

# PURELY LINGUISTIC TABOO/GOOD LUCK LANGUAGE AND ITS IMPACT ON BEHAVIORS IN CHINA

by  
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In recent decades, increased attention has been given to taboo phenomena and the study of taboo language has been considered as 'central to any full understanding of linguistic beliefs and linguistic behavior' (Bolton and Hutton 1995:163). However, the fact that semantically neutral words/expressions may become taboo/good luck language for purely linguistic reasons, such as the associative processes of linking a word with its homophone or with its antonym, has not received due attention so far. In this study, we examined, from both the social and linguistic perspectives, linguistically derived or purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions collected from different sources. The social perspective reveals that our data fall into seven categories of life, including 'poverty-prosperity'; 'bad luck/good luck'; 'infertility/fertility'; 'conflict/harmony'; 'demotion/promotion'; 'death/longevity'; and 'good personal qualities', reflecting to a great extent the biggest concerns/fears of the general public in present China. The linguistic examination shows that most purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions are absolute homophones of their corresponding factual taboo/good luck words/expressions. However, associations also take place between near homophones, when certain conditions are met.

## *1. Introduction*

In Chinese culture, many semantically neutral words/expressions<sup>1</sup> may become taboo or good luck language merely because they are associated with some factual taboo/good luck words/expressions for purely linguistic reasons. These linguistically derived (purely linguistic) taboo/good luck words/expressions will then influence social behaviors. A real life story may serve as an illustration of this phenomenon.

An American chief executive manager in China prepared a gift package for each of the employees in his company before the Chinese New Year Festival. The package included a clock and this particular gift item created uproar among the Chinese employees, because the phrase used to describe the behavior of giving a clock 送钟 /sùn t♣ūŋ/<sup>2</sup> sounds exactly the same as a taboo word 送终 /sùn t♣ūŋ/ meaning 'see one to one's end/funeral'. The well-meant gift-giving behavior turned into an embarrassing situation for the manager. To correct the mistake or reverse the violation of the taboo, the manager had to, following the suggestion of a Chinese employee, throw in a history book to complete the gift package, because the situation of having both a history book and a clock can be described as 有史有钟 /iǒu ♣ǐ iǒu t♣ūŋ/, meaning 'having history and having clock', which is homophonous to a lucky Chinese idiom 有始有终 /iǒu ♣ǐ iǒu t♣ūŋ/, meaning literally 'having a beginning and having an end' and idiomatically 'accomplishing a task from the beginning to the end' (Shenjiang Fuwu Daobao (Shenjiang Service Guide) 2004).

Using a good luck or a purely linguistic good luck word/expression (like the idiom 有始有终 /iǒu ♣ǐ iǒu t♣ūŋ/ 'accomplishing a task from the beginning to the end' in the story told above) to name or describe a regular object or behavior is called 口彩 /k<sup>h</sup>ǒu ts<sup>h</sup>ǎi/ 'mouth luck' by Chinese people. 'Mouth luck' is not exactly euphemism, because a euphemistic expression is usually a mild or vague expression of a taboo topic according to the definition given in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (1995), while 'mouth luck' has to imply good luck. 'Mouth luck' is an art of using language, because an association must be ingeniously made between a good luck word/expression and an apparently ordinary or even an unlucky object/behavior.

In China, 'mouth luck' is commonly practiced to wish good luck or reverse a taboo. A typical example of using 'mouth luck' to wish good luck is calling four pieces of stewed pork 四喜肉 /sì jǐ |òu/ 'Four Happinesses Meat'. Stewed pork is an ordinary dish but the deliberate choice of putting four pieces of it on a plate makes it possible to link the dish with a popular good luck expression 四喜 /sì jǐ/ 'four

happineses', which has been traditionally used to represent the four greatest happinesses: getting rain after a long drought; meeting an old friend in foreign land; entering the bedroom on one's wedding night; and seeing one's own name on the emperor's golden list. Making use of 'mouth luck' to reverse a taboo usually requires more ingenuity. Breaking something by accident during the Chinese New Year Festival is considered a taboo<sup>3</sup> and this taboo can be reversed by simply uttering a lucky idiomatic expression 岁岁平安 /suèi suèi pīn ān/ 'peace all year round', which associates 碎 /suèi/ 'broken' with its homophone 岁 /suèi/ 'year', thus suiting the lucky idiom to the unlucky situation of breaking something (everyday experience).

Using 'mouth luck' to reverse a taboo may be done through associating words with their homophones, as the above examples show. It may also be done through the use of antonyms of taboo words. A classical example is the renaming of chopsticks. Originally, chopsticks were called 箸 /t♣ù/, which soon fell out of favor because it was (and still is) a homophone of the unlucky word 住 /t♣ù/ meaning 'cease to move or be stranded'. People started to use 快 (筷 in writing)<sup>4</sup> /kuài/ 'fast', the antonym of 住 /t♣ù/ 'cease to move or be stranded', to refer to chopsticks, and the new word gained popularity soon during the Ming dynasty (Lan 1993). In contemporary China, most people do not even know that 筷 was once 箸 in history.

The American manager's experience and the 'mouth luck' examples have shown how linguistic processes, such as the association of words with their homophones or with their antonyms, may turn ordinary words/expressions into what scholars (Anderson and Trudgill 1990; Leach 1976) call 'purely linguistic' taboo/good luck words/expressions, and how a taboo behavior can be reversed if the situation is modified to qualify a different description which is homophonous to a good luck expression. More importantly, from the above examples we have seen the impact of language on social behaviors in China.

Purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions constitute an important sub-category of taboo/good luck language in general and

present an interesting sociolinguistic topic which has not received due attention so far.

