

PROVERBS IN THE SYSTEM OF LANGUAGE AND THEIR CREATIVE USE: A CROSS-CULTURAL VIEW

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Abstract

Proverbs form part and parcel of intangible cultural heritage. They are handed down from generation to generation and retained in the collective long-term memory of a people, constituting part of their language and culture. The purpose of this paper is to revisit proverbs and examine some of their essential features in the system of language and in their creative use in discourse from a cross-language and a cross-cultural perspective. This approach calls for semantic and stylistic analyses of empirical material, which I have chosen from my own archive of English and Latvian proverbs.

Linguistic examination of proverbs promotes an understanding of their functioning across the broad spectrum of languages and cultures, bringing out similarities in the figurative structure of their base form and their stylistic use in various types of discourse. Cognitive linguistic research on proverbs reveals an infinite diversity of expression of figurative thought: a manifestation of the capacity of the human mind for abstraction and generalisation. The study of figurative meaning of proverbs and its changes in discourse accounts for the uniqueness of their stylistic use in text, which lies in the creativity of the cognitive mind. Stylistic use of the same proverb and the same stylistic pattern yields a different creative form of expression. Novel stylistic instantiations emerge in discourse as a reflection of the development of figurative thought.

Keywords: *proverb, cognitive linguistics, metaphor, conceptual metaphor, collective long-term memory.*

Introduction

When studying my empirical material, I have performed cognitive linguistic analysis of proverbs to account for their figurative meaning and types of figuration in the system of language. For the purposes of cognitive semantic analysis, I have relied

on the method of identification¹ of figurative meaning in discourse [Naciscione 2001: 33–46, 2010: 43–55, 252]. The procedure is applied in order to establish the identity of the proverb and explore its use, including instantial stylistic use.² In the process of identification, the stages – *recognition* > *verification* > *comprehension* > *interpretation* – form integral parts of a unified cognitive process. I have also used the method of critical metaphor analysis [Charteris-Black 2004, 2014], as it integrates linguistic analysis with cognitive understanding and social context. I agree that “no single methodology is privileged over others or considered the gold standard of investigation” [Talmy 2007: xi]. When researching proverbs, one method cannot meet all the challenges, as proverbs are a complicated multidimensional figurative phenomenon.

A cognitive perspective of proverbs

My approach to proverbs is cognitive linguistic when examining base forms³ in the system of language and their functioning in core use⁴, and when analysing instantial stylistic use in discourse. Cognitive linguists have researched the human ability to think figuratively – an essential characteristic of the human mind. In the cognitive view, proverbs arise from figurative thought: they are linguistic manifestations of figurative thought, including the cognitive skills of abstraction and generalisation. I rely on the findings of cognitive linguistics about the role of metaphor in figurative

¹ In this century, the term *identification* has been used in research as a method for identifying figurative language material and its use. Although I published it in my first book in 2001, I actually formulated and applied it when I was faced with the task of identifying all phraseological units in the *Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (3610 in number) and all cases of their creative use for my dissertation. This method perfectly suits the needs of analysing phraseological units, proverbs included.

Steen [2002a, 2002b] demonstrates a five-step procedure of metaphor identification, later developed by the Pragglejazz Group [2007].

Charteris-Black explores metaphor identification as one of the four principal stages of critical metaphor analysis [2004, 2014: 174–186].

² Instantial stylistic use is a particular instance of a unique stylistic application of a PU in discourse resulting in significant changes in its form and meaning, determined by the thought and the context. An instantiation is a specific instance of a stylistic realisation in discourse. It is an infinite resource for the writer's or speaker's creativity [Naciscione 2010: 252].

³ The form to which other forms of the PU can be related and with which they can be compared, in practice is the dictionary form and meaning, recorded as the headphrase. It is the form of the PU outside discourse, used as a base when assessing PUs used in discourse. The base form is stored in the long-term memory of the language user.

⁴ Core use is use of a PU in its most common form and meaning. In its core use the PU does not acquire additional stylistic features in discourse and does not exceed the boundaries of one sentence, the same as the base form.

language in general and the function of conceptual mappings in proverbs and their use in particular [Gibbs 1994: 310–317].

