to…*, etc.). While semantic idioms are not transparent at all, pragmatic idioms (SBUs) generally remain transparent and usually have a freely generated counterpart (for instance: *get out of here*, *welcome aboard*). In contrast to idioms, SBUs do not mean anything different from the corresponding free sentences: they simply mean less. Their meaning is functional rather than compositional.

The loss of compositionality is a matter of degree. When SBUs are frequently used in a particular meaning, they will encode that meaning and develop a particular pragmatic function. This pragmatic property is beginning to become conventionalised when it starts to mean the same thing for most native speakers. That is to say, when native speakers are asked what comes into their mind first when they hear a given expression and their response will be very similar, we can say that the SBU has already encoded a specific pragmatic property. For instance, in Chinese nobody will think of the literal meaning of ***nǐ chī le ma?*** 'have you eaten?', when it is used as an SBU.

SBUs are both selective and completive. They are selective because their use is preferred over a number of utterances, both freely generated and idiomatic, which equally could be used in the given situation. SBUs are completive because they evoke a particular situation, which freely generated utterances usually do not do. For instance, *let me tell you something* generally creates a negative expectation by the hearer, or *step out of the car, please* is something that most people identify with police stops. In freely generated utterances the sense of the utterance is defined by the interplay of linguistic meaning and context, situation, background knowledge. In SBUs, however, the communicative meaning, the sense of the utterances, is encoded and fixed by pragmatic conventions. Consequently, prior context encapsulated in them can create actual situational context, for instance, *license and registration, please*, *can I help you?*, *you are all set*. All these expressions can create their own situation (based on the "history" of their prior use) without being used in an actual situational context.

SBUs are usually transparent and have psychological reality. They are idiomatised in the sense that the words in them as a whole constitute a pragmatic unit with a particular function. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1989, p. 128) referred to them as "idioms with a pragmatic point". The weaker an SBU is motivated, the stronger it is idiomatised. According to the degree of motivation, we can distinguish three types of SBUs: *plain, loaded*, and *charged* (Kecskes, 2003, 2010). *Plain SBUs* have a compositional structure and are semantically transparent. Their situational meaning may only differ slightly from their propositional meaning because their pragmatic extension is minimal, if any. Their meaning can be com-

puted from their compositional structure. For instance:

(2)

Assistant:	*Can I help you*, Sir?
Customer:	Thank you. *I'm just looking.*

In this conversation *Can I help you?* and *I'm just looking* function as plain SBUs while *thank you* is a speech formula.

On the other end of the continuum we find *loaded SBUs* that are the closest to semantic idioms because they may lose their compositionality and are usually not transparent semantically any more. Their pragmatic function is more important than their original literal meaning that is difficult to recall if needed. These SBUs are "loaded" with their pragmatic function that remains there, and usually cannot be cancelled by the actual situational context because it is encoded in the expression as a whole. They are pragmatic idioms whose occurrence is strongly tied to conventional, frequently repeated situations. We think of a particular situation even if we hear the following expressions without their routine context: *it's not my cup of tea*, *help yourself*, *you are all set*, etc., because their most salient meaning is the one that is extended pragmatically.

Charged SBUs come in between plain and loaded SBUs. An SBU may exhibit pragmatic ambiguity, in the sense that its basic function is extended pragmatically to cover other referents or meanings (cf. Sweetser, 1990, p. 1). For instance, this is the case with a phrase such as *see you soon*, which retains its original sense but can also be conventionally (situationally) interpreted as a closing, a way to say good-bye to one's partner. So this expression has two interpretations: a literal and a situation-bound one. However, the situation-bound function ("closing") is charged by the situation only. If the expression *see you soon* is given without a particular actual situational context it may be ambiguous because it can create one of two situations in the mind of a hearer: (a) closing, a way to say good-bye, and (b) what its compositional meaning says: the speaker will see the interlocutor soon. Here is another example with the expression *come on*.

(3)

Jenny:	*Come on*, Jim, we will miss the train.
Jim:	Relax, we have plenty of time.

(4)

Jill:	Bob, I think I can't go with you.
Bob:	*Come on*, you promised to come with me.

In (3) *come on* is transparent and functions like a speech formula while in (4) it is more like an SBU that serves to press the interlocutor to do something.

