Innovation Humanities and Social Sciences Research, Volume 22, Issue 7, 2026. ISSN: 2949-1282
Proceedings of The 6th International Conference on Education, Language and Inter-cultural Communication (ELIC 2026)

Comparative Study on Phonological Rhetoric in French and Chinese Proverbs

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ABSTRACT
Proverbs are short and fixed expressions which often have particular phonological forms. Rhyme, repetition of consonants or vowels, similarity of sounds and regular rhythm can be found in both French and Chinese proverbs. However, French and Chinese have different phonological systems, and these rhetorical forms are not used in the same way. This paper makes a contrastive study of phonological rhetoric in French and Chinese proverbs. The examples are selected mainly from French and Chinese proverb dictionaries and databases. The study focuses on alliteration, paronomasia, antanaclasis, assonance, rhyme and rhythm. The results show that alliteration and paronomasia are particularly noticeable in French proverbs, while Chinese proverbs make frequent use of finals, rhyme and balanced syllabic structures. Assonance and rhythmic organization are important in both languages. The comparison also shows that similar rhetorical effects may be produced by different phonological means in French and Chinese.

Keywords: *Proverbs, Paremiology, Phonological rhetoric, French, Chinese, Contrastive linguistics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are generally short, concise and rhythmic. Many proverbs also contain repetition, rhyme, parallel structures and other rhetorical forms. These features are not limited to proverbs, but they are very common in proverbial expressions. For this reason, the form of proverbs has always been an important question in paremiological studies.

Rhetoric is also closely related to proverbs. According to Reboul [1], rhetorical figures can be divided into different categories according to their relation to discourse. Among them, figures concerning words and sounds are particularly important for proverbs. A proverb is often remembered and transmitted in a relatively fixed form. If its sounds, rhythm or structure are changed, part of its proverbial form may also disappear.

Anscombre [2] studied the relationship between proverbial speech and metrical structure. He points out the importance of binary structure, rhyme and syllabic regularity in proverbial forms. Gouvard [3] also proposes a metrical analysis of proverbs by examining syllable number, rhythmic groups and phonological recurrence. These studies show that sound and rhythm are not only ornamental elements of proverbs. They take part in the construction of their form.

French and Chinese provide interesting materials for contrastive study because their phonological systems are different. In French proverbs, we can find alliteration, assonance, rhyme, paronomasia and different rhythmic combinations. Chinese has its own traditional categories such as shuāngshēng 双声 and diéyùn 叠韵. Chinese proverbs also frequently have balanced numbers of syllables and parallel structures.

The author has previously studied French and Chinese proverbs from a contrastive paremiological perspective [4]. The previous study examined different linguistic and rhetorical characteristics of proverbs. The present paper focuses on phonological rhetoric. It tries to answer a simple question: how do French and Chinese proverbs use their respective phonological resources to produce rhetorical effects?

The analysis mainly concerns figures of sound and figures of rhythm. For figures of sound, alliteration, paronomasia, antanaclasis and assonance are examined. For rhythm, several

French and Chinese examples are compared according to their syllabic organization. Through these examples, the paper aims to show both the differences and the similarities of phonological rhetoric in the two languages.

2. DATA AND METHOD

The Chinese examples in this paper are mainly selected from *Xinhua Yanyu Cidian* (新华谚语词典) edited by Wen Duanzheng [5], together with other collections of Chinese proverbs such as Kordas [6] and Cheng [7]. The French examples are mainly selected from French proverb dictionaries [8] and the DicAuPro proverb database [9].

The study uses a qualitative contrastive method. Representative proverbs are selected according to the phonological phenomena under discussion. The analysis concerns repeated consonants, repeated vowels or finals, similar syllables or words, rhyme and rhythmic organization. French and Chinese examples are then compared to identify their common and different characteristics.

French examples are kept in their original form. Chinese examples are presented with Chinese characters and Pinyin. English translations are given to explain the meaning of the examples, but the translations themselves are not used for phonological analysis.

