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2 Origin of Proverbs

2.1 Introduction

In 1931 Archer Taylor, the twentieth-century doyen of international paremiology, stated at the beginning of his seminal book *The Proverb* that “the origins of the proverb have been little studied” (3). In the same year his friend Bartlett Jere Whiting published his invaluable article on *The Origin of the Proverb*, also arguing that much more scholarly work is needed to understand the multifaceted aspects of proverb origins. Both paremiologists present much information on this intriguing subject matter, and they certainly agree that proverbs are not created by the folk but rather by an individual. Someone at some time and somewhere couches a general observation, behavior, or experience into a short complete sentence that subsequently is picked up by others who might well change the wording slightly resulting in a number of variants until a standard formulation results. As early as 1823 the British statesman Lord John Russell said it best, when he defined a proverb as *One man’s wit, and all men’s wisdom* that in itself has become proverbial as *The wit of one and the wisdom of many* (Taylor, 1975: 68). In other words, every proverb begins with an individual whose keen insight is accepted and carried forth as a piece of proverbial wisdom by people of all walks of life. Of course, for most proverbs the individual coiner is no longer known, and the numerous cultural, ethnographic, folkloristic, historical, linguistic, and literary studies of the origin, dissemination, function, and meaning of individual proverbs only rarely succeed in identifying that very person who uttered the proverbial wisdom for the first time (see Quitard, 1860; Röhrich, 1991-1992; Mieder, 1977 and 1984).

Thus a comprehensive study of the ancient proverb *Big fish eat little fish* was able to trace the proverb back to an allusion in the didactic poem *Works and Days* by the Greek writer Hesiod of the eighth century B.C from which it developed by way of variants and translations until it became established in more or less identical wording in most European languages and beyond (Mieder, 1987). But the first reference in Greek does not really identify the originator of this rather obvious insight based on a common observation in nature. Most likely the proverb was already in oral communication and it will never be known who uttered this concise piece of wisdom for the first time. And yet, for some proverbs it is precisely known who started it and at what time, to wit William Shakespeare’s *Brevity is the soul of wit* (1601), Alexander Pope’s *Hope springs eternal in the human breast* (1733) that is now usually cited in its truncated form of *Hope springs eternal*, Theodore Roosevelt’s *Speak softly and carry a big stick* (1900), and Erich Segal’s *Love means never having to say you’re sorry* (1970). Some proverbs clearly started as sententious remarks with famous literary authors such as Cicero, Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra,

Friedrich Schiller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bertolt Brecht, etc. It is known that their statements became literary quotations, that they were repeated again and again, and that they eventually circulate as proverbs, with their original author slowly but surely being forgotten. This phenomenon is definitely going on today. Well-known individuals like Winston S. Churchill, John F. Kennedy, Mikhail Gorbachev, Willy Brandt, Martin Luther King, and others have formulated concise and memorable statements that have become proverbial (Mieder, 2009). At times these proverbs are cited by also naming their author (Taylor, 1931: 34-43), but as is the usual case with proverbs, they circulate in oral and written communication as anonymous folk wisdom. Today, with the power of the mass media, some of these utterances can become proverbs in a very short time sequence.

But it should also be noted that certain proverbs get attached to names of famous people to add special authority to their wisdom, without anybody having been able to find these texts in their written works. Thus, it has falsely been claimed that Martin Luther coined *Wer nicht liebt Wein, Weib und Gesang, der bleibt ein Narr sein Leben lang* [Who does not love wine, women and song will remain a fool his whole life long] (first reference in 1775) which starting in 1857 also gained currency in the Anglo-American world as *Who does not love wine, women, and song, remains a fool his whole life long* while stubbornly keeping Luther's name attached to it (Mieder, 2004b). And speaking of America, it should be noted that while such anonymous proverbs as *The cat in gloves catches no mice*, *There are no gains without pains*, and *Creditors have better memories than debtors* were in fact used by Benjamin Franklin in his almanacs and his famed essay *The Way to Wealth* (1758), he most certainly did not coin them. But to give this proponent of Puritan ethics his due, the proverbs *There will be sleeping enough in the grave* (1741), *Time is money* (1748), and *Three removes is as bad as a fire* (1758) are his very own inventions (Gallacher, 1949: 250-251).

2.2 The Creation of Proverbs

The older scholarship on proverbs followed the romantic notion that the origin of proverbs lies somehow in the soul of the folk. Their *birth is veiled in mystery and obscurity* (Trench, 1853: 42), and *their parentage is enveloped in mystery* (Hulme, 1902: 18). In fact, it was "loosely imagined that proverbs are a kind of mystic accretion of wisdom; that they have crystallized out of the experience of the past ages without the precise effort of individuals, almost without the intervention of human agency" (Firth, 1927: 262). As can be imagined, it remains an especially vexing problem to ascertain the origin and age of proverbs from oral societies, but proverbs from literary traditions might in fact also have been in anonymous oral use prior to their first historically recorded reference (Schneider, 1981: 33-41). Confronted with the collection of proverbs in oral use only among the Maori of New Zealand, anthropologist Raymond

Firth came to the same conclusion regarding the origin of proverbs as scholars have reached dealing with the proverbs of literate societies:

It seems fairly clear that at one time or another some one person must have expressed the feeling of the community on that particular point in words which appealed to other members of the group, and which were passed around and adopted as a convenient mode of expression. [...] There are three processes which usually go to the making of a proverb among primitive folk:

