



APHORISM AS AN OBJECT OF LINGUISTIC STUDY: THE PROBLEM OF IDENTIFYING DIFFERENTIAL FEATURES

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Abstract

This article investigates the status of the aphorism as an object of linguistic inquiry and the problem of delimiting it from other stable (fixed) linguistic units. The aim of the study is to identify the linguistically relevant features of the aphorism and to isolate, among them, its differential feature. Definitions found in reference literature, together with aphoristic material drawn from Chinese, Uzbek and Russian, were examined using methods of definitional, componential and distributive analysis. The criteria of essentiality/non-essentiality and necessity/contingency were applied in evaluating the features. As a result of the analysis, ten features of the aphorism were identified and distributed into three groups — differential, essential and accompanying features. It was established that the feature of "separate formation" is neither essential nor necessary for the aphorism, whereas the function of a differential feature is performed by the generalized character of meaning. The results obtained provide a basis for the practice of marking and classifying aphoristic units in dictionaries.

Keywords: aphorism, aphoristics, stable (fixed) unit, differential feature, supra-word status, single-clause structure, generalized meaning, idiomaticity, phraseological unit, Chinese language.

1. Introduction

The term aphorism is widely used in scholarship. It is employed freely in literary studies, philosophy, cultural studies and folklore studies; in speech practice it stands alongside the notions of "maxim", "winged expression", "quotation" and



"proverb". However, such broad currency of the term does not mean that it is precisely defined from a linguistic point of view.

Seeking an answer to the question of what an aphorism actually is, we examined a number of dissertations and monographs. None of them provides a full linguistic account of the aphorism. In reference works on general linguistics, the term aphorism is either vaguely interpreted or not explained at all. This allows one to conclude that the authors and compilers of linguistic reference works deliberately avoid interpreting the concept of the aphorism.

In our view, this state of affairs has two causes. First, the aphorism has traditionally been regarded as a literary genre, and the need to characterize it as a linguistic unit arose only later. Second, since the aphorism borders on the phraseological unit, the proverb, the saying and the winged expression, distinguishing it requires a precise criterion, and such a criterion has not yet been developed in a generally recognized form.

A further aspect of the problem concerns terminology. Different languages and traditions apply different terms to notions close to the aphorism: in Russian linguistics — «афоризм», «крылатое выражение», «изречение»; in English — aphorism, maxim, apophthegm, saying; in Chinese — 格言 geyan, 名言 mingyan, 警句 jingju. The scope of these terms and their mutual relations are not clearly defined, which creates confusion in comparative studies.

The most consistent research into the aphorism as an object of linguistics belongs to E.E. Ivanov [3; 4]. This author has substantiated a list of the linguistically relevant features of the aphorism and has raised the question of establishing aphoristics as an independent branch of linguistics. In the works of N.T. Fedorenko and L.I. Sokolskaya [8] and of A.V. Korolkova [6], the aphorism is described chiefly from a literary-stylistic standpoint. Within Chinese material the issue has been raised in the studies of P.P. Vetrov [1] and Bai Yu [10].

Nevertheless, the question of dividing the system of aphoristic features according to their status — into differential, essential and accompanying features — has not been specifically investigated. At the same time, it is precisely such a division that makes it possible to delimit the aphorism from other stable units. The purpose



of this article is to identify the linguistically relevant features of the aphorism and to isolate, among them, the differential feature.

2. Materials and Methods

The research material comprises two sources. The first consists of the definitions given to the term aphorism in linguistic reference works and encyclopedic publications. The second consists of aphoristic units drawn from Chinese, Uzbek and Russian, which were used as illustrative material for testing the features.

The following methods were applied in the analysis: definitional analysis (isolating and comparing the components of existing definitions); componential analysis (identifying the constituent senses of the unit's meaning); distributive analysis (determining the unit's position within the sentence); and quantitative calculation (determining the size of the lexical composition).

Two pairs of criteria were applied in parallel when evaluating the features. The first pair — essentiality and non-essentiality — concerns whether a feature characterizes the linguistic nature of the unit or pertains only to its outward appearance. The second pair — necessity and contingency — concerns whether a feature is observed in all aphorisms without exception or only in certain groups. The combination of these two pairs of criteria makes it possible to distribute the features according to their status.

