

# Phraseological units expressing a high degree of adjective intensity in the French language

Normatov Azamatbek Abdukhalilovich (ASIFL doctoral student)  
e-mail: [normatovazamatbek84@gmail.com](mailto:normatovazamatbek84@gmail.com)

**Annotation:** This text explores the role of phraseological comparisons in intensifying adjectives in the French language. These fixed expressions, often rooted in historical and cultural contexts, amplify the intensity of adjectives, sometimes adding emotional or humorous connotations. Examples include both traditional idiomatic expressions and more creative constructions found in contemporary literature, highlighting their expressive and emotive potential.

**Keywords:** Phraseological comparisons, French adjectives, Intensity, Idiomatic expressions, Cultural reflection, Emotional connotation.

## Introduction.

Among the means of intensifying adjectives in French, the phraseological comparisons constructed according to the model *adjectif + adverb “comme” + nom* are the most frequently used. In Old French, these figurative comparisons had a distinct and comparative meaning, and due to their frequent use, they became fixed as idiomatic expressions. They evolved into a way of expressing a high degree of intensity of the adjective. In other words, phraseological comparisons, while retaining the structure of comparative constructions, exhibit modeled forms that amplify the intensity of the adjective: *clair comme de l'eau de roche*, *malade comme un chien*, *bête comme un âne*, *rapide comme le vent*, *vieux comme le monde*, *beau comme un ange*, *solide comme un chêne*, etc.

In these constructions, the component (object of comparison) functions as an adverb of intensity. These comparisons are linked to free word combinations (*très clair*, *bien malade*, *extrêmement bête*, *extrêmement rapide*, *tout à fait vieux*, *admirablement beau*, *très solide*, etc.). This phenomenon is due to the weakening or even total loss of the lexical meaning of the nominal component. The second component of the comparison, reinterpreted as an intensifying element relative to the adjective, gives the entire construction a meaning of extreme intensity of the adjective. These constructions become fixed expressions in the language and are listed in dictionaries. The inherent emotionality of phraseologisms is often diminished in these expressions (e.g., *blanc comme neige*, *bête comme une oie*, *fort comme un bœuf*, *doux comme un mouton*, *têtu comme une mule*, *simple comme bonjour*), which explains why they can be replaced or supplemented by other expressions<sup>1</sup>[1, 401].

The degree of intensity expressed by the adjective, as a quality, increases even further when the image serving as the standard of comparison loses its objective and logical meaning completely. As noted by Sh. Bally, “the image and the perception of the imagery here are completely eroded, and they can only be discussed from a historical perspective”<sup>2</sup>[2, 93].

In general, these comparative constructions express an extremely high degree of intensity with a strong emotional connotation. The use of these units can be observed in contemporary French literature:

*Le concierge, derrière les vitres de la loge somptueuse, était aimable comme une porte de prison...* (E. Triolet, *Le cheval blanc*, p. 178).

*Il est malheureux comme les pierres et fier comme le pape.* (E. Triolet, *Le cheval blanc*, p. 382).

In these examples, the objects and images serving as standards of comparison lose their objective and logical meaning, while the comparative constructions only reflect the high degree of the adjective. The origin of many figurative comparisons is linked to social and historical events of different eras (*saoul comme un Polonais*, *fort comme un Turc*, *fier comme Artaban*, *sérieux comme un pape*, *solide comme le Pont-Neuf*); many images are derived from Greco-Roman mythology (*fort comme Hercule*, *beau comme Apollon*, *riche comme Crésus*, *pauvre comme Job*); the standards of comparison are often proper names, household objects,

1 J.Damourette et E.Pichon. *Des mots à la pensée*, t. II, p.401.

2 Ш. Балли. *Французская стилистика*. 2009. Пер. с фр. Изд.3, стр. 93. ISBN 978-5-397-00124-3. 384 pages

or small currency names (*fier comme Artaban, tranquille comme Baptiste, haut comme la tour Eiffel, bête comme un pot, propre (net) comme un sou, net comme un denier (neuf)*).

These comparisons reflect the lifestyle, history, and cultural traditions of certain nations (specifically of the French language here). Some comparisons are common to several languages. For example: *fidèle comme un chien, rusé comme un renard, vieux comme le monde, fort comme un bœuf, rouge comme une pivoine, doux comme un agneau, blanc comme neige*, etc.