- (1) Concrete formulation by one individual in response to some set of circumstances.
- (2) Acceptance by the people at large as being appropriate to a more general situation, and seeming by its peculiar form and twist of phrase to give fit expression to their thoughts and feelings.
- (3) Possible modification of phraseology or meaning with the passing of time by an unconscious process, with the effect of keeping it consonant with public sentiment. (Firth, 1927: 262-263)

The renowned American medieval literature scholar and paremiologist Bartlett Jere Whiting agreed with Raymond Firth's observation in his seminal article on *The Origin of the Proverb* (1931), arguing that the creation and acceptance of proverbs is very much the same as far as orality and literacy are concerned:

Just as it is incomprehensible that a group should join in the manufacture of an ordinary word, so it is incomprehensible that a group, working from whatever impulse and under whatever circumstances, should join in the composition of a proverb. Thus, at the outset, we are forced to admit that every proverb was the work of an individual; and, at the same time, we must ask ourselves just what kind of an individual it is which we mean. If we are to assume conscious literary creation of a proverb, we assume that it was the work of an author who might under his own name have issued it alone, or in a collection of proverbs, or incorporated in some more extended literary work; or of an individual who contrived to incorporate his name into the proverb itself. (Whiting, 1931: 49-50).

More or less at the same time that Whiting wrote his essay, his friend Archer Taylor reached the same conclusion in his magisterial section on *The Origins of the Proverb* in his invaluable classic study *The Proverb* (1931): "It is not proper to make any distinction in the treatment [of the invention] of 'learned' [literary] and 'popular' [oral] proverbs. The same problems exist for all proverbs with the obvious limitation that, in certain cases, historical studies are greatly restricted by the accidents of preservation. We can ordinarily trace the 'learned' proverb down to a long line of literary tradition, for the classics or the Bible through the Middle Ages to the present, while we may not be so fortunate with every 'popular' proverb. [...] Obviously the distinction between 'learned' and 'popular' is meaningless and is concerned merely with the accidents of history [and the (im)possibility of having recorded the origin of the proverbs]" (Taylor, 1931: 4-5; see also Urbas, 1876: 511; Seiler, 1922: 19-20; Röhrich & Mieder, 1977: 26-27; Mieder, 1996: 236-237).

Following these masters on whose shoulders modern paremiologists stand, one might well state the following, keeping in mind that “you can only call a communicative form a proverb when it is known and common – and this means that you unfortunately missed its genesis [in most cases]” (Ayaß, 2001, 239) and that there is a “processus de proverbialisation” (Schapira, 2000: 85-86) involved for a proverb-like statement to become an actual proverb:

Proverbs, like riddles, jokes, or fairy tales, do not fall out of the sky and neither are they products of a mythical soul of the folk. Instead they are always coined by an individual whether intentionally or unintentionally. If the statement contains an element of truth or wisdom, and if it exhibits one or more proverbial markers [parallelism, rhyme, alliteration, ellipsis, metaphor, etc.], it might ‘catch on’ and be used first in a small family circle, and subsequently in a village, a city, a region, a country, a continent, and eventually the world. The global spread of proverbs is not a pipe dream, since certain ancient proverbs have in fact spread to many parts of the world. Today, with the incredible power of mass media, a newly formulated proverb-like statement might become a bona fide proverb relatively quickly by way of the radio, television, and print media. As with verbal folklore in general, the original statement might well be varied a bit as it gets picked up and becomes ever more an anonymous proverb whose wording, structure, style, and metaphor are such that it is memorable. (Mieder, 2004a: 9; Mieder, 2007a: 396-397)

Keeping the matter of variants in mind as the original statement develops into its standard proverbial form and that the proverb itself can then be employed in various forms as a mere allusion, a partial remnant, a question, an anti-proverb, etc., it is of theoretical use to realize that “an individual proverb is something of an abstraction, a form that exists as the basis for a range of possible variation” (Doyle, 2001: 73; see also Taylor, 1931: 22-27). Put another way, the conclusion that can be reached from all of this is that “the texts of all proverbs are self-sufficient, in general dissociated from their sources and origins, and continually being added to the canon” (Olinick, 1987: 464). Indeed, new proverbs are constantly being added to the repertoire, but it must not be forgotten that traditional proverbs can also disappear when they no longer fit the mores of the modern world, to wit such anti-feministic proverbs like *A woman’s tongue is like a lamb’s tail* or *A woman is the weaker vessel*. Little wonder that the woman’s liberation movement led to the creation of the new proverb *A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle* and its variant *A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle* in the early 1970’s not by the American feminist Gloria Steinem but rather by the Australian educator Irina Dunn (Doyle, Mieder, Shapiro, 2012: 279-280).

It must not be forgotten that proverbs continue to be created and that there is obviously a future for proverbs in modernity (Combet, 1996), as Wolfgang Mieder’s book *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season. Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age* (1993) has clearly shown. But before turning to the peculiarities of modern proverb creations, it is necessary to take a look at the four major periods of the creation of proverbs that belong to the common stock of European proverbs (Mieder, 1999; Mieder, 2000b: 303-307; Mieder, 2006: 86-92). Restricting the comments to just these nations, cultures, and languages does not mean that similar developments did not occur in Africa, Asia,

the Middle East, etc. (see Goitein, 1952; Yankah, 1989; Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1990; Paczolay, 1993).

