

CLASSIFICATION OF THE SEMANTIC TYPES OF JIXIANGYU (吉祥语, AUSPICIOUS EXPRESSIONS) IN CHINESE: HAPPINESS, JOY, CAREER-WEALTH, LONGEVITY, VIRTUE, PEACE, AND COLOR SYMBOLISM



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Abstract: This article presents a systematic semantic classification of jixiangyuy (吉祥语) in modern Chinese and explicates how these expressions function across real-life contexts. The dataset combines ceremonial texts, everyday greetings, spring couplets (春联), classical sources, and explanatory dictionaries. Seven domains are examined—happiness, joy, career and wealth, longevity, virtue, peace, and color symbolism. Findings indicate that jixiangyuy operate as stable communicative formulas due to their brevity, rhythmic patterning, visual symbolism, and sound-based associations.

Keywords: jixiangyuy; semantic classification; homophony; color/number symbolism; ritual speech; domain–symbol–homophony.

Annotatsiya: Maqolada hozirgi xitoy tilidagi jixiangyuylar (吉祥语) semantik yo‘nalishlar bo‘yicha tizimli ravishda tasniflanadi va ularning ishlatilish mexanizmlari izohlanadi. Tadqiqot bazasi sifatida marosim matnlari, kundalik tabriklar, chunlian (春联) yozuvlari, klassik manbalar hamda izohli lug‘atlardan tuzilgan kichik korpus foydalanildi. Tahlil yetti asosiy guruhni qamrab oladi: baxt, quvonch, martaba–boylik, uzoq umr, fazilat, tinchlik va rang ramzlari. Amaliy jihatdan, maqola tarjima va o‘qitishda “domen–ramz–homofoniya” yondashuvini qo‘llashni taklif etadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: jixiangyuy; semantik tasnif; homofoniya; rang–raqam timsoli; marosim nutqi; domen–ramz–homofoniya; xitoy tili.

Аннотация: Статья предлагает системную семантическую классификацию цзисяньюй (吉祥语) современного китайского языка и описывает механизмы их функционирования в реальных коммуникативных ситуациях. Эмпирическая база включает обрядовые тексты, повседневные поздравления, весенние парные надписи (春联), классические источники и толковые словари. Анализ охватывает семь доменов: счастье, радость, карьера и богатство, долголетие, добродетель, мир/благополучие и цветовую символику.

Ключевые слова: *цзисяньюй; семантическая классификация; омофония; цветовая/числовая символика; обрядовая речь; домен–символ–омофония; китайский язык.*

INTRODUCTION

Jixiangyu (吉祥语), commonly translated as “auspicious expressions,” represent concise linguistic units employed within Chinese society to convey good wishes, blessings, and favorable omens. They are particularly prominent in ritual and everyday contexts such as weddings, New Year celebrations, the commencement of business activities, housewarming ceremonies, or departures for travel. The effectiveness of these expressions lies in their brevity, rhythmic sound patterns, and strong symbolic associations with cultural signs such as colors, numbers, animals, and objects. These features ensure their memorability and immediate recognition in ceremonial discourse.

According to authoritative dictionaries and reference works [2; 3], the characters 吉 and 祥 are consistently explained as denoting auspiciousness and good fortune. The stability of this semantic nucleus is preserved in contemporary discourse, where jixiangyu continue to encode positive expectations in formulaic form [8:92]. In practice, values such as peace, prosperity, and social advancement are compressed into compact verbal formulas that circulate widely in both oral and written communication.

The present study proposes a systematic classification of jixiangyu into seven semantic domains: happiness, joy, career–wealth, longevity, virtue, peace, and color symbolism. Each category is analyzed through three interrelated components: (1) the core meaning, (2) the symbolic foundation—typically associated with animals, colors, numbers, or objects—and (3) the role of homophony in reinforcing or extending meaning. This tripartite framework not only facilitates accurate interpretation but also provides guidance for appropriate usage.

The research corpus includes ritual texts, everyday congratulatory phrases, chunlian (春联) couplets, classical sources, and explanatory dictionaries. The methodology applied is predominantly descriptive and practical: each expression is identified by its semantic category, examined for symbolic associations and potential homophonic links, and then contextualized in typical communicative settings. The aim is not to impose excessive theoretical abstraction but rather to map the semantic fields of jixiangyu in a clear and accessible way.

From an applied perspective, the study demonstrates that explanations based on the triad of “domain–symbol–homophony” significantly enhance comprehension in teaching and translation contexts. For example, when an expression belonging to

the wealth domain is associated with a particular color (red), number (8), or animal/object symbol, highlighting these cues in translation increases communicative equivalence. Consequently, the classification presented here may serve as a practical reference for teachers, translators, and professionals engaged in intercultural communication.

Purpose and Objectives

The main purpose of this study is to analyze systematically the semantic types of jixiangyu (吉祥语) in modern Chinese, to identify their symbolic foundations and the mechanisms of homophony, and to describe their application in ritual and everyday discourse.