3. PHONOLOGICAL RHETORIC IN FRENCH AND CHINESE PROVERBS

3.1 Figures of Words

What characterizes figures of words? According to Reboul [1], they are untranslatable, because they are destroyed as soon as their sound material is changed, even slightly. These figures can be divided into two groups: figures of rhythm and figures of sound, which concern phonemes, syllables or words.

Proverbs are necessarily characterized by their form: they are brief, concise and rhythmic. This form contributes to the mnemonic function of proverbs and makes them easy to remember. Figures of rhythm emphasize the phonetic beauty of French and Chinese proverbs in different ways. In this section, we focus on figures of sound.

3.1.1 Alliteration

Alliteration consists of the exact or approximate repetition of one or more phonemes, especially consonants, at the beginning of syllables in the same word, or at the beginning or inside neighboring words in the same sentence. It therefore produces an identical phonetic transformation. Alliteration is commonly used in poetry, but it is also found in prose, especially in short sentences such as proverbs. It can produce not only musical harmony of sounds but also give force to proverbial expressions.

In French, alliteration can be found in many proverbs and strengthens their expressive form while making them easy to remember. In the proverb:

- On se perfectionne par la pratique.

the two words *perfectionne* and *pratique* begin with the phoneme /p/, forming an alliteration in /p/. In addition, the preposition *par* also begins with /p/ and reinforces the alliterative effect of the proverb.

In general, alliteration in French proverbs can be divided into several types.

Alliteration at the beginning and the end of each rhythmic group:

- **S**ouhaits n’ont jamais / rempli le **s**ac.

  Dire et faire / sont **d**eux.

  Pêcheur / a toujours **p**eur.

Alliteration at the end of each rhythmic group:

- Toujours **p**êche / qui en **p**rend un.

  L’argent est **r**ond / il faut qu’il **r**oule.

  Il faut qu’un **m**enteur / ait bonne **m**émoire.

  La fortune **s**ourit / aux **s**ots.

Alliteration of three consonants:

- Qui **s**onge à oublier / **s**e **s**ouvient.

  Il **f**aut **f**aire un pont d’or / à l’ennemi qui **f**uit.

  On ne **s**aurait **s**atisfaire / tout le monde et **s**on père.

Alliteration of connected words:

- Tout se sait / **t**ôt ou **t**ard.

  Tout bois n’est pas bon / à **f**aire **fl**èche.

  Il n’y a que le **p**remier **p**as / qui coûte.

Alliteration at intervals in two rhythmic groups:

- **L**a **v**érité / est dans **l**e **v**in. (l-v / l-v)

  Balais **n**euf / **n**ettoie **b**ien. (b-n / n-b)

  Il **n**'y a **s**i petit **m**étier / qui ne **n**ourrisse **s**on **m**aître. (n-s-m / n-s-m)

There is a similar figure in Chinese called *shuāngshēng* 双声. It refers to two identical initial consonants in two Chinese characters. Examples can be found in disyllabic words such as *fǎngfú* 仿佛 "it seems", *yǒngyuǎn* 永远 "forever" and *zhīzhū* 蜘蛛 "spider". However, *shuāngshēng* is less present in Chinese proverbs than alliteration in French proverbs. Kordas [6] divides alliteration in Chinese proverbs into two groups: contiguous alliteration and distant alliteration.

Contiguous alliteration most often occurs in two syllables. Both one-line and two-line proverbs can contain this type of alliteration. For example:

- 有志者，事竟成

  Yǒu **zh**ì **zh**ě, shì jìng chéng.

  Have / will / person / thing / finally / accomplish

  "Those who have determination can finally succeed."[6]

  In this example, *zhì* and *zhě* have the same initial.

Another example is:

- 虎落平阳被犬欺

  Hǔ luò píng yáng bèi **q**uǎn **q**ī.

  Tiger / descend / plain / passive marker / dog / bully

  "When a tiger comes down to the plain, it may be bullied by a dog."[6]

In general, contiguous alliteration concerns words belonging to different grammatical paradigms. In the first example, *zhì* is a noun and *zhě* is a particle which nominalizes the verb-object group *yǒu zhì*. In the second example, *quǎn* is a noun and *qī* is a verb.