2.3 Four Major Sources for Common European Proverbs

Even though for most proverbs their creators will never be known, it is quite feasible to estimate the time of their origin. Detailed diachronic and comparative work can succeed in tracing a proverb back to a time when it most likely was created. The realia expressed in such proverbs will certainly provide clues for an approximate date of origin (Dundes, 2000b). Thus, the Danish paremiologist Bendt Alster has provided herculean labor in deciphering the cuneiform tablets of ancient Sumer, showing that parallel proverbs to those of the ancient wisdom literature and those of classical antiquity having become common European proverbs must have been in oral communication before 2500 B.C. (Alster, 2005). These cuneiform tablets even include remnants of very early fables and folk narratives that have subsequently been reduced to proverbs, but again without revealing who might have been the individual person who first shortened such texts to mere proverbs and at what precise time. Some of the highly metaphorical proverbs go back to Aesop's animal fables as well as fairy tales and folk tales. In fact, some of these ancient and later medieval narratives have been forgotten and live on only as proverbs or proverbial expressions, to wit *Sour grapes*, *To be a dog in the manger*, *Don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg*, *Much cry and little wool*, *The sun will bring it to light*, etc. (Taylor, 1931: 27-32; Röhrich, 1960; Huxley, 1981; Carnes, 1988; Mieder, 2007b: 1108-1109).

Of course, it has long been noticed that some of the proverbs known in identical wording in most European languages can at least be traced back to Greek and Roman sources, always with the caveat that they might in fact be considerably older than their earliest written record found thus far. The still valuable comparative study *The Antiquity of Proverbs* (1922) by the British scholar Dwight Edwards Marvin includes fifty small essays on such "international" European proverbs, stating at the outset that "it is a mistake to assume that the earliest known record of a saying indicates its origin. Many with which we are familiar were, so far as we know, first used by the Romans, but the Latin language was the medium of innumerable Greek phrases that predate their Roman use and they may have been the utterances of unknown philosophers, the fragments of lost historic records, the attributed responses to ancient oracles or the accepted lessons of forgotten myths and fables" (Marvin, 1922: 3; see Taylor, 1931: 61-65). It should be noted, however, that Bishop Richard Chenevix Trench in his early paremiological survey *On the Lessons in Proverbs* (1853) had already seven decades earlier stated that "nations are continually borrowing proverbs from one another" (Trench, 1853: 32). More significantly, the German paremiologist Friedrich Seiler, to this day known for his comprehensive *Deutsche Sprichwörterkunde* (1922) that was of

much use to Archer Taylor for his celebrated overview *The Proverb* that appeared a few years later in the United States, referred to such borrowed proverbs as *Lehnsprichwörter* (loan proverbs) and presented the scholarly community with his four-volume compilation and analysis *Das deutsche Lehnsprichwort* (1921-1924), showing that there are many proverbs current in the German language that were loaned or borrowed from classical, Biblical, and medieval Latin proverbs. Proverbs from such languages as primarily French, Italian, Danish, Swedish, Czech, Polish, etc. were also borrowed later, as the German speaking people came in touch with their neighbors. This type of borrowing was a common European phenomenon (see Taylor, 1931: 43-52; Barta, 1989; Hrisztova-Gotthardt, 2009), and it has been documented in two monumental comparative proverb collections, namely Emanuel Strauss' three-volume *Dictionary of European Proverbs* (1994) and Gyula Paczolay's *European Proverbs in 55 Languages with Equivalents in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese* (1997). Of course, it must not be forgotten that Erasmus of Rotterdam played a major role in disseminating the proverbs from classical antiquity by way of his unsurpassed *Adagia* (1500ff.) with its thousands of references from Greek and Roman sources. As is well established, his compilation was used by the humanists of the sixteenth century, the proverbs were employed for instructional purposes, and they found their way into the literary works and vernacular collections by way of translation. In fact, Gyula Paczolay considers this annotated collection as a "secondary source" for classical proverb dissemination (Paczolay, 1998: 606). All of this borrowing was so widespread that what might appear to be a proverb of definite Russian, Spanish, or Hungarian origin upon closer scrutiny proves itself to be much older and having found its way into those languages through loan translation. Bishop Trench has described these surprises in a charming fashion over one hundred fifty years ago:

There is indeed nothing in the study of proverbs, in the attribution of them to their right owners, in the arrangement and citation of them, which creates a greater perplexity than the circumstances of finding the same proverb in so many different quarters, current among so many different nations. In quoting it as one, it often seems as if we were doing wrong to many, while yet it is almost, or oftener still altogether, impossible to determine to what nation it first belonged, so that others drew it at second hand from that one; – even granting that any form in which we now possess it is really its oldest of all. More than once this fact has occasioned a serious disappointment to the zealous collector of the proverbs of his native country. Proud of the rich treasures which in this kind it possessed, he has very reluctantly discovered on a fuller investigation of the whole subject, how many of these which he counted native, the peculiar heirloom and glory of his own land, must at once and without hesitation be resigned to others, who can be shown beyond all doubt to have been in earlier possession of them. (Trench, 1853: 31)

Every paremiographer putting together a national or regional proverb collection is faced with this troubling phenomenon. For example, the *Dictionary of American Proverbs* (Mieder, Kingsbury, & Harder, 1992) includes many proverbs that originated in North America, but it also lists British proverbs and many other proverbs that have been loan translated during the past centuries. The title of this large compendium

should more appropriately have been *A Dictionary of Proverbs Current or Found in America*, and the little book of *Vermont Proverbs* (Mieder, 1986) should have been called more precisely *Proverbs Used and Registered in Vermont*. That is not to say that an attempt was not made to record as many indigenous proverbs from the United States or from the small state of Vermont as possible. But as the proverb says, *Don't judge a book by its cover [or title]*, and it must simply be realized that the important matter is whether a proverb, no matter what its origin or date, is in fact known and used in a particular language. Naturally this also indicates the danger of trying to determine something like a national character or worldview by a set of proverbs, especially if that set includes proverbs that are of general European or even global prominence.

