ABSTRACT

Numerals (数词) are but a small fraction of the vocabulary in any language in terms of quantity. However, the functions of numerals embrace not just mathematical, but rhetorical as well. This Honours thesis addresses the use of numerals in spoken and written Chinese, specifically on their rhetoric applications.

The thesis first traces the origin and development of numerals in Chinese. Next, it examines examples from the literature that employs numerals rhetorically. An attempt to analyse the structures and rhetorical techniques of such word-forms (phrases, cliches, and clauses) follows. The study also makes a comparison between English and Chinese over their use of numerals for varied rhetoric purposes. On a last note, the study explores and investigates the rhetorical usage of numerals in local Chinese, with the aid of a small-scale survey in the format of a simple questionnaire that measured the extent to which junior college and university students employ numerals in their everyday verbal expressions.

Findings reveal that numerals have a mystic origin in the Chinese culture. Significantly, there are good or bad underlying meanings associated with different numbers. All this provides the foundation for the rich, colourful and varied rhetorical functions of the numerals. The study suggests that the Chinese people have a distinct fondness for numbers, as numerals are used extensively in Chinese. The study also highlights the unique ways numerals are adopted locally.