

SEMANTIC FUNCTIONS OF THE NUMERAL “一” IN CHINESE CHENGYU

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Abstract. Chinese chengyu (成语) carefully preserve echoes of ancient myths, literary plots, and historical events. A lack of familiarity with these cultural realities often leads to misunderstandings between interlocutors and, most importantly, complicates the process of communication. This article examines the semantic functions of the numeral “一” in Chinese chengyu. By analyzing a selected corpus of idiomatic expressions containing this numeral, the study seeks to identify and classify the main semantic patterns in which “一” operates to demonstrate how the numeral contributes to the formation and interpretation of idiomatic meaning. Such an analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the linguistic and semantic mechanisms underlying Chinese phraseology and may also

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Introduction. Chinese chengyu (成语) constitute a distinctive and highly condensed component of the Chinese phraseological system. Typically composed of four characters, they encapsulate moral lessons, historical references, and philosophical reflections, and are regarded as a hallmark of Chinese linguistic and cultural heritage (Shi, 1979). Due to their semantic density and figurative nature, chengyu play an essential role in both written and spoken Chinese, functioning not only as linguistic units but also as carriers of cultural knowledge and collective memory. The interpretation of chengyu often requires not only linguistic competence but also familiarity with the cultural and cognitive frameworks embedded within the Chinese language. Well-known Chinese linguist Ma Guofan (马国凡) is one of the leading specialists in Chinese phraseology, particularly in the study of *chengyu* (成语). He offers the following definition: “Chengyu are fixed expressions widely used among people, possessing features of historicity

and nationality. They consist of monosyllabic words, generally forming a four-syllable structure” (Ma, 2008, p.23). This four-character structure represents a distinctive lexical pattern and constitutes an important component of the Chinese vocabulary.

Among the structural elements that frequently appear in chengyu, numerals occupy a particularly significant position. Numbers in Chinese idiomatic expressions often extend beyond their literal quantitative meaning and acquire additional semantic and expressive functions. One of the most productive numerals in this regard is the numeral “一” (yī, “one”), which occurs in a large number of chengyu and performs a variety of semantic roles. In many cases, “一” does not simply denote numerical singularity, but rather conveys meanings such as unity, immediacy, completeness, decisiveness, or consistency. These functions contribute to the expressive power and semantic compactness characteristic of Chinese idiomatic expressions. The present study **aims to** examine the semantic functions of the numeral “一” in Chinese chengyu. By analyzing a selected corpus of idiomatic expressions containing this numeral, the study seeks to identify and classify the main semantic patterns in which “一” operates to demonstrate how the numeral contributes to the formation and interpretation of idiomatic meaning. Such an analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the linguistic and semantic mechanisms.

Methods and material. The study employs a qualitative semantic analysis of Chinese chengyu containing the numeral “一”. The corpus of idiomatic expressions was compiled from authoritative Chinese phraseological dictionaries. The selected chengyu were analyzed with the aim of identifying the semantic roles performed by the numeral “一” within different idiomatic structures. The analysis focuses on the contextual and figurative meanings of the expressions rather than on their literal numerical interpretation. In order to systematize the data, the idioms were classified into semantic groups according to the function that the numeral “一” performs within the expression, such as unity,

immediacy, completeness, decisiveness, and consistency. This approach provides a clearer understanding of the semantic contribution of the numeral to the overall meaning of the idiom.

Results and Discussion. The analysis demonstrates that the numeral “一” in Chinese chengyu rarely functions solely as a literal numerical indicator. Instead, it serves as a multifunctional semantic element that contributes to the intensification and conceptual structuring of idiomatic meaning. The examined expressions reveal several recurrent semantic patterns in which “一” expresses notions such as unity

and concentration, immediacy of action, completeness or totality, decisiveness, and continuity. These semantic roles highlight the flexibility of numerals in Chinese phraseology and illustrate how a simple numerical component can acquire broader figurative and expressive functions. The findings suggest

that the numeral “一” plays an important role in the semantic organization of chengyu and contributes to the compactness and expressiveness of Chinese phraseology.

