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1 Subject Area, Terminology, Proverb Definitions, Proverb Features

1.1 The Subject Area of Paremiology

The linguistic units called proverbs in a culture constitute a diverse, organically developed and developing collection of certain recurrent sayings from the discourses of a language community. Lexica and anthologies can mislead us into thinking there are some fixed, homogenous groups of items called proverbs – as opposed to an adhoc grouping of recurrent sayings. There is no a priori reason to expect the proverbs of a community to constitute a coherent syntactic type or to express a consistent set of propositions. We should not expect to discover a single characteristic *proverbiality* or a single inclusive definition of the proverb, and we should not be surprised when isolated proverbs contradict each other. Hence Taylor's (1962) famous remark that the definition of the proverb is too difficult to reward the effort.

What we generally call proverbs are traditional, pithy, often formulaic and/or figurative, fairly stable and generally recognizable units. Proverbs are characteristically used to form a complete utterance, make a complete conversational contribution and/or to perform a speech act in a speech event. This differentiates them from non-sentential items like proverbial phrases, idioms, binomials etc. Proverbs make apodictic (expressed as undeniable truth) statements like *Money talks* or they evoke a scenario applicable to a range of analogous situations, as in *Little strokes fell great oaks*. In supplying ready-made responses to recurrent types of situations, proverbs seem to suggest particular evaluations or courses of action.

Proverbs can be collected and anthologized as little texts complete in themselves; they can be described in their relations to other proverbs, in their discourse contexts and within their cultural matrix. For folklorists, proverbs exist as items of folklore alongside riddles, proverbial phrases and jokes. They provide highly recognizable, (relatively) fixed textual building blocks with unique rhetorical potential. Proverbs are valued as folk wisdom and bearers of traditional lore. Their cultural salience renders proverbs interesting in cross-cultural comparison as well, including questions of intercultural transmission and translation. For linguists, proverbs unite features of the lexeme, sentence, set phrase, collocation, text and quote. They illustrate interesting patterns of prosody, parallelism, syntax, lexis and imagery. Because of their imagery, proverbs provide evidence of stereotypes and standard cultural metaphors. These properties further make proverbs valuable in psycholinguistic testing. Proverb variation by text and by speech community raises interesting issues as well. Recent advances in corpus linguistics have established patterns of proverb use as statistical facts rather than educated guesses. Corpus investigations show that proverbs

are rare and often manipulated in contexts where they appear, but they nevertheless remain recognizable due to their cultural salience. For lexicographers, proverbs are items to be collected, categorized and catalogued with information on their origins and distribution along with appropriate links to other proverbs, proverbial phrases, idioms and so on within and across linguistic communities. Thus, proverbs have been studied from a range of perspectives for various reasons, and the diverse research traditions have produced a breadth of differing terminologies, which require description and comparison.

1.2 Terminology

Proverbs have repeatedly been characterized as self-contained, traditional units with didactic content and fixed, poetic form, whereby all these characterizations have been cast in varying terminologies with various nuances and connotations. Folklorists have been concerned with setting proverbs proper off from the proverbial phrases, proverbial comparisons, superstitions, wellerisms, clichés and idioms. At the same time, linguists have sought to define the proverb with terms such as sentence, clause, idiom, and conversational turn among others. In the following, the standard terms will be investigated and compared before turning to the matter of definition as such.

1.2.1 The Proverb and Its Kin

The *proverb* is a traditional figurative saying which can form a complete utterance on its own. Its ability to constitute a complete utterance distinguishes the proverb proper from another traditional, characteristically figurative form, the *proverbial phrase*, which cannot stand on its own, for example *to kick over the traces*, which lacks a subject. The linguistic term *idiom* is often applied to proverbial phrases with figurative meanings. A special sort of proverbial phrase is the *proverbial comparison* (or *proverbial simile*) with *as*, *like* or *than*, for example *as brown as a berry*, *like a house afire* and *older than the hills*. The *maxim* and the *cliché* are like the proverb in forming a complete utterance, but they lack its traditionality and imagery: Whereas the maxim states a rule for conduct as in *Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today*, the cliché expresses a trite observation as in *When you're hot, you're hot*. The slogan is a non-traditional form created to promote a product or idea as in Nike's advertising slogan *Just do it* or Obama's campaign slogan *Yes, we can*. Non-traditional sayings in general usage but perhaps associated with particular sources such as Greek mythology for *Pandora's box* or historical persons as for Martin Luther King's *I have a dream* are called *winged words*. There are also *aphorisms*, literary forms like the proverb in its straightforward memorable formulation as in *Art is long, life short*.

Winged words and aphorisms merge into the stock of allusions to well-known texts and writers such as *All the world's a stage* from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Apart from that a *binominal* is a linguistic term for formulaic phrases consisting of two parallel words connected by *and* or occasionally *or*, including proverbs such as *Live and learn* and *Sink or swim*. The *wellerism*, which derives its name from the character Sam Weller in Charles Dickens' novel *The Pickwick Papers*, is another traditional item which extends a proverb or a cliché, playfully assigning it to a speaker as in *It won't be long now, as the monkey said when he backed his tail into a fan*. Superstitions are traditional beliefs without any fixed expression, e.g. that breaking a mirror brings seven years of bad luck. Although, these definitions and distinctions seem rough-and-ready, they provide an initial working basis, the more precise parameters of which such as self-containedness and traditionality will be examined in the paragraphs to come.