SBUs encode the history of their use just like words (Kecskes, 2003, 2010). However, there is a significant difference between the two types of lexical units. Words can collocate with many other words in creating meaningful utterances, and their use is very rarely tied to particular situations only. SBUs, however, are usually tied to one or more particular situations. Coulmas (1981) argued that frequency of occurrence has a crucial impact on the meaningfulness of linguistic expressions. The more frequent they are, the more meaningless they may become in terms of referential semantics. This fact may have a profound effect on their evaluative functions. The compositional meaning of utterances often becomes of secondary importance, and the functional aspect begins to dominate. Frequency and familiarity correlate in a unique way. Frequency can be general or attached to a particular register or situation. For instance, the utterance *Hello, how are you?* is very frequently used in everyday interaction. This is true because the situation (meeting and greeting others) requiring the use of this (or a similar) expression occurs very often. There seems to be a difference between word frequency and utterance frequency. Word frequency refers to the general use of words in any kind of situation. Utterance frequency, however, is more register-oriented and/or situation bound. It is especially true if we take SBUs. It does not make much sense to speak about the general frequency of utterances when they are usually register oriented and/or situation bound. Consequently, *the frequency of an SBU depends on the frequency of a given register or a situation the SBU is attached to*. This fact has an important influence on the evaluative functions of SBUs.

After this overview of the characteristics of SBUs we should make an attempt to describe what place SBUs take in Chinese formulaic language.

3. Formulaic language in Chinese

The Chinese language just like any other language is full of formulaic expressions that are culture specific. As an example we can take the word CHI 吃 'eat'. Eating takes a central place in Chinese culture. For instance Dong (1995) explained that all the semantic extensions of CHI are related to each other in the manner of the following relational chain:

> < put eatable things into mouth and swallow (core meaning) → eat by way of (e.g., ***chī shítáng***, 吃食堂 'eat dining-hall') → kill (***chī diào dírén*** 吃掉敌人 'eat the enemy') → absorb (***chī lì*** 吃 'eat energy') → consume (***chī mò*** 吃墨 'eat ink') → be in a certain state of life or depend upon something (***chī fùmǔ*** 吃父母 'eat parents') → get used to accepting certain treatment (***chī kǔ*** 吃苦 'eat hardships') → suffer from unhappy things (***chī kuī*** 吃亏 'eat losses').

When talking about formulaic language scholars usually refer to proverbs

(*yànyǔ* 谚语), idioms (*chéngyǔ* 成语), and *guànyòngyǔ* 惯用语 compounds. However, this does not mean that there are no other categories of formulaic language in Chinese (see Zhou, 2012 about this issue). But it is definitely true that these three are the major categories. Since we want to introduce a fourth major category our focus will be on how these three categories relate to the proposed one.

It is quite complicated to draw a dividing line between the categories of Chinese formulaic expressions. Four-character idioms (*chéngyǔ* 成语) have been developed from social dialects, sayings and historical stories in China. *Chéngyǔ* are in general four-character expressions and used frequently in formal writing and not necessarily in everyday conversation. Most of these expressions are found in Chinese idiomatic dictionaries. *Yànyǔ* consist of a different number of characters and are frequently used in daily life to express truth based on common sense and life experience. *Guànyòngyǔ* compounds are somewhat different. They are metaphorical expressions that are packaged with the experience of Chinese people and their perceptions and conceptualisations of the world. Literal meanings of these compounds are rarely used. It is important to emphasise that the use of *guànyòngyǔ* is not tied to any particular situation. Now we need to discuss the main characteristic features of each of these three categories.

3.1 Proverbs: *yànyǔ* 谚语

Yànyǔ are proverbs that are short, generally known, and repeated sentences of the general populace that express wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views based on common sense or the practical life experience of humanity. *Yànyǔ* have a fixed and memorisable form, which is handed down from generation to generation. They are usually considered colloquial expressions. For instance:

yī rén chī bǎo quán jiā bù è
一人吃饱，全家不饿
Lit.: If a single member of a family eats, the whole family will not feel hungry.
He is a bachelor; once he is fed, no one is hungry in his family.

sān bǎi liù shí háng háng háng chū zhuàng yuán
三百六十行，行行出状元
There are masters in every walk of life. You can achieve greatness in whatever profession you choose to follow.

yǒu zhì zhě shì jìng chéng
有志者事竟成
A man of determination will surely succeed.

