Literature, Language and Cultural Studies
ISSN Print: 3079-5095
ISSN Online: 3079-5109
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9222

Temporal and Spatial Orientation in English and Chinese Children's Poetry

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How to cite this paper: Gao, L. (2026). Temporal and spatial orientation in English and Chinese children's poetry. Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, 7(1), 92–100. ISSN Print: 3079-5095, ISSN Online: 3079-5109.
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9222
Published: 2026-10-22

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Abstract

Research on English and Chinese children's poetry has largely centered on themes, rhythm, and educational functions, with limited attention to structural differences and their cognitive roots. Adopting Wang's [1] theory of "temporal–spatial differences between English and Chinese," this study explores the temporal and spatial features of children's poetry in the two languages, filling a gap in applying this framework to children's literature. Results indicate that English children's poetry emphasizes temporality: sentence-level time is shaped by verb tenses and hypotactic connections, while phrase-level time relates to verb ellipsis and logical connectors. By contrast, Chinese children's poetry foregrounds spatiality: sentence-level space is constructed through nouns, locatives, and image juxtaposition, and phrase-level space through noun phrases dominated by nouns or locatives. These contrasts reflect that English prioritizes temporal sequence, whereas Chinese privileges spatial configuration—offering a reference for studying temporal–spatial patterns in other bilingual texts.

Keywords

Contrastive Linguistics; Children's Poetry; Syntactic Structure; Temporal Orientation; Spatial Orientation

1. Introduction

Children's poetry combines concise language, rhythm, and imagery accessible to young readers, making it a useful genre for examining how language organizes experience. Jiang Feng [2] characterizes it as an art form that conveys emotion through condensed, rhythmic language arranged in lines. English and Chinese children's poetry both present familiar objects, actions, and scenes, providing a basis for comparing the linguistic resources used to express temporal and spatial relationships.

Previous research has primarily addressed aesthetic features, educational functions, rhythm, and translation. Less attention has been paid to how syntactic structures organize temporal and spatial information in the two languages. Drawing on Wang Wenbin's [1, 3] account of temporal orientation in English and spatial orientation in

Chinese, this study examines these patterns in children's poetry.

The study combines quantitative description with qualitative analysis, distinguishing complete-sentence structures from phrasal structures. It examines how verbal predication, tense, linking devices, nominal expressions, and locatives contribute to the presentation of events and scenes. The aim is to identify patterns in the selected corpus and assess how they can be interpreted within the temporal-spatial framework. These patterns are treated as contextual tendencies rather than exclusive properties of either language or direct evidence of cognitive differences.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous Research on English and Chinese Children's Poetry

Research on Chinese children's poetry has emphasized aesthetic characteristics, imagery, and childhood experience. Jiang [4] examines children's poetry across the Taiwan Strait in relation to Chinese poetic traditions, while Tan [5] explores the construction of imaginative spaces. Luo [6] and Wang [7] address children's perspectives and aesthetic values. Studies of English children's poetry have focused on literary development, classification, and stylistic features [8–11]. Together, these studies provide a foundation for examining poetic expression, although they give limited attention to the systematic comparison of temporal and spatial encoding.

Contrastive research has largely centered on translation. Studies of translation history and translators' choices highlight adaptations intended for young readers [12, 13], while other work examines rhythmic equivalence, syntactic simplification, and the recreation of childlike expression [14, 15]. International scholarship contributes perspectives on literary systems and educational conventions [16], child readers and reading situations [17], and read-aloud qualities and reception [18]. These approaches help explain translation decisions but do not establish the specific English–Chinese temporal-spatial contrast examined here.

The literature reviewed thus offers substantial discussion of aesthetics, rhythm, and translation, while leaving the relationship between syntax and temporal-spatial organization less fully explored. The present study addresses this gap by comparing complete-sentence and phrasal structures in English and Chinese children's poetry.

2.2. The Temporal and Spatial Orientation Framework

The distinction between hypotaxis and parataxis has long informed contrastive accounts of English and Chinese [19]. Building on a broader connection between language and conceptualization, Wang Wenbin [1] proposes that English displays a predominantly temporal orientation, whereas Chinese displays a predominantly spatial orientation. Within this account, verbs play a central role in organizing temporal relations in English, while nouns contribute to spatial organization in Chinese.

