

## ON UNDERSTANDING PROVERBS

**GORDANA MIKULIĆ**

Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Filozofski fakultet  
Centar za jezičnu nastavu  
41000 Zagreb, Đ. Salaja 3

**398: 82 - 7. 01**

Izvorni znanstveni rad  
Original scientific paper  
Primljeno: 15. 12. 1991.

### *1. Introduction*

*The paper addresses the issue of proverbs as interpreted and understood by American students studying Croatian.*

*The aim of the paper is more to highlight the problem of such an investigation - in particular with respect to methodological issues - than to reach and propose far reaching conclusions.*

#### 1.1. Proverb as Folklore Item

"The proverb is a traditional statement passed on in a fixed form and assumed to convey some ethical or philosophical truth or some wise observation about life, the world or human nature" (Caro, 1986).

This definition given from the ethnological point of view, stresses four characteristics of the proverb: tradition, fixed form, oral transmission, and content.

All these characteristics have been repeatedly identified by scholars as defining characteristics of proverbs, but at the same time there is still no definition that would be generally accepted, "the definition that would give their (paremiologists') subject that longed for precision that would transform it from an ad hoc collection of disjointed information into a rigorous discipline" (Barley, 1974).

"In view of the considerable attention which the proverb has continued to receive, it comes as a surprise to learn that 'proverb' has never been adequately defined" (Dundeas, 1975). A. Taylor, a famous paremiologist, begins his book on proverbs with the following pessimistic statement: "The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking. An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not" (Taylor, 1962). Whiting takes more or less the same attitude:

"Happily no definition is really necessary since all of us know what a proverb is" (Whiting, 1952). But as Dundeas rightly wonders "it seems incredible that, if all of us do know what a proverb is, someone could not articulate this common knowledge" (Dundeas, 1975). Be that as it may, one could hardly agree that we could altogether dispense with the definition of proverb. On the contrary it could be argued that even a most tentative definition of the proverb is necessary, at least to any proverb research.

Let's dwell for a little while on the defining proverb features as quoted in the above definition.

According to Abraham's definition (Abraham, 1975), folklore is "traditional items of knowledge which arise in recurring performances". Like all folklore then, proverbs are traditional.

However, the fixed form of the proverbs might be argued. Changing times and situations require different forms of expressions. So, the old traditional proverb forms are submitted to innovative applications. The quotation of proverbs in original wording (their fixed form) is by no means the most frequent use of this folklore genre today (Bošković-Stulli, 1983). But even in their altered form proverbs retain their appeal for authority and claim for truth. In addition, a twisted proverb will serve even better than the original as an attention getter, a very important point for example for a newspaper headline or an advertisement. In this use proverbs undergo all sorts of syntactic and semantic changes (Dim bez vatre?; Dobro je jer se dobro završilo; Ima dima i bez vatre. Stulli, 1983) but their familiar ring is never destroyed.

As to their oral transmission one can also argue that proverbs today are hardly very active items in our verbal repertoire. It comes as no surprise in view of the fact that our culture emphasizes the value of originality and creativity. Nevertheless, we continue to know and understand proverbs. The point is that they are today less frequently used in their traditional way, i.e. as a didactic piece of wisdom, as a part of ordinary conversation.

But only a look at the newspaper headlines, advertisements, cartoons, etc., will prove that proverbs still are by far the most popular folklore genre used in mass media. The reason for this preferential treatment of proverbs lies in the basic fact that they satisfy the need for shortness, simplicity, and conciseness, their function being to inspire trustworthiness in the reader by awaking his positive traditional feelings. After all, in such use the proverb as a traditional folklore genre is still very much alive. It is true that we may dismiss the traditional passed down proverbs as clichés; nevertheless it cannot be denied that the proverb can be an effective tool if employed shrewdly.

It can't be denied that proverbs, as all forms of folklore, reveal something of society's morals, values, and attitudes. People always think of proverbs as having something to do with morality.

Although it can hardly be assumed that an analysis of a culture's proverbs may provide a picture of that culture's moral system (Sapir & Crocker, 1977) nevertheless proverbs do have a meaningful content and it may still be possible to draw some conclusions about values and attitudes by analyzing that content and studying it cross - culturally to see how proverbs of different cultures depict the same limited area of concern.

