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“ENTRÉE INTO THE MIND AND MOOD OF AMERICA”:
PROVERBS IN COMMENCEMENT RHETORIC

Abstract: The present paper explores different aspects of proverb use in the commencement address discourse. It draws on the analysis of 100 speeches delivered at US universities over the past three decades. First, I offer some introductory remarks about the commencement ceremony as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Second, I look at the discursive characteristics of the commencement address. Next, I analyze the role proverbs play on the thematic level of the speeches and provide comments on their cognitive-discursive functions in the most significant thematic groups distinguished in the course of study. Last, I offer a closer study of the entertaining function and the function of structural organization of discourse proverbs fulfill in the commencement address.

Keywords: proverb, commencement address, graduation, politics, cognitive-discursive function, structural organization of discourse, entertaining function

Introduction

The ceremony during which graduating university students receive their degrees or diplomas is traditionally referred to in the USA as *commencement*. It is a significant occasion for both graduating class and the whole university. The inseparable part of any commencement ceremony is the commencement address delivered by an outstanding speaker, who, as a rule, is specially invited to share his/her opinions and ideas in this contemporary rite of passage.

In modern American anthropological literature the ceremony of conferring degrees and diplomas is viewed as a ritual of incorporation, wherein there is a change of social roles as the student becomes a graduate (Manning 2000; Rutherford 2004). Thus, graduation is a “semi-formal marker in a series of steps to adult status, especially for middle-class Americans” (Manning 2000: 586). The commencement address, as the centerpiece of the ceremony, serves to facilitate the entrance of the young people into the

adult world by informing them on the dominating social values and expectations.

In her research into the ceremonies and rituals of American higher education institutions, K. Manning assumes that these events are a treasure trove of accumulated meaning of university culture (Manning 2000). As Rev. Th. Hesburgh, the former president of the University of Notre Dame, economically put it, commencement speeches provide an “entrée into the mind and mood of America” (Hesburgh 2003: xii). Thus, being a complex, dynamic, and constantly changing environment, a university community can be examined through the analysis of its cultural events.

My review of the existing literature has shown that the commencement speech discourse has not yet been thoroughly studied. There exist a number of anthropological papers focusing on the ritual nature of the commencement ceremony along with various collections of commencement addresses and practical guides on writing them (Manning 2000; Miscamble 2003; Malloy 2003; Rutherford 2004; Wilson 1952). It is worth mentioning some recent articles by Prof. Ivanova at the Pushkin Leningrad State University, who studies the commencement address as a means of verbalization of American culture code (Ivanova 2017; Иванова 2016).

Discursive characteristics of the commencement address

As has been indicated, commencement addresses are delivered by eminently public figures who have reached certain heights in their careers. These normally include government officials and politicians, scientists, business people, notable celebrities, etc. The commencement address is the part of the ceremony that occurs prior to the conferring of degrees and diplomas and the actual celebration of the event – hence, its expected shortness (no longer than 30 minutes, in most cases).

Commencement speakers normally pursue several goals in their addresses to the graduating class and their families:

- celebration of the graduates,
- inspiration,
- instruction,
- entertainment.

Despite the vast thematic scope of speeches, I was able to distinguish the following conventional thematic groups of commencement addresses:

- “Grown-up world” speeches, wherein the speakers inform the young audience about the way things are in the real “world out there” they have to step in upon graduation and all its challenges. The talks are usually seasoned with pieces of advice deemed necessary to facilitate the transition and adjusting to grown-up life, and to encourage the young listeners to use their education to the greatest advantage.
- Inspirational speeches. Although virtually any commencement address is meant to encourage the graduating class to aim high, some talks tend to focus on young people’s potential to make a difference or leave their mark by putting their ambitions and fine education into practice.
- “My own experience” addresses center around the speaker’s personal experience.
- “Expert’s talk” speeches are usually delivered by well-known experts. The speech may not be wholly devoted to some particular subject but it seems to be predominant over other possible topics.
- “Enduring values” speech is another way to approach the topic of making this world a better place, and highlight the moral values and norms that transcend time.
- “The root of all evil” speeches consider some vice or human trait that the speaker believes to be the reason of many problems.
- “Edgy” speeches are devoted to controversial topics, often feature non-mainstream views and beliefs.
- Speeches praising the education the graduates received and the university/college they are graduating from. This can be the leitmotif of the talk with the speaker repeatedly referring to the university name and highlighting its uniqueness or outstanding quality of education it provides.
- Politically-loaded addresses. I decided to distinguish the group of speeches that, in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, are mainly (but not always) delivered by political figures and border on political discourse. The

speakers use the occasion as the platform for reaching out to young audiences and sharing their views and assessment of the current political situation in the country.

In terms of composition, the commencement speech has a traditional structure:

- Greeting of the audience:
Good afternoon, Deputy Dean Rubinfeld, Honored Guests, Colleagues, Students, Family and Friends:
This is your day, Class of 2003, and you have earned it! We have come together as a community, despite the troubling events of last week, to celebrate your achievements and to rejoice in the hope and promise for the future that your graduation represents:
- The main part of the speech;
- Closing congratulatory remarks:
<...> *With these thoughts, and with my warmest regards, I say to you, the Class of 2003: congratulations and best, best wishes!* [Prof. Steve Gunn, Yale Law School, May, 2003].

The present paper draws on the cognitive-discursive analysis of 100 addresses delivered at American universities from 1990 to 2017. I aimed to make the sample of speeches chosen representative of:

- occupational characteristics of the speakers (politics, business, mass media and show business, law, science and technology, art and literature, sports);
- type of university (prestigious Ivy League universities, state and private universities, community colleges).

Some of the sampled addresses can be placed within one of the distinguished thematic groups. Most speeches, however, belong with several of them as they explore multiple topics and issues.