The cognitive metaphor theory is a framework “for understanding the pervasiveness of metaphorical language and thought across a wide range of cognitive domains and cultural/linguistic environments” [Gibbs 2017: 6]. Studies by cognitive psychologists and neuropsychologists [Gibbs 1994, 2008, Lakoff 2008] have proved that proverbs conceptualise personal and social experiences, human behaviour, abstract thought, and the external world. Their research reveals how people think and their ability to think and reason abstractly [Gibbs and Beitel 2003: 109–115]. It is cognitive processes that determine stylistic changes of proverbs in actual use and the emerging new meaning in discourse that reflects our ongoing thoughts.

Proverbs in the focus of different fields of research

Proverb lore presents an enormous wealth of empirical material in different languages. Every language may boast innumerable proverbs of various structural types and an admirable diversity of imagery and lexical composition. Proverbs have been researched from many points of view: folklore, anthropology, etymology, ethics, philosophy, culture, mass media, social sciences and several others. This opens up a broad field of investigation and yields different definitions. In research, the theoretical stance explains the great differences in attitudes and approaches to proverbs and their use. The theoretical perspective will be implicit in research questions and dictate the researcher’s choice of methodology.

Cognitively, proverbs reflect the whole gamut of human thoughts and emotions, and the external world with its various personal, political, social and cultural experiences. Proverbs are viewed as a complicated and multidimensional phenomenon, displaying “multiple facets of human experience” [Gibbs 2017: 7].

In Latvian research, proverbs are explored as part of folklore [Kokare 1957]. They are qualified as folk expressions, including aphorisms, conveying ethical and aesthetic values, firmly linked with Latvian culture and hence valued as part of the intangible Latvian heritage.

In lexicographical practice, Latvian dictionaries also classify proverbs as folklore. For example, *ne mana cūka, ne mana druva* (folkl.)¹. (It is not my pig and it is not my cornfield (folklore). The meaning is: I couldn’t care less.)

The theory of Latvian stylistics tends to be conventional, striving to achieve correctness, precision and purity, and stipulating that only neutral vocabulary should

¹ Latviešu valodas skaidrojošā vārdnīca (Dictionary of the Latvian Language). *Cūka* (a pig). Available: <https://www.vardnica.lv/svesvardu-vardnica/c/cuka> (viewed 05.04.2019.)

be used in official style: official speeches, business and scientific texts [Rozenbergs 2004: 57, 84]. As proverbs are figurative language units, clearly this prescription refers not only to single metaphors but also to proverbs. Accordingly, this approach has also been introduced in school books to teach Latvian official style and ensure that literary language norms are strictly observed¹.

A linguistic approach to proverbs

Linguistic aspects of proverbs have been less researched by far, or even completely neglected. Linguistic and stylistic interest in proverbs goes back to Aristotle. In his seminal book “Rhetoric”, Aristotle regards proverbs as figurative formations and formulates the basic tenet that “proverbs too are metaphors from species to species” [(350 BC) 1833].

The development of paremiology as a special area of proverb research emerged at the beginning of the 1930s. Taylor is universally recognised as the father of paremiological scholarship. His ground-breaking work “The Proverb” [1931] presents a systematic linguistic study of proverb issues. He also examines the folk character of proverbs, indicating that a proverb is a saying current among the folk. The same thought is expressed by Whiting, who emphasises the popular origin of proverbs. Moreover, he believes that proverbs are felt to be common property as they convey a generalisation [Whiting 1931, 1968].

The post-war period has witnessed rapid development in proverb studies. Mieder’s research represents a huge contribution to the development of paremiology in numerous aspects [1989, 1993]. This is invaluable not only for the general advancement of paremiology as a special field of research but has also provided motivation and encouragement to many researchers in various areas of paremiology.

The basic linguistic understanding of proverbs in both the system of language and their stylistic use will promote an understanding of their functioning across a wide diversity of languages and cultures, bringing out similarities in the semantic figurative structure of their base form and their stylistic use in various types of discourse.

Proverbs as part of phraseology

As language units, proverbs belong to phraseology. This premise was advanced by Kunin, a leading representative of the Russian school of phraseology [Kunin 1970, 1986]. Proverbs are stable figurative language units, forming one of the structural types of phraseological units.