Many French linguists note that the origin of some figurative comparisons remains uncertain: *tranquille comme Baptiste, fier comme Artaban, nu comme un petit Saint Jean, triste comme un bonnet de nuit, facile comme bonjour*. P. Porto attempts to explain some of them: “Artaban survives in the language as a hero of memorable pride” [3, 20]. The absence of the article before the nouns testifies to the use of these comparisons in Old French. R. Georgin indicates that “Comparison is one of the most natural and ancient methods of expression. From the time of Homer to the present day, comparison remains alive not only among writers but also in everyday spoken language” [4, 143].

New figurative comparisons found in the works of contemporary French writers are created according to these structural models. They have a rather precise character, and in their creation, the authors use vivid and precise images to evoke certain emotions in the reader. These are known as individualized and author-created comparisons. Here are some examples:

Rivière sortit pour tromper l’attente, et la nuit lui apparut *vide comme un théâtre sans acteurs*. (A. de Saint-Exupéry, Œuvres, p. 52).

Il avait l’impression que ses perceptions, sa parole, l’enchaînement de ses idées, sa mémoire ne tenaient plus assemblés que par un fil mince, *mince comme un fil de cocon*. (M. Druon, Les Grandes Familles, p. 41).

In these comparisons, the vivid, emotionally expressive nature of the adjective is manifested by the fact that the standard of comparison retains its precise image. This image evokes an emotional vision and paints a complete picture of the concept, thereby adding liveliness and emotionality to the discourse. These expressions do not just reflect a high degree of intensity of the adjective but rather its emotionally expressive character. It is also important to note that not all phraseological comparisons can express a high degree. Some of them express a low degree of quality and acquire a pragmatic meaning that includes antiphrasis. J. Damourette and E. Pichon refer to them as “expressions of weakening” and consider them equivalents of the absolute superlative of inferiority [5, 406]. Here are some examples: *aimable comme une porte de prison, grand comme un mouchoir de poche, haut comme trois pommes, haut comme une botte, léger comme un chien de plomb, fichu comme l’as de pique*.

In the category of phraseological comparisons, it is also necessary to include expressions that have lost their meaning such as: *comme tout, comme pas un, comme quatre, comme personne*. These expressions are used with a wide variety of adjectives and form binary comparative constructions expressing an extreme degree of quality. In examining the expression *comme tout*, K. Sandfeld writes: “This comparison, apparently meaningless, seems to be due to the subject’s difficulty in finding a more striking one” [6, 41]. Due to their lack of semantic coherence, they are often not considered phraseologisms in various lexicological studies. Nevertheless, some of them have acquired a stable character and have transformed into independent phraseological units. For example: *fier comme tout, joli comme tout, bête comme tout, drôle comme tout, beau comme tout*.

Here are some examples with the expression *comme tout*:

La bravoure d’un soldat du rang... est exubérante, on n’est jamais si bête que cela, on est *malin comme tout*. (G. Bernanos, Les Enfants humiliés, p. 155).

... un bon élève, un peu enveloppé, déjà bon à rien, mais correct, *poli comme tout*, recevant des prix... (J.-P. Sartre, Les Mots, p. 131).

Expressions like *jolie comme tout, jolie comme pas une, joli comme tout, joli comme pas un, ou encore doux comme tout, doux comme pas un*, etc., can be used with adjectives qualifying sensory perception objects. For example: *bête comme tout, bête comme pas une, intelligent comme tout, intelligent comme pas un*, etc. These expressions can also be used with adjectives describing mental, psychological, or intellectual characteristics. For example: *malin comme tout, malin comme pas un, fidèle comme tout, fidèle comme pas un*, etc. They are also used with adjectives expressing moral, ethical qualities, etc. For example: *comme pas un, comme pas une, comme pas un seul, comme personne*, etc etc.

In the same context of phraseological constructions, there are also compound comparisons consisting of adjectives formed with adverbs like “tellement”, “si”, or “aussi” followed by the preposition “que” introducing the comparison (*tellement belle qu'une déesse, aussi haute qu'une montagne, si froide que de la glace*).

### Conclusion.

Phraseological comparisons in French are fixed expressions that intensify the quality of the adjective to which they are attached. They can express a high degree of intensity, often with a strong emotional charge. Some comparisons have become common idiomatic expressions, while others, created by contemporary authors, bring liveliness and specific expressiveness to the language. These comparisons also reflect cultural, historical, and social aspects and can sometimes express low degrees of quality, often with an ironic or humorous connotation.

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