And there is yet one more matter that needs to be mentioned here. All these loan processes assume a single origin of every proverb, i.e., monogenesis. And yet, separate origins of such minimalistic texts as proverbs can occur, after all, as Alan Dundes has pointed out: "If one is engaged in citing cognates of a particular proverb, one should be careful to distinguish actual cognates, that is, versions and variants of the proverb in question, assumed to be historically/genetically related to that proverb, from mere structural parallels which may well have arisen independently, that is, through polygenesis" (Dundes, 2000a: 298). The issue of monogenesis versus polygenesis has been discussed in folklore circles since the Brothers Grimm, and it remains a perplexing scholarly problem to this day (Chesnutt, 2002). After all, why should such short proverbs as *Love is blind* or *Walls have ears* not have been coined more than once in disparate areas of the world? They express common ideas or phenomena, often in a metaphorical way, that might well have resulted in more than one origin. Such proverbs, few as they might be, could be called *universal proverbs* in opposition to proverbs of but one origin appearing in many parts of the world due to normal loan processes that are enhanced by modern aspects of globalization (Paczolay, 2005: 74). Nevertheless, polygenesis is hard to prove, but it has, for example, been shown by painstaking historical analysis based on many contextualized references that the late medieval French proverb *Laissez faire à Georges* (1498) referring to the cardinal and statesman Georges d'Amboise and the modern American proverb *Let George do it* (1902, but probably somewhat older) with its reference to African-American railroad porters have no genetic connection (Mieder, 2014).

But to return to the classical muttons, here are a few proverbs of Greek or Latin origin, keeping in mind that each one of them deserves a detailed analysis as to its earliest recorded reference in Greek or Latin: *Where there is smoke, there is fire*, *Barking dogs do not bite*, *One swallow does not make a summer*, *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth*, *So many heads, so many minds*, *A rolling stone gathers no moss*, *A small spark makes a great fire*, *A true friend is known in need*, *Like father, like son*, *Blood is thicker than water*, *Make haste slowly*, *In wine there is truth*, etc. Yes, these proverbs go back to classical antiquity, but that is only one side of the coin, for it can certainly be argued that loan translated proverbs have what perhaps can be called several *secondary*

origins in the various target languages. In other words, take the classical proverb *One hand washes the other* with its earliest reference in ancient Greek. When it appears in Latin as *Manus manum lavat* it has a secondary origin and the history of this Latin proverb could be studied from its earliest reference on. When it is loan translated into German as *Eine Hand wäscht die andere* it has its secondary origin in that language that deserves to be studied in all its citations and meanings. The same is true for the Russian loan translation *Pyka pyky moem*, the French *Une main lave l'autre*, etc. The paremiological scholarship has not yet used the term *secondary origin*, but it is a term that fits the situation of a translated proverb taking on its own life in a target language well. After all, such proverbs do become part of the national corpora, and this continues to take place today. For example, the originally German proverb *Der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Stamm* [The apple does not fall far from the tree] with its earliest reference from 1554 appears in English translation for the first time in the *Notebooks* covering the years between 1824 and 1836 of the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson as *The apple does not fall far from the stem* and it has long become an *American* proverb among the population of the United States (Mieder, 2000a).

The second major source for common European proverbs is the ancient wisdom literature that found its way into the Bible and other religious texts (Westermann, 1995). As one of the most widely translated books the Bible had an incredible influence on spreading proverbs, some of them older than the Bible, to many cultures and languages (Pfeffer, 1975). These proverbs have become so well integrated into various European languages that native speakers often are not at all aware of the fact any longer that they are citing Biblical wisdom when using them. But be that as it may, the following proverbs from the Bible have entered many languages (not just European) as word-for-word loan translations: *As you sow, so will you reap* (Galatians 6:7-8), *He who digs a pit for another, will fall into it himself* (Proverbs 26:27), *You see the mote in another's eye but fail to see the beam in your own* (Matthew 7:3), *He that will not work, shall not eat* (2 Thessalonians 3:10), *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* (Matthew 7:12), *A prophet is not without honor save in his own country* (Matthew 13:57), *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth* (2 Moses 21:24), *He who sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind* (Hosea 8:7), *Man does not live by bread alone* (Deuteronomy 8:3, Matthew 4:4), etc. Of course, it depended at least to a certain degree on the Bible translator whether Biblical proverbs were able to establish themselves in the target language. A revealing example is the Bible proverb *Ex abundantia cordis os loquitur* (Matthew 12:34) that was awkwardly rendered into English as *Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh* in the King James Bible of 1616 and that consequently never really caught on as a proverb in that language. On the other hand, in Germany Martin Luther translated it quite *folksy* as *Wes das Herz voll ist, des geht der Mund über* in 1522, and the proverb remains current to this day. But there is also a counter-example: Luther rendered Mark 3:24 not at all well as *Und wenn ein Haus mit sich selbst uneins wird, kann es nicht bestehen* [If a house is at variance with itself it cannot endure]. It never caught on as a proverb in the German language, whereas the English

rendition of *A house divided against itself cannot stand* is very current in general speech especially in the United States, where Abraham Lincoln's use of it prior to the Civil War helped to popularize it. But as luck would have it, the then mayor of Berlin Willy Brandt used the proverb in English when he delivered a major address commemorating Lincoln's sesquicentennial birthday in 1959 at Springfield, Illinois. He then started using his own and much better translation *Ein in sich gespaltenes Haus hat keinen Bestand* from time to time in Germany, usually referring to Lincoln's use of it but not to its Biblical origin. When the wall came down in Germany in 1989, Brandt became very engaged in the process of unification and relied heavily on this translation to argue for a smooth transition to unity. With his popularity and the media coverage the proverb has now caught on in Germany as well, clearly a late development but a modern sign of the fact that the spread of loan translated proverbs continues, even if an old Bible proverb has to find its way into the German culture and language by way of America (Mieder, 2005: 112-117).