3. Results

3.1. Analysis of Existing Definitions

An analysis of definitions found in reference sources showed that they fall into three types (Table 1).

Table 1. Types of Definitions of the Aphorism and Their Limitations

Type of definition	Content	Limitation
Generic definition	An aphorism is a literary genre expressing a brief and complete thought	Does not establish the status of a linguistic unit; does not cover aphorisms in oral speech
Content-based definition	An aphorism is a profound, wise thought	Has an evaluative character; "profound meaning" is not a linguistic criterion
Authorial definition	An aphorism is a wise expression whose author is known	Excludes folk aphorisms; units whose authorship has been lost cannot be classified



It is evident that none of these three types of definitions is able to delimit the aphorism from other units of language on a linguistic basis. The generic definition raises the unit to the level of text and disregards its nature as a stable unit. The content-based definition relies on an evaluative, that is, subjective, criterion. The authorial definition, in turn, is diachronically unstable: many aphorisms lose their author over time and become proverbs.

3.2. Apparatus for Evaluating Features

The study showed that the properties inherent to the aphorism and linguistically relevant — that is, capable of being named and described from a linguistic standpoint — are relatively few. In isolating the genuine linguistic features of the aphorism, it is essential to distinguish them on the basis of the criteria of essentiality and non-essentiality, as well as necessity and contingency. The essential and necessary properties that characterize the linguistic nature of the aphorism serve as the basis for identifying it as an object of linguistics.

3.3. System of Features

On the basis of this apparatus, ten features of the aphorism were identified and distributed by status into three groups (Table 2).

Table 2. Linguistic Features of the Aphorism and Their Status

Feature	Content	Status
Generalized meaning	The unit expresses not a single instance but a general judgment	Differential
Supra-word status	The unit is larger than a word, being composed of words and word combinations	Essential, necessary
Single-clause structure	Grammatical organization is limited to a single sentence	Essential, necessary
Speech autonomy	The unit conveys a complete meaning even without context	Essential, necessary
Textual form	Created and used as a separate text	Essential



Reproducibility	Used repeatedly in speech in ready-made form	Essential
Stability	Its composition and structure do not change	Essential
Nominativity	The unit names a particular concept	Accompanying
Idiomatcity	Meaning does not derive from the meanings of its components	Accompanying
Aesthetics of expression	Rhythm, parallelism, figurativeness	Accompanying

The features of the third group — nominativity, idiomatcity and aesthetics of expression — although observed in the majority of aphoristic instances, are not exceptionless. For example, idiomatcity is present in almost all Chinese chengyu, yet may be absent in modern authorial aphorisms. For this reason these features are assessed as accompanying.

3.4. Supra-Word Status

Supra-word status is one of the most evident properties of the aphorism. Since the aphorism is composed of words and their combinations, it is naturally perceived as a unit larger than the word and, in terms of its parameters, stands above the word. However, the aphorism also differs considerably from the phraseological unit, and this circumstance requires separate explanation.

It is known that the number of words in aphorisms (excluding function words) usually ranges from three to five. At the same time, the lexical range is considerably wider — aphorisms composed of a larger number of words are also frequent. These are mainly literary-artistic aphorisms, which have even acquired the separate designation "aphoristic statement". At the opposite pole are units consisting of only two content words, such as the Uzbek examples corresponding to "Give it, and you shall receive", "Money is water", "If we live, we shall see". In Chinese material, this corresponds to three-syllable units such as 穿小鞋 chuān xiǎoxié ("to make things difficult for someone").



In our view, supra-word status serves to indicate not only the number of lexical components but also the qualitative difference between the aphorism's grammatical and semantic parameters and those of the word. From this standpoint, the notion of brevity should be linked not only to the number of words but also to the number of syntactic connections among them. The two-word unit "Money is water" contains a single predicative connection, whereas a ten-word aphoristic statement displays a multi-level syntactic relationship. Consequently, the number of syntactic connections, rather than the number of words, is a more reliable indicator of size.