Chengyu as a Phraseological Phenomenon
One of the defining features of Chinese is the use of idiomatic expressions. The meaning of a chengyu often cannot be fully understood through the literal interpretation of its individual components. Instead, the expression must be interpreted as a single semantic unit whose meaning has been established through long-term usage in the linguistic and cultural tradition. As a result, idioms like chengyu frequently

require a certain level of cultural and historical knowledge for accurate interpretation. This characteristic distinguishes them from many other types of phraseological units and contributes to their expressive and stylistic richness. Many of these idioms originate from classical Chinese texts, historical narratives, myths, and philosophical writings, which explains their strong cultural and literary background. Due to their fixed structure and figurative meaning, chengyu function as an important component of the Chinese lexical system and play a significant role in both written and spoken discourse. From a structural perspective, idioms like chengyu demonstrate a high degree of stability. Their lexical composition and syntactic arrangement are generally fixed, and alterations are usually not acceptable in standard usage. This stability contributes to the recognition of chengyu as established idiomatic expressions and allows them to function as compact carriers of complex ideas, evaluations, and cultural concepts within the Chinese language.

The Role of Numerals in Chinese Idiomatic Expressions

Numerals occupy an important position in the structure of many Chinese idiomatic expressions, including chengyu. In such contexts, numbers often extend beyond their primary quantitative meaning and acquire additional semantic, stylistic, and expressive functions. Rather than indicating precise numerical values, numerals in chengyu frequently serve to intensify meaning, structure the expression, or convey broader conceptual notions such as totality, unity, plurality, or completeness. Among the numerals that appear in Chinese idioms, certain numbers are particularly productive, including 一 (one), 三 (three), 四 (four), 八 (eight), 千 (thousand), and 万 (ten thousand). These numerals often contribute to the rhythmic balance and structural symmetry characteristic of many four-character idioms. At the same time, they may also reflect traditional Chinese patterns of conceptualization and symbolic thinking, where numbers function as meaningful elements within linguistic and cultural expression.

Semantic Functions of the Numeral “一” in Chinese Chengyu

The numeral “一” (yī, “one”) is among the most frequently occurring numerical components in Chinese chengyu. Although its primary meaning denotes the number “one,” within idiomatic expressions it often functions as a semantic intensifier or structural element that contributes to the overall figurative meaning of the idiom. In many cases, 一 does not refer to an exact numerical value but instead conveys broader conceptual meanings such as unity, immediacy, completeness, decisiveness, or consistency. Based on the analysis of representative examples, several major semantic functions of “一” in Chinese chengyu can be identified.

- **Unity and Concentration**

One of the most common semantic functions of the numeral “一” in chengyu is the expression of unity, single-mindedness, or concentrated effort. In such idioms, the numeral emphasizes acting with a unified purpose or devoting full attention to a particular goal. For example, 一心一意 (yī xīn yī yì), literally “one heart, one intention,” describes wholehearted dedication. Similarly, 一心一德 (yī xīn yī dé) expresses unity in moral purpose, while 上下一心 (shàng xià yī xīn) refers to solidarity between leaders and subordinates. Collective unity is also emphasized in 万众一心 (wàn zhòng yī xīn), meaning “millions united as one,” and 同心一意 (tóng xīn yī yì), which highlights shared intention. A related idea of concentrated attention appears in 一门心思 (yī mén xīn sī), describing complete focus on a

single objective. The philosophical concept 知行合一 (*zhī xíng hé yī*), associated with the Ming dynasty thinker Wang Yangming, likewise emphasizes the unity of knowledge and action.

- **Immediacy and Suddenness**

Another semantic function of “一” in chengyu is the expression of immediacy or sudden action, indicating that something occurs instantly after a particular stimulus. A typical example is 一见钟情 (*yī jiàn zhōng qíng*), “to fall in love at first sight.” Similarly, 一拍即合 (*yī pāi jí hé*) describes people who quickly reach agreement, while 一触即发 (*yī chù jí fā*) refers to a situation ready to erupt at the slightest touch. Other examples include 一呼百应 (*yī hū bǎi yìng*), meaning “one call and a hundred responses,” describing an immediate collective reaction, and 一蹴而就 (*yī cù ér jiù*), referring to achieving something very quickly. The idiom 莞尔一笑 (*wǎn ěr yī xiào*), “to smile faintly,” also reflects the momentary nature of an action.