These orientations are relative tendencies rather than mutually exclusive properties: both languages express time and space, but may differ in the prominence given to each dimension [3]. The framework therefore directs attention to how linguistic features work together in context. Verbal predication and tense may contribute to event organization, while nominal expressions, locatives, and juxtaposed images may foreground relationships among objects and locations.

The distinction between phrases and sentences is also relevant. Lü [20] discusses the less sharply defined boundary between these units in Chinese, while Wang [20] considers constructions outside conventional subject-predicate patterns. These accounts support attention to nominal predication and compressed poetic expressions. However, the absence of an overt copula does not necessarily make an expression a phrase, and explicit linking devices do not necessarily encode temporal relations.

The present study uses this framework to interpret syntactic patterns in the selected poems. Its proposed connections with conceptualization remain theoretical interpretations, since textual analysis alone cannot independently establish cognitive differences between speakers of the two languages.

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus and Selection Criteria

This study uses a bilingual corpus of children's poetry selected to allow comparison across shared themes. The final Chinese corpus comprises 200 poems, including traditional nursery rhymes and contemporary original works on nature and everyday life. The materials were drawn from *A Collection of Traditional Chinese Nursery Rhymes* [21], *Contemporary Children's Nursery Rhyme* [22], and *The Aesthetic Evolution of Contemporary Chinese Children's Poetry* [23].

The final English corpus comprises 210 poems on themes including nature and recreation. These were drawn from *The Oxford Book of Children's Rhymes* [24], *Mother Goose Rhymes* [25], and *A Classification Study of English Children's Rhymes* by Zhang Jingwen [26].

Three principles guided corpus selection. First, purely rhythmic texts without identifiable temporal or spatial imagery were excluded. Second, culturally specific selections, such as Chinese Spring Festival rhymes and English Thanksgiving rhymes, were excluded to reduce differences attributable to culture-specific subject matter. Third, poems on shared themes were selected to support thematic comparability. These criteria define the scope of the analysis, and the findings are not intended to represent all English or Chinese children's poetry.

3.2. Analytical Categories and Annotation Procedures

The common basis of comparison is the temporal and spatial organization of

syntactic structures. The analysis distinguishes complete-sentence structures, which express grammatically interpretable predication, from phrasal structures, which lack a fully expressed clause structure. Poetic lines are not assumed to coincide with sentences: a sentence may extend across several lines, while a single line may contain multiple clauses.

The analysis considers verbal forms, temporal expressions, linking devices, nominal expressions, locatives, and image juxtaposition in context. These features are not treated as automatic indicators of temporal or spatial prominence. A verb may describe a state rather than an unfolding event, and a noun may identify an entity without establishing a spatial relationship. Similarly, the absence of tense inflection or an overt copula does not establish the absence of temporal meaning or predication.

UAM CorpusTool was used to annotate linguistic features and textual information, including theme and structural category. AntConc 3.5.8 supported frequency analysis, which was complemented by qualitative examination of selected passages. The reported category totals comprise 158 English and 180 Chinese poems in the complete-sentence category, and 52 English and 20 Chinese poems in the phrasal category.

These totals refer to poems, whereas the qualitative examples illustrate individual constructions. Poem-level frequencies must therefore be distinguished from counts of sentences, clauses, or phrases, and each percentage requires an explicit denominator. Particular attention is given to imperatives, participial fragments, and Chinese nominal or adjectival predication, which complicate a simple distinction between complete sentences and phrases.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Complete-Sentence Structures

Table 1 summarizes the complete-sentence category, which includes 158 of the 210 English poems and 180 of the 200 Chinese poems. The other measures describe features identified within these categories.