1.2.2 Self-containedness

According to Seiler (1922), proverbs must be self-contained sayings (in *sich geschlossene Sprüche*), by which he means that none of their essential syntactic units may be replaced. Seiler introduces this criterion to distinguish proverbs from proverbial phrases: it excludes proverbial phrases like *to face the music* and *smooth as silk*, because they lack syntactic units essential to render them complete clauses, and these can be linked to them at will, as in *you have to face the music* and *hair smooth as silk*.

Milner (1969a) and Barley (1972) come quite close to Seiler's self-containedness when they identify proverbs with statements. Abrahams (1972) is perhaps more precise in requiring that a proverb be a *full* statement, and Dundes (1975) proposes the even more precise *propositional* statement. Now, Abraham and Dundes seem to mean that the proverb must be co-extensive with a logical proposition, i.e. one unit consisting of a subject and predicate. An initial objection to this criterion is that it fails to correspond to natural conversational conventions, which have little to do with formal logical conventions (Abercrombie, 1965; Crystal & Davy, 1969). Second, all five writers cited apparently intend their criteria to apply to some deeper, semantic level underlying the surface structure of proverbs, since proverb surface structures routinely consist of pure predicates without arguments, as in *Forewarned, forearmed* or *Live and let live*. But without a complete semantic analysis and a theory of proverb deep structures, such features provide no firm basis for definition.

Moreover, even presupposing deep structure semantic analyses for the proverbs in question, the logical proposition or statement can only serve as a lower boundary on proverb structure, since proverbs commonly contain more than a single proposition-like unit, as in e.g. *Marry in haste and repent at leisure*. As characteristically conversational units, proverbs are more appropriately described in terms of the structure of conversation, say that of a complete conversational turn syntactically independent of surrounding discourse (Norrick, 1985).

Paremiologists have also had recourse to the syntactic notion of the sentence. Taylor (1934) determines that proverbs must be complete (if elliptical) sentences, and goes on to insist (Taylor et al., 1939) that they be *grammatical* sentences. Such scholars as Abrahams (1968a), Holbek (1970) and Röhrich and Mieder (1977) also accept (complete) sentence status as a basic property of the proverb; see also Mieder's (2004) summary definition as a "short sentence of wisdom." Unfortunately the syntactic notion of the sentence suffers from some of the same problems as the statement or the proposition as a definitional criterion for the proverb: it ignores the fundamentally conversational nature of the proverb; it is untestable due to its appeal to some unoperationalized notion of deep structure; it is not coextensive with the proverb, but provides only a lower boundary on its form at best. And the notion of the sentence brings in problems of its own.

For one thing, many proverbs exhibit special recurrent proverbial structures (formulas in the terminology of Neumann, 1966), which diverge from the standard Subject-Predicate pattern, for instance *Like father, like son*, and *Better late than never* among many others. Second, there are proverbs like *Them as has gits* in violation of standard rules for sentences and even foreign proverbs like *Che sarà, sarà* completely outside English sentence structure. Again characterization in terms of a possible conversational contribution makes better sense. The notion of the sentence was brought in to reflect the criterion of self-containedness necessary to distinguish proverbs from proverbial phrases (Seiler, 1922; Taylor, 1962; Röhrich, 1973), and these latter cannot alone constitute an independent contribution to conversation, which would suffice to distinguish the two, again appealing to conversational categories. Sayings whose referring expressions are interpreted generally rather than particularly in context as in *A rolling stone gathers no moss* can then classify as proverbs, as can imperatives like *Strike while the iron is hot*, interpreted with reference to the hearer in the conversational context.

1.2.3 Traditionality

Proverb scholars have repeatedly stressed the traditional nature of proverbs as items of folklore, including their common use in recurring verbal performances (see, e.g., Seiler, 1922; Firth, 1926; Taylor, 1950; Mieder, 1996; among many others). Certainly, we must insist on currency in some linguistic community. The traditional nature of proverbs coordinates closely with their status as items of folklore. The relation between traditionality and folklore comes out nicely in Abrahams' (1969: 106) definition of folklore as "traditional items of knowledge which arise in recurring performances." Since folklore is traditional and recurring, it is seen as authorless, sourceless and also as non-literary, non-learned. Inasmuch as proverbs are linguistic units, the recurring units must initially be oral/verbal, even if they are later recorded in writing and canonized in lexica.

Firth (1926) cites the rustic nature of proverbs as items of folklore in his definition, but he also stresses their common use in recurring verbal performances. Seiler's (1922) term *Volklässigkeit* (folkloricity) encompasses both the folkloristic nature of proverbs and their common use as well. More recent definitions have preferred the term *traditional*, perhaps including the notion *items of folklore* (e.g. Taylor, 1950; Röhrich, 1967; Holbek, 1970; Abrahams, 1968a; Milner, 1969a; Dundes, 1975). In sociolinguistic terms, proverbs must be associated with some language community. To the extent that they contain dialectal, sociolectal features, proverbs can further be associated with particular social groups or "communities of practice" (Eckert, 1989; Eckert, 2000; Wenger, 1998). Then terms like *Volklässigkeit* and *traditionality* can be understood as implying long-term common usage in certain communities of practice.