### 1.2. Proverb Investigations

The study of proverbs has attracted a great number of scholars from varying disciplines: linguistics, philosophy, ethnography, anthropology, cognitive psychology, sociology etc. Most of the scholarship tended to be historical in emphasis. Commonly the goal was to discover proverb cognates among peoples with related languages or to propose possible places and times of origin for individual proverbs. In the last twenty years there has been a shift away from purely historical and literary investigations in the direction of other aspects of proverbs. Thus the concrete contexts in which proverbs are used have been studied and content analysis has been made in an attempt to correlate proverb content with national character in order to extrapolate world view. In linguistics an increasing concern with linguistic performance and pragmatics and an increasing interest in the nature of text have resulted in more attention being paid to non-literal, that is, figurative uses of language.

The study of the processes involved in the comprehension of figurative language, especially metaphors and proverbs, not only constitutes an interesting challenge in itself, but the specification of proverbs constitutes also a good test for the power of theories of language comprehension in general.

In the area of "applied folklore" proverbs have been used as diagnostic tools. As early as 1908 Bühler began the experimental psychological use of proverbs to study thought. Though this tack was abandoned after Bühler, proverbs since then have been used to measure psychopathology and to assess intelligence. For example, schizophrenic patients give notoriously literal interpretations of proverbs if they give any at all (Benjamin, 1974). Some norms established through the Stanford-Binet test indicate that almost all children younger than 11 yrs and the majority of adults, have difficulty interpreting even familiar proverbs (McNemar, 1942). A high correlation has been shown between intelligence and ability to interpret proverbs: the average adult performance on the Stanford-Binet proverb sub-test correlates about .75 with full scale performance (Terman & Merrill, 1973).

There is hardly any research done, at least to our knowledge, on comprehension, of either proverbs or figurative language in general, in the foreign language area.

### 2. The Aim of Research

The purpose of the present study was to test the second language learners' comprehension of proverbs. The research was designed to test to what extent the second language learners are capable of coping with complex structural and figurative structures of proverbs without adequate context, especially those which have no counterparts in English, in other words, proverbs which are culturally specific.

The research started from the postulate made by Honeck et al. that proverbs are "knowledge driven" as opposed to metaphors which are "context-driven". The process of

reading comprehension is construed in terms of the schema theory of knowledge representation in memory as proposed by Rumelhart & Ortony (1977).

The schema theory postulates interacting knowledge structures called schemata. Schemata are data structures for representing the generic concepts stored in memory. They exist for generalized concepts underlying object situations, events, actions. A schema contains the network of interrelationships that is believed generally to hold among the constituents of the concept in question.

As a subject reads he invokes several schemata in order to comprehend it. If the schemata are semantically very remote or non-existent or irrelevant schemata are activated, the result will not be satisfactory.

Thus it might be hypothesized that subjects interpreting proverbs out of context will fail to do so successfully if they lack the necessary cultural knowledge, in other words necessary schemata, crucial for proverb's interpretation.

### 3. Method

The experiment involved testing the quality of interpretation of each of sixty proverbs as well as the knowledge of their counterparts in English. Proverbs were chosen as the test material because they represent part of the language medium in both cultures, because they contain complex figurative structures and because they are self-contained.

### 4. Subjects

Seven Yale university graduates and three Harvard undergraduates—seven women and three men—participated in the experiment. Their mean age was 24,5. All the students have been learning Croatian through three years.

### 5. Materials

Sixty proverbs have been used as test materials. To ensure the present currency of the proverbs and to eliminate personal preference, the material was composed of a number of randomly selected proverbs identified in the daily newspaper *Vjesnik* from 1974 through 1978 (Bošković-Stulli, 1983). In addition four native speakers gave lists of what they considered currently used proverbs. The lists were paired with the proverbs found in the newspapers and only those appearing in both sources were singled out.

The subjects were given lists of proverbs and the standard meaning of all the words to ensure that unknown words would not be the cause of misunderstanding or misinterpretations.

The subjects were instructed to interpret the figurative meaning of proverbs in English and give, if they knew, the equivalent proverb expressing the same idea in English. The time was limited to two hours.