3.2 Idioms

Idioms have two main groups: ***chéngyǔ*** 成语 that are in general formal expressions and ***guànyòngyǔ*** 惯用语 that are metaphorical expressions. ***Chéngyǔ*** usually consist of four characters while ***guànyòngyǔ*** can have any number of characters.

3.2.1 Chéngyǔ 成语

Chéngyǔ idioms are closely related to Chinese history and literature. They all have a story to explain their meaning, and many were coined when spoken Chinese was very different. They are considered cultural treasures that are still used today. ***Chéngyǔ*** can be used in daily speech, but they are more frequently used in formal communication as an indicator of the user's advanced level of Chinese. They do not follow the usual grammatical structure and syntax of the Chinese spoken language, and are instead highly compact and synthetic. For instance:

yǐ yá huán yá
以牙还牙
Lit.: with teeth return teeth
Eye for eye; tooth for tooth

wàn niàn jù huī
万念俱灰
Lit.: ten thousand thought all ashes (ten thousands of thoughts have turned into ashes)
All is lost. A hopeless situation.

bù zhī suǒ yún
不知所云
Lit.: not know what say
A phrase for not knowing what to say, because a situation is beyond comprehension, or it is an awkward topic.

3.2.2 Guànyòngyǔ 惯用语 ***compounds***

A ***guànyòngyǔ*** compound is usually composed of two or more characters bound together to form one word (Chao, 1968). These compounds are idiomatic, lively, and very frequently used (Cui, 2005). They generally refer to popular conceptions, traditional values, and cultural attitudes with extraordinary vividness. The form is short (usually three syllables) with set rhythm patterns that easily facilitate memorisation. According to Wen (2008, p. 250) what makes a ***guànyòngyǔ*** compound different from most Chinese compounds is its culturally specific semantics. The meaning of the compound is usually figurative and metaphorical, which derives from cultural and social events. Its usage is based on the understanding of its original meaning and extended cultural connotations. The pragmatic function of

guànyòngyǔ is often in either a commendatory or derogatory sense. For instance, ***kāi lǜ dēng*** 开绿灯 'turn on green light' means to provide opportunities and convenience to favourable people by abusing one's privilege. Wen (2008) argued that the compound activates the cognitive association with the concept of corruption. It connects the function of the green traffic light to the conceptions of privilege, corruption, and inappropriate human connections. The cognitive associations are presented through metaphorical imageries. Another example is ***fēi máo tuǐ*** 飞毛腿 'flying hair leg', which refers to legs that run very fast; the compound refers to people who can run really fast. The expression activates the mental image of "flying speed". From the examples it is clear that the metaphorical imageries are closely associated with the literal or original meaning of the compounds. They describe the way we perceive objects, events, and actions around us. According to Wen (2008), these compounds also reveal how our experiences with the world are organised and our perceptions are conceptualised.

There is no doubt about the importance of these three groups in Chinese formulaic language. But none of the three categories covers what we called situation-bound utterance such as:

Dào nǎlǐ qù ya?
到哪里去呀?
Where are you heading?

Nǎlǐ nǎlǐ
哪里哪里
I am flattered.

Hǎo jiǔ bù jiàn!
好久不见!
Long time no see.

They are neither ***yànyǔ*** nor ***chéngyǔ*** nor ***guànyòngyǔ***. The closest to SBUs come the ***guànyòngyǔ*** compounds. They are culture specific just like SBUs, follow changes in the life of society, and refer to everyday phenomena. However, they are not tied to specific situational contexts. They are used when speakers find them appropriate just as is the case with conversational routines in English.

We cannot ignore the existence and importance of SBUs in Chinese, although most textbooks and grammar books pay little attention to them. So I propose to introduce SBUs as a separate, fourth category in Chinese formulaic language. Their knowledge is especially important for Chinese second language learners, because the ability to select common expressions from less common ones, an ability Pawley and Syder (1983) called "native-like selection", is an important indicator of second language development.

