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“TIME’S UP” WHEN ENOUGH IS ENOUGH: THE PROVERBIAL VOICE OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Abstract: The present article explores how Anglo-American proverbs function in the discourse of the contemporary social movement “Time’s Up”. The hypothesis behind the study is the proposition that due to their cognitive nature and universality as a linguistic means proverbs can serve as efficient tools of influencing public opinion and achieving the ultimate goal of making social change happen. Cognitive-discursive functions of 8 paremias used in public speaking and Internet discourse by prominent activists and supporters of the “Time’s Up” initiative are described. It is revealed that proverbs fulfill the function of semantic highlighting (formulate key ideas of the campaign), phatic function (a signal of establishing and maintaining contact in discourse), the function of cognitive economy and emotional highlighting. The hypothesis is supported by the results of the study.

Keywords: Anglo-American proverbs, social movements, #Time’s Up, #MeToo, cognitive-discursive functions, social change, women’s rhetoric

Introduction

Research into illocutionary potential and functions of Anglo-American paremias in the mass media and public communication undertaken over recent years has revealed frequent use of proverbs in different types of the English language discourse and confirmed yet again their universality as a powerful linguistic means (Konstantinova 2007, 2012). From the cognitive point of view, proverbs are “unique formulae which seek to represent reality by capturing a certain situation, while serving as ready-made tools for representing analogical situations” (Konstantinova 2017: 159)

It has already become a postulate that language is an instrument of asserting political and social power. Proverbial nature of civil and women’s rights movements of the 19th century in America has been described in detailed works by Wolfgang Mieder (Mieder 2009, 2014). Women’s voices are gaining more strength

at the moment as the world is witnessing new waves of social campaigns, movements, and initiatives. In this regard, their discourse can be viewed as engaging material for analysis. Its study can be expected to contribute to the overall understanding of what linguistic means can be most efficiently employed for achieving the goal of molding public opinion.

A social movement can be defined as activities of groups of people led by faith in social change and united in pursuit of a goal. Thus, as the rhetoric of social movements can be said to be aimed at cognitive, emotional, and volitional spheres of personality, it is logical to assume that the use of proverbs – that are linguistic units appealing to our elementary views, feelings, and wishes from which arise more complex outlooks, attitudes (social mindsets), and plans – could serve as efficacious means of affecting mass audiences. That said, we shall take a closer look at the role proverbs play in the discourse of the contemporary social movement “Time’s Up” and several other campaigns connected with it or launched in its wake.

“Time’s Up” was initiated by high-profile Hollywood women to combat sexual harassment, pay disparity and discrimination women face in the workplace and beyond. Although the campaign is rather young – the open announcement letter was published in *The New York Times* on January, 1 in 2018 – we were able to gather examples enabling us to draw certain conclusions about the cognitive power, pragmatic, and rhetorical potential of paremias in this already influential movement vastly supported worldwide.

Much earlier, in 2003, the *Guardian* published the article “Final Injustice” by a female university administrator who wished to remain anonymous. In it she raised the problem of unequal pay she and her male peer got. It was one of probably hundreds of similar essays discussing the same issue of gender gap; what is eye-catching about this particular text is a witty and, obviously, heartfelt and emotion-driven modification of a popular paremia “Jack of all trades and a master of none” which involves a play with the two folklore names Jack and Jill traditionally indicating a man and a woman:

Laboratory superintendent - we assume from this description that the role is technical, for which read diffi-

cult, complicated, possibly obscure. The title alone suggests complex, scientific skills and a senior management position. **Jack** the clever lad. A man.

Department administrator - we probably deduce from this that the role is non-technical, for which read simple, straightforward, easy to fulfil. The title alone - when applied to women - suggests service, subordination, and a lack of specialist skills. **Jill of all trades, master of none.** A woman.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2003/may/23/educations-gendergap.gender>

Due to the substitution of the names “**Jill** of all trades, master of none” and the author’s curt comments, the extract cited becomes the focal point of the article with significant semantic and emotional charge. Thus, it makes for an eloquent example that may, we believe, serve as a proper introduction into the problem discussed in the present paper.