However, *folklore* and *traditionality* can also refer to the content of proverbs, specifically their rustic imagery relating to pre-industrial society. *Time is money* goes back at least as far as the ancient Greek Theophrastus (c. 372-287 BC) and is attested for English as early as 1659 (Taylor, 1950), so that it clearly counts as traditional in the sense of being in common use over time, but it hides its age well. By contrast, proverbs like *Strike while the iron is hot* and *Don't put the cart before the horse* trade on rustic images which give them a traditional ring, whether they have been in common use over time or not. Clearly, we must distinguish these two senses of *folklore* and *traditionality* in any consideration of proverbs.

1.2.4 Didactic Content

Didactic content has also been consistently predicated of proverbs (e.g. by Seiler, 1922; Firth, 1926; Abrahams, 1968). The didactic tendency may take the direct form of a prescriptive rule, as in *Look before you leap*, or the indirect form of a general observation, as in *Soon gotten, soon spent*. Jolles (1930) objects to calling proverbs didactic in the first direct sense, allowing only the empirical interpretation of proverb content as general observations, but he fails to distinguish, first, the neutral ideational meaning of a proverb, second, the reason for its use in some context, and, third, the effect of a proverb in context. Thus, we can say some proverbs explicitly express a social injunction, others are often used with didactic force, and others may suggest a course of action to a listener in context. Mieder's (1996: 4) definition of proverbs as containing "wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views" seems to cover all these aspects. Still, whether speakers perceive *The early bird catches the worm* as a summation of past experience or not, they can deploy it as a warning and they listener can interpret it as advice and follow it in any case. Requiring didactic tendency would eliminate some items often included in the category of proverbs, in particular those bound to specific situations like *Long time no see* as a greeting formula or *A little bird told me* as a way to avoid divulging the source of information. Sayings like these lacking any didactic

potential are perhaps better separated from proverbs proper and labeled clichés or conversational gambits

Certainly many proverbs exhibit either direct didactic tendency as items of advice, as in *Put your best foot forward*, or indirect didactic tendency as potential advice summarizing past experience, as in *First come, first served*. Others can be used with didactic intentions under appropriate conditions, for instance *Little pitchers have big ears* as advice about the danger of exposing children to adult talk generally rather than as a specific warning that children are listening.

1.2.5 Fixed Form

Taylor (1950) explicitly mentions *fixed traditional form* as characteristic for the proverb, and in Taylor (1962) he calls “rigidity of form ... an essential characteristic of proverbs.” Barley (1972) also invokes the notion of fixed form, though he includes “limited restructuring and variation.” Dundes (1964) distinguishes fixed-phrase genres of folklore such as proverbs and songs from free-phrase genres like jokes and riddles. Fixedness in the form of proverbs follows from the necessity that they remain recognizable in context. Speakers cite proverbs as units, assuming their listeners will recognize them as such and interpret them appropriately. Nevertheless, recognizability does not require complete immutability of proverb form. Listeners continue to identify proverbs in spite of lexical and grammatical variation because proverbs are “strongly coded” (Meleuc, 1972) and “overcoded” in Eco’s (1972; 1976) terms: their structures are marked and they bear greater social and psychological significance than do other set phrases. Seiler (1922) stresses that fixedness cannot preclude variability through time and from one community to the next. This variability naturally leads to multiple forms for a proverb in some cases, e.g. *Where/when one door shuts/is shut another opens/is opened* and *All that glitters/glisters is not gold/All is not gold that glitters/glisters*. In conversational contexts it may be impossible to say whether a particular speaker has uttered a pre-existent variant or a nonce restructuring of a given proverb.

Further, because proverbs are strongly coded and highly recognizable, mention of one crucial phrase can serve to call forth the whole proverb. Thus, the first noun phrase from *A rolling stone gathers no moss* yields the name of the rock group *The Rolling Stones* and the music magazine *The Rolling Stone*, as well as the title for Bob Dylan’s song *Like a rolling stone* and so on. In conversation simply saying *Remember the early bird* alone would serve to warn a listener about arriving late.

Finally, proverbs are often introduced with *frames* like *you should, one should* and *always*, as in **You should** *strike while the iron is hot* or **Always** *look before you leap* (Taylor (1930) calls these proverb *formulas*, but Kuusi’s (1966) term *frame* seems to be more popular). Proverbs are also often introduced or followed by *proverbial affixes* (Norrick, 1981) like *as the saying goes, as they say* and *it is said*. Certain adjectives like

proverbial and *everlovin'* can appear before any stressed noun in a proverb without affecting its recognizability, as witness: *The proverbial pen is mightier than the sword* or *Make hay while the everlovin' sun shines*. In fact, these *proverbial infixes* (Norrick, 1981) help listeners identify proverbs as such. Taken together, these items hold out the possibility of varying and extending practically any proverb; at the same time, their frequent occurrence with proverbs tends to foreground proverbial utterances.

As Moon (1998) has shown on the basis of empirical corpus investigations, proverbs are both comparatively rare and variable in everyday discourse, but they remain recognizable to members of the language community due to their high salience. Fixedness in proverbs is relative, and proverbs are never completely frozen.

1.2.6 Poetic Features

Metaphoricity (or imagery) is also often included among the required features of a proverb. Thus, Barley (1972) distinguishes literal traditional sayings from necessarily metaphorical proverbs, terming the former *maxims*; Greimas (1970) draws a parallel distinction between the figurative *proverb* and the literal *dicton*. At the same time, other writers like Taylor (1950) and Hain (1963) consider imagery a common attribute of proverbs rather than a defining property as such. Moreover, as Seiler (1922) and others have noted, metaphoricity is a matter of degree rather than an absolute dichotomy, so that the distinction between proverbs and literal sayings would have to be a gradual one as well. Furthermore, many proverbs may vary by use between literal and metaphorical interpretation. *It never rains but it pours* can occur in the literal context of a real rain storm or with metaphorical reference to a streak of bad luck. Strictly speaking, metaphoricity is a matter of proverb use rather than an internal semantic property of proverbs themselves.