3.5. Single-Clause Structure

Another essential property of the aphorism is its single-clause structure, that is, the combination of maximal brevity in volume with broad scope of meaning. The single-clause volume of aphorisms is connected with their semantic completeness and with the sentence's specific syntactic organization. The grammatical organization of the aphorism is limited to a single sentence: the majority of both stable, reproducible aphorisms and free — speech-generated — aphoristic sentences take the form of a single simple or compound sentence.

Aphorisms may also be used in combination with other aphorisms, inseparable in meaning; in such cases they form a series of aphoristic statements, or aphoristic texts. The property of single-clause structure is characteristic of all aphorisms without exception. At the same time it cannot be regarded as a differential feature, since other free and stable units possessing supra-word status are likewise limited to a single sentence.

3.6. A Critique of the Feature of "Separate Formation"

A number of researchers isolate the feature of "separate formation" in the aphorism, that is, they oppose it to a single-word form of expression. The analysis showed that this feature is neither essential nor necessary for the aphorism.

First, separate formation is a natural consequence arising from the aphorism's expression in the form of a complete sentence: a unit possessing sentence structure cannot, by definition, be a single word. That is, this feature is not independent — it derives from single-clause structure. Second, this feature



contradicts the specific content of certain aphorisms. Third, the feature of "opposition of a word within a phrase to the phrase itself", which is essential and necessary for phraseological units, cannot automatically be transferred to aphorisms, since these two types of unit belong to different levels of the linguistic system.

3.6.1. Speech Autonomy and Textual Form

Speech autonomy refers to the aphorism's capacity to convey a complete meaning independently of context. A phraseological unit remains incomplete when separated from the sentence: taken in isolation, the unit 一丘之貉 yī qiū zhī háo does not indicate to whom it refers. The aphorism, by contrast, expresses a complete judgment even in isolation. It is precisely this property that allows aphorisms to be compiled into separate collections, whereas a collection of phraseological units always takes the form of an explanatory dictionary.

The feature of textual form is closely linked to speech autonomy: the unit is created and used as a separate text. The aphorism can function as an epigraph, a slogan, a title or an independent quotation; the phraseological unit does not possess such a status. At the same time, this feature is not differential, since proverbs and sayings likewise possess textual form.

3.7. The Differential Feature

Examination of the features presented in Table 2 showed that only one of them performs a differential function — the generalized character of meaning. Supra-word status is also characteristic of phraseological units; single-clause structure is also observed in proverbs and sayings; stability and reproducibility pertain to the entire class of stable units. Generalized meaning, however, distinguishes the aphorism from all units bound to a single instance: the aphorism always expresses a general judgment and can therefore be applied to a variety of situations.

3.8. The Boundary Between the Aphorism and the Proverb

The isolated differential feature also makes it possible to clarify the relationship between the aphorism and the proverb. Both units possess generalized meaning, and both are equivalent to a sentence. The difference lies along another axis —



that of origin and social usage: the proverb is the product of collective creation, with an anonymous author, whereas the aphorism initially arises in the speech of an individual author.

This distinction, however, is not diachronically stable. Many aphorisms whose author is known lose their authorship over time and become folk proverbs. In Chinese material, this is exemplified by 诲人不倦 *huì rén bù juàn* ("to teach others tirelessly"): originally an expression from Confucius's *Lunyu*, it subsequently acquired the status of a proverb. For this reason, in our view, it is appropriate to regard the aphorism and the proverb not as two opposed classes but as two poles of a single axis: a unit moves from individual authorship toward collective tradition.

This view also has a practical consequence: in classifying a unit, its current sphere of social usage — whether it is cited in speech with reference to an author or used as an anonymous piece of wisdom — must be taken into account. The very same unit may function as a quotation in one context and as a proverb in another.

4. Discussion

Recognizing the generalized character of meaning as the differential feature entails a number of theoretical and practical consequences.

