

Comparative analysis of proverbs: Universals and Specifics

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Introduction

It is generally accepted that proverbs represent the smallest verbal folklore genre, but they can be viewed as linguistic units, too. They are used in everyday conversation, journalism, advertising, speeches of all types, in sermons, literature, slogans, songs, and other forms of human communication. By using proverbs in our speech we wish to strengthen our argument, express certain generalizations. Among hundreds of different definitions as a starting point of this work we have chosen a definition of a proverb given by Permyakov (1979: 20) who says: »...proverbs and proverbial phrases are signs of situations or of a certain type of relationships between objects«. It corresponds to K. Burke's (1957) definition: »Proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations«. The fact is that certain situations happen to be similar or identical in different speech communities and we presume that they are represented with identical or similar linguistic structures. If we rely on previous definitions which define a proverb as a complex linguistic sign relevant for a certain situation we ought to explain whether there are any linguistic constraints on proverbial form regarding the proverbs of different languages. The results of the cross-cultural analysis of proverbs show that there are many proverbs which are quite similar in their meaning and structure. In other words, as our experience is structured by the language it is likely that similar experience is framed with similar logical relations expressed with similar or identical linguistic structure. Consequently, it may be quite mistaken to view the forms that proverbs may take as entirely

arbitrary. They are probably constrained by languageuniversal influences and human experience. It seems rather a challenging task to analyze proverbs of different languages especially those which are widely accepted in different ages, languages and cultures. We have based our investigation on the supposition that all cultures which have proverbs, have the same or similar proverb structural types. This article seeks to show that such a general basis does in fact exist. In order to achieve that goal we intend to trace similarities and differences in proverbs from 3 different languages: Italian, English and Croatian. Preliminary results of contrastive analysis show that a small number of proverbs have no semantic equivalent in other languages while a high percentage of proverbs share a very strong mutual resemblance, despite all the differences stemming from ethnic, geographic, historical and language factors.

300 proverbs		
	equivalent	specific
Croatian	93%	7%
Italian		
Croatian	89%	11%
English		

The prevalence of equivalent, synonymous proverbs over specific ones imposes questions like the following: What is common to all languages in the proverb tradition? What kind of features make them so transferable and acceptable in different ages and cultures? We have chosen a linguistic approach and the study of formal structure to answer these questions.

2. Linguistic description of proverbs

(Grammar of proverbs)

What follows is based on a structural analysis of 300 (100 + 100 + 100) proverbs chosen from 3 different languages. Detailed analysis of the corpus (which includes lexical, syntactic, semantic and stylistic levels) shows that those languages share some common characteristics and that they differ very little in their basic structure. Universal characteristics relevant for all proverbs included can be divided in 3 groups: grammatical markers, semantic features and phonic devices.

2.1. Grammatical markers

A proverb uses the sentence as its linguistic frame. The sentence structure of a proverb has the form of fixed, frozen formula with no redundant elements. The smallest form consists of two words, e. g. *Time flies*. (S:226)

– They show a special temporal category which refers to an action that might happen at any time. This means that past is always future and always ready to be present. The most frequent grammatical tense is the present, e.g.

The cowl *does not make* the monk. (S:44)

He lives long who *lives* well. (S:1 37)

Proverbs bear the weight of tradition. The speaker is linking his sayings to the past using archaic words, archaic structures, dialectal words and rustic pictures, e. g.

Manners maketh man. (S:145)

Dogs bark, but the caravan goes on. (S:58) (rustic picture)

By doing so, the speaker shifts the responsibility of his claim to past traditions and authorities whose wisdom cannot be questioned.

– Most proverbs are phrased impersonally, so that a very personal problem becomes more universalized (neutral statement; present, 3. person sing.). The appearance of objectivity is further heightened when they employ metaphoric techniques of argument (from literal to figurative meaning, e. g. One swallow does not make summer. (S:218)). Even while they may seem to be making statements about a specific individual at a specific time and place, proverbs have a significance which goes beyond particular circumstances, e. g. Homer sometimes nods (S:113). Indicative form and abstract or omitted subject appears to be valid for a high percentage of proverbs, e.g. Hope springs eternal. (S:114); Out of sight, out of mind. (S:172)

– In its most typical form proverb consists of a statement in 2 parts (or 4 minor segments), standing in a balanced and structured relationship to one another both in their form and content, e.g. English:

– *New brooms / sweep clean*. (S:161)

A fair exchange / is no robbery. (S:71)

Cold hands / warm heart. (S:40)

Soon ripe / soon rotten. (S:207)

Nothing venture / nothing gain.

Croatian:

Kakav otac, / takav sin.

Kakva mladost, / takva starost.

Daleko od očiju, / daleko od srca.

Italian:

Amico beneficato / nemico dichiarato. (A:28).

Chi matto manda / matto aspetta. (A:391)

Chi troppo abbraccia / nulla stringe. (A:690)

Milner (1970) also suggested that the basis of at least a large number of traditional sayings is a quadripartite structure employing culturally valued elements. (We should not seek to force all traditional sayings into the form of a quadripartite structure.) It is supposed that this structure is not arbitrarily chosen. Considering the fact that such proverbs are known to be extremely long-lived and widespread, it is likely that their basic structure corresponds to some kind of kernel sentences which are universally acceptable. This hypothesis is based on some previous works. Odlin (1986) says: »...there is probably something akin to a law of natural selection which tends to promote the remembering of proverbs that have certain characteristics...«. It seems that the binary or quadripartite structure, mentioned above, and other formal characteristics correspond to natural selection. It has also long been known from the writings of Jung that quadripartite structures are of special interest for the study of the deep structure of the human mind.