The rich treasure trove of medieval Latin proverbs makes up the third major source for some of the most popular proverbs known throughout Europe. They have been edited in Hans Walther's and Paul Gerhard Schmidt's massive nine-volume *Proverbia sententiaeque latinitatis medii aevi. Lateinische Sprichwörter und Sentenzen des Mittelalters* (1963-1986). Add to this Samuel Singer's und Ricarda Liver's thirteen-volume *Thesaurus proverbiorum medii aevi. Lexikon der Sprichwörter des romanisch-germanischen Mitealters* (1995-2002) that registers thousands of Latin and vernacular proverbs from literary sources of the entire Middle Ages, and one gets an idea of how prevalent proverbs were at that time. As would be expected, not all of these Latin as well as Romance and Germanic language proverbs became known throughout Europe, but there are plenty who did reach such an international status, as for example such popular favorites as *Never put off till tomorrow what can be done today*, *New brooms sweep clean*, *Strike while the iron is hot*, *When the cat is away, the mice will play*, *All that glitters is not gold*, *Empty vessels make much sound*, *A horse has four legs and still it stumbles*, *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*, *The pitcher goes so long to the well until at last it breaks*, *All cats are gray in the dark*, *Clothes do not make the man*, *The devil is not so black as he is painted*, etc. It might be surprising to find the proverb *All roads lead to Rome* in this group of Latin proverbs from the Middle Ages. However, it is placed here correctly, since *Rome* in this case is not the imperial city but rather the city of the church. In other words, for believers and clergy alike everything leads to the center of the papacy in Rome.

Let it be forgotten, it should be pointed out before turning to the fourth and more modern source of wide-spread proverbs that there are naturally also the thousands of home-grown proverbs dating from medieval to modern times that are part of any national or regional repertoire. For most of them the individual coiner is not known, but they were phrased by someone as pieces of wisdom with certain proverbial markers (metaphor, structure, rhyme, alliteration, ellipsis, parallelism, etc.) that made it possible for them to be accepted and repeated by others so that in due time

they took on a proverbial nature. By way of detailed historical and contextualized analysis their approximate dates of origin can be ascertained, as for example for such indigenous English proverbs as *Early to be and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise*, *A stitch in time saves nine*, *Birds of a feather flock together*, *Nothing ventured, nothing gained*, *Practice makes perfect*, etc. Everyone of these folk proverbs deserves a detailed study regarding its origin, dissemination, meaning, and continued use, but the originator and precise date will never be known.

This certainly is also true for the fascinating more recent fourth group of proverbs that belongs to the stock of common European proverbs. As is well known, Latin as the *lingua franca* of Europe has long been pushed aside, but it has now been replaced by the *Englishes* of the world, notably the Anglo-American variety. British and American proverbs have been loan translated for quite some time, but this trend has increased at an impressive rate since the end of the Second World War that brought the United States as a major political, economic, and cultural player in closer contact with Europe and the world at large. The American way of life with its future oriented worldview and emphasis on pragmatism, business, consumerism, mobility, and popular culture (music, television, film, mass media, etc.) has infiltrated societies throughout the globe, and the English language has become the communicative tool that ties the world together. Individual English words have long been taken over by other languages, either directly or as loan translations. This is also true for proverbs that are accepted either in their original wording or as loan translations. Benjamin Franklin's *Time is money* has entered numerous languages in the form of loan translations, but with the power of English as the international *lingua franca*, the German version of *Zeit ist Geld* is today also cited in its original English as *Time is money* in Germany. In fact, the following Anglo-American proverbs have all been loan translated into German (and also other languages), but especially the shorter ones are also cited in English at times and not surprisingly so considering the general knowledge of English in Europe and elsewhere:

(1) English: *Don't swap horses in mid-stream.*

German: *Mitten im Strom soll man die Pferde nicht wechseln.*

(2) English: *It takes two to tango.*

German: *Zum Tango gehören zwei.*

(3) English: *Don't put all of your eggs into one basket.*

German: *Man soll nicht alle Eier in einen Korb legen.*

(4) English: *An apple a day keeps the doctor away.*

German: *Ein Apfel pro Tag hält den Arzt fern.*

(5) English: *A picture is worth a thousand words.*

German: *Ein Bild sagt mehr als tausend Worte.*

(6) English: *The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.*

German: *Das Gras ist immer grüner auf der anderen Seite des Zaunes.*

(7) English: *A dog is man's best friend.*

German: *Der Hund ist des Menschen bester Freund.*

(8) English: *No news is good news.*

German: *Keine Nachrichten sind gute Nachrichten.,* and

(9) English: *Good fences make good neighbors.*

German: *Gute Zäune machen gute Nachbarn* (Mieder, 2010a; Mieder, 2010b: 297-340).

