

Encyclopedia of Chinese Language and Linguistics

Volume 4

Shā–Z

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Sven Osterkamp

## Sì zì géyán 四字格言 (Four Character Maxims)

### 1. WHAT IS SÌ ZÌ GÉYÁN?

*Sì zì 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 dictions 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:

#### 1. Informal

##### a. 你來我往

nǐ lái wǒ wǎng  
2SG come 1SG go

‘back and forth’

##### b. 連蹦帶跳

lián bèng dài tiào  
link hop bring jump

‘jumped up and down, bounced’

##### c. 稀裡糊塗

xī lǐ hú tu

xī lǐ muddle (xī-lǐ has no meaning)

‘muddleheaded’

#### Formal

##### d. 德高望重

dé gāo wàng zhòng  
virtue high name heavy

‘have a high virtue and a glorious name’

##### e. 萬壽無疆

wàn shòu wú jiāng  
ten thousand old.age no limit

‘a long life’

##### f. 前車之鑒

qián chē zhī jiàn  
before carriage SUB mirror

‘the preceding carriage’s mirror (condensed from “the fall of the preceding carriage serves as a mirror for the following one”)’

##### g. 進退兩難

jìn tuì liǎng nán  
advance retreat two difficulties

‘between a rock and a hard place’

#### Elevated

##### h. 高山仰止

gāo shān yǎng zhǐ  
high mountain look.up PRT

‘look up to the high mountain > to admire someone greatly’

##### i. 以介眉壽

yǐ jiè méi shòu  
PRT wish brow old.age

‘best wishes for a long life.’

##### j. 殷鑒不遠

Yīn jiàn bù yuǎn  
Yīn mirror not far

‘the Yīn-dynasty mirror is not far > the former mirror’

##### k. 進退維谷

jìn tuì wéi gǔ  
advance retreat be valley

‘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 *sizi gé* as a cover term to explore why they are so characteristic in Chinese.

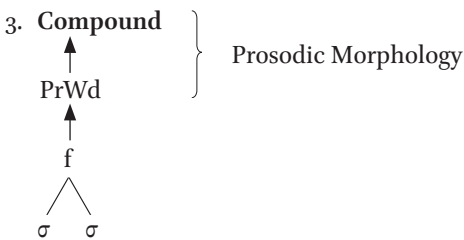
## 2. WHY ARE THERE FOUR-CHARACTER EXPRESSIONS?

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.

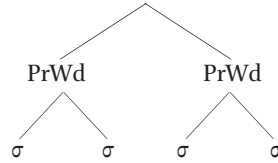
One of the effects of the Natural Foot Formation (NFF) on Chinese grammar is the morphological process of compounding, which results from the Prosodic Word Formation determined by the NFF in (2), as seen from the following diagram in (3).



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).

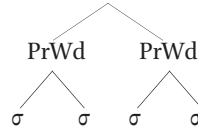
The Minimal PrWd combination, like a combination of two lexical words (cf. brown sugar), can

## 4. Minimal combination of PrWds

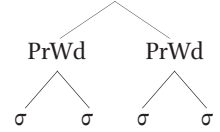


be further analyzed into two subcategories in natural speech: one is a minimal phrase (hence forth, PrWd-phrase), and another is a double-foot compound (hence forth, PrWd-compound), as shown in (5a) and (5b), respectively.

### 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. 你來 我往                      一衣帶水  
 nǐ lái # wǒ wǎng yī yī dài shuǐ  
 2SG come 1SG go      one cloth belt river  
 'back and forth'      'a narrow strip of water  
 > be continuous to  
 each other'

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-lə has no meaning)  
'muddleheaded.'

- (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 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

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 [2x2] 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'

wǎng], chéng le péngyou.  
go] become ASP friend  
'The two interact back and forth, becoming friends.'