- **Completeness and Totality**

In many chengyu, the numeral “一” functions as an intensifier expressing completeness or total extent. For instance, 一无所有 (*yī wú suǒ yǒu*) literally means “to have nothing at all,” indicating total deprivation. Similarly, 一干二净 (*yī gān èr jìng*) refers to something being completely removed or cleaned, while 一应俱全 (*yī yīng jù quán*) describes a situation where everything necessary is fully provided. Further examples include 一览无余 (*yī lǎn wú yú*), meaning “to see everything at a glance,” and 一清二楚 (*yī qīng èr chǔ*), describing perfect clarity. The idiom 焕然一新 (*huàn rán yī xīn*) refers to complete renewal, whereas 一头雾水 (*yī tóu wù shuǐ*) metaphorically describes total confusion. In addition, 数一数二 (*shǔ yī shǔ èr*) denotes something among the very best.

- **Decisiveness and Finality**

The numeral “一” may also express decisiveness and finality, highlighting a single action that produces a definitive result. For example, 一刀两断 (*yī dāo liǎng duàn*), literally “one cut, two pieces,” metaphorically refers to completely severing a relationship. Similarly, 一笔勾销 (*yī bǐ gōu xiāo*) means “to cancel with one stroke of the pen.” Other examples include 一了百了 (*yī liǎo bǎi liǎo*), meaning that once one matter is resolved everything else is settled, and 一决胜负 (*yī jué shèng fù*), referring to determining a winner in a decisive contest. A related expression is 一针见血 (*yī zhēn jiàn xiě*), which describes a statement that directly reveals the core of a problem.

- **Continuity and Consistency**

In some chengyu, the numeral “一” conveys constancy and consistency over time. For instance, 一如既往 (*yī rú jì wǎng*) means “as always,” while 始终如一 (*shǐ zhōng rú yī*) emphasizes maintaining the same principles from beginning to end. Similarly, 表里如一 (*biǎo lǐ rú yī*) describes sincerity and harmony between inner and outer behavior, and 言行一致 (*yán xíng yī zhì*) refers to consistency between words and actions. By contrast, 一暴十寒 (*yī pù shí hán*), literally “one day of sun and ten days of cold,” describes irregular effort and lack of perseverance.

Conclusion. The analysis demonstrates that the numeral “一” in Chinese chengyu performs a wide range of semantic functions that go far beyond its basic quantitative meaning. In idiomatic expressions,

“一” frequently acts as a semantic intensifier and conceptual marker. Depending on the structural and semantic context of the idiom, the numeral may highlight concentrated effort, the instantaneous nature of an action, the totality of a state, or the finality of a decisive act. The examined samples also illustrate that “一” often functions as a cognitive and cultural symbol rather than a literal numeral. In many cases, it represents the notion of wholeness, singular focus, or the beginning of an action, reflecting traditional Chinese patterns of conceptualization. Such semantic flexibility explains the high productivity of “一” in the formation of chengyu. In the context of chengyu, the numeral “一” does not simply indicate a numerical value but serves as an important semantic component that contributes to the compactness and figurative richness characteristic of Chinese phraseology. The findings of this study therefore highlight the role of numerals as meaningful structural elements in idiomatic expressions and contribute to a deeper understanding of the semantic organization of Chinese chengyu. From a broader perspective, the results of this analysis may also be relevant for the teaching and interpretation of Chinese idiomatic expressions, particularly for learners of Chinese as a foreign language. Understanding the semantic functions of numerals such as “一” can facilitate a more accurate interpretation of chengyu and help learners recognize the conceptual patterns that underlie Chinese idiomatic usage.

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