Of special interest is what has happened with the early seventeenth-century English proverb *The early bird catches the worm* that has always been considered as the equivalent of the extremely popular German proverb *Morgenstunde hat Gold im Munde* [The morning hour has gold in its mouth] from the previous century. Once the English proverb was loan translated into German as *Der frühe Vogel fängt den Wurm* in the 1970s by way of American mass media, it caught on very quickly, in fact so much so that it is now giving the old German proverb a run for its money! (Mieder, 1997; Mieder, 2010b: 285-296). There is no doubt that the international domination of the English language will continue this process, spreading old and new proverbs in English or as loan translations throughout the world. This is not to say that proverbs from other languages are not translated as well, but these incidents are relatively rare and usually limited to but neighboring cultures and languages. An example would be Mikhail Gorbachev's consequential proverbial statement in October of 1989 at Berlin that was translated into German as *Wer zu spät kommt, den bestraft das Leben* [Who arrives late is punished by life itself] that became a new proverb in Germany almost over night by way of the ever-present mass media (Mieder, 2010b: 363-382).

2.4 Origin of Some Modern Proverbs

But speaking of the mass media, lines of popular songs and films, book titles, advertising slogans, bumper stickers, T-shirt inscriptions, headlines, etc. can very quickly turn into proverbs.¹ For quite a few the creators and the first date of occurrence can

¹ For precise references for the examples used in this sections see Doyle, Mieder & Shapiro 2012

be found, if one bothers to research them. But often such individuals are not in the public eye, and for most people it is irrelevant who might have coined them. There is no doubt that especially in modernity people delight in creating proverb-like statements that could be called pseudo-proverbs. Yet, over time, they might well reach a general currency and become *bona fide* proverbs (Mieder, 2012). Thus the advertising slogan *What happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas* (2002) to attract tourists has turned proverb, and so have the slogans *Say it with flowers* (1917) from the Society of American Florists, *Number two tries harder* (1962) from the Avis car-rental company, and *You've come a long way, baby* (1968) from the Philip Morris cigarette company. Lines from songs by famous lyricists and musicians have also become proverbs, to wit *There's no business like show business* (1946) by Irving Berlin, *Life is just a cabaret* (1966) by Fred Ebb from the musical *Cabaret*, and *All you need is love* (1967) by John Lennon of Beatles fame. Then there are those lines turned proverbs from popular films, like *If you build it, they will come* (1989) from *Field of Dreams* that actually is based on W.P. Kinsella's story *Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa* (1979) that was not popular enough to create a proverb, *Keep your friends close and your enemies closer* (1974) from the *Godfather*, and the often heard *Life is like a box of chocolates* (1994) from *Forrest Gump*.

Modern proverbs are also created consciously by individuals as so-called *laws* of the trials and tribulations of life in a stressful world. Quite often the bits of wisdom intended for the greater public have the name of the originator attached to them, and by now entire little books have been published with such personal maxims or mottoes, as these texts might better be called at first. However, many of them have been accepted by others and they can be found in oral and written communication, either with a name attached to them or as anonymous laws that have indeed become proverbs. Of special interest is the law *If anything can go wrong, it will* which together with the variants *Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong* and *Anything that can possibly go wrong usually does* has definitely developed into a well-known proverb. Its first reference appears in Nevil Maskelyne's article *The Art in Magic* (1908): "It is an experience common to all men to find that, on any special occasion, such as the production of a magical effect for the first time in public, everything that can go wrong will go wrong. Whether we must attribute this to the malignity of matter or to the total depravity of inanimate things, whether the exciting cause is hurry, worry, or what not, the fact remains". Nothing is mentioned here about a possible author of this basic truth, and it took until 1951 for this law to appear in print with the designation *Murphy's Law*. According to *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (2012), here is the story of how the name Murphy was attached to it: "In popular legend, Murphy's Law originated in 1949 at Edwards Air Force Base in California, coined by project manager George E. Nichols after hearing Edward A. Murphy, Jr., complain about a wrongly-wired rocket-sled experiment. However, there is no documentation of that connection until 1955" (Doyle, Mieder, & Shapiro, 2012: 101-102). So it really isn't known precisely who coined this law turned proverb, but the name of Edward Murphy has

been attached to it and to other such laws as well, just as Benjamin Franklin's name became associated with numerous proverbs two hundred years earlier. Among other well known *proverb laws* that have entered folk speech are Healey's Law *When you are in a hole, stop digging* (1911), Parkinson's Law *Work expands to fill the available (allotted) time* (1955), and Hardin's Law *You can never do merely (just, only) one thing* (1963). And there are also those modern proverbs that have been attributed to famous individuals, as for example *It's not over (the game is) not over till it's over* (1921) to the baseball star Yogi Berra, *A week is a long time in politics* (1961) to former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, *Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee* (1964) to the boxing champion Mohammed Ali (Cassius Clay), *Trust but verify* (1966) to former President Ronald Reagan, and *Old age is not for sissies* (1969) to the American actress Betty Davis.

Other proverbs are created, again for the most part anonymously, by way of intentionally creating so-called counter-proverbs (changing an existing positive proverb into a negative statement and vice versa) or anti-proverbs (the intentional manipulation of a proverb that changes the wording and meaning). At times the originators of such *playful* reactions to proverbs are known, as for example aphoristic writers, journalists, and other wordsmiths. The important matter is that new proverbs get created on the basis of traditional proverbs. Among examples of counter-proverbs are *Flattery will get you everywhere* (1926) versus the older *Flattery will get you nowhere*, *Bigger is not always better* (1928) versus *The bigger the better*, and *Size does matter* (1964) versus *Size doesn't matter*. While counter-proverbs are not particularly plentiful, the deliberate creation of anti-proverbs, while nothing new in the proverb tradition, has become a wide-spread phenomenon since the beginning of the twentieth century (Litovkina & Lindahl, 2007). Of literally hundreds of them the following three might serve as telling examples: *No body is perfect* (1958) versus the older *Nobody is perfect*, *Beauty is only skin* (1963) versus *Beauty is only skin deep*, and *Expedience is the best teacher* (1966) versus *Experience is the best teacher*. While most anti-proverbs are one-day wonders that have not entered general folk speech, there are those that express new wisdom and have been accepted as innovatively expressed wisdom based on traditional proverbial structures – a process that is nothing new in the long history of creating new proverbs. Since much of this humorous, ironical or satirical manipulation of common proverbs is taking place in the vast arena of the mass media (newspapers, magazines, radio, television, film, and the Internet), anti-proverbs with a claim of some truth or wisdom can reach thousands or even millions of people who in turn might use them to such a degree that they may well become new proverbs (Valdaeva, 2003; Mieder, 2008).