The hypothesis was tested by three variables:

1. the knowledge of the adequate English equivalent
2. the type of the implied structure
3. the type of the figure of speech employed

#### 5.1. First variable - a knowledge of the English counterpart

The quality of the interpretation was rated by three judges, natives of Croatian. The interpretations were rated as: excellent (5), good (4), mediocre (3), poor (2), and unrelated (1). A missing interpretation was assigned zero (0). If the student did not interpret the proverb because she/he considered it self-explanatory and instead of offering an interpretation gave only an English equivalent, the interpretation was rated as zero, because even normally literal sayings can take on figurative meanings in certain contexts whereby they become proverbs. As for example, the proverb "Kako došlo, tako prošlo" (Easy come, easy go) could be uttered with reference to the person's job, or reputation rather than simply to his money, as is usually supposed. Without an explicit interpretation, we could not assume that a figurative meaning was deciphered.

Another problem was related to what the standard meaning of some proverbs was. It comes as no surprise since available collections of proverbs do not offer any meanings so the judges had to rely on their personal opinions. But prior to the discussion and clearance of certain points, judges were by no means in consensus in some cases.

One of the debatable proverbs was "Zlato se u vatri, a čovjek u nevolji poznaje". (You test gold in fire, and man in trouble).

Several students gave as an English equivalent the proverb "A friend in need is a friend indeed". The raters disagreed as to the appropriateness of the offered proverb. The question arose as to "Who is in trouble? A friend or a man who has to prove himself as being a man. The proverb "A friend in need..." would be appropriate only if the former is the case. The disagreement also arose in the case of the almost synonymous proverb: "Na mucu se poznaju junaci". Again "Tko je na mucu?" (Who is in trouble?)

Another ambiguous proverb was "I vuk sit i koza cijela". When the proverb is used in its non-elliptical form "Ne može biti i vuk sit i koza cijela", the meaning seems to be fairly clear: A is incompatible with B but in the elliptical form the meaning is far from clear. Some native speakers interpret it in the same way as the non-elliptical form and some as a Solomonic decision.

Interestingly enough, the students who interpreted it at all, did it in the meaning: "Both sides are satisfied". It may be speculated that a shift in world view has influenced the change in meaning - perhaps people today are more apt to compromise and look for midway solutions. But it remains to be confirmed by research done on the use of proverbs in context.

## 5.2. Second Variable - Structural Analysis

The stable structure of proverbs has been recognized by almost all the scholars dealing with proverbs. Some take it even as a defining characteristic (Barley, 1972; Milner, 1969). Dundees argues that there appears to be a finite number of proverbial, compositional or architectural formulas, relatively independent of image. So underlying structural formulas provide a basis for definition. Thus he divides proverbs into equational (Time is money) and oppositional (Two wrongs don't make a right - Dundees, 1975).

According to Dundees all proverbs are potentially propositions which compare and/or contrast. But Dundees' attempt at definition turns into a system of classification (an error he faults Milner for) based on the presence or absence of opposition. Although this binary system of classification obscures and contradicts his original provision that he would consider structural formulas in his definition, it offers a good pattern for proverb classification. Thus we applied his binary system to classify the proverbs in an attempt to see:

1. what structural types Croatian proverbs exhibit and
2. whether certain structure types are easier to process for the second language learners.

So, all the proverbs were classified according to the equation - opposition criterium and those two groups were then subdivided into several sub-categories. The following categories were recognized:

### Equational

*A is B*

2. Zrno do zrna pogača,  
kamen do kamena palača.

*A causes B*

1. Tko pod drugim jamu kopa,  
sam u nju pada.

2. Tko rano rani,  
dvije sreće grabi.

*If A is present B is present*

1. Nema ruže bez trnja.  
2. U svakom žitu ima kukolja.

### Oppositional

*Negation*

*A # B, A does X but not Y*

1. Šutnja je zlato.