Like metaphoricity, prosody is often counted among the typical, but not necessary, features of proverbs, e.g., by Seiler (1922), Hain (1963) and Abrahams (1968). Besides rhyme as in *Birds of a feather flock together*, alliteration as in *Live and let live*, and assonance as in *Strike while the iron is hot*, Taylor (1962) identifies various metrical patterns and parallelism characteristic of proverbs. Related to prosody is the tendency for proverbs to display certain word-order patterns, e.g., shorter elements first, longer elements toward the end (Panini's Law), as in *Here today, gone tomorrow*; see Cooper and Ross (1975) and Norrick (1985). Prosody and regular patterning make proverbs both more memorable and more recognizable in context.

Both imagery and prosody help render a construction more memorable and thereby increase its chances of becoming a standard formula. This explains why so many proverbs do display ostentatious prosody and remarkable imagery, but it does not entail that all proverbs exhibit such poetic structures. Indeed, plenty of everyday prosaic phrases have somehow managed to achieve proverbial status, e.g. *Time is money* and *Children should be seen and not heard* among many others.

1.3 Proverb Definitions

What we generally call proverbs are recurrent, pithy, often formulaic and/or figurative, fairly stable and generally recognizable units used to form a complete utterance, make a complete conversational contribution and/or to perform a speech act in a speech event. This definition differentiates them from non-sentential items like proverbial phrases, idioms, binomials etc. Proverbs make apodictic statements like *Money talks* or they evoke a scenario applicable to a range of analogous situations, as in *Little strokes fell great oaks*. In supplying ready-made responses to recurrent types of situations, proverbs seem to suggest particular evaluations or courses of action, resulting in their often noted didactic tendency. They are associated with various discourses and recognized texts, speakers and writers, including famous authors, all of which accrues to the significance they bear in society. Still, there is no single *proverbiality* and no single inclusive definition of the proverb. Alternate definitions will be examined and contrasted, leading to a consideration of the features characteristic for proverbs – or really for groups of proverbs. Despite Taylor’s (1962) warning about the futility of defining the proverb, paremiologists have proposed various sorts of definitions through the years.

With culturally determined items like proverbs, as with other areas of language use, it is necessary to recognize the fuzziness of the category and the scalar application of features. Wittgenstein (1953) showed that cultural institutions like *game* could only be defined as families of related activities, rather than in a feature-by-feature manner, and this holds for institutionalized sayings like proverbs as well. Probably no single proverb unites all the characteristics we imagine to be prototypical. Among those proverbs we might consider prototypical, there are, first, proverbs which sketch a scenario generalizable to comment on a range of analogous situations like: *The early bird catches the worm; A rolling stone gathers no moss; A stitch in time saves nine*. Second, there are formulaic examples, which tend to make a literal statement such as: *Like father, like son; The more haste, the less speed; Easy come, easy go; Better late than never*. A few common formulaic proverbs may evoke a scenario as well, e.g., *Once bitten, twice shy; When it rains, it pours; Fair weather after foul*. Third, there are those proverbs which make a specific statement about a particular matter, usually in less strikingly figurative language like: *Money talks; Time flies; Beauty’s only skin deep*.

The attempt to discover a definition of proverbiality based on specific properties is probably just as fruitless as a definition of the proverb itself in such terms. The notion of proverbiality is itself even more clearly a matter of prototypicality (compare Arora, 1984). Honeck and Welge (1997) develop a scale of proverbiality based on “characteristics shown by the prototypical best proverbs.” Their definition contains characteristics like *nonliteral in relation to a topic, use of poetic features, and nonhackneyed*, but these features themselves cry out for definition. Moreover, according to such criteria, there can be no clear line between proverbs, clichés, literary allusions

and popular sayings like: *When you're hot you're hot*; *All the world's a stage*; *Fools rush in where wise men fear to go*; *It's just like déjà vu all over again*. What counts for all such sayings is currency in community discourse in relatively stable form. This fact presents a problem for any effort to define the proverb in purely structural terms. Two noteworthy attempts in this direction are Milner (1969a; 1969b) and Dundes (1975).

Milner (1969a) argues that the most characteristic form of the traditional saying “consists of a statement in four parts,” whereby each part can be assigned a positive or negative value and the four parts naturally group into two halves. Then, for each half, two plus or two minus signs yield a plus, and the combination of a plus and a minus yields a minus. Milner develops analyses like the following for proverbs.

+	+	+	
new	brooms		

+	+	+	
sweep	clean		
+	+	+	
a fair	exchange		

-	-	+	
is no	robbery		

Unfortunately, even clearly quadripartite (four-part) proverbs resist any obvious assignment of positive and negative values: for instance in *Monkey see, monkey do* how would one decide to score monkeys or doing as + or -? Moreover, many attested proverbs simply do not fall into four discernible elements, most clearly short examples like *Time flies* and *Money talks*; moreover, Milner’s appeal to some “hidden structure which must be perceived by the unconscious level of our minds” (Milner, 1969b) is clearly unconvincing. Dundes (1975) argues that Milner’s assignment of values and configurations ends up as a system of classification rather than a definition as such.