Traditional studies on taboo language mostly focus on areas such as death, sex, body functions, illness, blasphemy, cursing, etc. These are indeed important taboo areas, which reveal not only the conscious worldview of people but also the most elusive and impalpable fears and concerns in people's unconscious and subconscious minds (Leach 1976; Douglas 1973; Freud 1950). According to Bolton and Hutton (1995:163), 'the study of taboo language is central to any full understanding of linguistic beliefs and linguistic behavior', and the past decades have witnessed the publications of a considerable number of books on different aspects of taboo behaviors and taboo language (Anderson and Trudgill 1990; Burris 1972; Leach 1976; Robinson 1996; Chen 1991; Lin 1994; Ren 1990; Shen 1996; Wan 2001a, 2001b; McEnery 2006).

Some of the aforementioned scholars (Leach 1976; Anderson and Trudgill 1990) have also briefly mentioned purely linguistic taboo language, but so far no focused study has ever been done on it. Even less attention has been given to purely linguistic good luck language. There might be two reasons for this lack of attention. First, in many languages, purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions are not very common. Second, many people may consider purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions less important because they are only derived from taboo/good luck language through linguistic processes.

Purely linguistic taboo/luck words/expressions may be rare in many languages, but they are very common in Chinese. The special phonological system of Chinese, which will be discussed in detail in a later section, determines that it is extremely rich in homophones, so the chances of semantically neutral words becoming taboo/good luck words due to their phonological sameness/similarity to factual taboo/good luck words are much higher in Chinese than in many other languages. Therefore, Chinese is ideal for the study of purely linguistic taboo/good luck language.

It is true that purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expression are only derived from factual taboo/good luck language, but we consider them as more revealing of people's fears and desires, because it takes collective associative efforts of the general public to generate them. It follows that they emerge only in areas of people's greatest common concerns, especially the commonly feared and the commonly desired. For example, 四 /sì/ '4' has become a taboo because it is homophonous to 死 /sǐ/ 'die', but none of the homophones of 性 /jìng/ 'sex' has become a taboo, although sex is also an avoided conversational topic in Chinese. The reason might be that death is greatly feared but sex is not. A study on purely linguistic taboo/good luck language will provide us with a better understanding of the different degrees of people's fear/desire towards different taboo areas (i.e. which areas represent greater concerns, which are more feared, etc.).

A study on purely linguistic taboo/lucky words/expressions is also important in terms of their linguistic features. It will be interesting to know what linguistic features determine the possible association of one word/expression with another.

The present study aims at an extensive investigation on purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions and their impact on people's behaviors. The study will not only allow us to gain better understanding of the linguistic processes that produce new taboo/good luck words/expressions but also throw new light on our understanding of important aspects of Chinese culture. We will try to answer the following two questions: 1) what are the common areas of social life in which purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions usually emerge? And 2) what are the linguistic features that lead to the emergence of purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions?

## 2. *Previous Studies on Taboo Behaviors and Taboo Language*

Many scholars have studied the phenomena of taboo and identified different taboo areas. According to Anderson and Trudgill (1990), Western societies have taboos relating to sex, religion, bodily functions, ethnic groups, food, dirt, and death. Leach (1976) suggests that taboo words in English fall into three major groups: 1) 'dirty' words having to do with sex and excretion such as *bugger* and *shit*; 2) profane or blasphemous use of words that have to do with the Christian religion; and 3) words which are used in 'animal abuse' (calling a person by the name of an animal).

Some of the taboos, like death and sex, are common taboos in different cultures. There are also culture-specific taboos. For example, in the Miao community in China, it is forbidden to step on the three-legged iron frame they use over fire, because they believe that the three legs were originally their three fire protecting ancestors (Minzu Fengqing Wang (Customs of the Minorities Web), n.d.).

Taboo language is closely related to taboo behaviors, but, as Anderson and Trudgill (1990) and Leach (1976) have pointed out, it is not the case that each taboo word has its root in a taboo behavior. There are the possibilities of taboo behaviors having no corresponding taboo words and also the possibilities of purely linguistic taboo words which may or may not give rise to new taboo behaviors. Anderson and Trudgill (1990) cite the name of the animal *ass* in English as an example of a purely linguistic taboo that has no corresponding taboo behavior or object. People avoid using this label merely because of its phonological similarity/sameness to *arse* in British English and *ass* in American English. Leach (1976) mentions that a purely linguistic taboo may give rise to a behavioral taboo. However, so far we have not seen extensive studies on behavioral taboos resulting from purely linguistic taboos.

### 3. *Special Features of the Chinese Culture and Language*

In *Lunyu (The Analects)*, Confucius, one of the greatest thinkers in Chinese history, was recorded as advising his disciples to 'ask about the prohibitions when entering a territory; ask about the customs when touring a country; and ask about the taboos when visiting a family' (入境而问禁, 入国而问俗, 入门而问讳).<sup>5</sup> We can see that Confucius was regarding taboo as being just as important as are prohibitions and customs. More than two thousand years have gone by since Confucius first delivered this teaching of his, but the same advice still serves as guiding principle for social interactions in China.

In Chinese culture, death, sex, and bodily functions are also major taboos. Things that may lead to death or misery, such as illness, poverty, ill luck, loss of property or valuable things, etc., are also feared and avoided. Anything that may cause infertility is feared too, because having children to carry on one's family name is of utter importance in Chinese culture. According to Confucius, of all the unfilial sins, having no children is the most serious.

The phenomenon of taboo language reflects people's belief in the power of language. On the one hand, people avoid language relating to all taboo areas, especially the feared areas of death, poverty, illness, ill luck, etc. On the other hand, people believe that good luck language may bring good luck, so people love language relating to the opposites of the feared taboos, such as longevity, fertility, prosperity, happiness, health, and so on. The avoidance of taboo language and the love for good luck language or 'mouth luck' have led to the creative use of language: the emergence of numerous purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions.