1. Nije zlato sve što sija.

2. Vuk dlaku mijenja ali  
ćud nikada.

*Contrastive pairs*

If you have A you can't have B

1. Puno babica, kilavo dijete.

*Better A than B*

1. Bolje vrabac u ruci nego  
golub na grani.

*Causal*

*a) neg. imp. conveying a prohibition or warning with  
a clause expressing consequence or cause left out*

*Don't do X (because)*

1. Ne dolijevaj ulje na vatru.

*b) effect inappropriate to cause*

1. Tresla se brda rodio se miš.

*c) normal effect being placed before cause*

1. Mi o ražnju a zec u šumi.

*Opposition by implied contrastive pair*

1. Jabuka ne pada daleko od stabla. /nego blizo/

2. Jedna lasta ne čini proljeće. /nego mnogo njih/

Fitting the proverbs into one of the categories was by no means a simple task. Very often there is not a clear cut border between equation and opposition. More often it is a matter of degree than of exclusion. In addition, in some proverbs there are both oppositional and equational features. For example, in an equational proverb "Kako došlo, tako prošlo". there is an equation which implies an identificational feature (kako-tako) but the equation involves "došlo-prošlo" which is clearly oppositional.

In other words the equational structure provides a frame suggesting identification but the content within this frame contains contrastive features.

### 5.3. Third Variable - Figurative Analysis

A quality that has often been considered essential to a proverb is its figurativeness. It is true that proverbs have a strong tendency to make use of figurative language. They abound in all kinds of figures of speech: metaphors, synecdoches, metonymies, hyperboles, etc. Most frequently, however, the whole sentence is a figurative expression of the idea for which it stands (Kuj željezo dok je vruće. Ne sjeci granu na kojoj sjediš.)

Any study of figurative language starts with Aristotle who considered the general relationship of metaphor to language and its purpose in communication. He mentions proverbs as examples of metaphors. Nevertheless he does not specify whether he considers proverbs by definition metaphorical or simply commonly so. This issue has split paremiologists ever since (Taylor, 1975). While some consider figurativeness a common property of proverbs (Seiler, 1952; Taylor, 1962) others consider it a defining characteristic (Barley, 1972).

Figurative analysis of the proverbs in the present study has been decided upon since figures of speech which recur in proverbs should illustrate regular types of synecdochic, metonymic and metaphoric transfer which are standard in language and should be natural in associative thought processes generally. Thus a taxonomy of regular proverbial figures should contribute to overall understanding of figurative language.

On the basis of traditional rhetorical categories the proverbs have been classified into the following categories (Ricoeur, 1977):

1. Scenic species-genus synecdoche when the relation of the literal meaning of the proverb and its interpretation is that of microcosm to macrocosm
2. Metaphoric when the relation of the literal meaning and the interpretation is that of similarity
3. Metonymic when the relation of literal meaning and its interpretation is one of contiguity or correspondence
4. Hyperbolic when the relation of the literal meaning and its interpretation is that of exaggeration
5. Paradoxical when the relation of the literal meaning and its interpretation is that of logical or contingent contradiction

6. The last category entitled "prosodic device" comprises the proverbs with the figures of speech dealing with relations and arrangements of expressions. The proverbs in this category are generally those which are expressions of general truisms. The figures are those of repetition, the use of anthithetic words, the rhyme, the pause, the assonance, the alliteration, the rhythm etc.

*Synechdoche*

1. Ne sjeci granu na kojoj sjediš.
2. Kuj željezo dok je vruće.

*Metonymy*

1. Nema kruha bez motike.
2. Stradao kao Janko na Kosovu.
3. Ne idi kao grlom u jagode.

*Paradox*

1. Nije lijepo što je lijepo,  
nego što je srcu drago.

*Metaphor*

1. Šutnja je zlato.
2. Ne traži kruha nad pogačom.

*Hyperbole*

1. Vuk dlaku mijenja ali ćud nikada.
2. I najdražeg gosta tri dana dosta.
3. U svakom žitu ima kukolja.

*Prosodic devices*

1. Kako doslo, tako proslo.
2. Čovjek snuje a Bog odreduje.
3. Strpljen, spašen.

It must be stated that it was only a very tentative classification because it was shown that proverbs exhibiting two or more figurative processes are more the rule than the exception. Thus, the proverbs were categorized according to the figure that was intuitively felt to be crucial for their interpretation. For example the proverb "Ne idi grlom u jagode" is a scenic specius-genus synechdoche but it was categorized as metonymic since it was supposed that the adequate decoding of metonymic "grlo" was basic for the comprehension of the whole idea. If it were not the case the scenic species-genus synechdoche would by far outnumber the rest of the categories, being category par excellance for proverbs.



