TEXTING CHRISTMAS WISHES IN CHINA: A VIEW FROM PRAGMATICS

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Abstract: Texted messages on mobile phones are a prevalent mode of conveying regards in contemporary China, where this use of language reflects a shift in cultural values and customs. By analyzing the texted messages of two internet corpora, this article aims to shed light on linguistic and extra-linguistic constraints on speakers' linguistic options when they formulate such messages.

Keywords: texted messages, pragmatics, discourse constraints, extra-linguistic constraints

1. Introduction

On the advent of festivities and national holidays in modern China, one way of conveying regards is to text blessing messages on mobile phones, in addition to mailing cards, calling on ground lines and door-to-door visits. The language of the texted message has become a new way of communication, displaying distinctive features that make it successful in the context of competing communicative media, such as radio, TV, regular telephone, e-mail and internet. The emergence of this form of communication reflects a change in cultural values and customs, which, in turn, involves a shift in the social and psychological approaches to human interaction. This topic is, thus, new and challenging for a linguistic study. This article[1] analyzes the pragmatic aspect of blessing messages on mobile phones, aiming to shed light on the linguistic manipulation and on the social and psychological motivations for speakers' linguistic options when they formulate such messages.

2. Data and theoretical perspective

The data presented in this paper come from two websites: www.sina.com and www.sohu.com; these sites collected messages texted on the occasion of the 2009 New Year. We chose this particular event because the New Year is celebrated in both Western and Chinese cultures, by speakers of any age, gender or religion, across many cultural divides. Such a sample is, therefore, representative for the linguistic features detected and for the social and psychological motivations behind the choice of those features. Our sample contains 100 messages, chosen randomly from these two sites.

The investigation we carried out relies on the most general principles of the linguistic pragmatic theory (Saeed 2004): speakers' reliance on context for interpretation, the common knowledge shared between speaker and addressee, rules of information packaging in syntax, and the ways the messages conform to Grice's conversational implicature (Grice 1975, 1978). Of particular interest is the identification of the main themes that constitute the "common knowledge" shared by users of mobile phones. This shared pool of information and concerns is the cornerstone for understanding shifts in social values and psychological reactions reflected in the language usage.

[1] This research is part of the project "An empirical pragmatic study of society discourse in English and Chinese", sponsored by a Chinese national grant (07BYY005).

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3. Linguistic and extra-linguistic constraints

This section considers the factors that condition the form of the message. These factors are divided in two groups: those that stem from the technology and from the socio-psychological motivation (section 3.1), and those that are intrinsic to the language itself (section 3.2). Section 3.3 looks at the possible variation in the form of messages within the limitations presented. The main argument is that the limitations on length and grammatical complexity are superseded by supplementing the linguistic expression with graphics, and by an effective exploitation of the Gricean maxims on *quantity* (i.e. type of information packaging) and on *relevance* (i.e. timely delivery). Thus, the constraints on length and the limitation to a visual (versus aural) medium may turn into an advantage, as the short punch lines may have a high impact on the addressee.

3.1 Extra-linguistic limitations

Messages on mobile phones are limited in length and time, because of the mechanical properties of the device and the airtime costs. In this respect, they may resemble the old telegram, with a bare bones syntactic structure outlined by substantive words and sacrificing the functional elements (e.g. no articles for nouns, no auxiliary or modal verbs). However, the old telegram was paid by the word, while the texted message is paid by time units; so the grammatical complexity does not have to be affected, but it has to be compressed in time. Consider the example below:

(1) 新年天气预报：今年你将会遇到金钱雨，幸运风，爱情露，友情雾，健康霜，美满雷，安全雹，它们将伴你整一年！
Xīnnián tiānqì yùbào: jīnnián nǐ jiāng huì yùdào jīnqián yǔ, xìngyùn fēng, àiqíng lù, yǒuqíng wù, jiànkāng shuāng, měimǎn léi, ānquán báo, tāmen jiāng bàn nǐ zhěng yìnián!
'New Year weather forecast: this year you will have money rain, luck wind, love dew, friendship mist, health frost, happiness thunder and security hail. Attention: they will possess you for the whole year!'