¹ *Latviešu valoda. Stilistika, 6. klase: teorija, uzdevumi un testi* (The Latvian Language. Stylistics Form 6: Theory, Exercises and Tests). Available: <https://www.uzdevumi.lv/p/latviešu-valoda> (viewed 12.02.2019.)

The theory of stability in phraseological units (proverbs included) was elaborated by Kunin in the 1960s. Kunin singles out stability of use, structural-semantic stability, lexical stability, morphological stability and syntactical stability [Kunin 1970: 89–110]. I would argue for two other important aspects of the concept of stability: 1) stylistic stability, which is manifest in preservation of the same image and type of figurativeness, and 2) diachronic stability, which displays the stability of proverbs across time [Naciscione 2010: 58]. Stability of the base form does not contradict the dynamic stylistic changes that proverbs may undergo in discourse.

Linguistically, I hold that proverbs are stable, cohesive combinations of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning and the structure of a sentence [Naciscione 2010: 19, 2013b: 16–19]. In the system of language, proverbs are standard out-of-context units. In their base form, they never exceed the boundaries of one sentence (declarative, interrogative or exclamatory). However, instantial stylistic use usually covers more than one sentence, frequently going across boundaries of paragraphs and chapters, as figurative thought does not stop at the end of a sentence.

In the cognitive semantic view, proverbs present original images used in a creative way, reflecting unique emotional and social experiences of people, their observations and generalisations of thoughts, behaviour and the world around them. They form part of the collective long-term memory of a people due to their semantic and stylistic cohesion.

Importantly, proverbs are not a stylistic void in their base form: their figurative meaning may be based on different stylistic patterns or a combination of these [Naciscione 2010: 36–38]. Figurativeness is one of the inherent features of proverbs and stipulates that at least one of their constituents must have a figurative meaning. Stylistic features play a cohesive role along with stability of the unit. Let me illustrate the main types of stylistic patterns in proverbs:

~ metaphor, e.g., EN *There is no smoke without fire.* LV *Tukša muca tālu skan.*

(An empty barrel makes much noise. Meaning: Empty boasting.)

~ metonymy, e.g., EN *Two heads are better than one.* LV *Labā roka nezina, ko kreisā dara.* (The right hand does not know what the left hand is doing (a proverb in EN too)).

~ personification, e.g., EN *Money talks.* LV *Nelaiime nenāk viena.* (Misfortune does not come alone.)

~ antithesis, e.g., EN *Less is the new more.* LV *Mazs cinītis gāž lielu vezumu.*

(A small grassy knoll overturns a big cartful. Meaning: Little strokes fell great oaks (a proverb in EN)).

~ euphemism, e.g., EN *Heads will roll.* LV *Dienas ir skaitītas.* (Someone's days are numbered.)

~ hyperbole, e.g., EN *A watched pot never boils*. LV *Nav kur adatai nokrist*. (No place for a needle to fall).

Attitudes to proverbs and their use, especially creative use, vary from country to country. For instance, in Africa widespread use of proverbs both in written form and orally, including official public speeches, is seen as a sign of wisdom and a great sense of humour, which is much appreciated. The importance of and love for proverbs form a common thread that unites Africa's diverse societies. They are a vital part of African oral tradition and actual use, including all stylistic levels, e.g.

~ *A good leader was once a good follower.*

~ *Chattering birds build no nests.*

~ *You don't teach a giraffe to run.*

In Africa, proverbs are taught at school. For instance, in Zimbabwe oral teaching of proverbs as ancestral insight starts before teaching reading at school, that is, starting from Form 1. Interestingly, following Mieder's idea, the USA and a number of European countries have compiled a paremiological minimum to be taught at different stages of the school curriculum.

To sum up, in the cognitive view, proverbs arise from figurative thought: they are linguistic manifestations of figurative thought and the human ability to think figuratively, including the cognitive skills of abstraction and generalisation.

Instantial stylistic use of proverbs

In their base form, proverbs demonstrate the human ability of abstraction, the same as other structural types of PUs, while creative use proverbs lie in the human ability to create novel stylistic instantiations that emerge in discourse as a reflection of the development of figurative thought. This is the result of cognition. In cognitive linguistic terms, instancial stylistic use is a mode of conceptualisation. Proverbs are dynamic in discourse, e.g.,

Love is blind.