## 6. Results and discussion

The experiment demonstrated, as expected, that the subjects scored far better on the proverbs that had their counterpart in English.

The data show a high correlation between the interpretation score and the knowledge of the equivalent proverb in English : 0.65.

Table 1 presents the mean scores of the interpretation and the percentage of students who knew the equivalent in English, for the first seven best interpreted proverbs:

| Table 1<br>Proverb                                                                               | Mean Score | Percentage |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| 1.Nije zlato sve što sija.<br>All that glitters is not gold.                                     | 5.00       | 100%       |
| 2.Sve je dobro što se dobro svrši.<br>All's well that ends well.                                 | 5.00       | 90 %       |
| 3.Šutnja je zlato.<br>Speech is silvern, silence is golden.                                      | 4.96       | 80 %       |
| 4.Bolje spriječiti, nego liječiti.<br>An ounce of prevention is better,<br>than a pound of cure. | 4.86       | 70 %       |
| 5.Kuj željezo, dok je vruće.<br>Strike while the iron is hot.                                    | 4.80       | 70 %       |
| 6.Nema kruha bez motike.<br>No pain, no gain.                                                    | 4.78       | 70 %       |
| 7.Svatko je svoje sreće kovač.<br>Everyone is master of his own fate.                            | 4.75       | 20 %       |

Global analysis of the above proverbs demonstrates that all of the proverbs are general statements about universal human concerns, values and rules for living that are very much present in both cultures. On their literal readings, though, they display differing degrees of generality. Whereas, for example "Kuj željezo..." describes a very specific scene requiring much generalization before it can be figuratively interpreted, "Sve je dobro..." possesses a high degree of generality even on its literal reading. But in both cases a subject has to draw inferences on stored world knowledge. Very often neither figurative nor literal meaning can be determined from the meanings of the individual lexical items. For example, in the dictionary the definition for "gold" is: yellow, non rusting precious metal.

Nothing about it glittering. And that is exactly the quality of gold that the proverb "Nije zlato sve što sija" highlights. But the reader from experience knows this very obvious characteristic of gold so the appropriate schema is immediately invoked and the relation between "zlato" and "sija" established. The subject also knows that the intention of the proverb is not to state such an obvious truism so he/she goes on drawing relevant inferences until he/she eventually comes up with the satisfying

interpretation.

The inferential process also involves resolving of the different metaphoric relations. In the case of almost all the above proverbs the task was easier because not only the proverbs expressing the same idea exist in English but the ideas are communicated through almost the same images. (Though there were examples of proverbs expressed in different images: "Don't judge a book by its cover." for "Nije zlato...") Thus the process of inferencing was very much like the one in the mother tongue. Two of the above proverbs seem to deserve special attention: "Nema kruha..." and "Svatko je svoje...". Though only twenty per cent of the subjects remembered the English counterpart all the interpretations were very good. It might be speculated that the attitudes towards such values as hard work as a means to succeed in life (Nema kruha..) and one's responsibility towards one's own prosperity and success in life (Svatko je...) are deeply grounded in the conceptual system of the Americans. Thus even without remembering or even knowing the proverbs in English, the subjects successfully groped through the metaphoric (kovati sreću) or the metonymic (motika-hard work) expressions to reach the intended meaning.

In this connection it is also interesting to look at the proverbs that 1002 or 902 of the subjects knew (Table 2) although their interpretations were not judged as successful. In addition, they were very consistent in giving one and the same fixed form which with most of the other items was not the case. It is even more surprising considering the fact that the images in most of the proverbs are completely different. This result is consonant with the Honeck et al claim that a conceptual base is imagery free.