Thus, considering the scope of goals and themes of the commencement address, I hypothesized that proverbs might be an efficient linguistic means frequently used in commencement address discourse for achieving these goals and supporting the themes.

*The role of proverbs on the semantic level of the commencement address**“Grown-up world” speeches.*

As my analysis revealed, the largest number of paremias were found in the so-called “grown-up world” speeches. In one of them, for example, Katie Couric, a prominent American journalist, starts addressing the class of 2007 at Williams College by describing the unfavorable environment in the country at the time of the graduation:

So your generation faces a tougher environment, and tougher competition, than ever. And not just from Amherst graduates. (Everyone knows you can beat them!) The challenge is to beat the investment banker from Bangalore, the software programmer from Prague, the manufacturer in Manila.

Add to that the shadow of terrorism that’s lurked since 9/11, and this unstable, interconnected **world has never been a more complicated place. Or, in many ways, a scarier one.** So the challenges are huge. **My challenge this morning is to offer some useful advice as you embark on this incredibly exciting and often nerve-racking time of your lives.** You all had college prep — but what about life prep? [Katie Couric «Simple Lessons for a Complicated Time», Williams College, June, 2007]

Having mentioned the existing outer threats, both economical and intellectual, the speaker remembers the frightening power of terrorism. According to the journalist, all these factors predetermine the unprecedented complexity and horrors of living in the “world out there”. The idea is emphasized in the discourse with the allusion to the proverb “The world is a scary place”: the speaker makes a statement, wherein she uses the elements of the popular dictum (“world”, “place”, “scarier”). Moreover, the split proverb used in the function of semantic highlighting helps to stress the significance and good timing of the ensuing thoughts, that, hopefully, will leave the young audience with “life prep”.

The commencement address given by the American screenwriter and director Callie Khouri at Sweet Briar College is permeated with a different – somewhat humoristic – mood. It is note-

worthy that the title of the speech “Rules to Live By: Dos, Don’ts, and Other Fabulous Tips from Someone Who’s Been There and Done That” contains the popular proverb “Been there, done that”. This modern phrase is used to talk about one’s familiarity with something and/or past experience(s). As becomes clear from the speech, C. Khouri has a lot of personal observations and guidelines to offer her young listeners to help them navigate through life. One of them is supported with two proverbs. These are her reflections on the importance of having faith in oneself and high self-esteem which, according to Khouri, are rooted in being independent from opinions of others:

Don't listen to things from yourself that you wouldn't accept from a friend. You wouldn't want a friend who wasn't supportive, so don't accept any less from yourself.

You're only human, so learn to forgive yourself the little things, and do the best you can on the big things. **No one is perfect**, and expecting perfection from yourself or anyone else is a waste of time. [“Rules to Live By: Dos, Don’ts, and Other Fabulous Tips from Someone Who’s Been There and Done That”, Callie Khouri, Sweet Briar College, May, 1994]

Callie Khouri, like many other speakers, aims to draw the attention of the audience to the well-known but often overlooked truth that it is in human nature to make mistakes. To stress this idea she uses two synonymic proverbs “We are only human” and “Nobody’s/no one is/perfect”. It is also noteworthy that the first paremia undergoes modification as the speaker changes the personal pronoun “we” to the pronoun “you”, which enables her to directly address the graduating class and maintain contact with the audience.

The same thought is shared in one of the best commencement addresses given throughout the USA in 2017¹. While dwelling on the problem of equality, Mark Zuckerberg tries to formulate the challenges of the modern times and the ways of handling them:

Every generation expands its definition of equality. Previous generations fought for the vote and civil rights. They had the New Deal and Great Society. Now it’s our time to define a new social contract for our generation.

We should have a society that measures progress not just by economic metrics like GDP, but by how many of us have a role we find meaningful. We should explore ideas like universal basic income to give everyone a cushion to try new things. We're going to change jobs many times, so we need affordable childcare to get to work and healthcare that aren't tied to one company. We're all going to make mistakes, so we need a society that focuses less on locking us up or stigmatizing us. And as technology keeps changing, we need to focus more on continuous education throughout our lives.

The basic principle underlying the “new social contract”, as suggested by the Facebook founder, is expressed by a slightly altered modern proverb “People/We make mistakes” (*Cf.* To err is human, 1539). The idea of human imperfection and inevitability of learning through trial and error is emphasized by the addition of the pronoun “all” and the change of the verb tense. The fact encapsulated in the proverb helps to focus the attention of the audience on the offered concept of a more forgiving society.

Inspirational speeches.

Next, we shall look at how proverbs function in inspirational commencement speeches. Such addresses motivate young people to aim high, succeed in life, and really make a difference by serving their community in the best way possible.

An eloquent orator, the former US President Barack Obama, modifies the popular American proverb “Hitch your wagon to a star” in his 2010 address:

Don't just hang out with people who look like you, or go to the same church you do, or share your political views. Broaden your circle to include people with different backgrounds and life experiences. Because that's how you'll end up learning what it's like to walk in somebody else's shoes. That's how you'll come to understand the challenges other people face.

And this is not just an academic exercise. It's a way to broaden your ambit of concern and learn to see yourselves in each other.

Which brings me to my final piece of advice for today, and that's to give back, to be part of something bigger than yourselves. **Hitch your wagon to something that is bigger than yourselves.** [Barack Obama, Kalamazoo Central High School, June, 2010]²

The theme of tolerance and mutual understanding is one of the focal points in the cited talk. According to the speaker, empathy or, to put it metaphorically, the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes, is the key quality of a young person stepping into the grown-up world. Barack Obama modifies the traditional proverb by changing the lexeme "star" for the phrase "something that is bigger than yourselves", thus marking the height his listeners should aim for. The use of the proverb in coda position enables the prominent speaker to round out a part of his talk and succinctly express its message. In this case, the proverb fulfills the summarizing function (summary).