There are relatively few proverbs in which contiguous alliteration occurs in disyllabic words. It is also rare to find three successive syllables repeating the same initial. For example:

- 事实胜于雄辩

  Shì **sh**í **sh**èng yú xióng biàn.

  Facts / prevail over / eloquence

  "Facts speak louder than words." [6]

Even rarer are proverbs in which all the words have the same initial. We found only one example corresponding to this condition:

- 惺惺惜惺惺
- Xīngxīng xī xīngxīng.
- Be intelligent / sympathize with / be intelligent
- "An intelligent person appreciates another intelligent person. Great minds think alike." [6]

Distant alliteration concerns cases in which alliteration occurs between the first syllable and an internal syllable, between two internal syllables, or between an internal syllable and the last syllable. Examples include:

- 识时务者为俊杰

  Shí shí **w**ù zhě **w**éi jùn jié.

  Know / present / circumstances / person / be / man of great talent

  "He who understands the circumstances is a wise man."

- 真金不怕烘炉火

  Zhēn jīn bù pà **h**óng lú **h**uǒ.

  True / gold / not / fear / great / furnace / fire

  "True gold does not fear the fire."

The comparison shows that consonantal repetition exists in both French and Chinese proverbs. However, alliteration in French proverbs is more varied, while Chinese *shuāngshēng* is relatively less frequent in the examples examined.

3.1.2 Paronomasia

Paronomasia is a microstructural figure of "repetition" [10]. However, no word is actually repeated. Different from alliteration, which concerns phonemes, paronomasia concerns syllables and consists of placing paronyms close to each other in an utterance.

We may therefore say that rhyme is a paronomasia occurring at the ends of words and recurring at a regular rhythm. For example:

- Qui vole un œuf, vole un bœuf.

The words *œuf* and *bœuf* are paronyms. This proverb therefore plays on paronomasia.

Other examples include:

- Qui se ressemble s'assemble.

  Comparaison n'est pas raison.

  Qui vivra verra.

  Qui trop s'excuse s'accuse.

Darbord [11] considers that paronomasia is a figure of both signifier and signified, because it is a figure of thought as well as a figure of sound. The near identity of signifiers produces a rapprochement between the signifieds. It creates analogies between signifiers together with unexpected semantic connections. Paronomasia is therefore also a poetic figure.

As Chinese is a monosyllabic language, a Chinese syllable can be divided into three elements: an initial phoneme, a final phoneme and a tone. Thus, repetition involving syllables may become repetition of initial phonemes or repetition of final phonemes. The first case can be related to alliteration and the second to rhyme. Consequently, paronomasia is less obvious in Chinese proverbs. The monosyllabic characteristic of Chinese makes paronomasia in Chinese proverbs less varied than in French proverbs.

3.1.3 Antanaclasis

Antanaclasis is defined as the repetition of the same term with different meanings. It differs from paronomasia, which concerns syllables, and from alliteration, which concerns phonemes. Antanaclasis is a figure of sound concerning words: the same word appears twice, but with two different meanings.

The following French proverbs use this rhetorical figure:

- Chose promise, chose due.

  Pas de nouvelles, bonnes nouvelles.

  Il n'est pire eau que l'eau qui dort.

  À la guerre comme à la guerre.

  À malin, malin et demi.

  Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.

In the last example, the first occurrence of *raison* means cause or explanation, while the second means the intellectual faculty of reason. Antanaclasis can therefore "give flavor to the expression of banalities" [10].

In Chinese, antanaclasis corresponds to the rhetorical figure *huàn yì* 换意, which plays on two different meanings of the same word. It is a derivative of the pun, *shuāngguān* 双关. There is also a particular kind of proverbial expression called *xiēhòuyǔ* 歇后语, or suspended expression, which often uses this figure.

There are relatively few examples of antanaclasis in Chinese proverbs. For example:

- 人穷志不穷

  Rén qióng zhì bù qióng.

  Man / be poor / will / not / come to an end

  "A poor man is not poor in ambition."