Paremiat in the Discourse of Social Change

One of the co-founders of the “Time’s Up” campaign is the popular Hollywood actress Reese Witherspoon well known for her active social stand and involvement in women’s rights organizations. In 2015 she received a Glamour’s Woman of the Year award.¹ It is worthwhile to consider her acceptance speech at the ceremony, wherein she formulates her social philosophy soon to be revealed in connection with the “Time’s Up” initiative. Here is an excerpt from the heralding talk expressing her reprobation of the biased tendency to depict in film women as wholly dependent on men’s guidance:

I dread reading scripts that have no women involved in their creation because inevitably I get to that part where the girl turns to the guy, and she says, “What do we do now?!” Do you know *any* woman in any crisis situation who has absolutely no idea what to do? I mean, don’t they tell people in crisis, even children, “**If you’re in trouble, talk to a woman.**” It’s ridiculous that a woman wouldn’t know what to do. I’ve made movies all my life, for 25 years, since I was 14 years old. It was time to turn

to myself and say, “OK, Reese, what are we going to do now?” The answer was very clear. My mother, who is here tonight, a very strong, smart Southern woman, said to me, **“If you want something done, honey, do it yourself”**.

<https://www.glamour.com/story/reese-wither-spoon-women-of-the-year-speech>

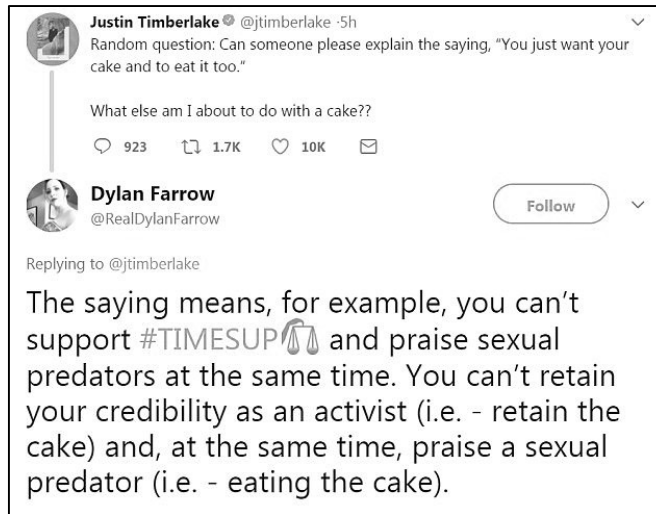
As we see, the actress resorts to advice given to her by her mother articulated with the help of the popular paremia “If you want something done/ and done well/ do it yourself” (1541). Moreover, R. Witherspoon coins the expression “If you're in trouble, talk to a woman”, which in the context cited can be treated as a pseudo-proverb. It uses the traditional proverb structural-semantic pattern “If you X, (you) Y” and is incorporated into the discourse with a jocular introductory formula “don't they tell people in crisis, even children” in the form of a rhetorical question. The two phrases seem to address the dreadful cinematographic question “What do we do now?” and emphasize women's strength, reason, and independence. And – as is crucial in cases of direct interaction with a mass audience – the actress's words are met with boisterous applause (can be heard on the video) confirming their value and indicating agreement with her message. Thus, we can conclude that the traditional proverb together with the pseudo-proverb serve as significant units of meaning that not only send the speaker's message across and convey her emotional attitude to the raised problem but also fulfill phatic function of establishing and maintaining contact with the listeners.

As is probably the case with any social initiative, “Time's Up” enjoys the support of its numerous followers as well as has neutral observers or gets critical opinions about the events that unfold and behavior demonstrated by Hollywood representatives. An innocent tweet by the popular singer and actor Justin Timberlake seeking to clarify the meaning of the metaphorical proverb “You can't eat your cake and eat it” triggered an intense emotional response on the part of one of “Time's Up” activists Dylan Farrow. The actress – who has stepped forward on several occasions with the allegations of sexual abuse by her step-father, the talented American writer and film director Woody Allen –

expressed her doubts concerning the truthfulness of Timberlake’s intentions in officially supporting the “Time’s Up” movement. When the singer took to Twitter and posed his followers with the question:

Random question: Can someone please explain the saying, “You just want your cake and to eat it too.” What else am I about to do with a cake??,

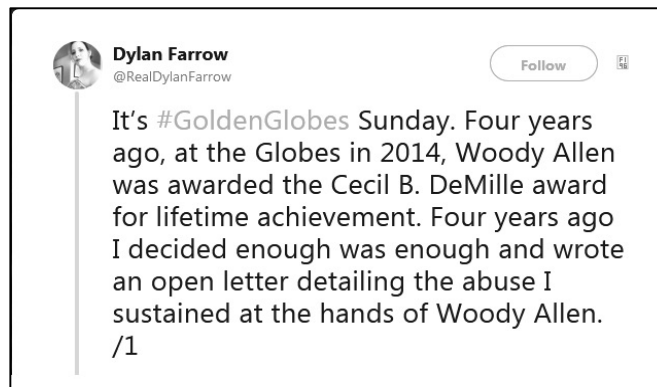
Dylan Farrow slammed Timberlake with the following reply:



