# New Phrases to Talk about Work Life in China

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**ABSTRACT—** *The paper is a small-scale study about eight newly created Chinese phrases in workplace in 2011, which are creative ways of talking about work life and health, new professions, working staff, and company. A cognitive linguistic perspective with a focus on metonymy and metaphor will be applied to analyze how Chinese people produce and interpret these new phrases at the workplace. In addition, various contextual factors will be considered in the analysis to reveal how they function in the creation and comprehension processes of the new phrases.*

**Keywords—** metonymy, metaphor, Chinese, context

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2011, Chinese people created 508 new phrases, which were later authorized by the Chinese Language Committee to be new entries in Chinese language dictionaries. I select only eight phrases to be my research objects due to the limits of the time and the space of my present paper. They are novel ways of talking about work life in China, and my analysis about them can be a small-scale research that attempts to unveil a part of the secret of how metaphor, metonymy and context jointly contribute to the creation of novel phrases in Chinese language.

Metaphor is defined as cross-domain mappings, which are a set of systematic correspondences between the source and the target in the sense that constituent conceptual elements of concept B correspond to constituent elements of concept A (Zoltán Kövecses, 2002). Metonymy involves a single domain, within which an element of the domain stands for another element of the same domain. It allows people to give mental access to an element through another element related to it——where the relationship either is conventional in the conceptual system or can be easily figured out in a given context (Zoltán Kövecses, 2006). Metaphors and metonymies often interact in particular linguistic expressions, and they are important conceptual tools to understand meanings.

Context is hard to define, and in the present paper I apply Zoltán Kövecses's classification of context which ranges from global to local. Global context is the general knowledge that the whole group shares and that, as a result, affects all group members. It may include: physical environment, social factors, cultural context, differential memory (history), and differential concerns and interests. The local context is the specific knowledge that pertains to a specific situation involving particular individuals, which contains immediate physical setting, knowledge about major entities in the discourse, immediate cultural context, immediate social setting and immediate linguistic context (Zoltan Kovecses, 2005). Cognitive linguists hold a view that context functions as a tool to facilitate the interpretations of figurative conceptualizations, guide people in choosing appropriate metaphors and metonymies, and contribute to the creation and understanding of meaning.

The first part of the paper is a brief introduction of the research. The following five parts present the detailed analysis of the eight new Chinese phrases concerned, with topics ranging from life at workplace, new diseases at workplace, new profession names to new types of employees and companies. All sample linguistic data are drawn from

an official website of Chinese language set up by Chinese national government (www.china-language.gov.cn). All examples discussed are excerpts from news or interviews on major Chinese websites with my English translation. The working systems of metaphor and metonymy involved are at the center place of the analysis, with contextual factors being taken into consideration to support the argumentations. The last part is the conclusion in which I summarize the findings.

## 2. A "BLACK LIFE" AT WORKPLACE

Life in workplace seems to be a common conversation topic in daily communication. A lot of Chinese people believe that white collars enjoy a bright, high quality life at work, a stereotype drawn from their work image, since most of white collars go to work in smart professional clothes of good quality. Besides, they usually work in well-furnished, modern offices in tall, fashionable office buildings in city centers, with a comparatively higher social status and good annual income. However, Chinese white collars began to describe their work life as "Black Life" in 2011. The following catchy title of a piece of on-line news claimed the birth of the phrase:

（1）白领辛苦更心苦，晒晒那些白领才懂的<u>黑生活</u>。

　　White collars work hard but their hearts suffer more; let's put the **black life** known only by them in the sun.

　　(http://finance.sina.com.cn/money/roll/20110601/12319931266.shtml)

In this on-line news, many white collars interviewed have complaints on their really tiring, depressing life in workplace. Working overtime, high pressure, competition with colleagues, strict and demanding requirements for performance, and intricate interpersonal relations lay a huge burden on white collars. They have to toil over piles of paper in front of their computers for the whole day, driven by impending deadlines and blames from their supervisors. Such big contrast between people's stereotype and white collars' real life is well expressed by the new phrase "Black Life", which is called "黑生活 (hei sheng huo)" in Chinese language.