The abundance of purely linguistic taboo/good luck words /expressions in Chinese is not only the result of a strong belief in the power of language, but also relates to a very special feature of the Chinese language: the presence of a huge number of homophones. There are two reasons for this: 1) the syllable structure of Chinese is very simple: '(C)(G)V{(G)C}' (where G can be either /i/ or /u/; the

final C can only be /n/ or /ŋ), so there is a limited number of different syllables (409 in Mandarin Chinese according to Huang and Liao (1991)); and 2) all monosyllabic characters (字), except a few, are meaningful morphemes as well as words which can stand alone or combine with each other to form new words or compounds. For example, 16 characters (they are also words), 魔 'ghost', 膜 'diaphragm', 模 'model', 摩 'touch', 摹 'imitate', 嬷 'old woman', 蘑 'mushroom', 馍 'steamed bun', etc., share the same pronunciation /mó/ with the same rising tone. Any one of these words may combine with certain other words to form different new disyllabic words/compounds like 魔鬼 /mó kuǐ/ 'demon', 魔法 /mó fǎ (/ 'witchcraft', 魔棍 /mó kù / 'magic wand', 魔影 /mó yǐng/ 'ghost shadow', etc. Substitution of one component morpheme for another in a disyllabic word/compound may produce a new word/compound: 魔棍 /mó kù / 'magic wand' and 磨棍 /mò kù / 'mill bar', for example. Due to its great number of homophones, Chinese is a gold mine of purely linguistic taboo/good luck words.

#### 4. Data Collection

In order to answer my research questions, I need to examine an extensive amount of data. As there is the potential for people to turn any word/expression into taboo/good luck language, it is not possible for me to make use of search software to identify target items in the many existing language data banks or corpora. Trying to be as systematic and comprehensive as possible, I collected data from four different sources: 1) published books or articles on the topic of taboo; 2) newspapers and news magazines; 3) websites; and 4) personal consultations.

Several Chinese scholars have studied taboo behaviors and taboo language. Although no research has focused on purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions and related behaviors, there is



brief mention of, or short discussion on, purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions in some of the published works of these scholars. Some of the data examined in this study were taken from these published works. Newspapers and news magazines are not academic works and we cannot find focused discussion on taboo behaviors or on taboo language there. However, in news stories or in feature articles, we may find instances of taboo behaviors or taboo language. For a period of more than four years, I followed the electronic versions of ten major Chinese newspapers/magazines, including Renmin Ribao (People's Daily), Xinwen Wanbao (Evening Post), Yangzhou Wanbao (Yangzhou Evening Paper), etc., recorded all occurrences of purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions and included them in my examination. I have also read dozens of websites devoted to the introduction of Chinese culture and the Chinese language for relevant data. To obtain data from the oral tradition, personal consultations were conducted with several dozens of people in the past three years. Finally, some examples from my own everyday experiences were also included for examination.

To make sure that my data reflect current and common language use, I have followed several principles in screening the data: 1) items from jargons of specific professions or occupations should be excluded; 2) items from particular dialects which have not gained popularity in the majority dialect (i.e., Mandarin) should be excluded; 3) incidental items used for special situations should be excluded; 4) archaic items which are no longer commonly used at the present should be excluded. In a word, the database for this study only includes generally accepted items in current use from well-established media and people's daily communication and activities.

An explanation about the second principle is due here. There are seven major dialects of Chinese, with Mandarin enjoying the largest number of speakers. As these dialects share the same ancestor language, Proto-Chinese, there are similarities between them. However, as they have followed different routes of development, they also display differences. As a result, homophones in one dialect may be or may not

be homophones in another dialect. That means a purely linguistic taboo/good luck word/expression that has originated in one dialect may or may not spread to another dialect. In the present study, all data items are from Mandarin including some that originated in other dialects but have gained popularity in Mandarin.

*5. Distribution of Purely Linguistic Taboo/Good Luck Expressions in Different Areas of Life*

A total of 105 different purely linguistic words/expressions were found.<sup>6</sup> A semantic examination of these words/expressions reveals that they fall into 7 generally feared/desired areas of life; their distribution into these categories is shown in Figure 1.

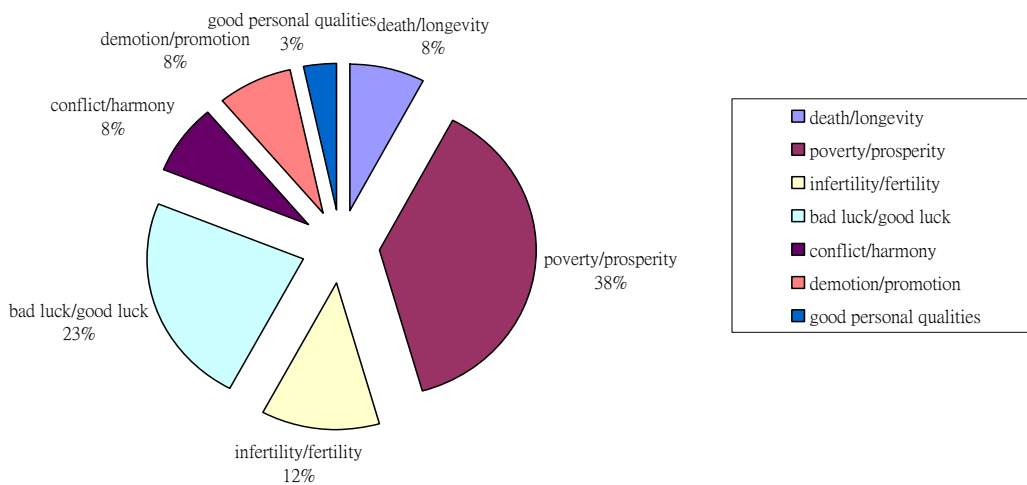


Figure 1: *Distribution of the purely linguistic taboo/good luck word/expressions*

The category of 'poverty/prosperity' occupies the biggest percentage (38%), followed by 'bad luck/good luck' (23%) and 'infertility/fertility' (12%). 'Death/longevity', 'conflict/harmony' and 'demotion

/promotion' have equal shares of 8% each and 'good personal qualities' has the smallest share of 3%.

