

CONCEPTS FOR CLASSIFYING APHORISTIC UNITS IN CHINESE LINGUISTICS: THE PROBLEM OF TERMINOLOGY AND CRITERIA

Saliyev Jasur Jumanazarovich

Master's student, Tashkent State University of Humanities and Social Sciences

Abstract

This article provides a comparative analysis of three leading concepts for classifying aphoristic units in Chinese linguistics — the "traditional" concept and the concepts of Wen Duanzheng and Liu Shuxin. The aim of the study is to identify the differential criteria of these concepts and to evaluate their practical applicability. The definitions given by Chinese linguists, data from explanatory dictionaries, and proposed classification schemes were examined using the methods of definitional analysis and criteria analysis. The analysis established that the undifferentiated use of the terms 格言 *geyan* and 熟语 *shuyu* in terminology is a systematic source of confusion. It was shown that none of the three concepts is able to draw the boundary between the groups "chengyu", "guanyongyu", "yanyu" and "xiehouyu" in a consistent manner; the principal reason for this is that the differential basis is tied rigidly to neither a synchronic nor a diachronic status.

Keywords: Chinese language, aphoristics, phraseology, *geyan*, *shuyu*, *chengyu*, *guanyongyu*, taxonomy, differential criterion, terminology.

Introduction

The study of stable units in Chinese linguistics has a history of more than half a century. Nevertheless, aphoristics here is still undergoing a process of formation as an independent scholarly field. The assessment given by Z.I. Baranov half a century ago — that aphoristics had not been isolated as a separate field in Chinese linguistics at all, and that there was not even a term to designate it — does not fully explain the present state of affairs, yet it points to the root of the problem.

At present, a number of characterizations of aphoristic units exist in Chinese linguistics, but they possess certain shortcomings, since they rest on amorphous (shapeless) criteria. Nevertheless, one taxonomic approach stands out as dominant, and it is reflected in authoritative philological textbooks and major encyclopedic

publications. It is likely that precisely this circumstance has contributed to this approach being adopted and popularized without any change since the 1960s–1970s. Questions of Chinese phraseology and aphoristics have been raised in Russian sinology in the works of A.P. Rogachev, Z.I. Baranov, V.I. Gorelov, A.A. Khamatova and I.R. Kozhevnikov; the most consistent and comprehensive study belongs to P.P. Vetrov [1]. Among Chinese authors, the principal contributions are those of Ma Guofan, Wen Duanzheng, Liu Shuxin, Xu Guoqing and Fu Huaqing.

In existing research, however, these concepts are usually presented separately; the question of comparing their differential criteria on a single plane, and of evaluating the practical applicability of these criteria, has not been specifically raised. The purpose of this article is to identify the criteria of the three leading concepts and to answer the question of whether they are able to delimit aphoristic units in practice.

2. Materials and Methods

The research material comprises three groups of sources: the definitions given by Chinese linguists to the term "geyan"; data from Chinese explanatory dictionaries («现代汉语词典», «辞海»); and the classification schemes proposed for dividing aphoristic units into groups.

The following methods were applied in the analysis: definitional analysis (isolating the components of the definitions); criteria analysis (identifying the differential features applied within each concept and evaluating their scope); taxonomic analysis (examining the relations among groups); and comparative analysis.

Two criteria were applied in evaluating the concepts: consistency — whether the features are applied uniformly at all stages of classification; and coverage — what proportion of the material the criterion encompasses and what proportion remains outside it.

3. Results

3.1. The State of Terminology

In most cases, contemporary Chinese linguists use the term 格言 geyan to designate the notion of "aphorism" or "aphoristic unit". The concept of "aphorism" is not traditional for Chinese linguistics; it appears to have been borrowed from Russian or English at the period when Chinese linguists began actively drawing on European

traditions. However, the borrowing of the term did not determine its place within the system.

An analysis of sources showed that, in the domain of stable units, Chinese lexicology employs at least four umbrella terms, and these are not strictly delimited from one another (Table 1).

Table 1. Umbrella Terms in Chinese Lexicology

Term	Literal translation	Scope	Problem
熟语 shuyu	"familiar speech"	General umbrella designation of stable units	The most consistent term, yet not used in all works
格言 geyan	"measured saying, maxim"	Wise saying; in some works — the entire phraseological fund	Used with two different scopes
俗语 suyu	"speech accepted by all"	Stable units of colloquial style	Sometimes an umbrella term, sometimes a group designation
成语 chengyu	"ready-made expression"	Four-syllable idioms	Used in both a broad and a narrow sense

In our view, the principal source of confusion in this list is the undifferentiated use of the terms 格言 and 熟语. 格言 in fact denotes "a wise saying, a maxim", that is, it designates one particular type of stable unit. As the general umbrella designation of stable combinations, it is the term 熟语 that has been adopted [1]. The use of 格言 as an umbrella term in certain works leads to a violation of hierarchy within the system: the name of a type is used in place of the name of the class.