Life is an abstract concept that is usually connected with notions like "journey", "war", "game" or "compromise", a series of concepts which serve as the source domains for very conventional conceptual metaphors about life, and have been productively discussed in cognitive linguistic sources. Here, we need both metaphorical conceptualization and context to understand the new phrase "Black Life", in which Chinese people conceptualize life as an object with a color and therefore develop a conceptual metaphor: **Life is an object with color**. When black color comes into the phrase, Chinese people actually resort to two more conventional conceptual metaphors: **Bad is dark** and **Darkness is black**, which are based on bodily experience in physical world that good things are seen to be bright with light while bad things are often dark without light, and when something is very dark, then it is usually black in color. The life state for white collars is so stressful that they regard it as a depressingly dark life under the shiny appearance, and the black color can aptly expresses their views towards the true life at the workplace.

## 3. NEW WORKPLACE DISEASES: BRAIN OBESITY AND OFFICE SYSTEM-HALT SYNDROME

This section deals with two new phrases that sound more like names of new diseases. However, they are not real, very serious diseases, but funny ways to describe phenomena prevailing among people who usually work with computers all the time.

### *3.1 Brain Obesity*

"Brain Obesity" is called "大脑肥胖症 (da nao fei pang zheng)" in Chinese language, and the example of its usage is as follows:

（2）"**大脑肥胖症**"的必然后果之一是工作效率低下，甚至影响任务的完成。

　　One of the inevitable consequences of "**Brain Obesity**" is the low efficiency at work, which even results in

the inability of fulfilling tasks.

(http://roll.sohu.com/20110525/n308538589.shtml)

This piece of on-line news gave an explanation about the new phrase "Brain Obesity", its syndromes and possible effects on people's behaviors at the workplace. Several major conceptual metaphors may work together with the immediate context of the workplace to explain why Chinese people describe their brain problem with a name of disease that usually is associated with the body. Obesity is a medical term for a disease that people have an extremely fat body. The causes of this disease are various, ranging from overeating, pressure, lack of exercises to problems of metabolism and heredity. When obesity is associated with the brain, then the brain is seen as a body that would have the same disease the body could have. Therefore, the conceptual metaphor "**Brain is Body**" is applied to make one of the connections between obesity and brain.

Generally speaking, if people eat too much, they will become fat. Long time of overeating could be a reason for obesity as demonstrated above. We are all familiar with bodily experience that food comes inside our body when we eat it, and conventional conceptual metaphor "**Human body is a container**" is based on such universal human experience. Since the brain is seen as a body, based on "**Brain is Body**" metaphor, we can draw a logical deduction that brain can also be seen as a container, where conceptual metaphor "**Brain is a container**" is at play. Chinese people say things like "remember something or somebody in the brain" or "knowledge is stored in the brain", so they actually conceptualize the human brain as a container.

The question still remains how the brain gets obesity. With the previous analysis, brain is now seen as body, a container that can hold things, but the brain can not actually eat food to get fat. We probably need another major metaphor to serve as the missing link. "Brain Obesity" is used in the news for describing syndromes of lack of concentration, low efficiency, and inability to perform normal tasks at the workplace. Such syndromes are shared by most white collars who spend every working day in front of a computer and acquire too much redundant information from the Internet and other sources. Their brains are filled with a variety of information all the time by news on line or anything that is happening in the office, and as a result neglect their job at hand. Therefore, the reason for "Brain Obesity" is over-absorption of information, so we can see another major conceptual metaphor in use: **Information is Food**. Too much information is too much food for the container brain to hold, and the consequence is becoming fat and suffering from obesity as the body would do with immoderate overeating.