The percentages shown in Figure 1 should not be regarded as mere figures. They reveal people's biggest concerns in present China.

### 5.1. Poverty/prosperity

The fact that 38% of the collected items fall into the category of poverty/prosperity shows that being prosperous is truly among the major concerns of the general public in present China.

The desire for prosperity is most clearly shown by names of food/dishes. People usually cook carp, lotus root, and 发菜 /fǎ# tsHài/, a special fungus, for Chinese New Year dinner, because 鲤鱼 /lǐ iy/ 'carp' is a homophone of 盈余 /li iy/ 'surplus profit'; and 莲藕 /liε↔n ōu/ 'lotus root' may be linked to 年年都有 /niε↔n niε↔n dōu iōu/ 'there is enough year after year' (Dajiyuan Web 2006).

发菜 /fǎ# tsHài/ literally means 'hair vegetable' because it looks like hair and can be eaten as vegetable. 发菜 /fǎ# tsHài/ is not particularly delicious but it is in great demand because its name sounds similar to 发财 /fǎ# tsHái/ 'make a big fortune'. As 发菜 /fǎ# tsHài/ grows in the form of entangled webs on the ground, it serves the function of protecting soil from being washed away by rain or flood. In recent years, people have been scraping 发菜 /fǎ# tsHài/ from the ground on a large scale, leaving behind large areas of bare, unprotected land and causing ecological damages to many regions. As a result, the Chinese government has banned the 发菜 /fǎ# tsHài/ business and some people have even suggested that the name of this fungus be changed to 破菜 /pò tsHài/ 'broken vegetable', homophone of 破财 /pò tsHái/ 'lose money', as a means to reverse the environmentally damaging 发菜 fǎ# ts Hài / business (Renmin Ribao (People's Daily) 2001).

As a near homophone or homophone of 财 /tsHái/ 'wealth, fortune' depending on the pronunciations in different sub-dialects, the word 柴 /t♣Hái/ (in Northern Mandarin) or /tsHái/ (in southern

Mandarin) 'firewood' has gained special favor and led to some interesting phenomena. In many areas in China, on the Chinese New Year's Day, a beggar may take a small bunch of tree branches (supposedly 柴 /t♣Hái/ 'firewood') to a door and shout '送柴(财)来了' /sùŋ t♣Hái lái lΦ/ 'I'm here to give firewood (wealth/fortune)', and the owner of the house will have to come out to take the so-called firewood and give tips to the beggar. Even if the owner of the house is reluctant to give money to the beggar, he/she has to do it because nobody wants to send 财 /tsHái/ 'wealth, fortune' away. According to a news report in Xinhua Wang (Xinhua Web) (2004), many people in Guiyang would collect dry tree branches on the mountain of a very popular park on Chinese New Year's Day, because 拾柴 /♣í tsHái/ 'collect firewood' is a homophone of 拾财 /♣í tsHái/ 'collect wealth/fortune'. This started some years ago and became very popular soon. As there were not enough dry branches to be collected, some people started to cut off branches from trees. The branch-cutting became so serious that the local government had to take measures to save the trees. In recent years, the local authorities will have firewood prepared and placed at certain places on the mountain for people to collect on the New Year's Day to prevent them from cutting trees down.

As a near homophone of 发 /fA#/ 'become prosperous', the number 8 /pA#/ has been specially favored as well. People want to have 8 in their telephone numbers, car plate numbers, license numbers, etc. They also like rooms numbered '8' and eighth floors. Many business people round up prices for their goods to 8, like \$9.8, \$9.88, \$8.88, etc. Car plate numbers like 888, 9888, etc. are reserved for special auctions and usually sell for amazingly high prices. According to Yangzhou Wanbao (Yangzhou Evening Paper) (2006), most lying-in women prefer natural delivery and usually there are only 2 to 3 cases of Caesarean section each day for medical reasons. However, on April 18, 2006, 20 women requested a Caesarean, because they wanted their babies to arrive on that day: 4-18 /sì ī pA#/ '18<sup>th</sup> of the 4<sup>th</sup> month', which can be interpreted as 誓一发 /♣ì ī fA#/ 'determined to become

prosperous'. Even high-ranking government officials will try to please people's fancy for the lucky number 8. Four years ago, the then Mayor of Beijing, Wang Qishan, told the media that the starting time of the Grand Opening of the Beijing Olympics had been set at 8:08 pm on the 8<sup>th</sup> of the 8<sup>th</sup> month (August) in 2008 (Beelink Web 2004), an absolutely lucky moment, because it involves five 8s in a row.

On the other hand, homophones of unlucky words like 'lose', 'unprofitable', and 'dry' will be avoided. When people are gambling, they will not allow anyone to read a book in the same room, because 书 /♣ū/ 'book' is a homophone of 输 /♣ū/ 'lose'. They do not even want to see a book around them. Some employers refuse to hire anyone with the surname of 裴 /péi/, a homophone of 赔 /péi/ 'incur a loss' (Xu 2005).

The importance of good luck language is also shown in brand names or translations of foreign brand names. The garment brand name *Goldlion* was originally translated literally into Chinese as 金狮 /t|īn ♣ī/ 'gold lion'. For a long time the brand could not gain favor among the general public. The marketing people then found that people did not like it because 狮 /♣ī/ sounds like 输 /♣ū/ 'lose'. Then Mr. Zeng Xianzi, the founder of the brand, changed the Chinese version of the brand name to 金利来 /t|īn lì lái/ 'gold profit come', a very clever combination of meaning translation and sound importation. Very soon after this change, the brand name became very popular in Hong Kong and then in mainland China (Alibaba Web 2004).

## 5.2. Bad luck/good luck

Being closely related to prosperity, good luck is greatly desired by people and it is not surprising to find 'bad luck/good luck' the second biggest category comprising 23% of our database.