One of the indispensable themes discussed in inspirational commencement addresses is the phenomenon of success. In the speech given by "the first woman of finance" Muriel Siebert in 1998, a popular *paremia* is also used as a summary in the initial position of a part of the talk:

You know, life is a very serious game. When you see a challenge, reach for it, grab it, and do it. And **if you don't succeed, pick yourself up and try again.** <...> Today's economic and social problems are profound. Resources are scarce. Our institutions -- educational, government, philanthropic -- are being challenged as never before. This world needs new talent and a continued dedication to a higher standard of human dignity. You will be asked to solve tremendously complex business and social problems, both here and globally. For the sake of all of us, please try. I'll close by giving you a challenge -- when you hit a closed door and it doesn't open easily, don't get discouraged. <...> When all else fails, just rear back and kick the door open. But don't do it just for yourself -- do it also for those who follow you. [Muriel Siebert, Case Western Reserve University, May, 1998]

Failure is traditionally associated with a fall. Hence, the addition of the phrasal verb “pick yourself up”. In her speech, the successful business woman encourages the graduating class not to relent when life’s challenges seem impossible to resist, and reminds them that success depends on the amount of perseverance one possesses.

Another example from the group of inspirational addresses I will analyze here, is remarkable for the phraseologically saturated context created in it:

Thoreau said, "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." That's one of those dumb cocktail quotations that will strike fear in your heart as you get older. Actually, I was leading a life of loud desperation. <...> A friend used to console me that **cream always rises to the top**. I used to think, so do people who throw themselves into the sea.

I tell you all this because it's worth recognizing that **there is no such thing as an overnight success**. You will do well to cultivate the resources in yourself that bring you happiness outside of success or failure. The truth is, most of us discover where we are headed when we arrive.
[Bill Watterson, Kenyon College, May, 1990]

When dwelling on a streak of bad luck in his life and the resulting feeling of utter despair, the prominent American cartoonist and comic strip author Bill Watterson shares a proverbial piece of advice he used to hear from a close friend of his “Cream always rises/comes to the top”. The speaker supplies it with an ironic comment “so do people who throw themselves in the sea”, expressing his then skeptical attitude to the traditional proverbial idea, and demonstrating the extent of his desperation. Next, Watterson resorts to a pseudo-proverb “There is no such thing as an overnight success”, which he constructs on the basis of the broadly used phrase “There is no such thing...” (*Cf.* There is no such thing as a free lunch). This coined utterance warns the audience about the fact that it takes time and effort to succeed, so one should not feel disheartened after a failure. Thus, the traditional proverb and the following pseudo-proverb highlight the significant pieces of information in the cited part of the commencement address.

“My own experience” speeches.

In a number of commencement speeches selected for my study, proverbs are used to express speakers’ life lessons, their philosophical views rooted in their life experiences. In her address to the graduating class of 2000 in Villanova University, the American writer and journalist Anna Quindlen shares a lesson she learnt from one such life changing event:

And realize that life is the best thing ever, and that you have no business taking it for granted. <...> It is so easy to waste our lives: our days, our hours, our minutes. <...> I learned to live many years ago.

Something really, really bad happened to me, something that changed my life in ways that, if I had my druthers, it would never have been changed at all. And what I learned from it is what, today, seems to be the hardest lesson of all. **I learned to love the journey, not the destination.** I learned that it is not a dress rehearsal, and that today is the only guarantee you get. I learned to look at all the good in the world and to try to give some of it back because I believed in it completely and utterly. [Anna Quindlen, Villanova University, June, 2000]

As becomes clear, the hardest lesson life could teach the prominent speaker was to learn to live “in the moment”, here and now. To formulate it, Quindlen uses the elements of the popular proverb “Life is a journey, not a destination”. The significance of the stated attitude (“to love the journey, not the destination”) is further stressed by the allusion to one more widely spread proverb “Today is the only guarantee you get” (*Cf.* Live today, for tomorrow may not come). Thus, a modified paremia followed by another proverbial idea become the focal semantic points in the cited part of the commencement talk.

Another exciting life story is told to the young audience by the Batman film producer Michael Uslan. A young man, with his childhood’s obsession with comic strips, first received a chance to teach an experimental course on comic book history and art at Indiana University, and, then, due to his quick-wittedness and ingenuity, was invited to a job interview with the largest American comic book publisher. His resourcefulness and absence of fear of

taking risks brought him face-to-face with the head of the company one day:

<...> one July day as I'm walking by the office of the editor of a character called "The Shadow," I hear him complaining loudly that he has no idea for a "Shadow" script that's due the very next day. Quickly, I poked my head into his office and blurted out, "I have an idea for a story." I didn't. But I realized this was a "moment" ...a chance to get my foot in the door. **Carpe Diem. Seize the Day.** I hemmed and hawed and literally created a story on the spot. The editor told me to have the script on his desk in 24 hours and suddenly, I'm a comic book writer for DC Comics. [Michael Uslan, Indiana University, May, 2006]

In his commencement address, Uslan employs the well-known paremia "Seize the day" (uses both its Latin and English versions) to explain his risky act. In the extract under consideration, the proverb expresses the speaker's emotional attitude towards this biographical fact, as his spontaneous decision turned out to be life-changing, and eventually led him to great success and enabled to make his childhood dream a life-long career. The proverb fulfills the function of emotional highlighting in this case.

"Expert's talk" speeches.

It is also worthwhile to look at how commencement speakers, who are world renowned experts, make use of proverbs in their talks on problems they are engaged with in their professional life. For instance, Eric Steve Lander, a Professor of Biology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former co-chair of U.S. President Barack Obama's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, dwells on his life-long research into the human genome. In his address to the graduates at the Roger Williams University, the scientist calls the genome the "Book of Life" that can teach humanity many lessons. One of them is succinctly formulated by the speaker with a proverb:

What have we learned so far? From the book itself and from the way it was obtained?