Dundes himself further develops the basic idea of a structural definition of the proverb. He says, first, that only underlying formulas provide the basis for definition, and, second, that the basic unit of classification is a *descriptive element* consisting of a *topic* and a *comment*—an analysis parallel to that Georges and Dundes (1963) had proposed for riddles. A proverb may consist of a single descriptive element, e.g., *Love is blind*, though examples with multiple descriptive elements are statistically more common. On this basis, Dundes distinguishes equational proverbs like *Time is money* from oppositional proverbs, which in turn may involve simple negation as in *All that glitters is not gold* or more complex oppositions as in *Better buy than borrow* and *You can't have your cake and eat it*. Ultimately Dundes analysis ends up as a classification system for proverbs as well. Simply saying proverbs are analyzable into two halves and four quarters or into descriptive elements consisting of topic-comment

pairs provides little basis for defining proverbs without showing the various ways proverbs instantiate these structures, so that any definition must include a system of classification.

Moreover, the topic-comment definition Dundes proposes is functional rather than structural at base. It ultimately derives from the theme-rheme distinction within the Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) analysis of the Prague School of linguistics. And it is precisely the functional—as opposed to structural—basis of this approach which allows for parallel analyses of such structurally distinct proverbs as:

Opposites attract (Noun Verb);
Easy come, easy go (Adverb Verb);
Out of sight, out of mind (Preposition Noun);
No pain, no gain (Determiner Noun).

Each of these proverbs contains paired descriptive elements as shown, each structurally distinct yet functionally identifiable as theme-rheme descriptive elements. This is the genius of FSP analysis; and this functional approach underlies any comprehensive proverb analysis. We require a functional definition of the proverb in any case, since we must continue to recognize, e.g., *Live and learn* as a binomial in structural terms (*Verb Conjunction Verb*), even though it functions as a proverb.

Barley (1974) argues that in defining items of folklore we should “forget the genres and concentrate on the features,” and he develops a feature-matrix definition for the proverb and related items. In abbreviated form:

	statement	fixed	metaphorical
proverb	+	+	+
riddle	-	-	+/-
maxim	+	+	-
proverbial phrase	-	+	+

Norrick (1985) makes a further attempt in this direction, arguing for prioritization of certain features and using different sets of features for ethnographic and supercultural proverb definition; see also Harnish (1993). Consideration of a feature-based definition of proverbs naturally leads into the following investigation of proverb features in their own right.

1.4 Proverb Features

Semantic features of individual proverbs are interesting in themselves and they may suggest an approach to proverbiality. Furthermore, standard semantic features of proverbs can serve as a model of basic types of meaning relations which should be familiar to all members of a culture. The assumption that standard proverb meanings will be accessible to normal adult members of the language community provides the foundation for the use of proverbs in tests of understanding by psycholinguists and psychologists.

1.4.1 Polysemy

The polysemy of the proverb *A rolling stone gathers no moss* with its two standard interpretations *a person on the move remains young* and *a person on the move remains poor* has often been noted. Historically the separate interpretations may have originated as dialect variants. Although tests have shown that both readings for this proverb co-exist, hearers interpret it interactionally to mean either that they should or should not *roll*, depending on their beliefs (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1973).

1.4.2 Pun

Proverbs occasionally contain puns. This makes them potentially polysemic as well, in as much as either meaning may predominate in any particular discourse context. For instance, we interpret *No news is good news* to mean either *news is never positive* or *the absence of new information leaves hope that nothing bad has happened*; similarly, we interpret the phrase *get up with the fleas* in the proverb *Lie down with the dogs and get up with the fleas* to mean either *arise when the fleas do* or *arise infested with*.

1.4.3 Hyperbole

Any proverb containing absolute modifiers and adverbs like *no*, *never*, *all* and *always* is likely to involve overstatement, as in *A watched pot never boils* and *The grass is always greener on the other side (of the fence)*. We understand the first to mean that a watched pot seems to take longer to boil and the second to mean that distant grass tends to seem greener. See Norrick (2004a; 2004b) on overstatement and Extreme Case Formulation in proverbs.

1.4.4 Irony

A few proverbs are ironic, e.g., *All geese are swans*, though irony is much commoner in proverbial phrases such as *A fine kettle of fish* and *As clear as mud*.

1.4.5 Tautology

Tautologous proverbs are considerably more common. The most obvious examples are proverbs where the same noun phrase appears on both sides of a copula verb, as in *Enough is enough*; *Boys will be boys*; *What will be, will be* and *It isn't over till it's over*. Of course, such proverbs are not meaningless expressions of equivalence. They exhibit regular patterns of interpretation, and various attempts have been undertaken to explain how listeners produce appropriate interpretations, e.g., Wierzbicka (1987), Fraser (1988) etc.

1.4.6 Paradox

One might not expect to find paradoxical proverbs at all, in as much as proverbs record salient observations and rules of conduct. Yet proverbs expressing preposterous claims like *The pen is mightier than the sword* are fairly common in English, and level-mixing, vicious circle proverbs like *Never say never* and *Expect the unexpected* are not particularly rare. If proverbs employ paradox, it must somehow reinforce their generalizing, didactic tendencies. Golopentia-Eretescu (1970; 1971) recognizes several different patterns of interpretation, whereby non-contradictory meanings are derived for some paradoxical proverbs, but others like *Nothing is permanent but change* exhibit genuine logical contradiction, mixing logical levels and leading to vicious circles. For such proverbs no resolution works: The paradox asserts itself, scintillates and intensifies: permanence passes, change abides, as Norrick (1989) shows.