To celebrate the Chinese New Year, people have the tradition of pasting on their door panels couplets to wish good luck, and quite often a red poster with an upside down 福 /fú/ 'luck' will be pasted on

the center of the door, because 倒 /dào/ 'upside down' is a homophone of 到 /dào/ 'arrive' and an upside down 福 /fú/ 'luck' may symbolize the arrival of luck. What is more interesting is that the upside down 福 /fú/ 'luck' is associated with the bat and has made the bat a lucky animal, simply because the word for bat 蝙蝠 /biān fú/ contains a homophone of 福 /fú/ 'luck' and bats always hang themselves upside down. An upside down bat thus becomes a live simulation of an upside down 福 /fú/ 'luck'. 鸡 /jī/ 'chicken' is a homophone of 吉 /jí/ 'luck'; and 鹤 /hè/ 'crane' is a homophone of 贺 /hè/ 'celebrate'; thus the chicken and the crane are also considered as lucky animals and have been common themes for Chinese paintings (according to everyday experience).

Purely linguistic good luck words/expressions have given artists an infinite number of ideas. For example, painters will draw a leopard and a magpie together because leopard is 豹 /bào/, a homophone of 报 /bào/ 'report' and magpie is called 喜鹊 /jǐ què/, literally 'good luck bird' or 'happiness bird'. A leopard and a magpie together symbolize 'reporting the arrival of luck' (Dajiyuan Web 2003). In the Chinese New Year season, we may see light decorations in the form of a magpie on the top of a Chinese plum tree, too: a visual simulation of the Chinese idiom 喜上眉梢 /jǐ shàng méi sāo/ 'happiness up on the eyebrow'. The visual simulation is possible because the magpie is a happiness bird and the name of the Chinese plum tree 梅 /méi/ is a homophone of 眉 /méi/ 'eyebrow' (Minjian Jixiangwu Wang (Folk Mascots Web), n.d.).

In the Chinese New Year season, almonds and tangerines will be common snack food, because the almond is 杏仁 /jìng rén/, which may be understood as 幸福人 /jìng fú rén/ 'happy person', and the tangerine is called 桔 /jú/, which sounds similar to 吉 /jí/ 'luck' (Zhongguo Chunjie Wang (Chinese Spring Festival Web), n.d.).

### 5.3. Infertility/fertility

Having children to carry on one's family name is very important in Chinese culture, so there are also a considerable number of purely

linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions in this category. These words/expressions are mostly used during weddings.

Chinese people have the tradition of offering snack food to guests during wedding ceremonies. The snack food usually includes dates, lotus seeds, and peanuts. The Chinese word for dates is 枣子 /tsäu tsi/. 枣 is homophonous to 早 /tsäu/ 'early'; 子 /tsi/ is a nominal suffix in this word, but by itself it means 'son' or 'child'. 早 'early' and 子 'son, child' together means 'to have children as early as possible'.<sup>7</sup> In the Chinese word for lotus seeds 莲子, there is also 子 'son, child'. 莲 /liE≡n/ is a homophone of 连 /liE≡n/ 'continuously one after another', so 莲子 together means 'having children continuously one after another'. 花生 /huA# ♣ēŋ/ 'peanut' originally means 'grow out of flowers' with 花 meaning 'flower' and 生 meaning 'grow out of' or 'give birth to', but 花 has a homonym with the meaning of 'variety'. Therefore, 花生 may mean 'having children of different sexes' (Pan and Li 2001).

Aside from offering snack food, people have other methods of expressing a wish for fertility. In some regions, when people prepare beddings for the new couple, they will put chopsticks and chestnuts under the quilt. 筷 in 筷子 /kuài tsi/ 'chopstick' is originally 快 /kuài/ 'quick, soon'; 栗 in 栗子 /li tsi/ 'chestnut' is a homophone of 立 /li/ 'establish, stand', and both 筷子 /kuài tsi/ 'chopstick' and 栗子 /li tsi/ 'chestnut' contain the word 子 /tsi/ 'son, child'. Therefore chopsticks and chestnuts together may symbolize the wish for 'quickly establishing the next generation' (Taolai Luyou Wang (Taolai Travel Web) 2005). People may also put big bags (usually five) one after another on the path leading to the bedroom of the newly wedded couple. When the bride arrives, she will walk on the bags to the door. The line of bags symbolizes 'the family name being carried on from generation to generation', because 袋 /dài/ 'bag' is a homophone of 代 /dài/ 'generation' (Dongguan Zazhi (Dongguan Magazine) 2006).

Drawings or sculptures of a monkey on a gourd plant are favored for houses of the newly wedded people as well. The gourd plant is considered as very productive, while in folklore and literature, the most

famous monkey's surname is 孙 /sūn/, which has a homonym meaning 'grandchildren'. Therefore, a monkey on a gourd symbolizes numerous children and grandchildren.

On the other hand, some behaviors are forbidden, because they may be associated with infertility or a break in the family line. For example, dead people cannot be dressed in satin, because 缎子 /duàn tsi/ 'satin' is a homophone of 断子 /duàn tsǐ/ 'having no children' (Jinian Wang (Commemoration Web), n.d.).

#### 5.4. Death/longevity

Although death is greatly feared and longevity is much desired, only 8% of our data fall into this category, which is much lower than the three categories discussed above. The reason might be that chance is less important in this category (all people eventually die) than in the previous ones (only some people are lucky or rich).

The first word to be avoided in this category is 死 /sǐ/ 'death'. As a homophone of it, 四 /sì/ '4' becomes a taboo. People try to avoid 4 whenever possible. In Hong Kong, Canton, and some other provinces, there is no 4<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> floor in many buildings. In recent years, the Transportation Departments of several provinces in China have decided not to use 4 as the last digit of their vehicle plate numbers because nobody wants 4, especially 4 as the last digit, on their car plate (Xinwen Wanbao (Evening Post) 2004)

Other words to be avoided include 钟 /t♣ūŋ/ 'clock' and 粽 /tsùŋ/ 'pyramid-shaped dumpling', homophone or near homophone of 终 /t♣ūŋ/ 'end'. People may never give a clock or a pyramid-shaped dumpling to others as a gift, because 送钟/粽 /sùŋ t♣ūŋ/ or /sùŋ tsūŋ/ 'give clock or pyramid-shaped dumpling' sounds like 送终 /sùŋ t♣ūŋ/ 'see one to one's end/funeral' (from everyday experience).