This leads to the fascinating question whether proverbs can be consciously invented? Bartlett Jere Whiting in his otherwise valuable article on *The Origin of the Proverb* answered with a definite *no*, stating that "There have been many who have issued sententious sayings of their own labelled as proverbs, but in no case have such imitations deceived for a moment even the most superficial student of the

true proverb. [Especially literary authors] have failed in their attempts to imitate the proverb” (Whiting, 1931: 20). He might be right regarding especially authors of aphorisms whose texts, frequently actually based on traditional proverbs, have failed to become accepted proverbs (primarily because those that might in fact be proverb-like had no chance of becoming true proverbs because of the small number of readers in most cases). However, it might be pointed out that the novelist but also philologist J. R. R. Tolkien certainly *invented* proverbs for his *Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1956-1957) that serve as sapiential *leitmotifs* and might well be current among the special *folk group* of Tolkien enthusiasts (Trokhimenko, 2003). Field research among that reader group would probably establish that the invented proverbs *Every worm has its weak spot* and *Never laugh at live dragons* from the widely read *Hobbit* have become proverbial among them! Be that as it may, Whiting is wrong with his negative view regarding the invention of proverbs. They all have been or continue to be invented by someone sometime, even if at first they are at best proverb-like or pseudo-proverbs, as for example a sententious remark in a novel, a verse from a song, or an advertising slogan. The issue is that such well-turned phrases might become proverbs if they are accepted and repeated beyond the individual who came up with it all. Surely Whiting would have to agree that there must be a beginning, no matter whether it is a by-chance start or a conscious creation.

2.5 New Theories on the Creation of Proverbs

In any case, the revered Whiting might be quite surprised to find what especially Stephen Winick and Richard Honeck together with Jeffrey Welge have to say about the conscious creation and invention of proverbs. In his pioneering article on *Intertextuality and Innovation in a Definition of the Proverb Genre* (2003), Winick argues that, “given the right conditions, new items created on proverbial models [structures] do indeed come to be widely quoted [as new proverbs]” (Winick, 2003: 572), to wit the older proverb *Different salves for different sores* with its well-established proverbial structure *Different Xs for different Ys* and the African-American proverb *Different strokes for different folks* (Mieder, 1989: 317-332). But he then goes one step further, claiming that such aspects as currency and traditionality should no longer be included in what is to be considered as *proverbiality*. In other words, an invented sentence that has some of the markers (alliteration, rhyme, parallelism, etc.) is a proverb from the very outset of its creation. Such “utterances, which are already proverbs, make their meanings in a proverbial way, at the moment of their creation” (Winick, 2003: 573). For Winick the proverbiality of an utterance is in the text itself, and that very text is a proverb without any need of such cultural or folkloristic aspects as dissemination, currency, traditionality, etc.:

It is neither necessary nor desirable to consider canonicity the essential component of proverbiality. All of the features that “sometimes” occur in proverbs – phonetic, syntactic and semantic poetic features, ascription to an ancestor, etc. – are techniques of intertextual reference, drawing our minds to previous proverbial utterances. Thus, on a more general level, all of these “occasional” qualities of proverbs add up to one quality that is always there: rhetorical force imparted through intertextual reference. This approach allows for dynamic creativity within the proverb tradition. (Winick, 2003: 577).

It is true, of course, that such a proverb-like statement or even pseudo-proverb might be interpreted by an individual listener or a reader as an actual proverb, or as Winick states, “It is a matter of interpretation. Once an item is interpreted as a proverb, it becomes one, at least in that situation” (Winick, 2003: 588). He looks at these possibilities as a new dynamic approach to proverb creation, concluding that his “intertextual model allows for the existence of new utterances that ring with the echoes of previous gnomic sayings, without stigmatizing these by suggesting they are ‘not-quite proverbial’” (Winick, 2003: 592). All of this makes plenty of sense from a purely linguistic or intertextual point of view. However, even if someone were to create such a proverb-like sentence and claim that it is a proverb – as Steve Winick suggests – it would still have to prove itself to be worthy of that designation by going beyond its mere creation by an individual to a state of group acceptance. Changing the proverb *The proof of the pudding is in the eating* for a moment, one might well respond to Winick’s laudable attempt to give possible new proverbs a chance with *The proof of the proverb is in the repeating*. But to stress once again, there is nothing wrong with intertextually looking for possible new proverbs – how else are they to be found? But for such a text to be called a proverb in the normal sense of that word, certainly more than one contextual reference has to be found, and what is wrong with saying *the more the merrier* as far as proverbiality is concerned?