1.4.7 Connotation

Connotations contribute to the overall discourse meaning of proverbs as well. They intensify the rhetorical force and the traditional significance of proverbs. Folksy, rural, pre-industrial connotations are typical of proverbs, e.g., *Make hay while the sun shines* and *Don't put the cart before the horse*. Many proverbs also exhibit Biblical and/or religious connotations as well, e.g., *The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak* and *The blind lead the blind*.

Proverbs employ humour fairly frequently and jocular connotations are evident in many proverbs (see section on *set phrases and humor*), e.g., *Monkey see, monkey do* and *If you can't be good, be careful* used as a leave-taking formula.

1.4.8 Imagery

Proverbs and proverbial phrases often have striking images. This helps keep them noticeable and memorable despite relative infrequency and variation, as Norrick (2007) argues.

Cognitive linguists argue that the metaphors in set phrases organize our perceptions, but the picture is far from clear (compare Burger, 1996; Burger, 1998). Proverbs contain specialized images from pre-industrial life, rather than basic-level metaphors or images familiar to speakers today. Proverbs thrive on foregrounding, high visibility and cultural salience, and consequently their images must be striking and memorable, not quotidian. Proverb images often fail miserably as models for organizing our perceptions of recurrent situations. In fact, they are frequently specialized, archaic and/or far-fetched, e.g., *Don't buy a pig in a poke* and *The pot calls the kettle black*. *The apple doesn't fall far from the tree* is certainly confusing and ambiguous by comparison with *Like father, like son*. *The hasty bitch brings forth blind whelps* introduces a whole range of irrelevant questions about dogs by contrast with the clear, concise, assonant and rhyming *Haste makes waste*. Proverbs frequently mix metaphors, combining images from separate source domains into complex, sometimes incompatible collages. Thus, *Every cloud has a silver lining* first draws on the metaphoric domain of weather phenomena standing for human experience and emotion, then switches to a scalar domain where silver represents something precious and desirable. The lining is mysterious, fitting, as it does, neither with clouds nor with silver. We try to imagine the cloud as a garment with a precious lining, but then the bad weather aspect of the cloud disappears. The result is a jumble of incongruous metaphors from unrelated domains, which cannot really resolve itself at all. As another example, *Hitch your wagon to a star* mixes the metaphoric domain of horses and wagons with astronomical imagery. It is difficult to imagine just how one might hitch a wagon to a star and what would result from the match. Again the image can hardly serve as a model organizing our perceptions.

Different sorts of imagery may be distinguished in proverbs. Seiler (1922) identifies both metaphor and personification in proverbs. Thus, some proverbs call forth a scenario generalizable to a range of analogous situations like *A rolling stone gathers no moss*, while others make a specific statement about a particular matter, often employing personification, as in *Money talks*. Proverbs may also be only partially metaphoric, as in *Every dog has its day*, where only the noun *dog* need be understood in a general figurative way as standing for any animate entity or human being.

Seitel (1969) shows how fully metaphoric proverbs express a scenario applicable to a range of parallel social contexts. He posits a relation between the leopard and his spots in the proverb *The leopard cannot change his spots* and the situation in which a speaker wishes to argue that a thief can never reform. The proverb in effect provides a model by which we comment on an analogous social situation: the leopard is to his spots as the thief is to his criminal tendency, abbreviated by Seitel in the formula $A:B::C:D$.

Maranda (1971) sets up a model for the riddle which looks much like Seitel's model for proverbs. His standard formula $A/B = C/D$ is simply a notational variant of Seitel's abbreviated formula. Maranda recognizes a metonymic relation between each of the paired terms A/B and C/D , and a metaphoric (analogical) relation between the two pairs. For the Finnish riddle *One pig, two snouts*, A stands for the pig, B for his snout, D stands for the two snouts, and C for the thing to be guessed, namely the traditional Finnish fork plow. Georges and Dundes (1963) show that the two sets of terms in Maranda's riddle formula are related just as the terms of the proverb are to its concrete situation. The metonymic relation between the pig and his snout parallels that between the leopard and his spots, while the relation between the plow and its two snouts parallels that between the thief and his criminal tendency.

Barley (1972) adapts and expands Maranda's model for the proverb. Since the relationship between the terms of a proverb, unlike those of a riddle, can be understood even outside context, Barley distinguishes the internal, logical relations between the terms of the proverb itself from the external relations which the proverb contracts to its situation of use. The analogy between the proverb image and the situation of use is then not drawn directly, but by way of the generalized relation expressed by the proverb. Barley calls this the *maxim level*, because metaphorical proverbs can be paraphrased by literal maxims, in the case of *The leopard cannot change his spots* we find the maxim *Once a thief always a thief*. Barley simply generalizes each term of a proverb, essentially just disregarding the particular semantic features of words, to generate its maxim level *structural description*. If *leopard* is characterized as *animate*, *animal*, *feline* etc., one simply erases features up to the level of *animate*. If the spots in the proverb are characterized as *natural*, *marking*, *blotch*, *contrastive color*, then all the features are erased up to the level of *natural*. This process yields a generalized structural description like *animate beings cannot change their natural characteristics*. See Grzybek (1994; 2000) for a good critical treatment of this research on proverb interpretation and context from a semiotic perspective.