The two sentences are fully articulated and stylistically laden. However, there is also a clear tendency to communicate the most by using the least structural complexity: the first sentence, for example, relies on a single verb ('have'), the complexity consisting in the recursion of the direct object. The headings for each sentence also save on the syntactic component; they resemble the "point form" note taking (or power point presentations) that counts on the addressee's ability to fill out the blanks and draw the correct inferences.

The second external factor that determines the complexity of the message is the motivation for the action itself. The intention is to please the addressee by formulating wishes the sender knows (or thinks s/he knows) to be close to the addressee's heart. A straightforward "point form" or telegraphic message would not make the right impression. Therefore, a compromise must be attained between means and purpose. One such compromise takes advantage of the visual medium of the communication, and substitutes graphic codes to linguistic signs, as in the following example:

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(2) 人每天要做三件事：第一件是笑(^_^)；第二件是微笑(^o^)；第三件是大笑(^0^)；相信你有愉快的一天。
Rén měitiān yào zuò sānjiàn shì: dì yījiàn shì xiào; dì 'èrjiàn shì wēixiào; dì sānjiàn shì dàxiào; xiāngxìn nǐ yǒu yúkuài de yì tiān.
'You should do three things every day: first, smile (^_^), second, smile merrily (^o^), and third, laugh (^0^). Then I am sure you will have a great day.'

In (2) the sender exploits the perceptual and ideographic potential of mathematical symbols, dashes and parentheses to capture the appropriate facial expression. This not only compensates for the blunt linguistic expression, but it modifies the compositional reading of the sentence, adding a humorous inference that atones what otherwise may look like an intrusive order, due to the re-iterated imperatives.

The second type of manipulation for negotiating means and purpose in the message involves the knowledge of language itself; namely, the intuitive knowledge of the performance rules the speakers acquired when they acquired their mother tongue. We discuss the relevant rules in the next section.

3.2 Linguistic frames

One factor for language change in the field of semantics concerns the continuous renewal of the metaphorical strength of expressions – a process that stems from the speaker's need to grasp the addressee's attention. Clichés qualify for this process, as they stand for "dead" metaphors/figures of speech, in terms of Searle (1979: 122): in the cliché, the original sentence meaning is bypassed and shifts into a new literal meaning, with conventional use. The expression of blessings runs into many clichés, considered "traditional" and classified as flat style:

(3) a. 新年快乐!
Xīnnián Kuàilè!
'Happy new year!'
b. 合家幸福!
Héjiā Xìngfú!
'All the best for you and your family!'

Texters try to avoid such clichés and become creative with their style, to emphasize the personal attention to the addressee, and "speak" to his/her emotions. After all, a cliché blessing can be sent in an easier way, through a free downloaded card from the web, without the effort (and the cost) of texting.

Linguistic creativity within the physical limitations of the texted message exploits the pragmatic principles that involve the addressee's cooperation for retrieval. Limited length makes many messages come in "point form" and look as good illustrations for Clark's (1977) use of *short-hands*: they rely heavily on figures of speech (metonymy, synecdoche etc.) rather than on syntactic complexity. In *short-hands*, as in our blessing messages, the figures of speech are not used as rhetorical devices but as routine calculations for making reference to information retrievable outside the language. For example, for a text like 短信热闹，金鼠带来欢笑… duǎnxìn rènào, jīnshǔ dàilài huānxiào… 'Messages are bustling, the golden Rat brings smiles…', both speaker and addressee know that *Rat* refers to that year's name

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(metonymy), not to a real animal. Hence, the factor governing the composition of messages is their *context-dependency*.