<https://twitter.com/RealDylanFarrow/status/955831368415698944>

Justin Timberlake had played the leading role in 2017 Woody Allen’s drama “Wonder Wheel” and after the new wave of sexual misconduct accusations against the director did not refuse to work with him like many other Hollywood actors did. In the case under discussion, the proverb becomes the metalanguage of the campaign without the author intending so. Dylan Farrow uses the imagery of the proverb for her harsh negative assessment of some of the show business people’s actions and condemnation of the hypocritical, in her opinion, behavior of her opponent. In this context, the proverb fulfills the function of emotional highlighting and cognitive economy due to its semantic substance and pithiness.

In the wake of sexual harassment allegations, seven days after the official announcement of the start of the “Time’s Up” campaign, many high-profile guests at the 2018 Golden Globes Award ceremony wore all black as a sign of solidarity with the victims, thus making January 7 a remarkably important day for the movement. On that very Sunday, Dylan Farrow tweeted the following text:



<https://twitter.com/RealDylanFarrow/status/950015295976026113>

In the excerpt cited the actress resorts to proverbial language yet again. She makes use of the popular dictum “Enough is enough” echoing the name of the social movement under consideration – “Time’s Up”. But for an insignificant grammatical change in verb tense (is→was), the proverb appears in its standard form as an authoritative folklore justification of Farrow’s bold move.

The aforementioned ceremony is still remembered well by an outstanding speech delivered by the Hollywood mogul Oprah Winfrey, whose eloquence even sparked speculations about her potential presidential candidacy in 2020. Shortly after the event, however, a meme (the now popular means of conveying information and attracting public attention) with the hashtag #SanctimoniousHollywood went viral on the net:



<https://ew.com/music/2018/01/11/seal-oprah-harvey-weinstein-chrissy-teigen/>

It was posted by the British singer Seal who published two photos of Winfrey sharing a friendly kiss with the notorious film producer Harvey Weinstein (allegations of sexual misconduct against whom triggered the #MeToo media campaign closely connected with the “Time’s Up” movement). In the analyzed context, Seal uses the elements (which constitute the two focal points) of the modern American proverb “If you are not the part of the solution, you are part of the problem” (1937) – for condemning the hypocrisy existing in American show business. We can conclude that in the given context the split proverb, like in the previous example, serves to focus attention on the stated problem and to express the author’s negative take on the recent developments.

As was mentioned earlier, the “Time’s Up” campaign is also aimed at fighting gender inequality in the workplace and, among other things, the issue of wage gap. After the reshoots of the R. Scott’s movie “All the Money in the World” (2017) were commissioned due the substitution of Kevin Spacey by another actor after sexual misconduct allegations, the Internet was abuzz with discussions of the drastic difference in pay the actors Michelle Williams and Mark Wahlberg had received for the job. The controversial situation was resolved after M. Wahlberg had transferred his wage

to the “Time’s Up” Legal Defense Fund in Williams’ name. William Morris Endeavor (WME), the talent agency representing both actors, then, issued the following statement:

The current conversation is a reminder that those of us in a position of influence have a responsibility to challenge inequities, including the gender wage gap<...> In recognition of the pay discrepancy on the ‘All the Money in the World’ reshoots, WME is donating an additional \$500,000 to the Time’s Up Legal Defense Fund in Michelle Williams’ name, following our \$1 million pledge to the organization earlier this month. It’s crucial that this conversation continues within our community and we are committed to being **part of the solution.**
<https://www.etonline.com/mark-wahlberg-and-agency-donate-2-million-times-after-all-money-world-controversy-94260>

In the context cited, the meaningful use of only one element “part of the solution” of the previously discussed proverb helps to emphasize the progress of the campaign and call upon other influential agencies and persons to act alike. Due to its conciseness and, at the same time, semantic load the truncated proverb fulfills the function of cognitive economy as there is a broad socio-cultural context behind it, i.e. the background against which all the events unfold. Moreover, the element “part of the solution” used with personal and possessive pronouns – “**our** community”, “**we** are committed” – fulfills phatic function as it identifies the senders of the message as members of the “Time’s Up” closely-knit community and supporters of their beliefs and initiatives.