Norrick (1985) reworks Barley's traditional feature semantic approach in terms of frame theory. Schema representations for words like *bird* and *worm* will include the information that (some) birds hunt for worms, because worms serve as food for them, thereby ensuring that generalization of the concrete image in *The early bird catches the worm* will lead to *early agents reach goals* rather than simply *early animate beings get animate beings*. Norrick goes on to identify all kinds of imagery in proverbs. He first distinguishes the scenic species-genus synecdoche of proverbs like *The leopard*

cannot change his spots and *The early bird catches the worm* from nominal (part-whole) synecdoche in which a single noun in a proverb must be interpreted in *pars-pro-toto* fashion, e.g., *A false tongue will hardly speak the truth*, where *tongue* stands for the whole speaking person. Then he analyzes various sorts of predicate extension metaphor, in which a selectional feature or presupposition of the verb forces an anthropomorphic, animate or concrete interpretation, e.g., *Pride feels no pain*, where *pride* is personified, *Familiarity breeds contempt*, where *familiarity* is interpreted as a living organism, and *Fair words break no bones*, where words are treated as physical objects, respectively. Norrick further recognizes, first, object-attribute metaphor in proverbs like *Necessity is the mother of invention*, where *mother* stands for its attribute of nurturing, and, second, metonymy of the instrument-function variety, e.g. in *Fear gives wings*, where *wings* stand for the ability to fly.

1.4.9 Syntactic Features

Proverbs often represent structures which would be ungrammatical by normal standards. Like other idiomatic structures, proverbs represent an anomaly in any generative linguistic paradigm (Chafe, 1968). Proverbs often contain archaic and dialect words and structures, e.g. *Them as has gits*. They may even come from other languages entirely, as in *Che sarà sarà* and *C'est la vie*. Proverbs are also often constructed around formulas which fail to conform to normal sentence grammar, e.g., *Like father, like son*; *The bigger they come, the harder they fall*; *Once bitten, twice shy*.

Since proverbs are typically conversational, it makes more sense to think of them as potentially complete contributions to conversation in order to sidestep the issue of grammaticality. Nevertheless, the syntactic structures of proverbs are interesting in themselves, e.g. those without verbs like: *No rose without a thorn*; *Soon ripe, soon rotten*; *Many men, many minds*. As Nordahl (1999) argues, when proverbs lack verbs, and when they are otherwise elliptical, hearers must mobilize rhetorical principles to work out discourse inferences. This holds as well for proverbs without nouns like: *The more, the merrier*; *Easy come, easy go*; *Slow and steady wins the race*.

Along with truly formulaic structures, proverbs exhibit various patterns of repetition. As demonstrated in Norrick (1989), repetition in proverbs tends to focus attention on key terms and to emphasize contrasts between the repeated elements. Sometimes the syntactic frame of a proverb contains repetition as in *Where there's smoke there's fire*. Repetition across a copula results in tautological proverbs like *Enough is enough* and *Boys will be boys*. We find proverbs like *An eye for an eye*, where each token of *eye* stands for a different referent, but separate tokens may also seemingly refer to the same thing as in *You gotta do what you gotta do*, resulting in apparent paradox. Playful variation with repetition results in such memorable proverbs as *One is none* and *When the going gets tough, the tough get going*. We return to the interpretation of tautological and paradoxical proverbs below.

At the same time, as Bhuvanewar (2003) has shown, proverbs represent all the major types of syntactic structures (in English and Telugu). Many of the best-known proverbs instantiate standard types of sentences, e.g. Subject-Verb-Direct Object, as in *A rolling stone gathers no moss*; or Subject-Verb-Indirect Object-Direct Object, as in *You can't teach an old dog new tricks*; Subject-Copula-Predicate Nominal, as in *Time is money* and so on. To correctly assess the role of formulaicity in our perception of prototypicality of proverbs or in the notion of proverbiality, however, we need statistical data. We must consider not only the frequency of formulaic versus non-formulaic proverbs in various corpora, but also the frequency of specific formulas and the number of formulaic examples among the most frequently used proverbs.

Research on the length of proverbs in words has so far been suggestive, but inconclusive (see Grzybek, 2000). Czermaák (1998) determines an average length of 4.7 words for proverbs in the Czech National Corpus. More statistical data of various kinds will be necessary to reach any firm conclusions.

The matter of so-called transformational defects, as described by Fraser (1970), Newmeyer (1972), Dobrovolskij (1997; 1999) and others is not particularly important for proverbs, insofar as they often occur in variant related forms and remain highly recognizable even when truncated and manipulated. Currency and familiarity allow recognition of proverbs even in varied and abbreviated form: hence the use of recognizable chunks like *early bird* in contexts like *the early bird satellite* and *early bird air fares* (numerous examples in the internet) Proverbs provide convenient structures for manipulation to create original statements, as in this example from CNN market analysis: *The early investor catches the bargain stocks*. Note in particular the tendency to literalization of the proverb image here. See Mieder (2007), Mieder (1982) and Mieder/Litovkina (1999) on the modification of proverbs into *anti-proverbs* in discourse.

Finally, as Moon (1998) argues, transformability has now become a statistical corpus fact rather than an intuitive game. Corpus investigations show that some set phrases, including proverbs, tend to appear in certain variant forms while others do not. This discussion of recognizability despite manipulation leads naturally into the following section on proverbs in discourse.