Table 2

|                                                 |       |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. | 100%  |
| Bolje vrabac u ruci nego golub na grani.        |       |
| 2. The early bird catches the worm.             | 100 % |
| Tko rano rani, dvije sreće grabi.               |       |
| 3. Out of sight, out of mind.                   | 100 % |
| Daleko od očiju, daleko od srca.                |       |
| 4. You can't have your cake and eat it.         | 100 % |
| Ne možeš imati i ovce i novce.                  |       |
| 5. Everything comes to him who waits.           | 90 %  |
| Tko čeka, taj i dočeka.                         |       |
| 6. (There's) no rose without thorns.            | 90 %  |
| Nema ruže bez trnja.                            |       |

It might be speculated that as the consequence of their still very frequent currency, these proverbs are deeply rooted in the minds of even the younger generation although the morals and values some of them advocate are not amongst the most respected or followed in the culture today. On the other hand, the meaning of the English equivalents

might be considered so transparent that students did not feel it necessary to give interpretations. Their responses would then be coded "0" which would bring down the mean value of the interpretation. This needs to be kept in mind in the design of the future research.

The comparison between the specific type of structure and the interpretation score did not reveal any statistically significant correlation, although there were some differences in the degree of correlation. Table 3 shows the mean values.

Table 3

| Equational      |            | Oppositional       |            |
|-----------------|------------|--------------------|------------|
| Structural type | Mean value | Structural type    | Mean value |
| A is B          | 3.84       | Negation           | 4.34       |
| A causes B      | 3.62       | Antithet. opposit. | 2.60       |
| If A is present |            | Causal             | 3.75       |
| B is present    | 3.33       | Contrs. sem. pair  | 2.30       |

Thus, taken on the whole, the easiest to comprehend were the proverbs where the opposition was expressed by means of a negation, and the most difficult were the ones where the opposition was expressed by means of the implicit semantic pair.

The results seem fairly logical since while overt negation signals the opposition, the recovering of the implicit semantic pair requires elaborative inferences.

Table 4 states the mean values of the comprehension of the different types of the figures of speech. The correlation between a specific figure and the interpretation score was not statistically significant. Yet, the mean differences among the figures were quite high. Thus, the easiest to understand was the hyperbole and the most difficult was metonymy. It can be explained by the fact that hyperbole always exhibited an overt expression of exaggeration which probably helped in its understanding while in the case of metonymy the entity it stood for had to be inferred.

The things became even more complex in the case of culture specific concepts.

Table 4

| Type of figure   | Mean value |
|------------------|------------|
| Synechdoche      | 3.29       |
| Metaphor         | 3.66       |
| Metonymy         | 1.10       |
| Hyperbole        | 4.11       |
| Paradox          | 3.56       |
| Prosodic devices | 2.10       |

The proverbs that were the most difficult to understand are listed in Table 5.

Table 5

| Proverb                                                     | Mean | Structure       | Figure   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----------------|----------|
| 1. Ne idi grlom u jagode.                                   | 0.20 | caus. oppos.    | metonymy |
| 2. Poslije boje kopljem u trnje                             | 0.35 | oppos.sem. pair | metonymy |
| 3. Stradao kao Janko na Kosovu.                             | 0.42 | equat. A is B   | metonymy |
| 4. Ne traži kruha nad pogačom.                              | 0.62 | causal          | metaphor |
| 5. Baba šumom, deda drumom.                                 | 0.70 | oppos. anthit.  | metonymy |
| 6. Dođe maca na vratanca.<br>What goes around comes around. | 0.90 | oppos. sem pair | synech.  |
| In due time the fox is brought to the furrier.              |      |                 |          |
| 7. Tjera vodu na svoj mlin.<br>All's grist to his mill.     | 1.75 | oppos. sem pair | synech.  |

As the examination of the above proverbs shows five of the proverbs have no counterpart in English, at least to our knowledge, for one there is no confirmation in the dictionary (Dole maca..) and in the case of the last proverb the meaning is different in two languages although the image is almost identical.

It is quite obvious that even their literal readings imply a lot of problem solving strategies to account for the comprehension.