The first occurrence of *qióng* means the poverty of a person, while the second means "to come to an end" or "to be limited". Antanaclasis is therefore a figure of both signifier and signified. The second meaning of *qióng* is enriched in relation to the first. Antanaclasis involves a re-semantization of the sign [11].

3.1.4 Assonance

Similar to alliteration, assonance is based on phonological repetition. While alliteration mainly concerns consonants, assonance consists of the repetition of the same vowel sound in a sentence. This figure can create poetic coherence between words.

For example:

- Qui cherche la fortune, fond devant les thunes.

This proverb contains assonance in /ɑ̃/ in *fond* and *devant*, and in /y/ in *fortune* and *thunes*. It should also be noted that there is alliteration in /ʃ/ in *cherche*, /f/ in *fortune* and *fond*, and rhyme in /yn/ in *fortune* and *thunes*.

Other examples of assonance in French proverbs include:

- Il n'y a chance qui ne rechange.

  Un coup de langue est pire qu'un coup de lance.

  Chacun a son choix.

  La maison fait connaître le maître.

  L'amour apprend aux ânes à danser.

Assonance corresponds to the Chinese term *diéyùn* 叠韵, in which *dié* means repetition and *yùn* refers to the vowel or final. Thus, *diéyùn* means that the finals of two Chinese characters are identical or similar.

For example:

- 多行不义必自毙

  Duō xíng bù yì bì zì bì.

  Much / act / unjustly / certainly / oneself / perish

  "He who repeatedly does wrong will inevitably bring destruction upon himself."

There is an assonance in /i/ in *yì, bì, zì, bì*. It is an example of contiguous assonance.

Another example is:

- 尽信书不如无书

  Jìn xìn shū bù rú wú shū.

  Entirely / trust / books / not / as good as / have no / books

  "It is better to have no books than to believe everything in books blindly."

There is assonance in /in/ in *jìn* and *xìn*, and in /u/ in *shū, bù, rú, wú, shū*.

We can also find:

- 螳螂捕蝉，黄雀在后

  Táng láng bǔ chán, huáng què zài hòu.

  Mantis / catch / cicada / oriole / be / behind

  "When the mantis catches the cicada, the oriole is waiting behind."

The proverb means that a person who pursues an immediate advantage may fail to see a danger behind. There is assonance in /ang/ in *táng, láng* and *huáng*.

We can therefore observe that this poetic figure, based on phonological recurrence of vowels or finals, is very present in both French and Chinese proverbs.

3.2 Rhythm and Rhyme

Besides figures of sound, rhythm is another important element of proverbial form. Proverbs are short expressions, and many of them can be divided into two or several rhythmic groups. Rhyme and repeated sounds often occur together with these rhythmic divisions.

Gouvard [3] proposes to examine French proverbs according to their syllabic groups. One example is:

- Petit à petit, l'oiseau fait son nid.

The proverb can be divided into three groups:

- Petit à petit / l'oiseau / fait son nid

5 + 2 + 3

There is also a recurrence of /i/ in *petit* and *nid*. Thus, rhythm and sound repetition occur in the same expression.

Chinese proverbs also have clear rhythmic structures. One example is:

- 君子坦荡荡，小人长戚戚

  Jūnzǐ / tǎn dàngdàng // xiǎorén / cháng qīqī.

  "A gentleman is open and at ease; a petty man is always anxious."

The proverb can be divided into four groups of two or three syllables:

2 + 3 // 2 + 3

The two parts are parallel in their syllabic number and syntactic structure. The contrast between *jūnzǐ* "gentleman" and *xiǎorén* "petty man" also reinforces this parallelism. The earlier study likewise analyzed this proverb in four groups of two or three syllables.

Rhyme can also be combined with a balanced structure. For example:

- 上有天堂，下有苏杭

  Shàng yǒu tiāntáng, xià yǒu Sū Háng.

  "In heaven there is paradise; on earth there are Suzhou and Hangzhou."

