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“CLEANLINESS IS HALF OF NOBILITY”: PROVERBS AS
MEANS OF PERSUASION FOR CITIZEN’S AWARENESS.
THE CITY OF ATHENS CLEANING PROGRAM EXAMPLE

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to stress the use of proverbs as a process of communication strategy and means of persuasion in the context of the City of Athens cleaning program. The use of proverbs as an element of collective experience that makes them generally accepted in conjunction with their underlying message, makes them a promotional tool of this initiative.

Keywords: proverbs, communication, persuasion, contradiction.

Introductory remarks

In this paper we will try to highlight the use of proverbs as part of the City of Athens cleaning program by replacing the garbage bins during the last months of 2020. In particular, what is interesting is the use of proverbs as a communication strategy to the citizens in order to become part of the program themselves and to raise the level of awareness regarding the cleanliness of the city.

After describing the phenomenon by mentioning and analyzing the proverbs used, we will try to highlight some aspects that concern how folklore and especially proverbs are used in various contexts, proving their potential and adaptability in each case, while at the same time this whole process is a playful communicative strategy.

The City of Athens cleaning program

As a resident of the municipality of Athens, I could not help but notice the replacement of many garbage bins in the city in the past months. The fact for me could have gone unnoticed if there was not a poster on every trash can with a proverb or a tongue twister written on it.

The common feature of proverbial texts is that most of them include the word “clean” and its derivatives, emphasizing the responsibility of the citizen, while other proverbs are extended (pro-

verbial prolongement) to convey the message that something is changing in the city in the field of cleanliness.

In particular the texts used are the following:

1. *Η καθαριότητα είναι μισή αρχοντιά* (I kathariotita einai misi arhondia) – Cleanliness is half of nobility (image #1).
2. *Καθαρός ουρανός αστραπές δε φοβάται* (Katharos ouranos astrapes de fovatai) – Clear sky is not afraid of lightning (image #2).
3. *Καθαρά και ξάστερα* (Kathara kai xastera) – Clean and sharp (image #3).
4. *Ο καλός γείτονας, κάνει τον καλό νοικοκύρη* (O kalos geitonas kanei ton kalo noikokyri) – Good neighbor makes a good landlord (image #4).
5. *Άσπρη πέτρα ξέξασπρη και απ' τον ήλιο ξέξασπρότερη* (Aspri Petra kseksaspri kai apo ton ilio kseksasproteri) – White stone whitewashed and whiter than the sun (image #5).
6. *Βρέξει, χιονίσει, η Αθήνα θα καθαρίσει* (Vreksei, hionisei, i Athina tha katharisei) – Either it rains, either it snows, Athens will be cleansed (image #6).
7. *Η Αθήνα αλλάζει... ξεκάθαρα* (I Athina allazei... ksekathara) – Athens is changing... clearly (image #7).

The first text is a well-known proverb and perhaps the most clear and relevant to the intended message. Cleanliness is everyone's responsibility, so trash cans should be used.

The second text is also a well-known proverb, which refers to clear conscience: “innocent, moral and honest people have no reason to be afraid of slander, control or criticism of others” (Kouvelas, 2018: 1063). Apparently, the proverb is not related to cleanliness except for the fact that the word “clean” is used. However, the reference to the concept of pure conscience raises issues of awareness regarding cleanliness and protection of the environment.

The third text is used in the sense of honesty in words and deeds, without implication and twists (Kouvelas, 2018: 1063). In this case, too, we can argue that the question of liability arises, as no excuses should be used regarding cleanliness.

The fourth text is an anti-proverb of the proverb the bad neighbor makes the good landlord. The bad neighbor “... does paradoxi-

cally a good thing with his behavior, that is, he forces the householder to have his own things and not to borrow from him, to take care of what is his own and not to harm the other. In other words, anyone who has bad neighbors cannot count on their help and is therefore forced to become self-sufficient” (Kouvelas, 2018: 1558).

It is interesting that this anti-proverb is used. A message aimed at raising awareness around an issue would be paradoxical to use the bad neighbor model, which serves as an example to be avoided. On the contrary, the use of the word “good” may imply that we should all take our share of responsibility for the cleanliness of the city and therefore act as a role model for each other.

The fifth text is a tongue twister and not a proverb. However, we consider that it is worthy of attention as on the one hand it is a widely known and used twister, on the other hand the main weight bears the word “white”, which for Greek folk culture is synonymous to happiness, favor etc. Consequently, it refers to cleanliness and its benefits.

In the sixth text the phenomenon of prolongement / enlargement of the proverb is observed. Prolongement is about “in-creasing a proverb’s text, in order to express it more fully and intensely, by defining it narratively, locally, temporally, comparatively, etc.” (Doulaveras, 2010: 44). The proverb (Either it rains, either it snows) means that something is happening or will happen in any case and specifically here that Athens will cleanse.