If we take for example the proverb "Ne idi grlom u jagode " (Don't go to pick strawberries with your throat as the only container, in other words, unprepared) we see that crucial for its interpretation is the activation of the schema "throat" component referring to its function : swallowing. According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980) the metonymy is not only a referential device but also serves the function of understanding. The part "grlo" was not randomly picked out - it is exactly that part of the whole which performs the function we are focussing on. Lakoff & Johnson also claim that "metonymic concepts structure not just our language but our thoughts, attitudes and actions and... are grounded in our experience.".. If that were the case it might be hypothesized that metonymic relations are difficult to decode if they imply different thought structuring. The subjects definitely did not recognize the above relation as metonymic, the solution of which, we may assume, would have led them to the activation of the "ići u jagode" schema with the container as the salient item.

Some interpretations show that completely irrelevant schemas were invoked: "Take the bull by the horns" or " If you are greedy you'll suffer for it".

"Stradao kao Janko na Kosovu" is another example of the metonymic relation. Here

we have two metonymies "Janko" & "Kosovo". In the minds of the natives Kosovo is associated with the battle at Kosovo in 1389 although the proverb refers to the defeat of Janko Hunjadi who was commander of the Hungarian Army fighting the Turks at Kosovo in 1448. But for the interpretation of the proverb which particular battle is referred to has no relevance since both battles were lost. The important point is that for the interpreter from the other culture the retrieval of the appropriate schemata and consequently the correct interpretation of the metonymy is doomed to failure if some background cultural knowledge is not available.

"Poslije boja kopljem u trnje" is again culture-specific. It refers to some old custom when after the lost battle the commanders used to throw their arms into the bushes after which act the soldiers surrendered. Here again there is a part-whole metonymic relation "koplje-oružje". Radical ellipsis of the proverb was an additional problem (instrumental case instead of the imperative and the accusative : baci koplje!). Only after much inferencing and generalizing the proper schemata can eventually be retrieved and appropriate meaning applicable to "lost argument" arrived at.

The proverb "Ne traži kruha nad pogačom" involves the knowledge of of "pogača" as a symbol of the basics for life. So the literal translation of "pogača" as "round unleavened flat cake" is not of much help. On the contrary it can lead to the activation of completely opposite schemata. The underlying idea of the proverb is: Be satisfied with what you have (with the basics) and don't strive for more. Such an idea might be foreign to the American mind, where the maxim "You will not get anywhere if you don't aim high" is much more familiar.

These few examples demonstrate that the results confirmed the hypothesis we set out to test. The proverbs free of context can be comprehended even by the foreigners if the ideas the proverbs imply or the customs or events are not foreign or unfamiliar to them.

As it was seen, factors such as structural type and figure of speech also affected comprehension. Future research can concentrate on evaluating the respective weights of these factors.

The study has shown that cultural specificity and rhetorical devices affect proverbs' transparency to non-native speakers.

Several methodological issues inherent in the study of proverbs have been identified and approaches to their solution suggested.

Proverbs have been proven to be useful for elicitive information on cultural differences and for understanding figurative speech.

It is hoped that future research will broaden and clarify the results of this early study.

#### REFERENCES

- Abrahams, D.R. (1975). A Sociolinguistic Approach to Proverbs. *Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore*. Vol.1, No 2.
- Aristotle, (1989). *Rectorial*. Naprijed, Zagreb.
- de Caro, F.A. (1986). Riddles & Proverbs. In: *Folk Groups & Folklore Genres. An introduction*, Elliot Oring, Logan Utah.
- Barley, N. (1974). "The Proverb" and Related problems of Genre Definition. *Proverbium*, 23.
- Bošković-Stulli, M. (1983). *Poslovice u zagrebačkom Vjesniku. Usmena književnost nekad i danas*. Prosveta, Beograd.
- Čubelić, T. (1957). *Narodne poslovice i zagonetke*. Zagreb.
- Dundes, A. (1981). On the structure of the proverb. *The Wisdom of Many*. (Eds.) Mieder, W. & Dundes, A.. Garland Publishing, Inc. New York, London.
- Honeck, R.P. et al (1980). *Proverbs, Meaning and Group Structure. Cognition and Figurative Language*. (Eds.) Honeck & Hoffman. LEA, Hillsdale, New Jersey.
- Jolles, A. (1978). *Jednostavni oblici*. Studentski centar Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, Zagreb.
- Kekez, J. ((1984). *Poslovice i njima srodni oblici*. Zavod za znanost o književnosti, Zagreb.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors We Live by*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Ortony, A. (1979). (Ed.) *Metaphor and Thought*. CUP, Cambridge.
- Ricoeur, P. (1978). *The Rule of Metaphor*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and Henley.
- Rumelhart, D.E. & Ortony, A. (1977). *The Representation of Knowledge in Memory*. In: *Schooling and the Acquisition of Knowledge*. (Eds.) Anderson, C.R. & Spiro, J.R. LEA, Hillsdale, New Jersey.
- Sapir, D.J. & Crocker, C. (1977). (Eds.) *The Social Use of Metaphor*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Taylor, A. (1962). *The Proverb*. Folklore Associates, Rosenkilde & Bagger, Hatboro & Kopenhagen.