Lisa Borders, the former CEO and the president of the “Time’s Up” campaign, stated on several occasions that she deems it to be the civil-rights movement of the 21st century <https://www.marieclaire.com/career-advice/a25657212/lisa-borders-times-up-ceo-goals/>. As the “Time’s Up” movement has reached its first milestone – a year of existence – the second official letter appeared on its website celebrating a plethora of achievements and formulating among other things what a year of hard work and brave acts has taught the activists:

January 1, 2019

Dear Sisters,

TIMES UP

<...> **We learned a lot in 2018.** First, there is safety in numbers. Second, there is strength in numbers. And finally, everything will change when we have more women, especially women of color and women from other traditionally underrepresented groups, making decisions. Period. <...>

As we can see, this short paragraph summarises the most significant lessons learnt (as seen by the authors of the address) which is done in a succinct but powerful manner. The effect is achieved due to the use of parallel constructions that state two simple facts. In the case under consideration they also happen to be formulated with the help of two resonating proverbs “There’s safety in numbers” (ca. 1550) and “There is strength in numbers” (ca. 1759) which provide an authoritative folklore support of the conclusions made. The proverbs here fulfill the function of semantic highlighting and cognitive economy. Moreover, that authority (cognitive and cultural power) enables the activists to hope gain more supporters of their initiative and reach out to vaster and more diverse audiences with the following appeal:

That’s why, at the beginning of our second year, we’re launching TIME’S UPx2, to double the number of women in leadership and across other spaces where women are underrepresented.

Join us on this historic journey. Our efforts are already generating momentum and we are just getting started.
<https://www.timesupnow.com/timesupx2>

Within a year of joint actions the “Time’s Up” movement has seen considerable expansion to numerous other industries and sectors: healthcare, technology, advertising, etc. Shortly after the “Time’s Up” open letter was published, a team of Hollywood male actors expressed their solidarity with the female colleagues and spoke out against sexism discussing different ways men could deal with the problem. In March 2018 they launched the #AskMoreOfHim campaign with an open letter stating the following:

Some may question our motives for signing this statement and we aim to counteract their skepticism by being

painfully honest. **Men are imperfect. We are imperfect.** And many men, including perhaps some of us, may have enabled the bad behavior of others or acted in ways we now regret. Nonetheless, we believe that men must speak out against sexism, even as we engage in our own process of critical self-reflection, personal growth and accountability.

So consider this our pledge to support survivors, condemn sexism wherever we see it and hold ourselves and others accountable. As advocates, actors, writers, producers, and directors, we hope that our actions will inspire other men to join us. Until now, only a small number of them have been actively engaged in this effort. This must change. It's time we #AskMoreOfHim.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/david-arquette-david-schwimmer-join-hollywood-men-activists-launch-ask-moreofhim-campaign-1090121>

Yet again a proverb becomes the focus of attention of the discourse. The paremia “Nobody is perfect” (1763) undergoes a meaningful modification: the pronoun “nobody” is substituted by the noun “men” which narrows or, rather, shifts its scope and applicability. This, however, by no means serves as an excuse for the wrong doings of some men but is a call for action. This intended meaning is in line with Lisa Borders’ clever definition of “Time’s Up” essence – it’s not an absolution business but a solution business (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tw7Bh_IaQAA). Thus, the modified is then used with a personal pronoun “we”, which reverberates with the traditional wording of the proverb in question, but speaks to each and every person. The paremia fulfills the phatic function in the given context as the second substitution (“We are imperfect”) achieves inclusivity and helps create the feeling of belonging or involvement.

One more example of proverb use in connection with the #AskMoreOfHim campaign to be discussed here, is an emotional and reflexive Facebook post published by the Pakistani actor Mustafa Ali Khan who joined in the movement:

<...> Though I have always been careful in how I treat every woman I interact with. I know I am guilty of, in

one way or another, making them feel unsafe. So yeah, #MeToo.”

<...> I am guilty of trying to justify such behavior with things like “boys will be boys” or with the quote from *The Scent of a Woman* “the day you stop looking, is the day you die”. I am guilty of being the part of the problem. #MeToo (Sic!)