Except for the functions of metaphors, the creation and understanding of "Brain Obesity" may also involve the **Entity for Characteristic** metonymy, in which the disease of "obesity" stands for the characteristics a person could have if they suffer from it, such as being extremely fat, slow in reaction, difficult to move and so on. The container brain is overloaded with too much information as its food, and thus becomes too fat to work efficiently, which are characteristics of having obesity.

### 3.2 Office System-Halt Syndrome

"Office System-Halt Syndrome" is "职场死机症 (zhi chang si ji zheng)" in Chinese. It refers to the phenomenon of low work efficiency and distraction among white collars at the end of the year. The following interview excerpt is from an on-line news webpage:

（3） 在一家外企上班的薛小姐坦言，现在的办公室就像是一潭死水，大家的工作进展速度非常缓慢，……"于是大家都在说，我们得了**职场死机症**，……"

Working in a foreign company, Miss Xue said honestly that the office at present time was like a pool of stagnant water, and everybody's working speed was very slow,…… "Therefore all of us are saying that we are having **Office System-Halt Syndrome** now.……"

(http://news.online.sh.cn/news/gb/content/2011-11/25/content_4976950.htm)

The on-line news went on to explain that at the end of the year, companies went into the stage of Year-End Close, and every employee's year-end bonus were settled, so there was no further stimulus for working at full speed. It was also time to write a report for the whole year's work, and many white collars found out their goals were not achieved, which resulted in frustrating feelings and bad mood. Such negative emotions would slow down work efficiency as well. The interesting part is that compared with "Brain Obesity", the reason for having "Office System-Halt Syndrome" is that there is no will to work instead of being overburdened with too much information, even though similar symptoms are shared by the two workplace diseases.

Metaphors, such as **The human is a computer** and **The human mind is a computer,** are used to provide access to the constitution of the phrase after computers have become common work companions nowadays. People are familiar with the experiences of using a computer, including its technological convenience as well as the frustrations it may bring when it has a system halt. These experiences make the computer a good source for figurative conceptualizations, and give birth to the metaphors listed above. If a person is regarded as a computer, he or she is subjected to a system halt too, when nothing is born out of the job and the person is in the state of stagnation like nothing moves on the screen of a computer in a system-halt. Moreover, it is possible that "Office System-Halt Syndrome" is an instance of **Entity for Characteristic** metonymy too. The halt of the computer system is used to emphasize its characteristics of having CPU breakdown and processing stop. In the same way, "Office System-Halt Syndrome" is applied to white collars who characteristically display symptoms like losing driving force to work, suspension of daily working routine, distraction and low efficiency at the workplace.

Both "Brain Obesity" and "Office System-Halt Syndrome" have their creation and comprehension processes affected by context. "Brain Obesity" is born in the social context that obesity is a growing big health problem in China, and people are familiar with the fact that more and more overweight people are walking on the streets. At the same time, "information explosion" resulted from computer technology has become a common phenomenon in current Chinese society, making daily life and work even more stressful with manipulation of endless information flow. Without the invention of the computer in social context, people could not have come up with any conceptualizations through the source domain of a computer, not to mention any linguistic expressions about it. What's more, the immediate working context helps people form and understand these two phrases. For white collars, the elements in their working environment are always very handy and they serve as the best and most convenient choices for people to use as source domains in figurative conceptualizations.

## 4. NEW PROFESSION NAMES: ARE YOU AN ORANGE COLLAR OR A SCREW BLUE COLLAR?

In this part, two new professions are introduced, which were hot professions among Chinese young people in 2011. Color words make a big contribution in phrase formation here.

### *4.1 Orange Collar*

An "Orange collar", "橙领 (cheng ling)" in Chinese, is a new name for professionals in e-commerce industry, especially those who earn their income through Taobao union, the China-based, biggest retail business network on the Internet in the Asian-Pacific region. The following news excerpt explains the work details of an "Orange collar":

（4）他们通过网站、论坛、微博、个人博客等方式为消费者提供导购服务，帮助商家推广产品，并以此作为收入来源。他们被称为"**橙领**"，也是当下最有趣，最时尚的新鲜职业之一。

They provide shopping guide service to consumers, and get their income from helping sales promotion for businesses through websites, on-line forums, micro-blogs, and personal web blogs and so on. They are called "**Orange collars**", holding one of the funniest, most fashionable, novel professions in current time.