The seventh text is not proverbial, however we chose to refer to it as in a way it summarizes all the previous ones and states more clearly the desired goal of the Municipality. And in this case, however, it is interesting that an etymologically related word of the adjective “katharos” (clean) is used: the word “ksekathara” (clearly) which is related to clarity and honesty.

Context and communication: Proverbial use as a means of persuasion

Proverbs are essentially a rhetorical means of persuasion, as well as highly successful communication strategies, as is folklore in general. Dan Ben-Amos defines folklore as “artistic communication is small groups” (Ben-Amos, 1971: 13).

On the occasion of this definition, we consider that at this point a brief reference should be made on how the concept of communication is utilized in folklore studies. Ben-Amos in his attempt to

define folklore, tried to identify on a social level the process that could best be described as “folk culture” and came up with the concept of **communication**.

Communication can be verbal, visual, musical or kinetic. The term artistic should not be understood as evaluative but as descriptive, thus highlighting the aesthetic dimension of folklore. Finally, the reference to small groups, refers to face-to-face communication in an event in which the performers and their audience share the same symbolism and therefore understand each other, so they communicate (Ben-Amos, 2014: 17-18).

The short types of conversational genres allow the delimitation of groups themselves (Abrahams, 1968: 58). Proverbs in particular are uttered as impersonal communication strategies (Arewa & Dundes, 1964: 70) that are used without incurring social costs – despite the fact that they are evaluative (Blehr, 1973: 245), their judgment of people and things is attributed to the “folk”, to the collective experience and is therefore commonly accepted. At the same time, they place a specific situation in a more general, repetitive situation. Their success lies in the fact that the listener will understand the advice that is hidden in the proverb (Lau, Tokofsky & Winick, 2004: 7).

What is important, then, is the way in which the proverb is addressed to the listener and the message it conveys (that is, its function). These two parameters are especially important if we consider that proverbs can work in a specific communication context while at the same time they are mediators between society and its system of values (Jason, 1971: 617, 622).

And in the phenomenon we are dealing with, it seems that proverbs are used as communication strategies in order to promote a political agenda “by giving a folksy touch with which people can identify” (Mieder, 2004: 139). The same applies for anti-proverbs and prolongements of the proverbs as “many of them contain political and socioeconomic messages while maintaining the structure and some of the basic wording of the original proverb” (Mieder, 2004: 251).

However, all of the above is about oral communication. In the proverbs we examine in this paper we observe that the written speech is used, something that brings to the fore the issue of written and oral speech in folk tradition.

Language is duplicitous, spoken and written. The human tendency to narration has its roots in orality, but this disposition did not stop even with the invention of writing. Besides, folk literature includes not only products of the oral tradition, but also texts which were written by the carriers of tradition themselves. Therefore, folk tradition should not be considered as strictly oral (Meraklis, 2007: 11-12).

In addition, this strategy used by the Municipality has not to do with small groups but with a wide range of people. That is because the proverbs used are widely-known, on a national scale, so the message is very easy to be perceived. Thus, oral and written speech are intertwined.

Finally, we consider the use of proverbs to have been done in a playful way, due to the fact that proverbial texts are known to the citizens. This fact refers to the thoughts of the Dutch historian of culture, Johan Huizinga, about play as a cultural phenomenon, as he connects language with play, in the sense that all major archetypal activities are governed by it: "Behind every abstract expression there lie the boldest of metaphors, and every metaphor is a play upon words. Thus in giving expression to life man creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature" (Huizinga, 1949: 4).

One of the main characteristics of proverbs is metaphor and their form has a poetic dimension which lies next to reality. So even garbage throwing may be poetic!

Conclusion

The use of proverbs as a means of persuasion and conveying a message to the general public in a way that is familiar, but at the same time playful, is a widespread and frequent phenomenon. In this way one observes that proverbs are governed by a capacity that makes them useful in each occurrence and therefore are always current.

But beyond the dimension of communication and persuasion, we believe that the proverbial phrases analyzed in this paper simultaneously express a deeper dimension, a worldview that is not limited to conveying the message of cleanliness of the city and the effort to become citizen shareholders and members of this initiative.

The choice of proverbs that are dominated by the words "clean", "cleanliness" and their derivatives and their inscription on posters placed on trash cans, which are actually intended to place

something “dirty” there, the waste, that is, leads to the conclusion that the opposed relationship between cleanliness and dirt is emphasized here.

However, a careful examination leads to the perception that the relationship is not opposite, but rather complementary. The bin as an object in which we place something “filthy” contributes to the cleanliness of the city. Therefore, what is implied on a deeper level is how the insignificant becomes important and the “inside” (contents of the bin) keeps the “outside” clean. While, then, it seems that everything is based on basic contrasts (dirty vs clean, inside vs out, important vs insignificant) the impression is created that things can be perceived on the basis of some simplistic contrasts, but in essence complement each other creating contradictions. Is that so weird? Probably not. Besides, contradiction is the main feature of proverbs that express the contradictions of life itself.

Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6



Image 7



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