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;

And therefore is winged Cupid painted **blind**:

Nor hath **Love's** mind of any judgement taste;

Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste.

William Shakespeare

Diachronic records reveal that this proverb has existed throughout the course of history, functioning both in core use and in creative instantiations. It has been part

of the mental lexicon of people across the centuries due to the stability of its structure and figurative meaning. Moreover, this proverb is a metaphorical generalisation, reflecting people's social and individual experience.¹

These lines are based on the stylistic pattern of allusion. The metaphorical image of the base form of the proverb is extended, providing metonymic links of contiguity and performing a sustainable cohesive text-embracing function. Let me give another example of creative use of proverbs, drawn from MoE political discourse:

You can't have your cake and eat it.

This scenario will in the first instance be painful for Britons. In fact, the words uttered by one of the leading campaigners for Brexit and proponents of the "cake philosophy" was pure illusion: that one can **have the EU cake and eat it too**. To all who believe in it, I propose a simple experiment. Buy **a cake, eat it**, and see if it is still there on the plate.

The brutal truth is that Brexit will be a loss for all of us. There will be no cakes on the table. For anyone. There will be only salt and vinegar.

Donald Tusk, *Speech at the European Policy Centre*, 13.10.2016.

It is common knowledge that inferences are constantly drawn not only from what is overtly said but also from what is implied. This is a more complicated case of allusion. The proverb does not appear in its full form in the whole of the keynote address (the same as in the example above). The explicit image-bearing constituents of the proverb perform a metonymic function, acting like a recall cue alluding to the proverb, providing a web of associative links and securing sustained associative vision, enabling the reader or listener to see beyond words. The pattern of allusion may involve other stylistic patterns to make the associations work. In this instantiation, allusion involves punning on the metaphorical meaning of the proverb and the literal meanings of its constituents, presented ironically. The proverb has become a recurring part of the Brexit debate, exploited for sustained reasoning and argumentation. Allusion is frequently used in political speeches today. While it is a subtle reference, it is also a powerful strategy; it can be highly concise and economical, using very little language to convey semantic and stylistic subtleties of the issue involved.

Extended metaphor is another widespread pattern of stylistic use of proverbs. My empirical material reveals that proverbs function in different discourses for

¹ In English, the proverb *Love is blind* was first recorded in 1386: Chaucer, *CT, The Merchant's Tale*, l. 354. For **love is blind** al day, and m a y n a t s e e. However, diachronic evidence has it that the proverb was well-known in Ancient Greece. Theocritus, an ancient Greek poet, uses it in *Idyll* x 19 in the 3rd century BC. In the Old Latin Period, it is recorded in the plays of the Roman playwright Plautus (2nd century BC) [Simpson 1992: 58].

different purposes as they easily lend themselves to extensions and variations. This proceeds from their imagery and conceptual nature. Extension of the proverbial image is usually achieved in search of a novel, more accurate expression of human thought and experience, e.g.,

LV **Ūdens smeļas mutē.** (Water is rising up to one's mouth.)

Tādas lietas tagad, draugs, sev var atļauties tikai ministri un baņķieri. Nabaga tirgotājam jāķepurojas, lai **ūdens nesmeļas mutē**, citādi nogrimsi, pat lāga burbuļus nepasisidams.

Pāvils Rozītis

(Such things now, my friend, can only be afforded by ministers and bankers. The poor merchant must desperately struggle so that water should not get into his mouth, otherwise he will sink, without even having made any bubbles.)

Extension of a common proverb serves to form a sustained figurative thought, providing space for creativity. Each extension presents admirable diversity and striking turns of phrase, involving unexpected sub-images, which at the same time are firmly linked to the base metaphor of the proverb:

LV **Dzīve ir teātris.** (Life is theatre.)

Dzīve ir teātris, kurā neviens nezina scenāriju, bet visi lien aizkulisēs, lai pildītu sufliera pienākumus.

(Life is theatre, in which no one knows the scenario, but everyone pushes on to get behind the scenes to perform the prompter's duties.)