(http://cjmp.cnhan.com/cjrb/html/2011-09/19/content_4893357.htm)

From the news, we know "Orange collars" are shopping guides on line, and earning money by submitting comments on web bulletins to promote certain commercial productions. Most of them work at home and do not wear any kind of uniforms, so their name does not come from the color of their collars, but originates from the color of business website Taobao.com in China, which has orange as its theme color. Orange collars do not have to work full time and can make money in their spare time. Flexibility in time and working place, comparatively lower demands on working skills, and a pretty good source of income make "Orange Collar" a favorite job among young people.

Used as a way to refer to both the job and people who hold the job, the phrase "Orange collar" is a good example of metonymic conceptualization. The first metonymy involved here is **Characteristic for Entity** metonymy. The profession has a major characteristic of using orange as the theme color of the website concerned, which is a salient element that probably does not exist in other professions. Therefore, the color orange is chosen to represent the profession. When it comes to the "collar" part, **A Part of the Clothing of a Person for the Person** metonymy is applied to show that the "collar" part of the clothing is singled out to represent the person who wears it. If we see a person's job is his or her possession, then **Possessed for the Possessor** metonymy is activated as well when we use the name of the job to refer to the people who have the job. I think in Chinese people's mind, these three metonymies jointly contribute to the creation and interpretation of the new phrase "Orange collar".

### 4.2 Screw Blue Collar

The concept of blue collars is borrowed from American culture to indicate physical laborers, who usually wear blue working uniform. However, "Screw Blue Collar" is a phrase created by Chinese people to refer to a special kind of technicians, a highly-paid job with growing popularity in China. First, let's see the following excerpt from a news report on the Internet:

（5）这些专修标准件机械的技师，普遍收入较高，平均每年在 8 万元左右，人们亲切地称他们为"**螺丝蓝领**"。These technicians who are specialized in the repair and maintenance of standard parts machinery generally have a comparatively higher income at about 80,000 RMB. People call them in a friendly way as "**Screw Blue Collars**".

(http://www.handannews.com.cn/zxxx/2011-12/08/content_2060382.htm)

A skillful "Screw Blue Collars" in China could make more than 11,000 Euros a year, which is an attractive aspect of the profession for young technicians. Like "Orange Collar", major metonymies involved are **Characteristic for Entity** metonymy, **A Part of the Clothing of a Person for the Person** metonymy and **Possessed for the Possessor** metonymy. In China, technician workers dress in blue working uniforms, a characteristic of physical labor professions that get stressed in the new phrase. "Screw Blue Collars" mainly deal with standard screws and other types of fasteners, springs, gear wheels, etc. in their job so that machines are maintained in a good condition. Since screws are very important for the operation of machines, it is a characteristic of the job that can represent those technicians' profession and instantiate **Characteristic for Entity** metonymy. The collar part of the clothes is used again to refer to the people who wear it, which is an example of **A Part of the Clothing of a Person for the Person** metonymy. The phrase "Screw Blue Collars" can be used to refer to people who possess the job through **Possessed for the Possessor** metonymy. As demonstrated in the previous part, these three metonymies jointly constitute the conceptualization underlying the linguistic phrase.

There is no doubt that the social and immediate contexts provide help with the creation and interpretation of these two profession names. Without the invention of the computer and the development of the Internet, there would be no possibility to shop on line. High technologies lead to many new professions, and "Orange Collar" is only one of them. The bright orange theme color of the website is a highlighted element in immediate working environment, which gives

rise to people's choice of using it to name the profession. The same logic applies to the phrase "Screw Blue Collar" too. If there is no screw in the society, people won't use it to create other phrases. If screws were not so common to see at the workplace and were not very important to the job of those technicians, people would not choose "screw" to name their job, either.