Context-dependency, in this case, means exclusive reliance on extra-linguistic knowledge (i.e. part of the *common ground* for presuppositions in Stalnaker 1974) since there is no previous textual discourse into which the message could be integrated. Clark (1994) adapts Stalnaker's concept to pragmatics, as *common knowledge* that comes by virtue of membership in a community. However, he also distinguishes two types of *common knowledge*: one is relevant to the *communal common ground*, the other to the *personal common ground*. The latter type is predominant as the underlying assumption in the texted Christmas wishes, and the success of the message depends on the addressee's willingness to acknowledge this common ground. In particular, such sharing decides on the *bridging* inferences (in terms of Clark 1977): the addressee has to draw the right interpretation on the basis of reduced grammatical structure and in the absence of preceding discourse clues. In other words, the addressee has to fill in the blanks correctly, as in (4):

(4) 让我这份祝福跨过高山，掠过水沟, 闯过红绿灯，窜过大马路，闪过路边买东西的老爷爷，钻进你耳朵里：新年快乐！
Ràng wǒ zhèfèn zhùfú kuàguò gāoshān, lüèguò shuǐ gōu, chuǎngguò hónglǜdēng, cuànguò dàmǎlù, shǎnguò lùbiān mài dōngxi de lǎoyéye, zuānjìn nǐ ěrduō lǐ :xīnnián kuàilè!
'Let my blessings fly above high mountains, skim over ditches, break through traffic lights, flash across the roads, and dodge away from the elderly peddler in the street to get into your ears: Happy New Year!'

The right inference in the example above depends on the addressee's cooperation in constructing a humorous framework around the message; otherwise, the literal meaning may be offensive to the reader. This is a good example for Leech's (1983: 144) *Bantering Principle*, where solidarity between speaker and addressee builds on the basis of uttering something that is (i) obviously untrue, and (ii) obviously impolite. However, the intention is not to offend the addressee by violating the politeness codes, but to count on the addressee's correct *bridging* inference and partaking into the mock impoliteness.

This brings us to consider how the Gricean maxims for conversational implicature are observed in the texted message, since these maxims spell out the intrinsic cooperative principle at work between speaker and addressee. First, the maxim of *quality* implies that the texter is sincere in the conveying of the blessing. How effective this maxim is also depends on the personal common ground, where the relation between the speaker and the addressee is defined, e.g. as friendship or hierarchical obligation. The choice of literary style (that we discuss later) depends on this shared background.

The maxim of *quantity* ensures the success of the message because an efficient ratio of content-to-form is paramount for effectiveness. Regular conversation in Chinese displays a *topic-comment* structure, and this language group is classified (e.g. Li 1976) as *Topic-prominent* (versus *Subject-prominent*, e.g. English). Texted blessing/wishes skip the *topic* as the conveyer of "old/aboutness information" at the beginning of clauses, and develop only the *comment* side (i.e. the "new information", or the *information focus* in the framework of Lambrecht 1994). This is the case in all the examples we presented. The reader must expect that much, since there is no previous textual discourse to which an "aboutness" *topic* constituent could be related. Thus, the maxim of *quantity* decides in which way the discourse pragmatic information is packaged in the sentence. From what we observed, this packaging

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favours the exploitation of the lexicon and of recursive rules over syntactic complexity (e.g. embeddings or adjunctions of clauses are generally avoided). Even when a *topic* constituent is present, it is limited to a cliché introduction (i.e. common knowledge about the event) rather than conveying "aboutness", as in the examples below:

(5) 每年的这个时候, 祝福就会象海洋涌向你, 而我的祝福象一叶轻舟, 载你乘风破浪到达成功的彼岸!
Měinián de zhège shí hòu, zhùfú jiù hùi xiàng hǎiyáng yǒngxiàng nǐ, ér wǒde zhùfú xiàng yí yè qīngzhōu, zǎi nǐ chéngfēng pòlàng, dàodá chénggōng de bǐ' àn!
'At this time each year, blessings will flush to you as sea waves, and mine is like a skiff, braving the wind and the waves, carrying you to the shore of success!'

(6) 短信赶着过年把祝福送，祝你在新的一年里工资能够一涨再涨，爱情能够开花结果，有空了也别忘记请我喝咖啡!
Duǎnxìn gǎnzhe guònián bǎ zhùfú sòng, zhù nǐ zài xīnde yìnián lǐ gōngzī nénggòu yì zhǎng zàizhǎng, àiqíng nénggòu kāihuā jiēguǒ, yǒukòng le yě bié wàngjī qǐng wǒ hē kāfēi!
'On the occasion of the New Year, I wish you earn more and more salary and have a happy ending with your love. Don't forget to treat me to coffee when you are free!'