1.4.10 Discourse Features

Moon (1998) presents statistics from computer counts showing that proverbs are both comparatively rare and variable, but they are still recognizable to members of the language community. Moon stresses the correlations between frequency, form, type of idiomaticity and discourse function. Very frequent items like *at least* and *of course* tend to be functional and not fully lexical, frozen collocations rather than metaphorical, while colourful, stylistically marked and metaphorical expressions like proverbs are rare and often manipulated in contexts where they appear; see also Moon (2007).

Proverbs are statistically infrequent in corpora counts, because of the kinds of corpora available and the way computer programs search, but also due to the nature of proverb use itself, as Norrick (2007) argues. First, proverbs are often bound to contexts poorly represented in corpora, e.g. oral storytelling, everyday face-to-face talk. Second, proverbs occur in variants, as noted above, and these go unrecognized in computer searches (numerous examples in the internet, e.g. *early bird airfares* and *like a rolling stone*). Third, proverbs really are infrequent compared to gambits, prefabs, binomials, collocations like: (*do you*) *know what?*, *by and large*, *ins and outs* and *in short*.

Nevertheless, proverbs remain recognizable to native speakers, due, first, to their cultural salience and value as folk wisdom and bearers of traditional lore. Second, proverbs occur in prominent discourse positions like speech summaries and story closings with evaluation functions. In argumentation, as Wirrer (1998) shows, proverbs create a canonical specialization of topoi like the *busy bee*. Third, proverbial utterances are often foregrounded with special voice shifts and intonation speech and marked with framing devices like *we always say* and *as the saying goes*. As little recurrent texts in themselves, proverbs represent highly marked, “strongly coded” (Meleuc, 1972) structures, e.g. prosody (rhyme, alliteration, rhythm), rhetorical strategies (hyperbole, paradox, personification, metaphor), proverb formulas: *like N like N* and *the A-er the A-er*, special syntax and lexis: *Them as has gits* and *Look what the cat drug in*.

Finally, because they are highly codified and easily recognizable, proverbs often serve as templates for creative manipulation, and hence they appear in forms unrecognizable to a computer search. For instance, in a conversation reported in Norrick (1993), a participant comments on a recipe for tofu potato casserole by saying, *that’s like the bland leading the bland*. The original form of the proverb allusion appears in Matthew 15,14: *If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch*, but perhaps more frequent is the form *Like the blind leading the blind*. Either way, the full proverb provides a serviceable structure for creation of a new utterance. Consider also *I’d rather have some ten million in the hand than one million in the bush* in the passage from the London Lund Corpus (Svartvik & Quirk, 1980) below, where *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush* presumably served as template.

- B: fine.
I mean it’s not that I want to,
A: no, no no no, no, oh no.
but it seems absolutely fixed now.
B: and I’d rather have,
some ten million in the hand,
than than the one million in the bush.
um but,
A yes, yes of course.
B I think this is highly unlikely.

- and uh I I'm I'm personally assuming,
that uh a million in the bush,
is more likely to happen.
- A yes, yes, literally.
B yeah.
A in the bush.
B {laughs} yes. I think I know.

The proverb provides not only the initial allusion in lines 6-7, but the phrase *a million in the bush* in speaker B's next turn (line 12) and the phrase *in the bush* for speaker A (line 16). Note also the proverbial framing device *literally* in line 14 here produced by speaker A in response to the proverbial allusion. Neither this nor the previous allusion would, of course, be picked up in a computer search, yet allusions and variations like these are probably the most common occurrences of proverbs in discourse.

As noted in section 2.5 on fixed form, proverbs often appear along with other set phrases, e.g., *you know*, *they say*, *an apple a day*. There are standard frames like *one should*, *you should* and *always* which often fill out imperative structures in proverbs, rendering, say, *Keep your nose to the grindstone* as *You should keep your nose to the grindstone* or *Always keep your nose to the grindstone*. Proverbs in discourse are also frequently bracketed by various proverbial affixes like *they say*; *I always say*; *as the saying goes* and so on. In addition, framing devices like *literally* frequently occur in proverbial discourse contexts, and speakers generally set proverbs off from the surrounding discourse in various ways, as Hain (1951), Czermák (1998) and Moon (1998) demonstrate. Clearly more research is needed in this area, not just to determine how proverbs are varied with formulas like *you should* and *always*, but also to see how framing devices like *as the saying goes* and *literally* function in context.

Most of the foregoing discussion holds for proverbial phrases as well, defined as figurative but incomplete clauses (versus collocations, idioms, clichés) or, again, via prototypes like *as smooth as silk* for proverbial similes and *to live high on the hog* for verbal phrases. Proverbial phrases, too, occur rarely and in variant forms, specially marked and set off from their discourse contexts in various ways. Just as the *proverbial worm turns*, we also find people *living high on the proverbial hog*.

The patterns of frequency, salience and recognizability all hang together. Proverbs and proverbial phrases are not frequent, but highly noticeable, because they are salient in context, frequently foregrounded, easily remembered, and so they can be varied and serve as templates but still remain recognizable. By contrast, frequent phrases like *of course* and *at all* go unnoticed despite their frequency and because of their nondescript form.

1.5 Conclusion

Proverbs have been studied from folkloristic, linguistic and lexicographic perspectives with varying methods and goals, resulting in diverse terminologies, sometimes overlapping, sometimes complementary. Various attempts to define the proverb and proverbiality have met with differing degrees of success, but there is fairly general agreement about the basic groups of proverbs and their salient features.

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