The two parts contain four syllables respectively:

4 // 4

The final syllables *táng* and *Háng* rhyme. At the same time, the two parts have a parallel syntactic structure. The rhythmic effect therefore comes not only from rhyme but also from the regular number of syllables. This example was also identified as a rhyming Chinese proverb in the earlier corpus.

These examples show that rhythm in proverbs cannot always be separated from other rhetorical forms. Rhyme, repetition and syntactic parallelism often work together.

4. DISCUSSION

From the examples analyzed above, we can see that French and Chinese proverbs both make use of phonological rhetoric. However, the forms are not always the same in the two languages.

Alliteration is common in French proverbs. It can occur at the beginning of words, at the end of rhythmic groups, or in several words of the same proverb. In Chinese, the similar figure is called *shuāngshēng* 双声. It also concerns the repetition of initial consonants. However, this figure is less present in the Chinese examples. Most cases concern only two syllables, while examples in which the same initial appears throughout the whole proverb are rare.

Paronomasia is another figure which is easy to find in French proverbs. Proverbs such as *Qui se ressemble s'assemble* and *Comparaison n'est pas raison* are based on words which are very close in sound. The similarity of the sound forms also creates a relation between their meanings. In Chinese proverbs, this type of figure is less obvious. Similar sound relations are more often found in the repetition of initials, finals or homophonous syllables.

The situation is different for assonance. This figure is very present in both French and Chinese proverbs. French proverbs repeat the same vowel sounds in different words. In Chinese, *diéyùn* 叠韵 concerns the repetition of finals. For example, in *Jìn xìn shū bù rú wú shū*, several syllables contain recurring final or vowel sounds. Although the phonological units are not exactly the same in French and Chinese, the repetition produces a similar phonetic effect.

Antanaclasis can also be found in both languages. In French, the same word may appear twice with two different meanings, as in *Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point*. Chinese also has this type of wordplay, called *huàn yì* 换意. However, we found relatively few examples of this figure in Chinese proverbs.

Rhythm is also an important characteristic of proverbs. French proverbs can be divided into several rhythmic groups. Chinese proverbs often have a very regular number of syllables. For example, *Jūnzǐ tǎn dàngdàng, xiǎorén cháng qīqī* has a structure of **2 + 3 // 2 + 3**, while *Shàng yǒu tiāntáng, xià yǒu Sū Háng* has a structure of **4 // 4**. The second example also contains rhyme. Such examples show that sound repetition, syllable number and syntactic structure often appear together in Chinese proverbs. The rhythmic analysis of these Chinese examples also follows the earlier contrastive study.

In general, French and Chinese proverbs do not use the same phonological means in the same proportion. French proverbs show more varied forms of alliteration and paronomasia, while Chinese proverbs make important use of finals, rhyme and balanced syllabic structures. Assonance and rhythm are found in both languages. These differences are related to the phonological characteristics of French and Chinese. For this reason, the rhetorical categories of one language cannot always be directly applied to the other.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has compared several forms of phonological rhetoric in French and Chinese proverbs, including alliteration, paronomasia, antanaclasis, assonance, rhyme and rhythm.

The analysis shows some differences between the two languages. Alliteration and paronomasia are more varied in the French examples. In Chinese proverbs, the repetition of finals, rhyme and balanced syllabic structures are more noticeable. Assonance and rhythm are important in both French and Chinese proverbs.

French and Chinese have different phonological systems. Therefore, similar rhetorical forms do not always have the same structure in the two languages. *Alliteration* and *shuāngshēng*, or *assonance* and *diéyùn*, can be compared, but they should not be considered completely identical.

The present study is based mainly on representative examples. More French and Chinese proverbs can be examined in future studies to further compare the use of these phonological figures.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the Jiangxi Provincial Social Science Fund Project "Comparative Study of Phonological Rhetoric in Chinese and French Proverbs from a Paremiological Perspective" (谚学视角下汉法谚语音韵修辞对比研究) (Grant No. 21YY33). Beijing Municipal Social Science Fund Project "A Study on the Translation and Dissemination of Idioms in the French Version of Xi Jinping: The Governance of China" (《习近平谈治国理政》法译本中的熟语译介研究) (Grant No. 23YYC009).

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