Intrinsically related to the packaging of the information is the maxim of *manner*, requiring clarity and orderly articulation. This is very important when the message is short, while the texter's investment in its effect on the addressee is high. Keeping the syntax simple is the way to implement the requirement on orderliness.

Finally, the maxim of *relevance* is the key to understand the speakers' choice of the mobile phone texting in the first place. Under this maxim, timing is essential. A mailed card may arrive late, e-mails may not be read every day, but a mobile phone is answered or checked continuously. This mode of delivery is bound to reach the addressee at the *relevant* moment and score high in appreciation. Relevance makes up for the shortness of the message, even when the information is not packaged most effectively.

3.3 Outcomes

Within this linguistic frame, texters have the opportunity to exercise their choice in the type of figures or speech or literary style they adopt. This choice depends on the speaker's personality, on the addressee's personality, and on the type of relation and personal background they share. An adequate choice combined with a perfect adherence to the linguistic rules, may turn a short blessing message into a punch line that has a higher impact on the addressee than a more elaborate letter of good-wishing. The messages in our database display a wide variation in this respect, ranging from highly poetical style with abundant metaphors (7) to the point form style of cookbooks, the latter relying on *short-hands* metonymic substitutions (8):

(7) 我以为，我已经把你藏好，藏在泛黄的记忆里。谁知，那轻轻的*银铃*声，又撩起我向往的心情，我欲以美丽的*织锦*，缀成无数的祝福给你。
Wǒ yǐ wéi, wǒ yǐjīng bǎ nǐ cánghǎo, cángzài fànhuáng de jìyì lǐ. Shéizhī, nà qīngqīng de yínlíng shēng, yòu liáoqǐ wǒ xiàngwáng de xīnqíng, wǒ yùyǐ měilì de zhījǐn, zhuì chéng wúshù de zhùfú gěi nǐ.

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'I thought I had kept you in my yellowed and faded memories, but alas, the soft tinkling of the silver bells lift up my longing for you once more. So I would like to knit my infinite blessings into silk brocade especially for you.'

(8) 新年来临，送你个蛋糕作为礼物。
成分：5%的幸福；1%的关心；3%的友谊
保质期：农历八月十五
递送方式：以幽默捆扎，手机送达
保存方式：按"保存"键存入手机
Xīnnián láilín, sòng nǐ gè dàngāo zuòwéi lǐwù.
Chéngfèn: 5% de xìngfú; 1% de guānxīn; 3% de yǒuyì
Bǎozhì qī: nónglì bā yuè shíwǔ
Dìsòng fāngshì: yǐ yōumò kǔnzhā, shǒujī sòngdá
Bǎocún fāngshì: àn bǎocún jiàn cún rù shǒujī
'New Year is coming, a cake for you as a gift.
Ingredients: 5% happiness; 1% concern; 3% friendship
Expiration date: August 15th (Lunar calendar)
Delivery: bound by humour and sent by mobile phone
Storage: in your mobile phone by pressing the "Enter" button'

When syntax has to be kept simple, the lexical choices are very important. In this respect, we notice a tendency to mix codes, e.g. graphics and words from English and Mandarin, or to switch the language register as necessary, e.g. compose the message in a local dialect (whose symbols are different from the standard) to comply with the addresse's register, if s/he cannot understand the standard dialect. A frequent code mixing example concerns the choice for texting the name of the year 2009 in *Happy* 牛 *year!*, where 牛 has the same pronunciation as English *new*; in Chinese [njú] means 'ox', which is the zodiacal name for 2009.

The effectiveness of the message depends on adherence to the linguistic rules that all the speakers of the language know and apply intuitively. When deviations from such rules occur, they are still conforming insofar as all the participants are aware of what rule is violated, to what degree and for what purpose, as in (9). The right inference is then bridged from that knowledge.