As death is feared, the coffin is naturally feared as well. To reduce people's fear of a coffin, the compound 棺材 /kuān ts<sup>h</sup>ái/ (literally 'close timber') has been used for coffin in Chinese, with 棺 being a



homophone of 官 /kuān/ 'government official or military officer' and 材 /ts<sup>h</sup>ái/ being a homophone of 财 /ts<sup>h</sup>ái/ 'wealth' (from personal consultation).

On the other hand, 九 /t|ü/ 'nine' is considered a lucky number because it is a homophone of 久 /t|ü/ 'long, for a long time'. A very famous woman in Hong Kong chose HK9999 as her car plate number, because it may be read as meaning 香港长长久久 'Long live Hong Kong'. In the Forbidden City, the biggest royal palace in Beijing, the total number of halls and rooms is 9999, symbolizing the wish for the emperors' longevity (Zhongguo Jianzhu Feng Shui Wang (Chinese Architecture Feng Shui Web), n.d).

### 5.5. Demotion/promotion

In traditional Chinese culture, a higher position means more power and more power means a more prosperous and satisfying life. During the Chinese New Year season, people always prepare different kinds of cakes because 糕 /gāu/ 'cake' is a homophone of 高 /gāu/ 'high'. There will be a 年糕 /niE≡n gāu/ 'year cake' for the meaning of 年年高 /niE≡n niE≡n gāu/ 'higher year after year', and 萝卜糕 /luó bù gāu/ 'turnip cake', as 步步高升 /bù bù gāu ♣↔←η/ means 'higher step by step' (Zhonghua Wenhua Xinxi Wang (China Culture Information Net), n.d).

Jade sculptures are very precious in China. Three designs for jade sculptures have been popular for centuries: a monkey on a horse, a monkey on another monkey and a monkey on a palm leaf. 猴 /xóu/ 'monkey' is a homophone of 侯 /xóu/ 'marquis, a high-ranking official'; 马上 /mÁ ( ♣A\$η/ 'on horse' has a homonym meaning 'immediately'; and 背 /bèi/ 'back' is a homophone of 辈 /bèi/ 'generation'. Therefore, a monkey on a horse means 马上封侯 'becoming a high-ranking official immediately'; a monkey on another monkey becomes 辈辈封侯 'being a high-ranking official generation after generation'. Most interesting is the last design, as it involves complex associative

processes. Palm leaves have been traditionally used to make fans. Fans connote wind 风 /f↔↔↔↔↔↔/, a homophone of 封 /f↔↔↔↔↔↔/ 'grant a title', so a monkey on a palm leaf becomes to mean 封侯 'grant the title of marquis' (from personal consultation).

### 5.6. Conflict/harmony

A peaceful life and harmonious relationships are desired by people and the desire is also demonstrated by purely linguistic good luck words/expressions. As wedding presents, parents may give shoes to the newly wedded couple, because 鞋 /|iE≡/ 'shoe' is a homophone of 谐 /|iE≡/ 'harmony'. In some places, people also put in the new couple's bedroom two pairs of shoes, one pair tucked into the other, symbolizing harmony together for the whole life (Taolai Luyou Wang (Taolai Travel Web), 2005).

On the other hand, certain things, such as fans and umbrellas, cannot be given as gifts because 扇 /♣àn/ 'fan' and 伞 /sǎn/ 'umbrella' are near homophone or homophone of 散 /sàn/ 'separate, break up'. Also, sharing a pear has always being avoided by Chinese people, because 分梨 /f↔↔↔↔↔↔ lí/ 'share a pear' is a homophone of 分离 /f↔↔↔↔↔↔ lí/ 'depart, separate' (from everyday experience).

### 5.7. Good personal qualities

This is the only category in which there are only a few purely linguistic good luck words/expressions with no corresponding purely linguistic taboo words/expressions. The reason for the rareness of cases in this category might be that people usually consider personal qualities as inborn and not easily modifiable.

Examples in the category include people's preparation of onion, garlic, and celery for their children on their birthdays or on New Year's Day, because 葱 /ts<sup>h</sup>ūŋ/ 'onion', 蒜 /suàn/ 'garlic', and 芹 /tj<sup>h</sup>ín/

'celery' are homophones of 聰 /ts<sup>h</sup>ūŋ/ 'smart', 算 /suàn/ 'calculate, be able to do calculation' and 勤 /t<sup>h</sup>ín/ 'diligent' respectively (from personal consultation).

6. Linguistic Features of the Purely Linguistic Taboo/Good Luck Expressions

To identify the linguistic features that determine the likelihood of association of ordinary words/expressions with taboo/good luck words/expressions, we examined the levels of sameness of all the purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions and their corresponding factual taboo/good luck words/expressions. The findings are presented in Figure 2.