3.2. Definitions Given by Chinese Linguists

On the whole, definitions of the term are not frequent in the works of Chinese linguists devoted to lexicology, and when they do occur they are usually superficial in character. Authors, on the one hand, note that the matter is insufficiently studied, while, on the other hand, indicate that theoretical foundations are only now taking shape. The principal definitions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Definitions of the Aphoristic Unit Given by Chinese Linguists

Author, year	Content of definition	Feature isolated
Yun Sheng, 1959	The existing set of stable word combinations of a given language	Stability
Zhan Yunyan	Combinations and sentences not formed in the process of speech but existing in the language in ready-made form	Ready-made existence
Wu Zhankun, Wan Xin	A word combination or short sentence; complex in its internal composition, functionally equivalent to a word	Functional equivalence to a word
Fu Huaiqing, 1985	Part of the lexicon; its composition has taken shape as a result of prolonged speech practice	Belonging to the lexical level
《现代汉语词典》	Combinations used as a whole, whose components do not change	Invariability of composition
《辞海》	Stable combinations or sentences; chengyu, yanyu and guanyongyu are included among them	Enumeration

Table 2 shows that all of these definitions merely enumerate the unit's general features — stability of composition, ready-made existence, conformity to a model. Xu Guoqing criticizes precisely this state of affairs, maintaining that the definitions found even in the most authoritative dictionaries are incomplete and lead to erroneous conclusions, since they say nothing whatsoever about the unit's own specific features. Our analysis confirms this assessment: the definitions cited contain no reliable criterion for delimiting the aphoristic unit from other units of the language.

3.3. The "Traditional" Concept

Within this concept, the phraseological fund, in the narrow sense, comprises four groups: "chengyu", "yanyu", "xiehouyu" and "guanyongyu". Three types of differential features are proposed for delimiting these groups.

Lexico-grammatical features. The principal feature of chengyu is that they are composed of four syllables; deviations from this criterion are occasionally possible. They fall into two types: units organized according to the "2+2" scheme, displaying parallel structure, and those lacking parallel structure. Every chengyu contains either

grammatical, lexical or semantic archaisms; from the standpoint of modern syntax, the connection between its components is regarded as asyntactic.

Stylistic features. Chengyu are usually regarded as belonging to the literary (bookish) register. However, empirical material shows that the majority of these units are also actively used in colloquial speech, meaning that the stylistic criterion does not hold up.

Etymological features. Chengyu are frequently based on a literary source and possess an allusive character. This group includes idioms (无价之宝 wú jià zhī bǎo), fixed similes (安如泰山 ān rú Tàishān; 易如反掌 yì rú fǎn zhǎng), ancient proverbs, and aphorisms that later became proverbs (诲人不倦 huì rén bù juàn). Thus units of differing status are grouped together within a single category.

In the early 1960s the group "guanyongyu" began to be distinguished. In order to delimit it from chengyu, Ma Guofan and Gao Gedong proposed four criteria (Table 3).

Table 3. Criteria for Delimiting Chengyu from Guanyongyu

Criterion	Chengyu	Guanyongyu	Assessment
Degree of stability	Highest, in both meaning and composition	Relatively low	Relative
Number of syllables	Mainly four	Mainly three	Overlapping
Compositional component	Syllable	Syllable and disyllabic unit	Unclear
Etymology	Ancient, sources vary	More recent, established by comparison	Cannot be verified

Ma Guofan himself partly acknowledged the imperfection of these criteria, stating that in many cases none of the proposed criteria applies correctly. As a result, a situation arises in which the units under analysis cannot be assigned rigidly to a single group. The author, acknowledging this state of affairs, was compelled to introduce the term 兼类 jianlei — a "variable group". In our view, the very emergence of the term for an intermediate group is a direct indicator that the classification criteria are insufficient.

3.3.1. The Question of the "Suyu" Group

In addition to the four groups of the traditional scheme, certain researchers, including Fu Huaqing, propose distinguishing a further group — 俗语 *suyu*. According to Xu Guoqing, recognizing "*suyu*" as a phraseological group necessitates a reconsideration of the boundaries of "*guanyongyu*": in this case, multi-component units of five to eight syllable-morphemes pass into the "*suyu*" group, while only those of three to four syllables remain within "*guanyongyu*".