(9) 新年到，想想送什么给你，又不打算太多，就只给你*五千万*：*千万要*快乐！*千万*要健康！*千万*要平安！*千万*要知足！*千万*不要忘记我！
Xīnnián dào, xiǎngxiǎng sòng shěnme gěi nǐ, yòu bù dǎsuàn tài duō, jiù zhǐ gěi nǐ wǔ qiānwàn: qiānwàn yào kuàilè! Qiānwàn yào jiànkāng! Qiānwàn yào píng'ān! Qiānwàn yào zhīzú! Qiānwàn búyào wàngjì wǒ!
'New Year comes, let me think what I'll give to you. I will not give you too much, just fifty millions. Ten millions of happiness! Ten millions of health! Ten millions of security! Ten millions of contentment! And never forget me for ten millions of time!'

Prima facie, (9) violates the maxim of *quality*, since the speaker does not intend to give anybody fifty million in money. However, the message is interpreted as humorous instead of a pure lie, because the reader recognizes what rule is violated, and accepts it, under the Bantering Principle (Leech 1983).

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To conclude this section, there are constraints on the form of the message, from inside and from outside the grammar, and in accordance with the pragmatics of language use. These constraints point to the adoption of a simple syntactic structure for messages, with focus on the semantic complexity of the lexical elements involved. Within this framework, the contents may achieve a wide range of variation in coding, language register, literary style and manipulation of the maxims for conversational implicature. However, none of these manipulations would succeed if they were not rooted in the common ground/knowledge the speaker and the addressee share: the message is strictly context-dependent for interpretation.

4. Defining common knowledge

We argued that context-dependency is the overarching condition for the success of the texted wishes, and that the context consists of the common (extra-linguistic) knowledge that the speaker and the addressee share. In this section, we list the main types of common knowledge that underlie such messages. This list allows us to understand the major social and psychological needs of the mobile phone users.

Verschueren (1999) shows that communicators make their linguistic choices according to the pressure from the physical, the social and the mental worlds. The reflection of the mental pressures are especially informative about the speaker's personality, emotions, beliefs, desires or wishes, motivations, intentions, communicative intentions, etc. (Verschueren 1987: 66). In this respect, the main themes we see in our corpus cover concerns about health, wealth, happiness, and security, all of which may be related to the degree of luck surrounding the individual.

4.1 Happiness

Pervasive in the blessing messages are wishes for happiness, in addition to wishes of a more concrete nature. The common ground here is that no matter what the situation is, the state of mind takes priority. The insistence on happiness is reflected by the frequent use of the lexical roots for 'laugh', 'happy' in almost every message. Particularly in today's Chinese society, the ever-increasing pace of life deprives people of their daily enjoyment of their life. Hence, messages of *carpe diem*, as in (10) and (11), form the bulk of the blessings:

(10) 祝新春快乐，捂着肚子乐，躺在床上乐，端着饭碗乐，不想我也乐，想到我更乐，此时肯定乐，健康又快乐!
Zhù xīnchūn kuàilè, wǔzhe dùzi lè, tǎng zài chuángshàng lè, duānzhe fànwǎn lè, bù xiǎng wǒ yě lè, xiǎngdào wǒ gèng lè, cǐshí kěndìng lè, jiànkāng yòu kuàilè!
'I wish you a happy new year. Laughing your insides out, laughing in bed, laughing at the table. Happy without me, and even happier when you miss me. Now you must be happy getting this message, healthy and happy!'

(11) 祝你新的一年好事多多！笑容多多!开心每一秒，快乐每一天，幸福每一年！
Zhù nǐ xīnde yìnián hǎoshì duōduō! Xiàoróng duōduō! Kāixīn měi yìmiǎo, kuàilè měi yìtiān, xìngfú měi yìnián!
'In the New Year I wish many good things for you! Many smiles for you! Rejoice for every second, merry for every day and happy for every year!'

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4.2 Health

Health is another hot topic on people's mind. Health care in China has deteriorated, becoming a social problem. This is clearly demonstrated in blessing messages that turn into health advice, as in (12) and (13). Imperatives dominate the linguistic expression, conveying the speaker's feeling of worry and concern.