There are many lessons: some scientific, some social and some personal. Let me share a few with you.

From a scientific perspective, the human genome sequence is remarkable.

<...> For a decade I had taught MIT students the official textbook figure of approximately 100,000 protein-coding genes. You can imagine how shocked I was to discover that there are actually only about 25,000 – 30,000 genes.

This small number is particularly unsettling because it implies that the human being has only about as many genes as a mustard weed. This has been taken by some as an affront to human dignity, although I read it more as a lesson in humility — as well as a homily that **it is not how much you have, but what you do with it, that matters.** [Dr. Eric S. Lander, Roger Williams University, *June, 2003*]

As becomes clear, the daunting discovery made within the framework of the Human Genome Project, brought Lander to a very simple conclusion encapsulated in the popular proverb “It's not what you have but what you do with it/how you use it”, which, in the scientist's opinion, can serve as a homily to people.

Another example of an expert's commencement talk to be considered here is the address given by the celebrated American novelist Ursula Leguin. An astute wordsmith, Leguin treated the themes of gender, feminism, and women's rights in her work. In 1983 the author delivered her speech to the graduates of Mills College, the liberal arts women's college. Here are the opening remarks:

I want to thank the Mills College Class of '83 for offering me a rare chance: to speak aloud in public in the language of women. I know there are men graduating, and I don't mean to exclude them, far from it. <...> Anyhow, commencements are usually operated under the unspoken agreement that everybody graduating is either male or ought to be. Intellectual tradition is male. Public speaking is done in the public tongue, the national or tribal language; and the language of our tribe is the men's language. Of course women learn it. We're not dumb. If you can tell Margaret Thatcher from Ronald Reagan, or Indira Gandhi from General Somoza, by anything they say, tell

me how. **This is a man's world**, so it talks a man's language. The words are all words of power. [Ursula Leguin "A Left-Handed Commencement Address", Mills College, May, 1983]

When addressing the audience of young women, Ursula Leguin aims to make her speech unique, as she speaks "in the language of women", i.e., raises women's problems, encourages them to live their lives according to their own rules. The novelist admits that this is a rare opportunity, for the world we live in is ruled by men. To support this idea, she makes use of the modern proverb "This is a man's world" that serves to summarize all the enumerated facts of men's superiority.

"Enduring values" speeches.

Next, I shall look at how proverbs function in the commencement speeches exploring the theme of moral values and standards. Unsurprisingly, the most frequently used paremia in this group (as well as in the whole practical material) is the Golden Rule "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" – a maxim that exists in many cultures. To be noted is the fact that it appears in its standard, non-modified, form in only one out of 5 speeches:

Computers and smart devices are among the greatest intellectual gifts ever created for man, but if not balanced with human contact, may offer little to develop one's heart. Don't get me wrong, I am mesmerized by this Digital Tsunami, but Google doesn't have all the answers and are all those people on Facebook truly your friends? <...> So with the world at your fingertips, have you learned to listen to your heart, your intuition and your instincts? Have you learned to feel what others will feel before you say a word? Do you understand the lasting impact of a smile, or a simple thank you? Do you truly "**do unto others as you would have them do unto you**"? Your heart is a guiding force, teach yourself to listen to it, nurture it, and let it guide you as you start this next exciting chapter of life. [Angela Ahrendts, Ball State University, May, 2010]

Having shared her view of the modern communication, in many ways made easier by the plethora of smart devices and gadgets,

the then CEO of Burberry Angela Ahrendts stresses the importance of face-to-face contact allowing for feeling, truly hearing and understanding our interlocutors. The speaker poses four questions that compel the young audience to think about the value of personal communication. The last question contains the proverb which summarizes her ideas and succinctly formulates her message.

As has already been stated, the paremia undergoes modifications in other contexts taken from the selected speeches. In his two commencement addresses, the 44th US president Barack Obama substitutes the verb “do” with the lexeme “treat”. In the speech cited below, for instance, it is done in the part where he discusses the problem of maintaining democracy in the country. Obama mentions all the plots and mutual accusations in higher government circles obstructing the possibility of compromise and efficient management:

Now, we've seen this kind of politics in the past. <...>
But it's starting to creep into the center of our discourse.
And the problem with it is not the hurt feelings or the bruised egos of the public officials who are criticized.
<...> The problem is that this kind of vilification and over-the-top rhetoric closes the door to the possibility of compromise. <...>

It coarsens our culture, and at its worst, it can send signals to the most extreme elements of our society that perhaps violence is a justifiable response.

So what do we do? As I found out after a year in the White House, changing this type of politics is not easy. And part of what civility requires is that we recall the simple lesson most of us learned from our parents: **Treat others as you would like to be treated, with courtesy and respect.** (*applause*) [Barack Obama, University of Michigan, May, 2010]

The modified maxim is suggested by the speaker as a means of regulating the existing conflicts. He makes an important addition to the Golden Rule: in his opinion, courtesy and respect are crucial for successful co-existence of people. The use of the proverb enables Obama to focus on the most significant piece of information

in his discourse (a burst of applause heard on the tape proves that he has made his point).

Finally, I shall look at three contexts wherein the speakers support their views with the help of the modern paremia “The more you give, the more you receive”, originating from the Biblical proverb “It is more blessed to give than to receive/It is better to give than to receive”.