IR, 04.10. 2018., p. 54

Empirical observations reveal how extended metaphor works as a structure of figurative thought and language in different cultures and languages in different periods of their development; hence, use of extended metaphor does not depend on the peculiarities of a particular language or the stage of its development. As a structure of thought, extended metaphor forms part of the mental structures of the mind. It is a mode of reflecting extension of a proverbial thought. A cross-language and cross-culture view reveals that proverbs are an integral part of the human conceptual system.

Proverbs and conceptual metaphors

Proverbs reflect our metaphorical conceptualisation of experience. Hence, as figurative units, many proverbs are motivated by conceptual metaphors. Moreover,

“proverb understanding involves conceptual mapping” [Gibbs 1994: 314]. Conceptual metaphors serve as motivation for proverbs and their mental imagery [Gibbs, Strom, Spivey-Knowlton 1997: 81–110]. Cf.:

**Metaphorical Conceptualisation of Experience:
Proverbs versus Conceptual Metaphors**

Proverbs EN	Conceptual Metaphors EN & LV	Proverbs LV
Love is fire.	LOVE IS FIRE. MĪLESTĪBA IR UGUNŠ.	Mīlestība ir uguns.
Love is blind.	LOVE IS BLIND. MĪLESTĪBA IR AKLA.	Mīlestība ir akla.
Time is a value.	TIME IS VALUE. LAIKS IR VĒRTĪBA.	Laiks ir vērtība.
Time is money.	TIME IS MONEY. LAIKS IR NAUDA.	Laiks ir nauda.
Time is a thief.	TIME IS A THIEF. LAIKS IR ZAGLIS.	Laiks ir zaglis.
Life is theatre.	LIFE IS THEATRE. DZĪVE IR TEĀTRIS.	Dzīve ir teātris.
Patience is a virtue.	PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE. PACIETĪBA IR TIKUMS.	Pacietība ir tikums.
Life is not a bed of roses.	LIFE IS NOT A BED OF ROSES. –	–
Life is not a rose garden.	LIFE IS NOT A ROSE GARDEN. DZĪVE NAV ROŽU DĀRZS.	Dzīve nav rožu dārzs.

A number of scholars have noted the closeness between certain proverbs and conceptual metaphors. Apart from abstraction and a certain degree of generalisation, in many cases the syntactical structure of proverbs – conciseness of expression and brevity of form – bears a discernible similarity to conceptual metaphors.

Proverbs frequently contain metaphorical meanings which have been formulated over the centuries. “Metaphors provide a general mechanism for understanding the general in terms of the specific” [Gibbs 1994: 313], which is “one of the key features of proverbs” [ibid.]. I would argue that it is also one of the key features of conceptual metaphors. This explains the affinity between proverbs and metaphors.

It is apparent that not all proverbs present a distinct link to conceptual metaphors. For instance, the proverbs *Truth is a lonely warrior* and *Truth is a hard taskmaster* are stable metaphorical units in the system of language; however, they

have not been identified as conceptual metaphors. Clearly, these concepts are not widespread in English. In Latvian they do not exist at all.

The links between conceptual metaphors and proverbs certainly call for further exploration, based on ample empirical material and cognitive linguistic research.

Conclusion

Paremiology requires a cognitive understanding of proverbs as figurative units in thought and language, and their use and instantial development in discourse. A linguistic view of proverbs invariably explores linguistic categories and their functioning. However, as an interdisciplinary search it also needs to acquire significant insights into proverbs, drawing on stylistics, cognitive linguistics, history of language, discourse studies and others, all of which open up new avenues for further research and offer vast opportunities for the creative mind of paremiologists.

In cognitive semantic terms, the proverb is one of the modes of conceptualising the world and human experience. New inimitable stylistic cases of use reflect the creative development of figurative thought. A cognitive approach helps to explain instantiations of stylistic patterns (extended metaphor, allusion and others) in discourse. Extension of figurative meaning reveals the workings of the human mind and discloses the art and craft of creation. Stylistic use of proverbs facilitates cognition.

Proverbs need to be studied as part of the conceptual system of language. A cognitive approach to proverbs calls for further exploration of their semantic structure, functioning across languages, centuries and cultures.

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