(12) 非典肺炎使坏，朋友给你关怀。出门口罩要戴，少到群集地带。别信药品关爱，如今都已失败。经常蹦蹦跳跳，增强抵抗能耐。任凭病毒再拽，也会让它无奈！
Fēidiǎn fèiyán shǐhuài, péngyou gěi nǐ guānhuái. Chūmén kǒuzhào yào dài, shǎodào jíqún dìdài. Bié xìn yàopǐn guān' ài, rújīn dōu yǐ shībài. Jīngcháng bèngbèng tiàotiào, zēngqiáng dǐkàng néngnài. Rènpíng bìngdú zài zhuài, yě huì ràng tā wúnài!
'When SARS make troubles, friends care about you. Put on a mask when out, keep away from crowds. Don't believe in medicines, they have no effect. Keep exercising to improve your health, and then viruses can't have their way however they try!'

(13) 吃饭莫饱，走路莫跑，说话莫吵，喝酒要少，睡觉要早，遇事莫恼，经常洗澡，身体最好。
Chīfàn mò bǎo, zǒulù mò pǎo, shuōhuà mò chǎo, hējiǔ yào shǎo, shuìjiào yào zǎo, yùshì mò nào, jīngcháng xǐzǎo, shēntǐ zuì hǎo.
'Don't be full when you eat; don't run when you walk; don't raise your voice when you talk; drink less wine, go to bed earlier and bathe more often to keep in good health.'

Example (12) reveals the concern over public health issues after the proliferation of SARS in 2003, especially in relation to the adverse effects of drugs of inferior quality sold to sick people in China. Example (13) illustrates the recognition of the shared knowledge that people in the modern society are so busy with work and business entertainments that they lead an irregular life, which is detrimental to their mental and physical health.

4.3 Wealth

Besides health care, a major issue in the modern Chinese society concerns employment opportunities and the source of income. Modern social psychologist Max Weber even ranked wealth as one of the fundamental criteria beside prestige and power to stratify people into different social classes and status. He claimed that social stratification is a result of the interaction of wealth, prestige and power (Weber 1978). Importantly, wealth used to be a taboo in mainland China immediately after the founding of the republic, but now it has become a fairly universal theme in blessing messages, as in (14), (15), after many years of reform and opening-up practices. One obvious example is the greeting on festivals 恭喜发财 *Gōngxǐ Fācái* 'May you come into a good fortune'.

(14) 祝你致富踏上万宝路，事业登上红塔山，情人赛过阿诗玛，财源遍布大中华。
Zhù nǐ zhìfù tàshàng wànbǎo lù, shìyè dēngshàng hóngtǎ shān, qíngrén sàiguò āshīmǎ, cáiyuán biànbù dàzhōnghuá.
'I wish you get on the Wanbao Road to make a fortune, your career rises onto Hongta Mountain, your lover is prettier than Ashima, your wealth all over the Great China.'

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(15) 举杯迎2009，问候遥祝友。买股骑上牛，楼市质价优。
Jubēi yíng 2009, wènhòu yáozhù yǒu. Mǎigǔ qí shàng niú, lóushì zhìjià yōu.
'I propose a toast to greet the year of 2009 and send regards to my friends far away. I wish you to buy stocks in a Bull market and high-quality apartments in a Bear market.'

Example (14) reveals the influence of brand culture on people's concept of wealth. The background for (15) is that the stock market is gloomy under the impact of the global economic crisis while the price of Chinese real estate is skyrocketing. In addition, the year 2009 happened to be the year of the Bull, thus wishes mentioning the Bull became popular, to express the hope for a "bull" market.

4.4 Security

While the concerns about health care and wealth indicate new shifts in the social values in China, blessings referring to *security* illustrate a conservative trend that appeals to the preservation of the basic values of the Chinese culture. As shown in (16) and (17), the need for security is psychological, although it may include material safeguards as well. In traditional Chinese culture, people seek to preserve life and secure a place in the world (*ānshēn lìmìng*), while keeping a peaceful mind, no matter how the outside world changes.