In his address to the graduating class at Tufts University the then mayor of New York Michael Bloomberg raises the topic of public service. The main part of his commencement speech is presented as “the book for commencement” that features five main principles of life as seen by the politician («So I've decided to write a little book just for this Commencement and I'm calling it: “All You Really Need to Know You Learned By Commencement”»). The fifth principle is encapsulated in the proverb under consideration:

The Fifth and final principle in the Bloomberg book is
"The more you give, the more you get."

Tufts has an incredibly strong tradition of public service and volunteering. Through Tisch College and the Leonard Carmichael Society, most of you have experienced what it's like to get involved in the community and make a real difference. Don't lose that passion when you get out of here and go into the real world. <...> It's perhaps the most important thing you can do with your lives.
 [Michael Bloomberg, Tufts University, May, 2007]

The paremia “The more you give, the more you get” fulfills two functions in the cited speech. On the level of the whole commencement address, it serves as the structural element of discourse. On the level of this structural element (part of discourse), exploring the last of the proposed life principles, the paremia is used as the epitome of Bloomberg’s arguments and thoughts on public service (summarizing function).

In the following two commencement addresses from the selected material, the proverb is not used to express some generalization but is applied to rather concrete categories. The film director and producer Jerry Zucker also offers the young audience five pieces of advice (“To that end, I will give you my five rules to think about, quickly forget, but years from now kick yourself for

not having listened to”). One of them warns the graduates about overusing or even abusing the word “love”:

In Hollywood, they say "Love ya, babe!" So, OK, I get it. It's just the way people talk and it's probably harmless, but you shouldn't forget the real thing. The real thing is great.
<...>

Think of the world as a big glass of water with some salt in it. You have a choice. You can try to pick out all the salt or you can keep pouring in more water so eventually it gets less bitter. As you begin your new journey, you can try to remove everything that you find distasteful in the world, or you can just pour in more love. **It's the only thing that the more you give away, the more you have.** [Jerry Zucker, University of Wisconsin-Madison, May, 2003]

In his reflections on the beauty of love, the speaker modifies the proverb ([love] It's the only thing that the more you give away, the more you have), which serves to highlight significant information.

The media mogul Oprah Winfrey dwells on the power of wisdom in the commencement address to the graduating class of 2008 at Stanford University:

I think the great – One of the greatest compliments I've ever received: I interviewed with a reporter when I was first starting out in Chicago. And then, many years later, I saw the same reporter. And she said to me, "You know what? You really haven't changed. You've just become more of yourself." And that is really what we're all trying to do, become more of ourselves. And I believe that there is a lesson in almost everything that you do and every experience, and getting the lesson is how you move forward. It's how you enrich your spirit. And, trust me, I know that inner wisdom is more precious than wealth. **The more you spend it, the more you gain.** [Oprah Winfrey, Stanford University, May, 2008]

Winfrey firmly believes (“trust me, I know”) that every bit of experience people get in their lifetime may teach them some lesson, which, once learned, makes them wiser. She, then, compares wisdom with wealth. This, I assume, accounts for the lexical substitu-

tion in the phrase (give → spend, receive/get → gain). Thus, in the extract cited, the modified proverb also fulfills the function of semantic highlighting.

“The root of all evil” speeches.

As has already been stated, some commencement speakers explore the theme of human vices or traits of character they deem to constitute the reason of many problems, and have negative impact on people. Paul Glaser, an American actor, film director, and the chairman of “Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation” chooses to discuss the phenomenon of fear with the graduating class at Stanford University School of Medicine in 2004:

Our fear is an anathema to us, and we go to great lengths to avoid it <...> The great Masters ... Jesus, Buddha, Muhammed, and others studied and spoke to this fear. <...> They studied and taught that our fear is not our enemy, not something to be avoided at all costs, contrary to the romantic notion that "There is nothing to fear but fear itself." That when we experience our fear, when we say the words ... "I am scared," we have the choice, the ability to acknowledge that being 'scared' is not who we are. <...> We need our fear, ... in order to find our love. They go together. Ying and Yang. [Paul Glaser, Stanford University School of Medicine, June, 2004]

Glaser has lived through a lot of tragedy, for he lost his first wife and seven-year old daughter. In his address to the graduating medical students, the speaker calls fear the anathema to humankind, and reminds them of what Jesus, Buddah and Muhhamed said about it. The epitome of their teachings is conveyed in one sentence containing a well-known paremia “There is nothing to fear but fear itself”. In Glaser’s opinion, this “romantic notion” contradicts the ideas spread by the Masters. Thus, the use of the popular dictum enables the commencement speaker to succinctly express significant information (function of cognitive economy), and, then, to elaborate on the importance of being able to face and take one’s fears in stride.

The proverb “Stop and /take time to/ smell the roses” also fulfills the function of cognitive economy in the commencement speech delivered by the “Mythbusters” host Jamie Hyneman:

People are often so goal oriented, so focused on the finish line, that it's all too easy to lose track of how we are getting there, and what we are actually doing at any given point.

I'm not just talking about just **stopping now and then to smell the roses**.

My thought is that the best way to move ahead is to focus on asking the right questions along the way. It sometimes amounts to placing more importance on the question than the answer. Something as simple as asking yourself what you are really looking for is often missed, but it becomes evident how important it is when you realize that once you have a very clear idea about what the question is, the answer is often just sitting there waiting for you. [Jamie Hyneman, Villanova University, May, 2010]

In his talk, Hyneman reflects on the shortages of modern people, who find themselves overwhelmed by everyday hustle with their focus kept on achieving some particular goal. According to him, it is the reason people are missing life itself, that, quoting John Lennon, happens while they are busy making other plans. Having raised this topic and suggested his piece of advice, the speaker caveats "I'm not just talking about just **stopping now and then to smell the roses**". This popular proverb urging the people to slow down for a while and start paying attention to the little details around them, serves to economically express the idea that this approach seems to be insufficient or not efficient enough to the speaker. The best way, as suggested by Hyneman, is to look deep inside oneself, contrary to the proverbial advice to focus on the outer world.