Examples of multi-component units on which Chinese phraseologists have not reached agreement include: 换汤不换药 *huàn tāng bù huàn yào*; 赶鸭子上架 *gǎn yāzi shàng jià*; 求爷爷告奶奶 *qiú yéye gào nǎinai*; 人不知, 鬼不觉 *rén bù zhī, guǐ bù jué*; and 偷鸡不着蚀把米 *tōu jī bù zháo shí bǎ mǐ*. The status of these units changes depending on which classification is followed, which indicates the instability of the system.

There is likewise no consensus regarding the "*yanyu*" (proverbs) group: certain scholars understand the phraseological fund in a narrow sense and do not include proverbs within it, explaining this by the fact that proverbs express a judgment and, in their composition, constitute a sentence. In our view, it is precisely this argument that points to the correct path for classification: units should first be divided along the axis of predicativity, and only then should subgroups be identified within each class.

3.4. The Wen Duanzheng Concept

Wen Duanzheng divides aphoristic units into two stylistic groups: 俗语 "*suyu*" — units of the colloquial register (*yanyu*, *xiehouyu*, *guanyongyu*, *suchengyu*) — and 雅语 "*yayu*" — units of the literary register. Together, the two constitute the phraseological fund that he terms 语汇 *yuhui*.

The author proposes carrying out classification in two stages. In the first stage, units are divided into two groups according to their didactic, admonitory character — their "prescriptive force" in R.M. Hare's sense: the first group comprises proverbs and aphorisms, the second *chengyu*, *xiehouyu* and *guanyongyu*. In the second stage, origin and composition are taken into account.

The analysis showed that, within this scheme, the group "*guanyongyu*" is deprived of any clear differential feature of its own: it is isolated merely by virtue of comprising the units not covered at the remaining stages, that is, it acquires the status of a residual

group. Moreover, the author appeals to different types of features at different stages of classification — when one feature proves insufficient for the next stage, he shifts to another. This constitutes a violation of the criterion of consistency.

3.5. The Liu Shuxin Concept

In 1982 Liu Shuxin employed the terms "geyan" and "guanyongyu" in a sense entirely different from that accepted in the traditional description. He designates all idiomatic units, irrespective of their origin, composition or stylistic register, by the term "geyan"; "guanyongyu", in his work, is used to mean "expressions that are stable in form but disorderly in content".

The examples given by the author (三长两短 sān cháng liǎng duǎn; 七上八下 qī shàng bā xià; 马首是瞻 mǎ shǒu shì zhān; 穿小鞋 chuān xiǎoxié; 碰一鼻子灰 pèng yī bízi huī) are idiomatic in character. It follows that, in his concept, the term 格言 is effectively equated with the notion of "idiom". As the differential feature, Liu Shuxin identifies the two-plane character of meaning: the literal meaning triggers a metaphorical or associative response, while the true, condensed-form meaning is manifested in a hidden, internal way.

The strength of this approach lies in its reliance on a single, clearly defined differential feature. Its weakness lies in its sharp departure from the traditional use of the term: internationally, "geyan" is understood as "aphorism", whereas in Liu Shuxin it acquires the meaning of "idiom". This creates additional confusion in comparative research.

3.6. Comparative Characterization of the Three Concepts

The results obtained are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparative Characterization of the Three Concepts

Concept	Principal differential criterion	Consistency	Principal shortcoming
"Traditional"	Number of syllables, style, etymology	Low	Criteria overlap; an intermediate group becomes necessary
Wen Duanzheng	"Prescriptive force", then composition	Medium	Guanyongyu becomes a residual group
Liu Shuxin	Two-plane character of meaning	High	Departure from the traditional meaning of the term

4. Discussion

It is not accidental that none of the three concepts is able to fully perform the task of delimitation. The analysis made it possible to identify three causes of this state of affairs.

The first cause — the heterogeneous level of the criteria. Within the "traditional" concept, the number of syllables (a quantitative indicator), style (a functional indicator) and etymology (a diachronic indicator) are applied side by side. Such criteria do not complement one another; rather, they overlap: a four-syllable unit belonging to the colloquial register and of recent origin falls into three different groups according to the three criteria.

The second cause — the intermixing of synchronic and diachronic approaches. Authors of descriptions frequently fail to tie their differential basis rigidly to either a synchronic or a diachronic status, instead allowing them to intermix without justification. The etymological criterion is diachronic: it says nothing about the unit's present-day status. The stylistic criterion, by contrast, is synchronic. Applying both within a single classification generates internal contradiction.

The third cause — a violation of terminological hierarchy. As shown in section 3.1, the name of a type (格言) is used in place of the name of the class. This creates uncertainty at the highest level of classification: if the scope of the umbrella term is not defined, the subordinate groups cannot be consistently distinguished from it.