## O RAZUMIJEVANJU POSLOVICA

### *Sažetak*

U radu se tretiraju neki od faktora koji utječu na razumijevanje poslovice na stranom jeziku.

Iako poslovice kao tradicionalni oblik u svojoj didaktičkoj funkciji nisu više dio svakodnevnog verbalnog repertoira pojedinca, stručna literatura potvrđuje njihovu još uvijek veliku zastupljenost, posebno u medijima, i u hrvatskoj i u američkoj kulturi (Bošković-Stulli, 1983; B. i W. Mieder, 1977).

Internacionalni karakter poslovice ogleda se njihovim kompozicijsko-izražajno-stilskim kao i semantičkim podudarnostima. No bez obzira na te brojne istovjetnosti, koje se s jedne strane pokušavaju objasniti monogenetskim a s druge poligenetskim pristupom, postoje mnogobrojne poslovice koje su bilo historijskim, bilo sociološkim ili nekim drugim kulturološkim podacima vezane uz određenu kulturu, tako da nemaju svoju međunarodnu varijantu.

Eksperimentom koji smo proveli s američkim studentima koji uče hrvatski jezik, pokušali smo provjeriti koliko taj civilizacijski sadržaj utječe na razumijevanje poslovice. Naime, moguće je pretpostaviti da ispitanici, ako ne posjeduju znanja vezana uz civilizacijski sadržaj poslovice, tim više što je taj sadržaj obično izražen metaforično, neće moći razumjeti pa, dosljedno tome ni interpretirati poslovice izvan konteksta.

Odabrano je 60 poslovice koje su prema kriteriju prisutnosti u novinama (Bošković-Stulli, 1983) i odabiru autora i još trojice izvornih govornika potvrđene kao još uvijek dosta optičajne. Desetorica dodiplomaca i postdiplomaca sa sveučilišta Yale i Harvard sudjelovalo je u eksperimentu. Njihov je zadatak bio interpretirati hrvatsku poslovice a potom, ako postoji i ako ga znadu, dati njezin ekvivalent u engleskom.

Isto tako pokušali smo ocijeniti koliko struktura (Dundees, 1981) i tip figure (Ricoeur, 1978) utječu na razumijevanje. Klasifikacija svake pojedine poslovice prema ta dva kriterija nije se, međutim, pokazala nimalo jednostavnom.

Rezultati, koji su i statistički obrađeni, pokazuju značajnu koleraciju samo između uspješne interpretacije i poznavanja poslovice na materinskom jeziku (65.). Iako razlike s obzirom na tip strukture i figure nisu značajne, i tu se uočavaju neke pravilnosti.

Dakle, kao što se i očekivalo, najteže za razumijevanje bile su poslovice koje nose neki civilizacijski pečat (Proveo se kao Janko na Kosovu; Ne idi grlom u jagode; Baba šumom, deda drumom.) Međutim, rezultate valja promatrati s rezervom budući da u razumijevanju, tom tako kompleksnom kognitivnom procesu, sudjeluje još mnogo drugih faktora koji ovdje nisu uzeti u obzir. Osim toga, tijekom interpretacije rezultata iskrsnula su mnoga pitanja čisto metodološke prirode, posebno u vezi s pravim značenjem poslovice, a što je izvan konteksta vrlo teško utvrditi. Ipak, pokazalo se kako poslovice mogu poslužiti kao vrlo dobar test materijal za dobivanje informacija o civilizacijskim razlikama kao i o razumijevanju figurativnog jezika na stranom jeziku.