4. Nature and characteristics of SBUs in Chinese

4.1 Dialectal variety and SBUs

One of the major problems for us when we try to define whether a formulaic expression can be considered an SBU in Chinese is the presence of a great variety of dialects in the Chinese language. Public saliency is a crucial issue in the identification and use of SBUs (see Zhou, 2012) because SBUs are developed in human language to ease up communication, as they mean the same for all members of the speech community. However, if the speech community is as big and diverse as the Chinese one, problems will occur with the use of SBUs.

Dialects in Chinese have SBUs of their own that are not necessarily recognised by the majority of speakers in Putonghua (Modern Chinese). While dialectal variety usually is not a problem with *yànyǔ* and *chéngyǔ*, it is with SBUs. So we can distinguish SBUs that are commonly recognised in Putonghua and SBUs that are dialectal. Zhou (2012) mentioned *zuo haoshi* as an example that derives from the Xiang dialect and fully recognised as an SBU in Modern Chinese in the Xiang dialect zone (Hunan province). It is recognised as an SBU only by 45% of those participants of his test, who come from other provinces of China.

According to Hu (2004), Modern Chinese (Putonghua) refers to the contemporary common language of the Han. It is a standardised language, which adopts the pronunciation of the Beijing area as the standard pronunciation, the north dialect as the basic content, and the modern language classical works as the grammatical norm. One thing is for sure: SBUs in Putonghua come from different dialects of Mandarin; which of them become recognised by most speakers of the huge speech community of Putonghua is the matter of language use and will be decided in the next decades.

4.2 Categorisation of SBUs in Chinese

When we investigate SBUs in Chinese we can also rely on the categorisation given for English (Kecskes, 2003). We can distinguish *plain, loaded*, and *charged* SBUs in Chinese. In the case of *plain SBUs*, the literal meaning basically coincides with the functional meaning. Language learners can compute their meanings from their compositional structure. They need to learn how to use them appropriately with regard to the social relationship between the addresser and addressee. For instance:

Jiǔ wéi
久 违
Lit.: long part
Long time no see.

Jiǔ yǎng
久仰
Lit.: long admire
I've admired you for a long time.

Qǐng wèn nín guì xìng?
请问您贵姓?
Lit.: please ask you honourable surname
What's your honourable surname?

Qǐng liú bù!
请留步!
Lit.: please stop step
Please stop here. I will see myself out.

Xìng huì
幸会
Lit.: honour meet
It's my honour to meet you.

Cui (In Press) argued that many expressions (starters, directives, attention getters, etc.) used in the classroom can be considered plain SBU such as ***jǔ shǒu shuō*** 举手说 'raise your hand to speak', ***yīge yīge lái*** 一个一个来 'one at a time', and ***zuò hǎo*** 坐好 'sit straight'. It is interesting to note that these expressions would be considered not very polite if used in everyday situations but are appropriate in a classroom setting.

Loaded SBUs are more function bound than their original literal meanings, which are difficult to recall if needed. For instance:

Nǎlǐ nǎlǐ
哪里哪里
Lit.: There is nothing to pardon
I am flattered.

Mànman chī
慢慢吃
Lit.: Eat slowly
Enjoy the food.

Loaded SBUs may lose their compositionality and are usually not transparent semantically any more. They are functional units that are "loaded" with socio-cultural content that remains with them, and usually cannot be cancelled by

the actual situational context because it is encoded in the expression as a whole. ***Mànman chī*** literally means 'eat slowly' but its real function is not what it says but the metapragmatic meaning that refers to how food can be enjoyed.

Loaded SBUs are pragmatic idioms whose occurrence is strongly tied to conventional, frequently repeated situations. We think of a particular situation even if we hear the expressions without their routine context:

Charged SBUs are very interesting units in Chinese because Mandarin has a lot of multi-charged SBUs. Zhou (2012, pp. 76–77) used ***qingbian*** as an example, which, according to him, has three almost equally salient meanings: 'do as you like', 'ask somebody to leave', and 'scorn'. The following three examples illustrate these meanings separately.

(a)
Nǐ zuò de cài zhēn hǎo chī!
你做的菜真好吃！
The dish cooked by you is really delicious!

Bié kè qì, qǐng biàn ya.
别客气，请便呀。
Don't be shy, eat as you like.