<https://twitter.com/JKaziunwomen/status/987387771596824576>

In his post, wherein the actor shares his view on how men are “guilty of perpetuating this environment where every woman feels unsafe”, one paragraph stands out due to the fact that is built of precedent texts: a proverb proper “Boys will be boys”, an allusion to a proverb – its meaningful truncation – (“part of the problem”/Cf. If you are not the part of the solution, you are part of the problem), and a quotation from the 1992 Oscar-winning drama. The concentration of precedent texts saturates the short paragraph with meaning; the pithiness of proverbs yet again helps to send the intended message across, proverbs fulfilling the function of semantic highlighting and cognitive economy.

Another powerful use of the proverb “Nobody is perfect” is found in a tweet by the American filmmaker and actress Jennifer Siebel Newsom.



<https://twitter.com/JenSiebelNewsom/status/959188530961330176>

The post commending the men who have already supported the initiatives and attempting to inspire those who have not yet found the courage to do so features two concepts “bravery” and “perfection” – that seem to be frequent counterparts in contemporary discourse of social change. In the context cited the proverb is modified through the substitution of “nobody” with the inclusive phrase “none of **us**”; it fulfills the phatic function like in the previously analyzed example, and also the function of semantic highlighting as it is used as an authoritative substantiation of the author’s appeal.²

The last example to be considered here is an excerpt from a recent article celebrating the global impact of the #MeToo campaign on the International women’s day. Having highlighted the progress achieved, the authors make the following caveat:

But for all that momentum, an Economist survey shows that skepticism of harassment claims has grown. And though a rising number of female candidates have run for political office in countries globally, women remain dramatically underrepresented at the highest levels. It’s all too easy to despair.

The subsequent paragraph, however, is meant to dispel all doubts:

Fear not. A fundamental shift in women’s rights is underway. The #MeToo movement continues to achieve widespread—and tangible—progress on a global scale. Its influence can be measured in the courts, in changing legislation, and, paradoxically, in the growing backlash.

As we see, the message is supported by the meaningful use of the truncated proverb “Do right and fear not”. The element “do right” is absent from the discourse (in its verbal form) as it is intrinsic to the force and philosophy behind it. There simply seems to be no need to remind women and men that they are doing the right thing – that is accepted as absolute truth. Thus, the proverbial element “fear not” serves as an authoritative folklore appeal to feel courage to act and keep on believing in the righteousness of their actions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be stressed that our analysis has once again confirmed the thesis about proverbs being universal linguistic means possessing considerable potential for influencing how opinions are formed and assessments are made in society. The study has revealed that paremias play their distinct role in shaping the discourse of social change, chronicling in their unique fashion the “times that try women’s souls” (Mieder 2014: 1).

Firstly, in our practical material proverbs perform the function of semantic highlighting as they formulate the key ideas and messages purported by the activists of the “Time’s Up” movement. The paremia “If you want something done, do it yourself” creates the image of a modern independent woman equal in her rights with her male peers; the proverb “Enough is enough” stresses the urgent need of social change; the phrases “If you are not the part of the solution, you are part of the problem” and “You can’t eat your cake and eat it” serve as euphemistic markers of insincerity and hypocrisy that can be observed in American show business; the proverbs “There’s safety in numbers”, “There is strength in numbers”, “Boys will be boys”, and modified paremias “Do right and fear not”, “If you are not the part of the solution, you are part of the problem” and “Nobody is perfect” are all employed to highlight progress of the campaign, call for more action and celebrate the change that is already here. Secondly, we distinguish the phatic function proverbs have in the analyzed discourse: due to their currency and authority these dictums become signals of establishing and maintaining contact with the intended audience, and are also a special marker of social belonging or involvement of the discourse participants. Thirdly, the authors of the studied excerpts succeed in skillfully exploiting the semantic substance and conciseness of proverbs which is revealed in the cognitive function they fulfill in most texts. Lastly, proverbial phrases perform the function of emotional highlighting as they help indicate the emotionally charged spots in discourse.

Notes

¹ Every year Glamour magazine hosts a ceremony to celebrate “extraordinary and inspirational” women working in different sectors who are given this special honorary title and award.

² It is worthwhile to mention that the proverb “Nobody is perfect” is now gaining special meaning when applied to women’s discourse. Its modification featuring the two counterparts “bravery” and “perfection” turned into a motto “Teach girls to be brave not perfect” seems to be becoming a new social mantra (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauladavislaack/2017/03/08/lets-teach-girls-to-be-brave-not-perfect/#389bc12446df>; https://www.ted.com/talks/reshma_saujani_teach_girls_bravery_not_perfection)

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