Table 1. Complete-sentence structures in English and Chinese children's poetry

Language	Measure	Count and percentage
English	Complete-sentence poems	158 (75.2%; 158/210)
English	Complete-sentence poems containing tense-marked verbs	142 (89.9%; 142/158)
English	Complete-sentence poems containing multiple clauses linked by overt conjunctions such as and or when	110
Chinese	Complete-sentence poems	180 (90.0%; 180/200)
Chinese	Complete-sentence poems centered on nouns or locatives	162 (90.0%; 162/180)
Chinese	Complete-sentence poems containing nominal predication or nested locative expressions	144 (80.0%; 144/180)
Chinese	Complete-sentence poems containing multiple clauses without overt conjunctions	165

English Complete-Sentence Structures

The English examples show how verbal predication, tense, repetition, and discourse order contribute to the representation of actions and events. Of the 158 complete-sentence poems, 142 contain tense-marked verbs, and 110 contain multiple clauses linked by overt conjunctions. The role of these features in temporal interpretation depends on their grammatical and discourse functions.

Example 1

"Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream."

The threefold repetition of the imperative *row* reinforces the rhythm and evokes repeated or continuing action. The imperative does not overtly mark present tense; its temporal interpretation depends on the directive construction and its context. The phrase *down the stream* specifies the path of movement. The passage therefore combines an action-centered structure with explicit spatial information.

Example 2

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall."

The past-tense forms *sat* and *had* establish a shared narrative frame. Although the clauses are not linked by an overt conjunction, their order suggests that sitting precedes falling. This interpretation depends on discourse order and knowledge of the events, rather than on past tense alone. The phrase *on a wall* provides a spatial setting that also helps the reader interpret the subsequent fall.

Chinese Complete-Sentence Structures

The Chinese complete-sentence category contains 180 poems. Of these, 162 are recorded as centered on nouns or locatives, 144 contain nominal predication or nested locative expressions, and 165 contain multiple clauses without overt conjunctions. The following examples examine how predication and semantic continuity connect objects and locations.

Example 3

月儿光光，照见汪洋；汪洋里面，有只小船。

English rendering: "The moon shines bright, lighting the vast waters; within those waters, there is a little boat."

The moon, the waters, and the boat form a connected scene. Repetition of the reference to the waters links the two parts of the passage, while **里面** (inside/within) locates the boat within that setting. The verbs **照见** (illuminate/reveal) and **有** (exist/have) establish relationships among the images without tense inflection. Although spatial organization is prominent, the verbs remain essential to expressing these relationships.

Example 4

弯弯的月儿小小的船，小小的船儿两头尖。

English rendering: "The curved moon, a little boat; the little boat has two pointed ends."

The first segment juxtaposes the moon and a boat to establish a visual analogy without an overt copula. 弯弯的 (*curved*) and 小小的 (*little*) specify shape and

size, while 两头尖 (*pointed at both ends*) further develops the boat image. The passage foregrounds visual properties and relationships between objects. The absence of an overt copula does not, however, exclude a predicative interpretation.

Example 5

正月梅花香，二月兰花放，三月桃花红。

English rendering: "In the first lunar month, plum blossoms are fragrant; in the second, orchids bloom; in the third, peach blossoms are red."

Parallel month-and-flower constructions organize the passage. The floral images contribute sensory detail, while the sequence of lunar months provides explicit temporal progression. Reordering the clauses would preserve the set of flower images but disrupt the chronological sequence. This example therefore demonstrates the coexistence of temporal and imagistic organization in Chinese poetry.

The Chinese examples frequently use repeated nouns, locative expressions, and parallel constructions to organize scenes. They also contain actions, predication, and explicit temporal expressions. Their spatial prominence should consequently be understood as a contextual tendency rather than the absence of temporal organization.

Taken together, the selected examples suggest different emphases in the organization of events and scenes. English passages tend to foreground actions through verbal predication and discourse order, while Chinese passages emphasize objects and spatial relationships through nominal imagery, locatives, and parallel constructions. These tendencies nevertheless overlap: English examples also encode spatial settings and paths, and the sequence of lunar months in Example 5 establishes temporal progression in Chinese.

4.2. Phrasal Structures

Table 2 presents the phrasal category and its recorded subcategories. This category includes 52 of the 210 English poems and 20 of the 200 Chinese poems. The qualitative analysis examines the interpretation of incomplete or compressed expressions, with particular attention to the boundary between phrases and clauses.