(b)
Gāi xià bān la, gè wèi qǐng zì biàn.
该下班啦，各位请自便。
It is time to get off work, please leave.

(c)
Wǒ gào sù lǎo bǎn nǐ de chǒu shì.
我告诉老板你的丑事。
I will tell the boss your bad deeds.

Qǐng biàn.
请便。
Go ahead, I do not care.

The great number of charged SBUs in Chinese can partly be explained by the fact that in Putonghua actual situational context plays a very important role in utterance interpretation. In fact, I would say that actual situational context plays an even more decisive role in meaning creation than in English. I have argued in several places (e.g. Kecskes, 2010, 2013) that world knowledge is available to human beings in two forms: (a) as tied to lexical items and images based on prior encounters and experience, and (b) as provided by the actual situational context

framed by the given situation. Prior context is encoded in lexical items while actual situational context is in which the interaction takes place. These two sides of context (prior and actual) are intertwined and inseparable. Actual situational context is viewed through prior context, and this combination creates, as it were, a third space. Meaning is, in this view, seen as the outcome of the interrelation and interaction of prior and current (actual) experience. I have demonstrated in some of my papers that prior, reoccurring context may cancel the selective role of actual situational context in English. However, this is rarely the case in Chinese, where the role of actual situational context almost always overrides what is encoded in the characters as prior context. *In Mandarin the linguistic code proposes while context imposes.*

4.3 Difficulties of Chinese language learners with SBUs

As mentioned above, Chinese textbooks usually do not pay special attention to SBUs. However, Chinese language learners do, especially if they study abroad, because there they have direct exposure to these expressions. But exposure and frequency are not enough. In Schmitt, Dornyei, Adolphs, and Durow's (2004) study 7 participants selected from a pool of 24 participants were interviewed periodically. Data analysis revealed that successful learning of formulaic expressions was strongly related to the learners' active involvement in the English-speaking community. This suggests that learning formulaic expressions is to a large extent the function of the learners' sociocultural integration. Some studies also confirmed the important effect sociocultural factors have on the acquisition of formulaic language including SBUs (e.g. Kecskes, 2013; Ortaçtepe, 2012; Taguchi et al., 2013).

It has been argued that SBUs are important signs of pragmatic competence of L2 learners (e.g. Kecskes, 2010, 2013). However, the acquisition of SBUs is somewhat unique in the sense that exposure and frequency will not lead directly to better command of SBUs. Since these expressions are culture specific, much depends on how language learners can identify themselves with the function and content SBUs express. Doi's account of these expressions confirms this assumption:

> The "please help yourself" that Americans use so often had a rather unpleasant ringing in my ears before I became used to English conversation. The meaning, of course, is simply "please take what you want without hesitation," but literally translated it has somehow a flavor of "nobody else will help you," and I could not see how it came to be an expression of good will.
>
> Doi, 1973, p. 13

Willingness, motivation, and ability of individual learners to assume L2 sociocultural beliefs and norms expressed by SBUs seem to play a decisive role in their acquisition. A non-native speaker cannot be expected "simply to abandon his/her own cultural world" (Barro, Byram, Grimm, Morgan, & Roberts, 1993, p. 56). Adamson (1988) pointed out that non-native speakers are often reluctant to accept and share the values, beliefs, and presuppositions of an L2 community even if they have been living there for a long period of time and can speak the language quite well. The influence of L1 cultural expectations on communication patterns is so strong that, even if the conceptual socialisation process in L2 is very advanced and the individual has high proficiency and excellent skills in the L2, her/his interaction with Westerners can be severely blocked by the limits imposed by cultural factors. According to Lu (2001), the influence of the traditional Chinese culture is so far reaching and persistent that even second- or third-generation Americans of Chinese descendants are unable to fully ignore it, even though their English proficiency is on a par with that of native English speakers. Many of these people do not speak Chinese any longer and totally depend on English as the tool of thinking and communication. "Nevertheless, their speech acts are still in the shadow of culturally governed modes of thinking, talking and behaving" (Lu, 2001, p. 216).