Political commencement speeches.

As has been previously stated, a number of 2017 commencement addresses have some political agenda behind them. The invited speakers highlight the existing threats to democracy and the country's stability, while using the convocation as a place and opportunity for public discussion. Some speakers admit to being politically inclined for the situation is too urgent to remain silent, as does the politician and scholar Elizabeth Warren in her address:

I am not here to make a pitch just to Democrats – or to Republicans. Yes, I’m a Democrat. I am a proud Democrat. But my point applies to Ds and Rs – and to independents, and to libertarians, and to vegetarians...and to Big Mac-arians. The point I want to make is a point about democracy. <...>

And I’m trying to keep this apolitical, but I can’t help myself and I have one more – the principle that no one, no one, in this country is above the law. We need a Justice Department, not an Obstruction of Justice Department.

Apart from proverbs that do appear in this group of speeches, the notable characteristic is the use of recurrent constructions, i.e. idiomatic or set expressions that refer to some well-known political fact or event. They first appear in discourse but due to their frequent use (recurrence) become a part of language. I could distinguish several recurrent constructions associated with the 2016 US election campaign and the Trump administration in the thematic group under consideration. One of Elizabeth Warren’s recommendations, for instance, features the often mocked and derogatorily referenced euphemism “alternative facts”, that has become a label of a kind of the current presidency:

Second, do a little studying. <...> study up because knowing something about an issue makes a difference. So go online and read the facts. Not the **alternative facts**, the real facts. I have to say, I never thought we would need a modifier for “facts” – like how do you distinguish them now: facty facts, or the factiest facts? But you’ve got to get to the facts. [Elizabeth Warren, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2017]

Hillary R. Clinton’s bitter assessment of the present political climate is summed up with the phrase under discussion as well. The former presidential candidate stresses the fact of using this expression as a quotation, thus distancing herself from the situation as a whole:

And here’s what that means to you, the Class of 2017. You are graduating at a time when there is a full-fledged assault on truth and reason. Just log on to social media for ten seconds. It will hit you right in the face. People deny-

ing science, concocting elaborate, hurtful conspiracy theories about child-abuse rings operating out of pizza parlors, drumming up rampant fear about undocumented immigrants, Muslims, minorities, the poor, turning neighbor against neighbor and sowing division at a time when we desperately need unity. Some are even denying things we see with our own eyes, like the size of crowds, and then defending themselves by talking about quote-unquote “**alternative facts.**” [Hillary Clinton, Wellesley College, 2017]

The Academy Award winning actress Helen Mirren, known for her previous harsh remarks about President Trump, uses the recurrent construction “tweeting at 3 a.m.” referring to another often parodied and mocked fact of Donald Trump’s late-night tweeting after a TV debate during the election campaign:

Everyone advises a commencement speaker to say one thing that the students will remember 40 years from now. Now that was hard – it took me weeks to come up with it. And then it came to me, something that I believe you will remember in the year 2057 because it is so true. Here it is. Get ready. **“Whether you’re in the French Quarter or the Oval Office, no good can ever come from tweeting at 3 a.m.”**

Speaking of 3 a.m., it’s great to be back in a city where I never seem to get to bed before 3 a.m. [Helen Mirren, Tulane University, 2017]

As my analysis shows, it is a long-established tradition among American political figures to rely in their rhetoric on maxims encapsulating the fundamental principles of American socio-political philosophy. One of them, the dictum “All men are created equal”, appears in Joe Biden’s commencement address in its standard form, which emphasizes the importance of preserving and following the basic democratic premise formulated several centuries ago:

And the moment like this, it's more important than ever that we get back to basics. That we hold fast to what has always made America great and unique.

To me, at its basic, it's down to a simple idea: that every single person is entitled to be treated with dignity

and respect. It's in our DNA. It's in the fabric of our Declaration and our Constitution. It sounds corny but we do hold these truths self-evident that **all men and women are created equal**. It's the uniting feature of what makes us who we are. [Joe Biden, Cornell University, 2017]

The politician deems it extremely important that the young audience be reminded of this self-evident truth, which, according to him, is being repeatedly ignored at the present moment. And notice, he expands the well-known dictum to include women! This “miniature theory” has socio-cultural implications and serves to succinctly summarize and at the same time highlight the speaker’s message.

In his commencement address to Harvard Kennedy School graduates, John Kerry elaborates on the concept of truth. He is consistent with the claim that anything one says relies on “the speech being truthful” in his assessment of the present political environment in the country. The Biblical proverb “The truth shall set you free” serves as the irrefutable premise for the ensuing arguments and judgments, thus, fulfilling the function of semantic highlighting in discourse

Democracy relies on free speech. Yes, say anything you want, but it relies even more on the speech being truthful. **It is the truth after all that sets us free** <...> And the truth is – no, this is not a normal time. It’s not normal to see the President of the United States decrying ‘so-called’ judges. It’s not normal for the leader of the country that invented the First Amendment to routinely degrade and even threaten journalists. And no, it’s not normal to see the head of the FBI fired summarily because he was investigating connections between Russia and the presidential campaign of the very man who fired him. And it’s not normal that when you close your eyes and you listen to the news, too often the political back and forth in America sounds too much like it does in the countries that the State Department warns Americans not to travel to. [John Kerry, Harvard Kennedy School, 2017]

In her compelling speech before the graduating class of 2017 at Wellesley College, Hillary R. Clinton makes use of several

proverbs, which creates a phraseologically saturated context, indicating her emotional involvement and the significance with which she treats the opportunity of reaching out to a young audience:

