SÎZÎ GÉYÂN 四字格言 (Four Character Maxims)

1. What Is Sì zi géyán?

Sì zi géyán 四字格言 ‘four-character maxim’ is a popular term for a certain type of expression; literally meaning ‘four-character aphorism’, it is itself formed by four characters. Since each character in Chinese corresponds to a syllable (→ Prosodic Morphology), ‘four-characters’ is naturally understood as four syllables. The four syllable expressions in Chinese are powerful expressive dications in verbal communications. They are used to express very different things, from common notions to what in English would be translated with a proverb. For example:

Informal

a. 你來我往
nǐ lái wǒ wǎng
‘back and forth’
b. 運鏡帶跳
lián bèng dài tiào
‘jumped up and down, bounced’
c. 稀裡糊塗
xīlǐ hútu
‘muddleheaded’

d. 德高望重
dé gāo wàng zhòng
‘virtue high name heavy’
e. 萬壽無疆
wàn shòu wú jiāng
‘a long life’
f. 前車之鑑
qián chē zhī jiàn
‘the preceding carriage’s mirror (condensed from “the fall of the preceding carriage servers as a mirror for the following one”’)
g. 進退兩難
jìn tuì liǎng nán
‘between a rock and a hard place’

Elevated

h. 高山仰止
gāo shān yǎng zhǐ
‘look up to the high mountain > to admire someone greatly’
i. 以介眉壽
yǐ jiè méi shòu
‘best wishes for a long life.’
j. 殷鏡不遠
Yīn jiàn bù yuǎn
‘the Yīn-dynasty mirror is not far > the former mirror’
k. 進退維谷
jìn tuì wéi gǔ
‘between a rock and a hard place’

As seen above, the more ancient the expressions are, the higher the register will be. The remarkable use of the four-syllable expressions has earned them different names, each with little semantic differences. For example, sì zì géyán 四字格言 ‘four-character aphorism’, sì zì chéngyǔ 四字成語 ‘four-character idiom’ or simply, sì zì gé 四字格 ‘four-character pattern’, and so on. However different their names might be, one
crucial thing is the same: they are all composed of four syllables with a rhythmic pattern of 2×2. In what follows we will use the four-syllable expression or *sìzì gé* as a cover term to explore why they are so characteristic in Chinese.

2. Why are there Four-Character Expressions?

Why are four-character expressions so special in Chinese? It is because, as argued by Féng (1997), disyllabic foot formation has important impact in Chinese morphology. As we have seen from the article on → Prosodic Morphology, a rhythmic foot in Chinese, although different from what is called a stress foot as in English, is rooted in the Natural Foot Formation formulated in (2) (*σ* represents syllable).

2. Natural Foot Formation (NFF)

A natural footing in Chinese is grouped by two syllables from left to right and attaches the stray syllable to the neighboring foot when the number of syllables is odd.

One of the effects of the Natural Foot Formation (NFF) on Chinese grammar is the morphological process of compounding, which results from the Prosodic Word Formation determined by the NFF in (2), as seen from the following diagram in (3).

3. Compound

Under this system, 80% of the dictionary entries are made up of compounds shaped by a disyllabic or trisyllabic template (i.e., PrWd). Another striking impact of prosodic word formation in Chinese is a result of combination of two PrWds (see Féng 1997), as illustrated in (4).

The Minimal PrWd combination, like a combination of two lexical words (cf. brown sugar), can be further analyzed into two subcategories in natural speech: one is a minimal phrase (hence forth, PrWd-phrase), and another is a double-feet compound (hence forth, PrWd-compound), as shown in (5a) and (5b), respectively.

5. a. PrWd-Phrase b. PrWd-Compound

Given this analysis, (5a) will generate the forms seen in (1a-b) as PrWd-phrases, while (5b) gives rise to the forms listed in (1c-k) as PrWd-compounds.