All these studies refer to the fact that in analysing SBUs we must separate the ability of comprehending SBUs from the ability of producing SBUs. Understanding SBUs is much less motivated by sociocultural factors than producing SBUs. Taguchi et al. (2013) are right when they say that. Theirs is the only study so far that has looked at the production of formulas in Chinese and not comprehension. They argued that "production of formulaic expressions is more demanding because of a more fine-tuned syntactic/lexical analysis required in production" (Taguchi et al., 2013, pp. 26–27). When trying to understand an SBU it is possible to infer the meaning without a precise linguistic analysis, relying mainly on contextual cues. However, in production, lexis and morphosyntax must be accurate so that the meaning encoded in the forms is understood properly.

Production studies in other languages (e.g. Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, & Maynard, 2008; Warga, 2005; Yorio, 1980) have demonstrated that besides sociocultural factors there are other things that may explain why language learners avoid using formulaic language including SBUs. Non-native speakers usually do not know how flexible the formulas are linguistically, i.e., what structural changes they allow without losing their original function and/or meaning. Linguistic form is a semantic scaffold. If it is defective, the meaning will inevitably fall apart. For instance, it is quite a frequent mistake of Chinese learners to omit certain parts of an expression. ***Dào nǎlǐ qù ya?*** 到哪里去呀 is a greeting, which literally means 'where are you heading?'. But if Chinese learners change the tones of NALI from

nǎlǐ to ***nàlǐ***, then they will mean 'go there' (***nǎlǐ*** 哪里 'where'; ***nàlǐ*** 那里 'there').

Another reason for the difficulty is that Chinese SBUs usually do not have equivalents in the L1 of learners. Even if they do have something close, it is not the same. Zhou (2012) illustrated this with the example of *piece of cake*, which is a typical SBU in English. It means 'very easy' when someone responds to a request to do something. The compositional meaning is lost, only the functional meaning comes forward. The closest Chinese equivalent of the English SBU is ***xiǎo cài yī dié*** 'small dish one plate'. Literally it refers to 'the starter' or 'a light dish' (***xiǎocài*** refers to the starter of a dinner). The functional meaning of both expressions is quite similar; however, the wording is different in the two languages.

It is interesting to mention another example where the Chinese SBU does not have any English equivalent. ***Jiǔyǎng*** 久仰 functions in Chinese as an honorific. Chinese students often say to their professors ***jiǔyǎng, jiǔyǎng*** meaning something like 'I've long looked forward to meeting you', or 'it's an honour to meet you at last'.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that, when analysing formulaic language use in Chinese, besides the three main categories, proverbs (***yànyǔ*** 谚语), idioms (***chéngyǔ*** 成语), and ***guànyòngyǔ*** 惯用语 compounds, we need to distinguish and pay special attention to a fourth category: situation-bound utterances (***qíngjìng zhuānyòngyǔ*** 情境专用语). Situation-bound utterances represent a unique group within idiomatic expressions because their use is tied to particular social situations. SBUs fulfil social functions and are very important parts of the sociocultural background knowledge that is required to use a language appropriately in actual social situations.

Knowing what expressions to select, what is appropriate or inappropriate in different social situations, is an important sign of group-inclusiveness and "native-likeness". When interlocutors use SBUs, they know that they will not be misunderstood by their fellow speech community members. So we can consider SBUs as a cohesive and unifying force in a language. In Putonghua, however, SBUs occupy a unique place. They come from different dialects of Mandarin, and some of them are known well by all speakers of Putonghua, others are not yet. We can say that they are in an evolving stage of their development.

SBUs are very culture specific. In this respect they are close to ***guànyòngyǔ*** compounds. They both reflect changes in society diachronically. They are rooted in culture, expressed in vivid language, blooming, maybe, for some time and disappear when they are not needed anymore because of social changes.

It was also claimed that in Chinese there are a great number of charged SBUs, maybe more than in English. One and the same SBU can be tied to more than one situation, and its actual situational meaning is always determined by the actual situational context. This is due to the fact that actual situational context plays not just a selective, but also a strong constitutive role in the case of SBUs in Chinese.

There are a relatively small number of works that deal with SBUs in Chinese. We need exploration and investigation in this field to discover and describe the real nature and situational behaviour of these unique formulaic expressions. This article has tried to contribute to this endeavour by introducing the semantic category and discussing its relationship to other important formulaic categories in Chinese.

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