The practical consequence of this state of affairs is clearly visible in the domain of dictionary compilation. Compilers of Chinese phraseological dictionaries combine units of differing features and differing types within a single group; this leads to further confusion and to the emergence of questionable classification schemes. For the user, the status of the unit in speech remains unclear.

In our view, three conditions must be met in order to produce a workable classification. First, the umbrella term must be rigidly fixed: it would be appropriate for 熟语 shuyu to perform this function, while 格言 should be retained as the name of a type. Second, at every stage of classification, a criterion belonging to a single level must be applied. Third, synchronic and diachronic descriptions must be kept separate: a unit's present-day status and its origin are independent parameters.

The Liu Shuxin concept deserves the highest assessment in terms of consistency, since it relies on a single differential feature. His experience shows that, in classifying the

Chinese aphoristic fund, a shift from a multi-criterial to a single-criterial approach may prove more productive.

Another aspect deserving separate attention is that of diachronic change. It is possible to identify aphoristic units that are falling out of use at a given stage of the language's development, while others, retaining or modifying their composition, continue to survive through gradual development. Classification schemes usually fail to take this process into account and describe the unit in a static state. At the same time, the unit's degree of activity — whether it is used in modern speech or recorded only in dictionaries — is, in practical terms, no less significant than its compositional features.

As a solution to this problem, we consider it advisable to introduce into the classification a further parameter — an indicator of the unit's activity in modern speech. Such an indicator could be obtained from corpus data or from surveys of informants. It would not replace compositional criteria, but it would allow units to be sorted for the purposes of compiling dictionaries and teaching materials.

A limitation of the study is that the analysis was carried out on theoretical source material. To evaluate the practical applicability of the concepts, it is necessary to apply them to a large corpus and to measure the degree of agreement among the resulting classifications.

5. Conclusion

In the domain of stable units, Chinese lexicology employs at least four umbrella terms, and these are not strictly delimited from one another. The principal source of confusion is the undifferentiated use of the terms 格言 *geyan* and 熟语 *shuyu*: the name of a type is used in place of the name of the class.

The definitions given by Chinese linguists merely enumerate the unit's general features; they contain no reliable criterion for delimiting the aphoristic unit from other units of the language.

None of the three classification concepts is able to draw a consistent boundary between the groups. The causes of this are: the heterogeneous level of the criteria; the intermixing of synchronic and diachronic approaches; and a violation of terminological hierarchy.

To produce a workable classification, three conditions must be met: the umbrella term must be rigidly fixed (it would be appropriate for 熟语 *shuyu* to perform this

function); a criterion belonging to a single level must be applied at every stage of classification; and synchronic and diachronic descriptions must be kept separate. In terms of consistency, the Liu Shuxin concept deserves the highest assessment, since it relies on a single differential feature — the two-plane character of meaning. A shift from a multi-criterial to a single-criterial approach is regarded as a promising direction for classifying the Chinese aphoristic fund.

References

1. Vetrov, P.P. (2007). Phraseology of Modern Chinese: Syntax and Stylistics. Moscow: Vostochnaya kniga. 368 p. [in Russian]
2. Gorelov, V.I. (1984). Lexicology of the Chinese Language. Moscow: Prosveshchenie. [in Russian]
3. Ivanov, E.E. (2020). The aphorism as an object of linguistics: basic features. RUDN Journal of Language Studies, Semiotics and Semantics. [volume, issue, pages]. [in Russian]
4. Vinogradov, V.V. (1977). On the basic types of phraseological units in the Russian language. In Selected Works: Lexicology and Lexicography. Moscow: Nauka. [in Russian]
5. Baranov, Z.I. [title and publication details]. [in Russian]
6. Ma Guofan (1961). Yanyu, Xiehouyu, Guanyongyu. [in Chinese]
7. Ma Guofan, & Gao Gedong (1982). Guanyongyu. [in Chinese]
8. Wen Duanzheng. [title and publication details]. [in Chinese]
9. Liu Shuxin (1982). Fixed Expressions and Their Categories. [in Chinese]
10. Fu Huaqing (1985). Modern Chinese Vocabulary. Beijing. [in Chinese]
11. Xu Guoqing. [monograph title and publication details]. [in Chinese]
12. Xiandai Hanyu Cidian [Contemporary Chinese Dictionary]. Beijing: The Commercial Press. [in Chinese]
13. Cihai [Ci Hai]. Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House. [in Chinese]
14. Hare, R.M. (1952). The Language of Morals. Oxford: Clarendon Press.