### 5. NEW TYPE OF EMPLOYEES: COLA-TYPE STAFF AND FLASH RESIGNATION TRIBE

This part is about new phrases for employees at the workplace. "Cola-Type Staff" and "Flash Resignation Tribe" seem to be very creative ways of talking about employees.

### *5.1 Cola-Type Staff*

"Cola-Type Staff" is called "可乐型员工 (ke le xing yuan gong)" in Chinese. It is a very interesting way to connect people with Coca-Cola. Let's see the usage of the phrase in the following news excerpt:

（6）**可乐型员工**在刚进入一个公司或某个特殊时候，凭借一个新鲜的小诀窍或者运气，往往表现不俗。但由于缺乏踏实的积累，过硬的专业基础，**可乐型员工**的发展往往后续乏力。

"**Cola-Type Staff**" often give outstanding performance on their posts with luck or a fresh trick of success when they just came to work in a company or at certain particular moments, but they are also weak in the follow-up development due to their lack of steady accumulation of experience and perfect mastery of professional knowledge.

(http://daily.cnnb.com.cn/xqb/html/2011-07/15/content_343379.htm)

It is easy to see that "Cola-Type Staff" is a metonymic phrase, and primarily involves **Entity for Characteristic** metonymy. Coca-Cola is a well-known beverage that has the characteristics of giving out a feel of bustling glamour with the foam produced by carbon dioxide when it is just opened, but will turn to be dull sugar-flavored water with a dry taste after its foam is gone. "Cola-Type Staff" share the similar characteristics that their performance was loudly glamorous when they were just recruited, but after a while, they become neither good nor bad at their work posts, just like a bottle of flat foamless Coca-Cola. The entity of the drink is used to represent characteristics of transitory excellence based on hollow essence.

### *5.2 Flash Resignation Tribe*

"Flash Resignation Tribe" is called "闪辞族 (shan ci zu)" in Chinese language. The word "闪" is an abbreviation for "闪电 (lightning)" or "闪光 (flash light)", both are things that cannot last for long time. "Flash Resignation Tribe" refers to people who quit their job shortly after the recruitment.

（7）在"**闪辞族**"中，多是在普通企业工作，而进入国企和政府机关的新人则相对稳定。

Among people who are members of "**Flash Resignation Tribe**", most of them work in ordinary companies, but new employees in state-owned companies and government offices are relatively stable at their posts.

(http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2011-08-16/030822995735.shtml)

It is said in the on-line news that members of "Flash Resignation Tribe" are mostly new graduates from universities and colleges, and the reasons for flash resign are various, such as low salary, boring work, being deceived by employers, bad working environment and gloomy prospect for the future. The **Entity for Characteristic** metonymy is shown again in the way that the short time spent on the job post and quick decision to resign are conveyed by the entity "flash", which has the characteristics of quickness and short duration.

"Cola-Type Staff" and "Flash Resignation Tribe" are new phrases under social contextual influences. The invention and wide spread consumption of Coca-Cola in modern society are preconditions for the birth of "Cola-Type Staff". The dominance of Cola in the bubbled beverage market and people's countless times of tasting it make it easier for people to produce and understand the metonymic phrase. In "Flash Resignation Tribe", flash (or lightning if "闪" is interpreted as

lightning in Chinese) is an element from the physical setting, and lightning is from nature. Both of them are things people are very familiar with in their living environment. Therefore, they are chosen to form the new metonymic phrases.