2.2. Semantic markers

– Polysemy is the basic feature of proverbs. They usually take the form of abstract statements expressing general truths, which can be appealed in any situation, e.g.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder. (S:1)

Metaphor, metonymy, personification, paradox, sharp contrasts – these are all devices which are often found in proverbs. A method of reasoning from particulars to generalization or universals is very frequent in proverbs. A proverb **The lone sheep is in danger of the wolf** (A:523) in its literal sense uses a particular situation with its natural characters. But the message of this statement has to be reinterpreted and transferred onto the figurative level.

Its final meaning is more general, universal. Figurative language which includes a relationship »a minori ad majus« is the dominant feature of proverbial language.

2.3. Phonic devices

Phonic devices that have been attributed to proverbs are: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, repetition. The device of an equal number of stresses in two parts of a proverb is frequent. Extreme brevity might also be considered a phonic device. Acoustic perception of such sentences is quite easy, which proves its oral origin. Some proverbs are very similar to some popular rhymes. Finally, we can say that the form taken by any proverb must be such that the proverb is comprehensible and memorable. According to Odlin (1986; 130) »...one of the most important factors in determining the universal characteristics of human language is the need for language to be comprehensible and memorable – that is, learnable«. This is the

main strategy of proverbial utterances, too. Although these parameters are all logically independent of one another, it seems that there is a high degree of correlation among them, leading in some instances to statements of absolute implicational universals. Some of these factors probably account for the popularity and nearly universal distribution of proverbs throughout the world, irrespective of time, place, level of technical and economic development, language or culture. It seems that the proverbial form is transcultural while its imagery is monocultural.

If we observe similarities between languages, then there are, in principle, several reasons why these similarities, universals exist:

– They could be due to chance

– There is also a functional and pragmatic explanation according to which certain universals serve to make language more functional, while any universals of phonetic structure are determined by the nature of human auditory perception. Proverbs are constrained by phonetic structures in order to be memorized easily.

– There is no denying the fact that nations speaking cognate languages have more verbally similar proverbs than those belonging to different language families.

– Neighboring nations with a centuries-old history of contact have more sayings coinciding literally than nations which had no such contacts. Accordingly, Croatian proverbial language is closer to Italian than to English, probably because of geographic vicinity, cultural contact and because of strong influence of Latin. Equivalent proverbs in English and Croatian are mostly due to Latin which influenced both languages either directly or through the mediator.

– Yet even nations with no affinity, which have never had any direct contact with each other and are at different stages of social development have many proverbs of similar meaning. Similarity of such proverbs is probably due to universal language tendencies, e.g. Croatian: *Od magarca ne stvori konja*.

English: *You cannot make a silk purse out of sow's ear.* (S:204)

Italian: *Di coda di asino non si puo fare staccio.* (A:60)

Japanese: *The snake will not be straightened even if you put it into a bamboo pipe.* (P:182)

Turk.: *A donkey will not become a gazelle even if you trim its ears.* (P:182)

In each of these sayings one finds a different set of images and local realia. But the general meaning of all the sayings or, more precisely the logical formula of their content is identical: Out of bad things you can't make good. They have the same meaning and the same relationships of objects, while the objects themselves are different. Whatever difference there is between these proverbs, resides in the ethnic, geographical cultural and other specific features, in their imagery, in local realia and concepts. Their common feature is the logical content and the character of the relationships between everyday objects which they express. We can assume that proverbs of different languages show a highly universal character in their linguistic structure and meaning while differences are quite notable on a cultural level. This means that the cultural aspect of proverb analysis should not be neglected.

3. Conclusion

If we consider proverbs as complex linguistic signs their external imagery matters far less than the essence of the real situation they represent. The fact is that almost 90% of proverbs used in different cultures are equivalent. Decisive causes of their similarity, among other things, are universal tendencies which are present in all languages. Proverbs refer to specific situations, and the logical content of human reaction is similar, almost universal. But the way the speakers decode the same situation is arbitrary, which means that it mostly depends on cultural habits, or models of thinking. According to Corder, P. (1977:74): »The members of different cultures live in the same world but they categorize it differently.« Numerous examples show this:

English: *The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.* (S:100)

Korean: *The beans are larger in another's soup.* (P:194)

Japanese: *A neighbor's flowers are more beautiful.* (P:194)

Türk: *A neighbor's hen always looks as big as a goose.* (P:194)

Chinese: *It seems from this mountain that the other mountain is higher.* (P:194)

The two-plane description of proverbs, which takes into account their linguistic as well as semiotic structure, provides much better insight into their nature than any single – plane description.

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KOMPARATIVNA ANALIZA POSLOVICA: UNIVERZALIJE I SPECIFIČNOSTI

Osnovna je namjera ovoga rada istražiti temeljnu strukturu poslovice koje pripadaju različitim jezicima. Rezultati kontrastivne analize pokazuju veliki postotak poslovice koje imaju svoj značenjski par u drugom jeziku. Osim na značenjskom planu one se podudaraju i u temeljnoj strukturi rečenice. Sve to upućuje na postojanje jedne univerzalne strukture koja je imanetna poslovičnom načinu izražavanja.