- a. 我們現在都[有吃有喝]。  
Wǒmen xiànzài dōu [yǒu chī  
1PL now all [have eat  
yǒu hē].  
have drink]  
'Now we all have plenty to eat and drink—have very good living conditions.'
- b. 愛來不來  
ài lái bù lái  
like come not come  
Lit: like come then come, not come then not  
'regardless of whether (you come or not) or 'who cares (if you come or not)'
- c. 稀裡糊塗  
xīli-hútu  
xīli muddle (xīlǎ has not meaning)  
他做事總是稀裡糊塗，讓人不放心。  
Tā zuòshì zǒngshì xīli-hútu,  
3SG work always muddleheaded  
ràng rén bú fàng xīn.  
make people not put heart  
'He is always muddleheaded when working and people worry about it.'

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  
3PL two CLF [2SG come 1SG

(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 become a powerful expressive pattern: [ài V bù V 愛 V 丕 V] where any monosyllabic verb could be inserted in natural speech.

The last example *xīli 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* 懸差律), 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 (1f) and (1j) 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, effable 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 [2103] 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. 總統和副總統同床異夢，各有各的打算。

Zǒngtǒng hé fù zǒngtǒng tóng  
president and vice president same  
chuáng yì mèng, gè yǒu  
bed different dream each have  
gè de dǎsuàn.  
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  
yì mèng de dādàng.  
different dream SUB partner

'They two are partners of dreaming different dreams.'

- c. 他們同床異夢地合作了10多年。

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. \*父親從來不聞不問孩子的功課。

\*Fùqin 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。

Fùqin 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.

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Shengli Feng

## Slang

### 1. FEATURES AND DEFINITIONS

In an oft-quoted definition of "slang", Dumas and Lighter (1978:14–15) formulated four criteria; any expression meeting at least two of these can be identified as slang:

1. Its presence will markedly lower, at least for the moment, the dignity of formal or serious speech or writing;
2. Its use implies the user's special familiarity either with the referent or with that less status-ful or less responsible class of people who have such special familiarity and use the term;

3. It is a tabooed term in ordinary discourse with persons of higher social status or greater responsibility; and
4. It is used in place of the well-known conventional synonym.

Summarizing these criteria, Eble writes that "slang can only be identified by its social consequences, i.e., by the effects that the use of slang words and phrases instead of neutral vocabulary has on the relationship between speaker and audience" (2004:262). To be sure, this definition is by no means uncontroversial, and linguistic analyses of slang have to rely on heuristic inventories of features and criteria rather than on elaborate definitions. In addition to the above criteria adduced by Dumas and Lighter (1978), it can be added that slang is typically used in reference to playful language and as an in-group marker. This is emphasized by Adams who claims that "slang is casual, playful, racy, irreverent, or playful language that outlines social in-groups" (2009:13). A feature that is less uncontroversial but frequently mentioned pertains to innovative and relatively short-lived character of slang expressions. According to another definition by Lighter, for example, slang "denotes an informal, nonstandard, nontechnical vocabulary composed chiefly of novel-sounding synonyms (and near synonyms) for standard words and phrases" (2001:220).

As both the type of social behavior and its linguistic expression that are associated with slang are arguably universal, it may rightly be claimed that slang or slang-like phenomena exist in every language, including Chinese. Booklets on Chinese slang published in the last two decades provide countless examples, such as various slang expressions associated with money and making money, including *tì* 替 (also spelled with the Roman letter T) 'money', *yèzi* 頁子 'money (bills)', *gǎngzhǐ* 港紙 (lit. 'Hong Kong paper') 'Hong Kong dollars', *lǎo rì* 老日 (lit. 'Old Jap') 'Japanese yen', *lǜde* 綠的 (lit. 'the green one') and *měizi* 美子 'US dollar', *dàkuǎn* 大款 (lit. 'huge amount of money') and *kuǎngē* 款哥 (lit. 'fund bro') 'rich guy' (examples selected from Zhou and Wang 1995). Instead of extending this list with numerous other examples from