Richard Honeck and his co-author Jeffrey Welge gave their equally intriguing article the provocative title *Creation of Proverbial Wisdom in the Laboratory* (1997), and as Winick, they argue against the cultural or folkloristic view of proverb creation by paremiologists as Taylor, Whiting, and many others. They frame their approach from a cognitive point of view, arguing “that proverbs are best treated as abstract theoretical mental entities, rather than as familiar, culturally embedded forms” (Honeck & Welge, 1997: 207). In a certain way, though independently conceived, this cognitive approach looks at proverbs somewhat like Winick’s linguistic stance, for “according to the cognitive view, proverbs can be familiar or unfamiliar, personal or communal, used in social or nonsocial contexts, for social or nonsocial purposes, and either conform or not conform to various proverb formulae. The key question in the cognitive view is whether a statement is functioning, or is likely to be capable of functioning, as proverbs function. In this regard, the most basic functions of proverbs are psychological, namely, they categorize events and motivate thoughts and behavior” (Honeck & Welge, 1997: 208). But adding that proverbs obviously also have such pragmatic functions as exhorting or warning, Honeck and Welge see themselves

forced to state a caveat nevertheless: “To be clear, we do not question the emphasis on traditionality and currency in the cultural [and folkloristic] view of proverbs, but we do believe that it tends to omit due consideration of the initial, more cognitive psychological processes in their initial creation” (Honeck & Welge, 1997: 208). It is true, paremiologists for the most part have not properly answered the psychological question why people produce many proverbs in the first place and why, for example the Native Americans (Mieder, 1989: 99-110; Mieder, 2004a: 108-111), have created hardly any. But here then is the major point of their argument:

If the cognitive view of proverbs is adopted, the laboratory creation of proverbiality becomes feasible. This is because this view does not make any of the implicational complex of the cultural view – traditionality, social usage, etc. – necessary factors in proverbial function. What is necessary is that a statement serve the basic categorization and motivational functions that proverbs do. Indeed, speculatively, there may be more personal than cultural-level proverbs, and if the cultural definition is accepted, all of the former would be excluded from consideration. If the cognitive view’s premise is accepted, however, all that stands in the way of initial proverb creation is the set of experimental manipulations that could foster it. (Honeck & Welge, 1997: 208-209)

Having thus made the case for purely *personal proverbs* but failing to stress that the cultural and folkloristic view of proverbs does include the fact that every proverb starts as a piece of wisdom of an individual person, the authors become almost poetic in their concluding assessment: “It is important to acknowledge the early stage of proverb creation, when proverbs-to-be are performing basic figurative categorization, and perhaps largely personal functions. These proverbial statements are *baby proverbs* that may not be recognized as such but that have the potential to become full-fledged communal proverbs. There may therefore be a large pool of proverbs-in-waiting whose fate is determined in the crucible of larger sociohistorical forces. Both the cultural and cognitive views, as well as others, are needed to fully understand the overall process” (Honeck & Welge, 1997: 225). But notice the terms being used here for the initial and personal creation of proverbs, i.e., *proverbs-to be*, *baby proverbs*, [*not yet*] *full-fledged proverbs*, and *proverbs-in-waiting*. What does all of this mean other than that the creation of a proverb is a personal matter, but in order for such a proverb-like statement to become a *bona fide* proverb, one that is to be added to the annals of proverb collections, it does need to go beyond the original creator. This has always been the case, and in the mind of the folk with its view of proverbiality and that of most paremiologists a proverb remains an expression of a general truth that has been accepted and repeated by a folk group no matter what its size or background. Certainly no paremiographer could possibly wish to register all those “personal proverbs” that should perhaps better be called maxims or mottoes to distinguish them from what is commonly understood a proverb to be in the popular view (Mieder, 1993: 18-40).

2.6 Conclusion

Finally then, yes, proverbs are created by individuals. Anybody can create a sentence that includes a basic truth, that sounds like a proverb, that has all the stylistic and linguistic features of a proverb, and that appears to be full of wisdom. But there is a basic problem with such an invention, and this problem exists with every proverb that has ever been coined! Be the text ever so close to what we understand a proverb to be, it still needs elements that will turn it into a proverb. A proverb requires some currency among the folk. In other words, it has to be accepted into general oral and written communication and appear with at least some frequency and distribution.

If one looks back at the creation of proverbs over the centuries, it must be remembered that it might have taken years, dozens of years, or even centuries for a given proverb to get accepted and reach a certain currency and traditionality. Today, in the modern age of the computer and the internet, someone might make a spontaneous proverb-like statement that will literally travel across a country or even the globe in seconds. Truly modern proverbs cover such ground with solid speed. But, of course, it remains to be seen whether they will stay in circulation for some extended period of time. How long? That is a tough question to answer. After all, proverbs have always come, stayed, and gone. A day, a week, a month, a year surely are too short, but how about a decade? In any case, judging from the proverbs included in *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (2012), some of these modern proverbs have been around for several decades and have proven that they have staying power.

One thing is for certain, the age of proverb creation is not over! People will always feel the need to encapsulate their observations and experiences into easily remembered and repeated generalizations, and those that are of general interest and well formulated will, with a bit of luck, be accepted by other people. The proverb *Proverbs are never out of season* is as true today as ever before, and the study of the origin of modern proverbs is indeed as intriguing as trying to reconstruct the possible start of an ancient proverb. And why is there still much to be studied regarding the origin of individual proverbs? The answer is quite simple. The minute the question is raised about the origin of a proverb, a multilayered and intricate scholarly project is started that often results in lengthy monographs with a multitude of linguistic, folkloristic, literary, cultural, and historical references. The modern proverb *Nothing is as simple as it looks* (1905) certainly fits the question about the origin of proverbs, but that should not prevent paremiologists from searching for answers in their quest to uncover the process of proverb creation and dissemination.

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