What is the difference between a PrWd-Phrase and a PrWd-Compound then? Although it is not easy to make a clear cut between the two, it is detectable that there is a very short break which occurs in the juncture of the two PrWds in the PrWd-phrases, while no such break is attested in the PrWd-compound. Compare (bracketing represents rhythmic group, ‘#' represents a juncture, and the higher numeric numbers represent the heavier stress):

6. ткилай # wǒ wǎng yī yī dài shuǐ

‘back and forth’  ‘a narrow strip of water’

In addition to the ‘short break’ test, the difference between PrWd-phrase and PrWd-Compound can be captured by the stress pattern discussed by Yú (1989), Hoa (1983), and Scott (1900:154). It is then proposed (Féng 1997) that there are two stress patterns observed in the PrWd Compounds, as illustrated in (7).
7. Stress Pattern of PrWd-Compound
   a. ((02) (13)) yī yī dài shuǐ (see (6))
   one cloth belt river
   b. [2 0 / 1 3] xīli hútu (see (1c))
   xīli muddle
   (xi-lǝ has no meaning)
   ‘muddleheaded.’

In Chinese the so-called four syllable idioms (sì zì chéngyǔ) are all uttered with a pattern of [0213] as in (7a), which are different from the colloquial ones that have a [2013] stress pattern as seen in (7b). What is important to note here is the fact that the ones categorized as PrWd-Phrases do not exhibit the same type of stress pattern, instead, two parallel [w s] units co-exist as a pair, as seen in (8) (‘s’ stands for strong while ‘w’ for weak).

8. PrWd-Phrase 你來我往
[w S # w S]
   nǐ lái wǒ wǎng
   2sg come 1sg go
   ‘back and forth’

Whether or not the categorizations in (7) and (8) will accommodate all the four-character expressions in the language is still an open question; it is, however, unquestionable that the double footed rhythm, whether a PrWd-phrase or a PrWd-compound, is so powerful that it could force (or reanalyze) an ordinary four-character noun phrase into a 2x2 rhythm, creating either a Compound PrWd in the lexicon, or a parallel PrWd phrase in natural speech. For example:

9. a. 一衣帶水
   [yī yī dài] shuǐ
   one cloth belt river
   Lit: ‘a river like a belt in width’
   Re: [one cloth] [carry water]
   a narrow strip of water
   ‘be continuous to each other’
   b. 無肺病牛。
   Wú fèi bìng niú.
   no lung sick cow
   (i) ‘There are no cows with lung-disease.’
   [no lung sick cow]
   (ii) ‘A cow that has no lung-disease.’
   [[no lung sick] [cow]]
   (iii) ‘A sick cow that has no lungs.’
   [[no lung] [sick cow]]
   (taken from Chao 1968:458)

In (9a), the original meaning and structure of the idiom has become unrecognizable for most native speakers with limited education, and it is caused by a mismatch between the syntactic structure and the prosodic structure (i.e., the double-footed PrWd-Compound). In (9b), on the other hand, there are syntactically and semantically alternative readings from the four syllable string of “no lung sick cow”, however, the favorite reading is the illogical one, i.e., (9b-iii), which shows, once again, how powerful the [2×2] prosody is in Chinese.

3. Various forms of Four-Character Expressions

How are sìzì gé formed structurally? As a characteristic of the sìzì gé formation, it is widely recognized that any major syntactic relations, namely, Subject+Predicate, Verb+Object, Verb+PP, Adverb+V, Coordinating Structure, etc. is capable of forming a four-character expression either as a compound PrWd or a phrasal PrWd. For example:

10. Subject+Predicate
   山窮水盡
   shān qióng shuǐ jìn
   mountain end river exhaust
   ‘the end of hills and rivers’
   Verb+Object
   張牙舞爪
   zhāng yá wǔ zhǎo
   show fang brandish claw
   ‘bare fangs and brandish claws—make threatening gestures’
Verb+PP
業精於勤
yè jīng yú qín
work excellence from diligence
'efficiency comes from diligence'

Adverb+V
精雕細刻
jīng diāo xì kè
refined engrave precise carve
'work at sth. with the care and precision of a sculptor > work with great care'

Coordinating
生死存亡
shēng sǐ cún wáng
live die survive extinct
'of vital importance'

Modifier+N
井底之蛙
jǐng dǐ zhī wā
well bottom sub frog
'a frog in a well > a person of narrow view'

Duplication
戰戰兢兢
zhànzhàn-jīngjīng
fear-fear
vigilant-vigilant
'be in a blue funk'

As seen above, as long as a four-character string is capable of being prosodized into a 2x2 rhythmic structure, it can be analyzed as PrWd phrase (with a [s w/s w] stress pattern) or a compound (with a [0213] or [2013] pattern), depending on the stylistic nature of the words involved in the string, a topic we will discuss in the next section.