Theoretically, this clarifies the boundary between the aphorism and the phraseological unit. The phraseological unit performs a nominative function — it names a concept and functions as a sentence constituent. The aphorism, by contrast, performs a predicative function — it expresses a judgment and is equivalent to a sentence. It is precisely this distinction that determines the position of the two units within the language.



Table 3. Comparative Characterization of the Aphorism, the Phraseological Unit and the Proverb

Parameter	Phraseological unit	Aphorism	Proverb
Generalized meaning	–	+	+
Function in speech	Sentence constituent	Equivalent to a sentence	Equivalent to a sentence
Semantic function	Nominative	Predicative	Predicative
Authorship	Anonymous	Initially individual	Anonymous
Example	一丘之貉	流水不腐	诲人不倦

Table 3 shows that the aphorism differs from the phraseological unit in two parameters (generalized meaning and function in speech), but from the proverb in only one parameter (authorship). This indicates that the aphorism stands considerably closer to the proverb than to the phraseological unit.

Applied to Chinese material, this criterion yields a practical result. Chengyu of the type 一丘之貉 yī qiū zhī háo ("jackals of the same hill") name a concept and function as a sentence constituent — they are phraseological units. By contrast, 流水不腐, 户枢不蠹 liúshuǐ bù fǔ, hù shū bù dù ("running water does not rot, a door hinge is not worm-eaten") expresses a general judgment and is equivalent to a sentence — this is an aphorism. It follows that, rather than comparing the groups chengyu, yanyu and guanyongyu in Chinese on a single plane, it is more appropriate first to differentiate them along the predicative–nominative axis.

A further important aspect concerns the differential feature's function as a graded indicator. Generalized meaning is not a binary opposition of "present/absent" but a quantity that varies along a scale. In certain units generalization is manifested to a maximal degree, and they can be applied to almost any situation; in others it is confined to a particular thematic domain. For instance, the Chinese expression 失败是成功之母 shībài shì chénggōng zhī mǔ ("failure is the mother of success") is used universally, whereas 明主之道, 明于公私 pertains only to the sphere of



governance. It is therefore appropriate, in classifying aphoristic units, to take into account the degree of generalization as well.

The division of features into three groups is also significant for lexicographic practice. In current phraseological dictionaries, units of differing status are listed side by side: idioms, proverbs, aphorisms and even free combinations. The reason for this lies in the fact that compilers rely not on the differential feature but on accompanying features (figurativeness, wisdom, currency). If units were marked according to predicativity and generalized meaning, the internal consistency of the dictionary would improve considerably.

A third consequence concerns teaching practice. In foreign-language instruction, the aphorism is often presented as a "wise saying", that is, on a content-based criterion. In our view, it is more important to show the learner the unit's function in speech — whether it is equivalent to a sentence or functions as a sentence constituent — since it is precisely this aspect that enables its correct use.

A limitation of the study is that the system of features was tested mainly on written sources. The features of aphoristic units in oral speech, in particular those connected with intonation and stress, require separate investigation.

5. Conclusion

Definitions of the aphorism found in linguistic reference sources fall into three types — generic, content-based and authorial definitions; none of them is able to delimit the aphorism on a linguistic basis.

On the basis of the criteria of essentiality/non-essentiality and necessity/contingency, ten features of the aphorism were identified and distributed into three groups — differential, essential and accompanying features. The feature of "separate formation" is neither essential nor necessary for the aphorism: it is a derivative feature arising from single-clause structure.

The function of the differential feature is performed by the generalized character of meaning. It is precisely this feature that distinguishes the aphorism from the phraseological unit: the phraseological unit performs a nominative function, while the aphorism performs a predicative one.



The aphorism and the proverb do not constitute two opposed classes but two poles of a single axis: a unit moves from individual authorship toward collective tradition, changing its status along the way.

The results obtained provide a basis for the practice of marking and classifying aphoristic units in dictionaries, as well as for their presentation in foreign-language instruction. A task for further research is to test the identified system of features on material from other languages and to determine the specific character of aphoristic units in oral speech.

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***Modern American Journal of Linguistics,
Education, and Pedagogy***

ISSN (E): 3067-7874

Volume 2, Issue 4, April, 2026

Website: usajournals.org

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