(16) 送你一件外套, 前面是平安, 后面是幸福, 吉祥是领子, 如意是袖子, 快乐是扣子, 口袋里满是温暖, 穿上吧, 让它相伴你的每一天! 新年快乐!
Sòng nǐ yíjiàn wàitào, qiánmiàn shì píng'ān, hòumiàn shì xìngfú, jíxiáng shì lǐngzi, rúyì shì xiùzi, kuàilè shì kòuzi, kǒudiào lǐmiàn shì wēnnuǎn, chuānshàng tā ba, ràng tā xiāngbàn nǐ de měi yì tiān! Xīnnián kuàilè!
'I give you a coat as gift. *The front is security, the back is happiness*, the collar is prosperity, the sleeve is luck, the button is joy and the pockets are full of warmth. Wear it, and it will accompany you every day. Happy New Year!'

(17) 每一年的今天, 都是一个全新的开始, 任世事变幻, 时光流转，幸福, 平安, 快乐, 健康永远伴随你左右。
Měi yì nián de jīntiān, dōu shì yígè quánxīn de kāishǐ, rèn shìshì biànhuàn, shíguāng liúzhuǎn, xìngfú, píng'ān, kuàilè, jiànkāng yǒngyuǎn bànsuí nǐ zuǒyòu.
'This date of every year is a brand new start. *Happiness, security*, joy and health are around you forever no matter how time flies and how the world changes.'

In these two examples, security is linked to happiness, showing the typical mentality of the Chinese, namely, "security is fortune"; (17) in particular suggests the speaker's eagerness to secure peace of mind during the contradictions of the transition period of Chinese society.

4.5 Other values

Coming from the traditional stock of social and psychological values are the ideas of success, luck, auspicious outcomes that catalyse the maintenance of good health, the increase in wealth or the feeling of security, therefore yielding the overarching happiness to the individual. Linguistic expressions to this effect, as in (18), are either texted by themselves or are incorporated to wishes of a more concrete nature:

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(18) a. 大展宏图
dàzhǎn hóngtú
'ride on the crest of success'
b. 吉星高照
jíxīng gāozhào
'let the lucky star shine bright'
c. 吉祥幸福
jíxiáng xìngfú
'[be] prosperous and happy'

Table 1 sums up the main ingredients of the common knowledge the users of mobile phones share, and quantifies their impact. The table indicates that happiness is the number one concern shared in this society:

Table 1: Social and psychological concerns in texted blessings

	Happiness	Health	Wealth	Security	Luck
Number	51	39	38	21	22
Percentage	51	39	38	21	22

According to Fairclough (1992: 3), the discourse does not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, it also constructs or "constitutes" them. As a new medium for discourse, texted wishes on mobile phones not only strengthen the emotional bonds among people, but their rich and novel forms also contribute to the emergence of new values, constructing a unique "culture of fingers", beneficial to transcend various divides within the pluralities of Chinese society.

5. Conclusions

This paper investigated the form and the content of 100 Christmas blessing messages texted on mobile phones in China. The aim was to understand the texters' linguistic choices for composing such messages, and, implicitly, why such choices ensure the success of this form of communication – taking into consideration the availability of other competing media. A linguistic approach to this issue, from a pragmatic perspective, revealed that such messages are constrained by physical, psychological and linguistic internal rules and limitations. Despite such constraints, the texted wishes have important advantages for concentrating the information within simple syntactic patterns, and delivering it at the relevant timing for the event. It was shown that the retrieval process, on the recipient side, was crucially context-dependent, which involved a reliable sharing of the common knowledge/ground between sender and addressee. By identifying the main ingredients of this common knowledge, we pointed out how much language use can reveal (through linguistic inquiry) about the shifting in the societal and the psychological values of the interlocutors. In this particular case, we concluded that there is a strong attachment to traditional beliefs and values that favour happiness, peace of mind and lucky stars over any other life achievements, and that increasing importance emerges in the fields of health and wealth. As such concerns are expressed in good-wishing originating from speakers of various ages, religions, occupations or ethnicity, the language of these texted messages attests to a uniformization of the common ground that bonds the members of this society across the various divides.

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