And third, here at Wellesley, you learned the power of service. Because while free and fierce conversations in classrooms, dorm rooms, dining halls are vital, they only get us so far. You have to turn those ideas and those values into action. This College has always understood that. The motto which you've heard twice already, "Not to be ministered unto, but to minister" is as true today as it ever was. If you think about it, it's kind of an old-fashioned rendering of President Kennedy's great statement, "**Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.**"

Our culture often celebrates people who appear to go it alone. But the truth is, that's not how life works. **Anything worth doing takes a village.** And you build that village by investing love and time into your relationships. And in those moments for whatever reason when it might feel bleak, think back to this place where women have the freedom to take risks, make mistakes, even fail in front of each other. [Hillary Clinton, Wellesley College, 2017]

As we can see, Clinton first remembers J. F. Kennedy's indelible words, which have already acquired paremiological status, "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country", and, then, a modern American proverb "It takes a village to raise a child"³. The latter serves as the basis for the anti-proverb in her speech "Anything worth doing takes a village", which expands the meaning of the original formula and urges the young listeners to value the art of collaboration.

The role of proverbs on the structural level of the commencement speech discourse

Of special interest are commencement addresses wherein proverbs fulfill the function of structural organization of discourse. Relative conciseness, traditionality and the goals of the commencement speech are its key discursive characteristics accounting for the frequent efficient use of proverbs as structural elements of discourse.

One of the broadly employed means of structuring the main part of the commencement address, which, as a rule, is meant to impart the speakers' gems of advice, is the listing of their life principles or lessons accompanied by comments, facts and examples drawn from their lives. In some cases, proverbs serve to formulate one of the lessons from the distinguished guest's list, as in the following example:

I idly made a list, and soon I had written the speech I never heard. I might have ignored the advice, of course and so may you. Nevertheless, here are eight things I wish I'd been told at my commencement.

<...>

2. Do one thing at a time. Give each experience all your attention. Try to resist being distracted by other sights and sounds, other thoughts and tasks, and when it is, guide your mind back to what you're doing. <...> I'm not warning against learning many things on many subjects, and virtuosity can indeed be useful. My warning is against distraction, whether you invite it or just let it happen, as I've done all my life. [John Walsh, Wheaton College, May, 2000]

The TV host John Walsh offers the graduating class his own list of recommendations he wished he had heard on his commencement day. The second piece of advice is expressed with the help of a slightly modified popular proverb "One step at a time". He substitutes the lexeme "step" by the word "thing" which is necessary in the context to convey the speaker's message. Walsh deems it crucial to stop multitasking and give oneself to one occupation wholly and completely. Thus, in the cited part of the speech (a point from the list), the modified proverb serves as the starting focal point for the speaker's arguments.

Another notable example of a proverb used as a structural element of discourse is taken from the commencement address delivered by Jessica Lange at Sarah Lawrence College. While talking to the class of 2007, the famous actress thinks it necessary to discuss the political situation in the country and the world ("I would be remiss in addressing a group of young adults if I were to deliberately ignore the political realities that they are faced with").

The speaker finds analogies between the current situation and the time of her own graduation:

I look out at your faces and guess most of you graduates are about 22 years old. I think of the world I was living in at that age. Very different from yours and yet, ominously similar.

At 22, for me, the Vietnam war was in its seventh year. Nixon was employing round-the-clock bombing. We were destroying the infrastructure, the people, and the countryside of Vietnam to save it from the Communists.

History repeats itself.

Today, for you at 22, the Iraq war is in the sixth year. Thousands of American soldiers killed. Tens of thousands wounded. Hundreds of thousands Iraqis dead. The infrastructure and land destroyed to save it from (and this is a movable feast) first, tyranny, and then, terrorists.

<...> We are all citizens of a troubled world, yet it is your generation that carries the weight of the future on your shoulders. [Jessica Lange, Sarah Lawrence College, May, 2007]

In the excerpt cited, the idea of similarities between different time periods is substantiated by the non-modified proverb “History repeats itself”, which serves as a conceptual cue (a bridge of a kind) connecting two semantically analogical pieces of information.

In the following example, Tony Snow, the White House Press Secretary under President George W. Bush, shared five lessons he had learned through trial and error himself in his address “Reason, Faith, Vocation” with the graduating class of 2007. Although proverbs, both standard and modified, are not employed to formulate his pieces of advice or recommendations constituting the list, they become the focal points in his discourse bringing the most important ideas to the fore. Thus, the proverbs form a specific semantic and compositional frame of the whole address. Snow consistently relies on proverbial wisdom to make his points and support his arguments. When dwelling on the importance of using one’s common sense and thinking things through, he offers the young listeners the undeniable maxim “Know thyself”, which according to the speaker is the key to the Universe:

Number one, *think*. You've got a diploma now, you've got a brain. Put them to work. <...> Catholic University has equipped you with an extraordinary and valuable tool. It's taught you how to learn. This handy skill never wears out, so please use it all the time. <...> You're smart but we humans are also gullible. Really gullible. Just ask the serpent in Eden. Therefore you're going to need to develop some discernment, some common sense. <...> You know, hucksters perform an unintended service. Like everybody here, I'm sure you've all been conned. I am such a sucker that I get conned all the time. What happens is they make you look in the mirror and assess honestly the person on the other side. Now all of us love to delude ourselves, making excuses. But you know, the more we resist being honest and doing an honest evaluation, the sillier we behave. Socrates was right: **Know thyself**.

The speaker's second recommendation to practice a little daring also relies on the proverbial advice "No guts, no glory", which is used to formulate the lesson drawn from his rich life experience and to summarize all the comments put forward by him:

Second recommendation: Go off-road.

It's tempting to search for comfort, but don't play it too safe. <...> The point's simple. When a chance presents itself, take a prudent and interesting risk. If it doesn't work out, that is okay. Don't worry about that, either. You see, God presents blessings in unexpected packages. Don't overlook them. Remember: **no guts, no glory**.