## 6. ZOMBIE COMPANY: DEAD OR LIVING?

In 2011, the word "zombie" is connected with the word "company" to form a new phrase in Chinese business world: Zombie Company——僵尸公司 (jiang shi gong si) in Chinese language——a creative way to refer to a company that is in a huge amount of debt but remains in operation on loans or support from the government or lenders as shown in the following example:

（8）一家**僵尸公司**的存在，鼓励了千万家**僵尸公司**茁壮成长，从银广夏到紫鑫药业，足够印证中国证券投资者与市场的痛苦。

The existence of one **Zombie Company** has encouraged a rapid growth of thousands of **Zombie Companies**. A series of fraud events from Yinguangxia company to Zixin pharmacy company are sufficient to verify the agonies of both the market and Chinese securities investors.

(http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2011-08-22/141823031022.shtml)

Two major metaphors play an important role in the creation and comprehension of the new phrase: **A Company is a Person** and **Money is Blood**. When a company is seen as a person, it becomes a corpse if it is dead. Money flowing inside a company is always regarded as blood for keeping the company in good operational state. If a company is not able to generate enough profit or has big deficits, there will be shortage in money supply. It is really wiser to shut down this declining company, but it was an important company and the deficits were so big that neither the government nor private lenders could afford to let it go bankrupt naturally. Then monetary help is provided as if blood were poured into the almost dead company to make it work continuously. "Zombie Company" also involves the **Entity for Characteristic** metonymy, in which the entity of a zombie is used to stand for the properties of being a zombie such as its lack of vitality and reliance on blood. A "zombie company" is a dead company, but still operational by relying on sucking blood from social monetary help, which resembles the lifeless, blood hunger nature of a zombie.

Besides metaphorical and metonymical devices, the cultural context helps people to coin the phrase as well. The concept of a "zombie company" originally comes from a western economist, and I think his idea has its roots in legends or horror stories about zombies in western cultures. According to Wikipedia, a zombie is an animated corpse resurrected by mystical means, such as witchcraft. The term is often figuratively applied to describe a hypnotized person bereft of consciousness and self-awareness, yet ambulant and able to respond to surrounding stimuli (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zombie). Such cultural knowledge and beliefs of a zombie make the western economist come up with the phrase easily.

Chinese people accept this foreign linguistic invention, and simply translate it word-by-word to form a Chinese version of the idea. Such an easy acceptance lies in the fact that there are also legends about walking corpses in China. It is convenient for Chinese people to draw information from their domestic version of zombie stories to comprehend and use the phrase properly. Folklores in ancient Chinese books have lots of stories and mysterious beliefs about a zombie, which is primarily a moving dead human corpse that has stiff limbs without being completely decomposed. It is capable of wondering around at night and hunting living people for fresh blood as its food. Of course, it shows up frequently modern Chinese movies, games and novels as well. "Zombie" has long time been a word used metaphorically by Chinese people to mean anything ossified and decayed, but refused to disappear. It is also used to describe a person who is poker-faced, apathetic and cold-blooded, just like a dead body that is not able to show any kind of emotion or facial expression. Now people apply it to a dead company that continues to consume money and human resources which could have been invested into other new flourishing companies.

## 7. CONCLUSION

After carefully examining eight new Chinese phrases created at the workplace, we can see that metaphor and metonymy are very important cognitive tools for Chinese people to constitute and comprehend novel phenomenon and phrases. Conventional conceptual metaphors and metonymies are fundamental cognitive structures beneath new linguistic expressions. We need to resort to more generic metaphorical and metonymical conceptualizations to understand part of the meanings of the new phrases, and with the help of context, we can easily understand the remaining part of the meanings. Metaphors and metonymies can be combined together in new phrases, and context will influence Chinese people's choice in choosing appropriate source domains for metaphors and making up novel metonymic expressions.

As far as the paper is concerned, salient elements at workplace would have a priority to be chosen as source domains or as a part of metonymic expressions. Contextual factors such as society, physical setting, and culture are very important in the production and interpretation of new Chinese workplace phrases. They provide more information as clues to make the meanings more accessible. Metaphor, metonymy and context work together to make it easier for Chinese people to come up with new inventions of linguistic expressions to describe themselves and the world around them, and enable them to grasp the meanings embedded in each novel phrase they come across in life.

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