4. The Stylistic-Register Function of Four syllable expressions

A notable fact about four-character expressions is that they function differently in terms of register. First, the PrWd-phrases always exhibit a casual or informal style used mainly in every day speech, for example:

11. a. 他們兩個[你來我往]成了朋友。
Tāmen liǎngge [nǐ lái wǒ go] chéng le péngyou.
'The two interact back and forth, becoming friends.'

11c is a typical example showing how colloquial Chinese favors a PrWd phrase in casual speech: two separate phrases (i.e., 'if you like to come then do it, and if you don't like to come, then forget about it') is contracted or condensed into a four syllable expression favored by the PrWd phrase prosody, which has becomes a powerful expressive pattern: [ài V bú V 爱 V 不 V] where any monosyllabic verb could be inserted in natural speech.

The last example xīlǐ-hútu is even more convincing for why PrWd Compound with a [2013] stress pattern is exclusively used in casual speech. It is because, as suggested by Féng (2010), the swift jumping rhythm (xuánchā lǜ, like the prosody of a limerick exhibiting a "swift catchy meter" (Perrine 1963), is most suitable for casual but not serious situations. As a result, the stylistic effects of PrWd-phrases are expressively vivid, vigorous and succinct in style.
Of course, an even more remarkable feature of the four syllable expressions in Chinese verbal culture is this: the double-foot prosody has systematically served formal and elevated purposes in high verbal communications. Thus, examples like (if) and (ij) can only be used in formal and elevated occasions.

Although there is no distinct stress feature found between formal and elevated styles and both of them share the [0213] prosody, efabble and auditable ancient words with classical allusions (12b) are used to make the elevated style sound more educated and erudite. In terms of stylistic-register grammar (Féng 2012), it is the place where people look for stylistic differences between formal [0213] and informal [2013] and between higher or lower educations in Chinese verbal expressions.

5. The Syntax of 4-syllable expressions

How are they used syntactically? In terms of syntax, the Parallel PrWds (double foot prosody) are mainly used as predicates, that is, both the formal [0213] PrWd-Compound and the informal [2013] PrWd phrase are predicates (12a). When they are used as modifiers for both nouns (12b) and verbs (12c), the possessive (attributive) marker de 的 and the adverbial marker -de 地 must be added respectively, as seen below.

12. a. 总统和副总统同床異夢，各有各的打算。
Zōngtǒng hé fù zōngtǒng tóng president and vice president same sulf bed different dream each have
gè yǒu bed different dream each have
gè de dāsuàn.
each sub plan
‘President and vice president hide different purposes behind the semblance of accord, and each has his own plan.’

b. 他們兩個是同床異夢的搭檔。
Tāmen liǎng ge shì tóng chuáng 3pl two clf be same bed yi mèng de dādàng.
different dream sub partner

‘They two are partners of dreaming different dreams.’

c. 他們同床異地合作了10年。
Tāmen tóng chuáng yì 3pl same bed different mèng de hézuò le shí dream ADVM coordinate ASP ten duō nián.
more year
‘They have slept in the same bed but dream different dreams for more than ten years.’

Last, it is worthwhile to point out the syntactic constraint that prohibits transitive verbs from taking an object.

13. a. *父親從來不問不問孩子的功課。
Fùqìn cónglái bù wén bù wèn father always not listen not ask háizi de gōngkè.
children sub homework
INTENDED: ‘The father has never paid any attention to his children’s homework.’

b. 父親對孩子的功課從來不聞不問。
Fùqìn duì háizi de gōngkè father to children sub homework
cónglái bù wén bù wèn.
always not listen not ask
‘The father has never paid any attention to his children’s homework.’

Instead of taking the object in the canonical (post-verb) position, a preposition duì 對 must be used to introduce the object before the verb, as seen in (13b). It is still a mystery why this is so even if a suggestion has been made by Féng (2005) in terms of prosodic syntax.

From the above discussion on four-character expressions in Chinese, it is not unreasonable to conclude that they are a unique figure in the language in the sense that they function as a prosody embodiment, an education reflector, as well as a persuasive weapon—a highly cultivated linguistic form in Chinese.
Bibliography


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