To support his third recommendation that urges the students to have faith in God – some greater power than themselves – Snow expands the traditional dictum "Life is short" to emphasize the fact that a person's life is nothing in this Universe, which unfolds with its own order and according to its own unalterable moral laws that transcend time:

Third: Commit.

This is a way of talking about faith. American culture likes to celebrate the petulant outcast, the smart-aleck with the contempt for everything and faith in nothing. Snarky mavericks. The problem is these guys are losers. <...>

They've either decided that no moral law exists or they will be the creator, the author of those laws. Now one road leads to complete and total anarchy. **Life is solitary, nasty, brutish and short.** The other is to insanity, since it requires playing God. We know in our hearts, intuitively, from our first years as children, that the universe unfolds with a discernable order and that moral laws, far from being convenient social conventions, are firm and unalterable.

In his fourth recommendation, the politician alludes to the frequently used commencement formula “The world is a scary place”:

Next, get out. (Your parents are probably saying that, too.) <...>

Now, **the world can be a frightening place**, and sometimes a computer may seem to provide refuge, but don't do it. We also try to hide in other ways. By looking away from the panhandler around the corner or ignoring the fact that somebody is berating someone for no reason at all. <...> So, when it comes to the world, engage it in every possible way. <...> But don't shrink from the pain and the poignancy and aches because they're essential. They bring us together. They are a part of our experiences. They enliven everything you do but they cannot work their magic until you leave the computer screen and get out that front door.

As we can see, the speaker reminds the audience about the beauty of face-to-face communication, and urges the young people to leave their virtual worlds and literally get out into the *real* world with all its potential trials and tribulations, as they are an essential part of each person's experience.

In his fifth tip meant to make the audience reflect on “love”, Snow uses the popular proverb “You can't buy love”. No matter how trite it may sound, the speaker wants the graduates to be reminded of it:

Finally, *love*. How trite is that? But it's everything. It separates happiness from misery. It separates the full life from the empty life. To love is to acknowledge that life is not

about you. I want you to remember that: *It's not about you*. It's a hard lesson. A lot of people go through life and never learn it. It's to submit willingly, heart and soul, to things that matter. Love is not melodrama. **You don't purchase it**, you don't manufacture it. You build it.

The role of proverbs in the realization of the entertaining function of the commencement address

In my practical material I registered two instances of using parremias as a means of creating a joke, which contributes to the entertaining function of commencement addresses. One of them – an extract from the speech delivered by the prominent rock musician and activist Bono – will be analyzed here to show how proverbs fulfill the phatic function, i.e. help establish contact between the speaker and the listeners. The other instance was examined in my earlier article (Konstantinova 2017). It is also worth mentioning, that in both cases proverbs appear at the beginning of the talk – the crucial moment for setting up contact with the audience.

It is a well-established tradition in American universities to bestow honorary degrees on outstanding figures in science, business, politics, etc. as a sign of recognition of their great service. It is often the case that the commencement speaker becomes an honorary degree recipient. Bono starts his address by extending his gratitude for the conferred degree of Doctor of Law:

Doctor of Laws, wow! I know it's an honor, and it really is an honor, but are you sure? Doctor of Law -- you know all I can think about is the laws I've broken. Yes!

<...>

My resume reads like a rap sheet. I have to come clean; I've broken a lot of laws, and the ones I haven't I've certainly thought about. I have sinned in thought, word, and deed -- and God forgive me. Actually God forgave me, but why would you? I'm here getting a doctorate, getting respectable, getting in the good graces of the powers that be. I hope it sends you students a powerful message: **Crime does pay**. (*applause*) [Bono, University of Pennsylvania, May, 2004]

In his attempt to establish contact with the young audience, the speaker creates the atmosphere of relaxed, even intimate commu-

nication. To achieve this goal, Bono focuses on one side of his public life, i.e. his career as a rebellious rock musician who broke a lot of laws at some point in the past. The singer uses the counter-proverb “Crime does pay” (*Cf.* Crime doesn't pay). This positive statement contradicting the traditional view is strengthened by the use of the emphatic element “does”. Thus, this humorous “anti-lesson” is received with applause and a burst of laughter from the audience (can be heard on the audiotape), which testifies to the fact that the communicative goal is achieved and the contact is established.

Conclusion

The commencement address is the most significant part of the university graduation ceremony treated as a rite of passage in anthropological literature. My study has shown that the research into the discourse of commencement addresses and the use of proverbs in them is still rare. The commencement speech has a conventional structure, serves to celebrate and inspire the graduates, and also fulfills the instructive and entertaining functions. It has been proven that proverbs are a frequent and efficient linguistic tool employed in the discourse of the commencement address. Nine thematic groups of addresses were distinguished in the course of study. However, the majority of talks combine several themes. The greatest number of proverbs was registered in the “grown-up world” thematic group, wherein paremias help the speakers to realize the main goal of preparing the younger generation for stepping into the grown-up life. Proverbs fulfill the cognitive-discursive functions of semantic and emotional highlighting, the function of structural organization, the phatic function, and the function of summary and cognitive economy in the discourse of the commencement address.

Sources of the examples

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speechbank.htm>

<http://gos.sbc.edu/>

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks>

<http://www.graduationwisdom.com/>

<http://college.usatoday.com/2017/06/13/best-2017-commencement-speeches>

Notes

¹The list with the web links can be found at <http://college.usatoday.com/2017/06/13/best-2017-commencement-speeches>.

²This is the only exception of a speech delivered not at a university but at a high school.

³It is not the first occasion Hillary Clinton uses this proverb. The book “It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us” published in 1996 features it in the truncated form in the title. She also elaborated on this proverbial idea in her Democratic Convention speech on July, 28, 2016.

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