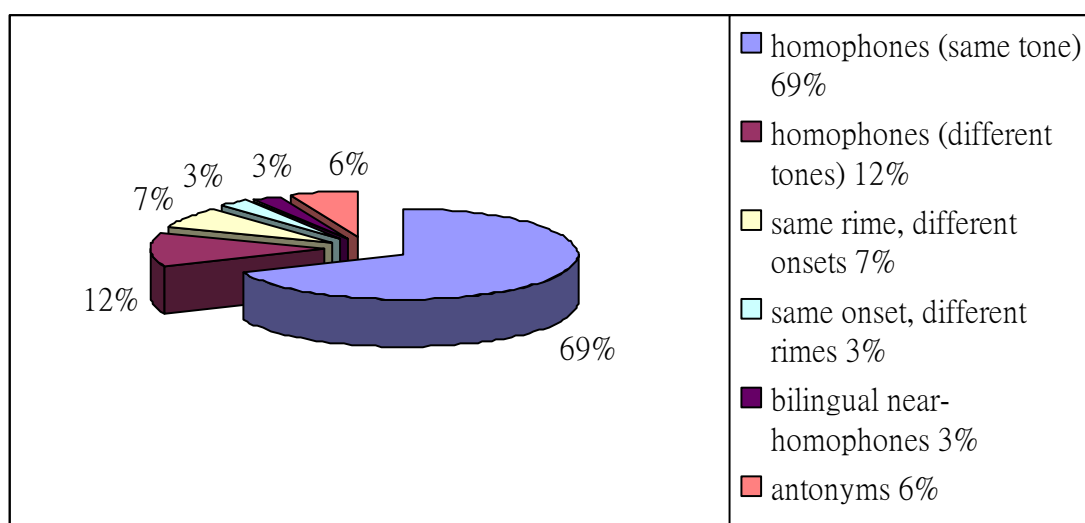


Figure 2: Linguistic features of the purely taboo/good luck words/expressions

As we can see from Figure 2, most of the items examined for this study (69%) fall into the category of what I will call 'absolute homophones', which are exactly the same as their corresponding factual taboo/good luck words/expressions with the same onset(s), the same rime(s) and the same tone(s) for the only syllable in a mono-syllabic word, or for all syllables in a multi-syllabic compound word or expression.

Homophones with a different tone in the only syllable of a monosyllabic word or in one syllable of a multi-syllabic expression are much less common, occupying 12% of our database. Near-homophones with either different onsets or different rimes are rare (7% and 3% respectively) and are possible only under certain conditions, which will be discussed later. Bilingual near-homophones are also rare (3%). The above five categories reflect the phonological bases for associations between purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions and their corresponding real taboo/good luck words/expressions. The last category contains cases where purely linguistic good luck words/expressions arise from the use of antonyms of taboo words (6%).

#### 6.1. Absolute homophones with the same onset, the same rime and the same tone

Chinese is a tonal language and tone is a distinguishing feature. For example /m $\text{A}\leftarrow$ / means 'mother' while /m $\text{A}\diamond$ / means 'horse'. In Mandarin Chinese there are 4 tones: high level, high rising, falling-rising and high falling, presented as [ $\leftarrow$ ], [ $\uparrow$ ], [ $\downarrow$ ] and [ $\downarrow$ ] respectively in this paper, following the model of Li and Thompson (1981). Of the total 105 purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions, 69% are absolute homophones of their corresponding factual taboo/good luck words. For example, we find 书 / $\clubsuit\bar{u}$ / 'book' and 输 / $\clubsuit\bar{u}$ / 'lose'; 大麦 /d $\text{A}\uparrow$  mài/ 'barley' and 大卖 /d $\text{A}\uparrow$  mài/ 'hot sale'. The high percentage shows that most of the time, association of one word with another takes place when the two words are pronounced exactly the same.

#### 6.2. Homophones with the same onset, the same rime but different tones in one syllable

However, there are also cases when association takes place between words which are not absolute homophones. 12% of the examined items are homophones with one tone difference. For example, the

falling tone 四 /sì/ '4' is associated with the falling-rising tone 死 /sǐ/ ('die, death'); 菜头 /ts<sup>h</sup>ài tóu/ 'vegetable head' is associated with 彩头 /ts<sup>h</sup>ǎi tóu/ 'good luck'. Most of the words in this category are compound words with two component syllables and the tone difference usually occurs only in one of the component syllables.

### 6.3. Near-homophones with the same rime but different onsets

When the onsets of two words are different, they are not usually considered as homophones. However, in our data we do find a few items which are different from their corresponding taboo/good luck words/expressions in onsets. Here are some examples. The behavior of weighing fish is considered lucky because the description for the behavior 称鱼 /t<sup>h</sup>↔↔↔↔↔ iý/ 'weigh fish' is a near-homophone of 剩余 /↔↔↔↔↔ iý/ 'surplus'. In this pair, the onsets of the first syllables are different: /t<sup>h</sup>↔↔↔↔↔/ and /↔↔↔↔↔/ respectively. The number 8 /p↔↔↔↔↔/ has been considered as lucky because it sounds similar to 发 /f↔↔↔↔↔/ 'prosper'. Here again, we see different onsets.

Near homophones of this type are rare, occupying only 7% of all the data examined. All the items in this category, except one (8 /p↔↔↔↔↔/), are disyllabic or multi-syllabic. For all the disyllabic or multi-syllabic items, the onset difference occurs in only one of the component syllables, as the aforementioned example of 称鱼 /t<sup>h</sup>↔↔↔↔↔ iý/ 'weigh fish' and 剩余 /↔↔↔↔↔ iý/ 'surplus' shows.

When we examined the different onsets closely, we further found that the difference usually involves only one distinctive feature. For example, /t<sup>h</sup>↔↔↔↔↔/ in 称鱼 /t<sup>h</sup>↔↔↔↔↔ iý/ 'weigh fish' and /↔↔↔↔↔/ in 剩余 /↔↔↔↔↔ iý/ 'surplus' are the same in place of articulation and voicing; they differ only in manner of articulation with the former being an affricate and the latter being a sibilant. The different onsets of the second syllables of another pair 送柴 /sùn t<sup>h</sup>ái/ 'deliver firewood' and 送财 /sùn ts<sup>h</sup>ái/ 'deliver wealth', /t<sup>h</sup>↔↔↔↔↔/ and /ts<sup>h</sup>↔↔↔↔↔/, differ only in the presence or the absence of retroflexion.

Generally speaking, near-homophones with different onsets are rare, though not impossible.