Objectives

- To classify jixiangyu into seven semantic groups: happiness, joy, career–wealth, longevity, virtue, peace, and color symbolism.
- To explain the core meaning and symbolic foundations of each group, including animals, colors, numbers, and objects.
- To illustrate semantic reinforcement through homophony with relevant examples.
- To describe their usage features in ritual and everyday contexts.
- To justify the practical relevance of the “domain–symbol–homophony” approach in teaching and translation.

Methods

- Material** – samples were collected from ritual speeches, everyday wishes, chunlian (春联) couplets, classical sources, and explanatory dictionaries.
- Descriptive analysis** – jixiangyu expressions were studied according to their semantic content and situational usage.
- Semantic grouping** – expressions were divided into seven groups: happiness, joy, career–wealth, longevity, virtue, peace, and color symbolism.
- Homophony** – expressions based on sound resemblance (e.g., 鱼/余, 福/蝠) were identified and analyzed.

Results and Discussion

The analysis, based on a small but targeted corpus, highlights the main semantic layers of jixiangyu, their symbolic associations, and contexts of use.

1. Happiness (福)

Happiness represents prosperity and well-being. The inverted 福 character is widely used during festivals, exploiting the homophony between *dao* (倒 “upside down”) and *dao* (到 “arrival”), conveying “happiness has arrived.” Fish images

combined with 年年有余 symbolize abundance, while short expressions such as 万事如意 or 福星高照 circulate in everyday greetings [7:116].

2. Joy (喜)

Expressions of joy are linked with good news such as marriage, childbirth, or new beginnings. The double 喜 (囍) is a constant wedding emblem. Business openings often use formulas such as 开业大吉, 生意兴隆, or 财源广进, accompanied by bright colors and decorative motifs.

3. Career–Wealth (禄/财)

Two sub-domains appear: career advancement and material prosperity. Historically, 禄 referred to official salary, associated with the deer 鹿 as a homophone [5; 6]. Success-related phrases include 步步高升 and 金榜题名, while prosperity is expressed by 恭喜发财 or 财源滚滚, widely used in red envelopes and congratulatory posters.

4. Longevity (寿)

Longevity wishes emphasize respect for elders. Typical symbols include the crane, tortoise [4], and the “longevity peach” (寿桃). Formulas such as 长命百岁, 寿比南山, 松鹤延年, or 福寿康宁 appear in birthday decorations and jubilee greetings.

5. Virtue (德)

Virtue-related expressions praise moral qualities such as honesty and diligence. Examples include 高风亮节, 德才兼备, and 诚实守信. They are often found in commendations, academic settings, and expressions of respect.

6. Peace (安/平安)

Peace is a broad domain, ranging from individual safety (一路平安) to family harmony (家和万事兴) and social prosperity (国泰民安). Simple forms like 平安喜乐 are widely used in letters and festive notes.

7. Color Symbolism

Colors and numbers act as immediate signs. Red conveys luck and festivity: 开门红, 红红火火. Yellow symbolizes high status (飞黄腾达), purple signals auspiciousness (紫气东来), while white varies with context. Numbers also carry value: 8 implies fortune, 6 smooth progress, 9 longevity, whereas 4 is often avoided due to phonetic association with death.

General observations

a) Categories often overlap: happiness with peace, joy with wealth, or longevity with virtue frequently appear together, intensifying positive meaning.

b) Symbol and sound reinforce memory: fish with 年年有余 or inverted 福 combine visual and auditory cues.

c) Brevity and rhythm make four-character formulas effective for banners, cards, and advertisements.

d) In translation, highlighting domain, symbol, and homophony ensures communicative accuracy.

e) Emerging trends show new regional and seasonal variations; corpus-based studies could enrich future research [8:92].

Conclusion

The study shows that jixiangyu (吉祥语) in Chinese can be grouped into seven semantic domains: happiness, joy, career–wealth, longevity, virtue, peace, and color symbolism. Each group is supported by symbolic associations with animals, colors, numbers, or objects, while homophony further strengthens their meanings.

The essential feature of jixiangyu lies in their brevity, rhythmic structure, and formulaic form [1]. These characteristics explain their wide circulation in both ritual and everyday communication. For instance, 年年有余 (“may there be abundance every year”) combines with the fish symbol, while 恭喜发财 (“may you prosper”) is linked to the red envelope tradition, reflecting their multi-layered symbolic nature.

From a practical perspective, the “domain–symbol–homophony” approach is highly effective in teaching and translation, as it provides learners and audiences with a more complete understanding of meaning. Moreover, jixiangyu continue to function as stable cultural units that embody positive values in Chinese society.

Future research may focus on regional variations, modern usage, and quantitative corpus analysis. In addition, the use of thematic mapping remains a promising tool for both pedagogy and translation practice [7:116].

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