Table 2. Phrasal structures in English and Chinese children's poetry

Language	Measure	Count and percentage
English	Phrasal poems	52 (24.8%; 52/210)
English	Poems assigned to the verbal ellipsis subcategory	32 (61.5%; 32/52)
English	Poems assigned to the nonverbal ellipsis subcategory	20 (38.5%; 20/52)
Chinese	Phrasal poems	20 (10.0%; 20/200)
Chinese	Poems assigned to the independent single-unit subcategory	6 (30.0%; 6/20)
Chinese	Poems assigned to the paired single-unit subcategory	8 (40.0%; 8/20)
Chinese	Poems assigned to the juxtaposed single-unit subcategory	6 (30.0%; 6/20)

Note. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place. Subcategory labels describe the

classification used in the corpus analysis; the examples below identify grammatical ambiguities relevant to their interpretation.

English Phrasal Structures

English poetic fragments may leave parts of a clause unexpressed while retaining enough information to support interpretation. Temporal meaning may be supplied by surrounding clauses, explicit temporal expressions, or an auxiliary recoverable from context. Ellipsis and tense therefore need to be considered separately.

Example 6

"Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight."

The opening expressions are compressed poetic units whose grammatical relationship is not fully explicit. Their interpretation is supported by the following expression, *first star I see tonight*, which contains the finite verb *see* and the temporal adverb *tonight*. The passage thus provides overt temporal information despite its fragmentary opening. Recognizing this temporal frame does not require the recovery of a particular omitted verb.

Example 7

"Falling down, falling down."

The expression consists of the present participle *falling* and the directional element *down*. In the context of "London Bridge," the understood clause *is* "London Bridge *is falling down*." The participle alone does not specify tense. In the fuller clause, the auxiliary *is* marks present tense and combines with *falling* to form the progressive construction. The expression remains a verbal fragment even though its subject and finite auxiliary are absent.

These examples distinguish the absence of a fully expressed clause from the absence of temporal information. They also show that verbal and nonverbal expressions must be classified according to the grammatical material present. Omitting a finite verb or auxiliary does not automatically make an expression nonverbal.

Chinese Phrasal Structures

Chinese poetic expressions may present a single object, connect an object with a location, or juxtapose several images. However, a compact form and the absence of an overt copula do not necessarily indicate a phrasal structure. Some such expressions can be analyzed as clauses.

Example 8

小伞花。

English rendering: "A little umbrella-shaped flower."

This nominal expression identifies an object and evokes its shape without overtly attributing a property or action to it. It illustrates how a noun phrase can introduce a visual image without forming a complete clause.

Two further expressions clarify the classification boundary. 小伞花，开山崖 ("Little umbrella-shaped flowers bloom on the cliff") connects an object with a location, but the overt verb 开 (*bloom*) supports a predicative reading. Similarly, 桃花红，李花

白，油菜黄 (“Peach blossoms are red, plum blossoms are white, and rapeseed flowers are yellow”) juxtaposes visual images, yet each unit can be interpreted as a subject followed by an adjectival predicate. Both expressions support an analysis of scene construction, but neither unambiguously represents a nonpredicative phrasal structure. Their classification therefore requires review when interpreting the reported category totals.

These examples also highlight the need for consistent grammatical classification. English imperatives may form complete clauses without overt subjects or tense marking, while participial fragments remain verbal despite the absence of finite auxiliaries. Chinese expressions may contain nominal or adjectival predication without an overt copula. The distinction between complete-sentence and phrasal structures therefore cannot rest solely on an overt subject–verb sequence, and the reported distributions depend on how these criteria are applied.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on a temporal-spatial framework, this study examines syntactic organization in English and Chinese children’s poetry. The selected English examples tend to foreground actions and event sequences, whereas the Chinese examples emphasize objects, locations, and scene construction. Both languages nevertheless draw on temporal and spatial resources, indicating relative tendencies within the selected texts.

The comparison also highlights the importance of distinguishing complete clauses from poetic fragments, since compressed expressions may retain verbal, nominal, or adjectival predication. For translation and teaching, attention to explicit and context-dependent relations may help guide decisions about subjects, auxiliaries, and linking expressions while preserving poetic effects.

These findings provide a descriptive account of the selected texts. Broader generalizations require verification of corpus classifications and independent checks of annotation, while claims about cognition require evidence beyond textual analysis.

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