#### 6.4. Near-homophones with the same onsets but different rimes

If the rimes of two syllables are different, it is even more difficult for them to be perceived as the same or similar. However, when a pair of disyllabic or multi-syllabic words/expressions differs in only one rime, there are still chances, though very small, for associations to be made between them. For example the behavior of dropping chopsticks to ground is considered as lucky because the expression describing it, namely 筷子落地 /kuài tsǐ luò dì/, can be shortened as 筷落 /kuài luò/ 'chopsticks fall', a near homophone of 快乐 /kuài lè/ 'happy'. A close examination of the different rimes in the associated pair shows that they are closely related. In the Chinese poetry tradition, /uo/ and /ɛ/ are considered as rimed because of their high level of perceived sameness (Huang and Liao 1991).

#### 6.5. The use of bilingual homophones

Recently English has been a compulsory subject in all secondary schools and colleges in China, and more and more young people now know some English and the association of homophones has crossed the Chinese language boundary. In recent years, university students in Beijing have started a new tradition of visiting 卧佛寺 /wò fó sì/ 'Sleeping Buddha Temple', when they are in the process of applying to higher degree programs and waiting for offers from these programs, because 卧佛 /wò fó/ 'Sleeping Buddha' sounds like 'offer' in English (from personal consultation).

As Chinese and English have very different phonological systems, homophonic associations across the language boundaries are not too likely. In the present study, I have found only three examples of this

kind. However, as more and more people are learning English, there may be more bilingual homophonous taboo/good luck words in the future.

## 6.6. The use of antonyms

Phonological association is based on perceived sameness/similarity. As I have mentioned before, association can also be based on semantic opposites. There are 6 cases where taboo words/expressions are substituted with their antonyms, producing, as a result, purely linguistic good luck words/expressions for ordinary objects or situations. For example, 肝 /kān/ in 豬肝 /t♣ū kān/ 'pig liver' is homophonous to 干 /kān/ 'dry, unprofitable' so 豬肝 /t♣ū kān/ 'pig liver' is now called 豬潤 /t♣ū |ùn/ with 潤 /|ùn/ meaning 'moist or profitable' in some regions of China (from everyday experience).

There are not many items in this category and all of them involve two-step associative processes. An ordinary word is first associated with a taboo word through the homophonic process and then this purely linguistic taboo is changed to a good luck word through the use of its antonym.

## 7. Conclusions

In the present study, data have been collected by extensive search in different sources and examined in terms of their meanings with their social implications and also in terms of their linguistic, especially phonological features. The results not only throw light on our understanding of the Chinese language but also have implications for our understanding of social and cultural behaviors in China.

The semantic examination shows that the purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions fall into seven major categories of life. As the emergence of purely linguistic taboo/good luck words

/expressions rests on a collective associative effort of the general public, the categories of our data can be considered as reflecting the major current concerns of the Chinese people. The different proportions of the categories can also reflect, to a large extent, the different weightings of people's different concerns as illustrated by the following hierarchy:

- (1) Poverty/Prosperity (38%)
  - > Ill luck/Good luck (23%)
    - > Infertility/Fertility (12%)
      - > Conflict/Harmony (8%)
      - = Demotion/Promotion (8%)
      - = Death/Longevity (8%)
        - > Good personal qualities (3%)

The phonological examination of our data has shown that there must be perceived sameness or close similarity between two words /expressions for them to be associated for phonological reasons. Most often, association takes place between absolute homophones with the same onset, the same rime and the same tone. Association also takes place sometimes between homophones with the same rime and the same onset but different tones. Association is also found between syllables with the same rime but different onsets. This type is, however, very rare. Even rarer is the type of association between syllables with the same onset but different rimes. The last two types are usually possible under two conditions. First, the difference occurs in one syllable of disyllabic or multi-syllabic words/expressions. Second, the difference in onsets or in rimes is minimal, usually concerning only one distinctive feature. The following hierarchy reflects the different degrees of easiness for possible associations.

- (2) Absolute homophones (69%)
  - > Homophones with different tones (12%)



## PURELY LINGUISTIC TABOO/GOOD LUCK LANGUAGE

- > Near-homophones with the same rime but different onsets (7%)
  - > Near-homophones with the same onset but different rimes (3%)
  - = Bilingual homophones (3%)

In addition to the association of homophones/near-homophones, association is also made between antonyms (6%). In my data there are a few examples of good luck words/expressions which result from the use of antonyms of taboo words/expressions.

The semantic and linguistic analyses of the data have revealed both the social and linguistic reasons for the emergence of purely linguistic taboo/good luck words/expressions. I hope that the findings of this study have thrown new light on our understanding of the Chinese culture and Chinese society, as well as on our understanding of the linguistic processes of associating homophones and antonyms.

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### Notes

1. The target items examined in this study include simple mono-syllabic words like 死 /sǐ/ 'die', compound words like 铜镜 /túnŋ t|ìŋ/ 'bronze mirror', and multi-syllabic, idiomatic expressions like 有始有终 /iǒu ʔǐ iǒu tʂūŋ/ 'accomplishing a task from the beginning to the end'.
2. Huang and Liao's (1991) transcription system (based on the IPA) is used for the Chinese examples. Tones are presented with strokes over the vowel: [˥] for high level tone; [˨˨˨] for rising tone; [˨˨˨˨˨] for falling and rising tone; and [˨˨˨˨˨˨] for falling tone.
3. According to Chinese traditional beliefs, the New Year holiday season is the time for different gods (i.e. the god of land, the god of stove, the god of

fortune, etc.) to come down from heaven to patrol the earth, so people have to be careful not to do anything wrong to offend any of the gods.

4. In writing, a top line signifying 'bamboo' is added to 快 /kuài/ 'fast' to indicate that chopsticks (筷) are made of bamboo.
5. The translation is my own.
6. All duplicates from different sources are excluded.
7. When 子 is used as a noun suffix, it carries the neutral tone: /tsi/. When it is used as a lexical word meaning 'son or child', it carries the third tone /ts ǐ/.

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