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DEFINITION MATTERS: THE PITFALLS OF PROVERB STUDIES

Abstract: This article serves two main functions: it warns about the complexity and risks surrounding proverb definition and also offers solutions to increase insight and avoid pitfalls. The first part analyses the reasons for the absence of clear consensus among scholars and includes a summary of the main trends or views in specialised literature, as well as a “scale of consensus” for definition criteria. The second part advocates for an optimistic approach and a strict methodology to define proverbs, including several principles to boost legitimacy and bypass common obstacles. The final part showcases, through concrete examples, how terminology and proverb definition can influence or distort results in several fields of paremiology.

Keywords: paremiology, phraseology, proverb, definition, methodology, terminology

1. Introduction

In many countries, the study of proverbs is becoming increasingly popular among scholars, including young ones. Whatever the subject of their articles, dissertations, or monographs, they inevitably have to deal with a very delicate matter in the introduction or first part of their works: proverb definition. Very often, the chosen solution is to quote a renowned scholar and get on with the subject at hand. Those who delve deeper into the matter quickly realise proverb definition is a can of worms.

2. On the impossibility of a universal definition

Unlike organic matter or objects made of atoms, proverbs cannot be identified via scientific detection methods: no electron microscope or chemical reaction can pinpoint this class of sayings. As a consequence, paremiology—like many “soft” sciences—is prone to typological and terminological entanglements or squabbles. Numerous scholars have pointed out the absence of clear consensus when it comes to proverb definition. In his entry on proverbs in the encyclopaedia of short forms, Grzybek (1994: 39) states that “There is no generally accepted definition which covers all specifics of the proverbial genre”. Decades later, this statement still holds true. In his chapter on proverb definition, Norrick (2015: 14) notes that “there is no single proverbiality and no single inclusive definition of the proverb”, adding that “The attempt to discover a definition of proverbiality based on specific properties is probably just as fruitless as a definition of the proverb itself in such terms”. Yet, countless attempts have been made. Mieder (1989: 13) even claims that “there are more definition attempts than there are proverbs”. In a nutshell, there seems to be a consensus among proverb specialists that **no consensus** has been reached on proverb definition.

The main reasons for the absence of an undisputed definition fall back to varying mentalities, cultures, languages, needs, and methods among scholars, as well as the interdisciplinary nature of paremiology. First of all, not all scholars believe it is possible to define proverbs. The most famous scholar sharing this “pessimistic” approach is without a doubt Archer Taylor, whose words have been cited so many times that they have somewhat become “proverbial” among paremiologists:

The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone. An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial. (Taylor 1962: 2)

Other scholars believe it is not possible to define proverbs because of the instability of their essential features. For instance,

Meschonnic (1976: 425) claims that proverbs cannot be defined because “the referent depends on the situation”, while Krikmann (2009) has famously argued in favour of the “semantic indefiniteness” of proverbs. This viewpoint is particularly common among scholars who favour a semantic or sociolinguistic approach to proverb definition. This highlights a very important factor: the interdisciplinary nature of proverb studies.

Even among “optimistic” scholars, who believe proverb definition is possible, there are numerous approaches. Firstly, some use the word *proverb* in a very broad or loose manner, making it an umbrella term and a category that includes many sub-genres. Others use the term more specifically but focus on various criteria since paremiology is at the crossroads of numerous disciplines: folklore, semantics, pragmatics, stylistics, narrative studies, and many more. Honeck (1997: 5) lists seven main “views” in proverb studies:

- The subjective view, based on personal feelings or intuition
- The formal view, based on linguistic and semantic-logic features
- The religious view, based on their moral message in religious texts
- The literary view, based on their emotional or aesthetic value in prose or poetry
- The practical view, based on real-life applications (psychotherapy, advertising, etc.)
- The cultural view, based on sociocultural contexts and situations
- The cognitive view, defended by the author, based on mental processes.

The author notes that the formal, cultural, and cognitive views are more scientific in nature and in their goals. It is also necessary to note that views may sometimes merge, or even branch into numerous subcategories, as is the case with the formal or “linguistic” approach. Given the vast number of fields it comprises, it is hard to imagine this approach is a unified one, however “scientific” it may be. Unsurprisingly, non-scholars and scholars alike – be they preachers, linguists, folklorists, or neuroscientists – devise definitions in order to apply them to a specific field

or work. This means that definitions are prone to what may be called **proverbial solipsism**: the vast majority of scholars who try to solve the mystery of proverb definition do so by relying on their area of expertise and criteria related to it.

Thus, most folklorists – such as Archer Taylor or Wolfgang Mieder – stress the importance of notions like currency while scholars who specialise in pragmatics, for instance Arvo Krikmann, put forward their functions and communicative potential. Similarly, linguists who choose a rhetorical or stylistic approach tend to claim that poetic or stylistic features – like rhyme or parallelism – are obligatory components, while those with a semantic or semiotic approach, namely Grigori Permyakov or Peter Grzybek, will give more importance to the role of the interaction situation. This is why proverbs have been characterised as “names” (Permyakov 1974, Kleiber 2019) or “strategies” (Burke 1941, Kuusi 1998) to describe or deal with situations. Scholars with a less linguistic and more cultural approach tend to choose widely different features, as with Winick (2011: 367), who puts the “communication of wisdom” at the centre of proverb definition. The list could go on nearly indefinitely but it needs not be exhaustive to convey the point: this abundance of approaches entails a range of very diverse, **need-oriented** definitions. Conversely, some scholars pay little heed to proverb definition as it is not central to their studies. This was the case with the pioneer Matti Kuusi, who preferred to focus on the meaning and applications of proverb lore.

Other scholars choose a very different methodology to define proverbs. Instead of basing their definitions on their own criteria, they base it on the criteria of others. This is the case with the *emic* approach, mostly used by anthropologists, where definition is based on the beliefs of the members or “insiders” of a cultural group, as opposed to that of “outsiders” such as scholars, who represent the *etic* view. The emic approach may be summarised as follows: “if people believe it’s a proverb, then it’s a proverb”. It takes root in the “subjective” view introduced earlier but it is indirectly subjective. From a linguistic viewpoint, such an approach likely amounts to typological anarchy – the very opposite of what is scientific and methodical. But anthropologists or folklorists would argue that its validity lies in the fact that definitions

depend on cultural aspects. This approach does offer one serious advantage: it makes proverb definition much easier. By avoiding complex analytical methods, it solves a famous paradox summarised by Milner (1969: 50), who wonders why it is “so easy to recognise proverbs when you hear them – even for the first time – and yet so difficult to agree on how to define them”. The answer lies in the **perception** of proverbiality.

In order to assess how people perceive proverbs, Wolfgang Mieder conducted a survey on 55 non-specialists. He summarised their answers as follows: “A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” (Mieder 1989: 13; 2004: 3). Although he immediately comments that this definition is not very scientific, one cannot help but wonder how it differs from those proposed by scholars. Whiting (1932), Honeck (1997: 19-24), Villers (2014; 2020), or Bhuvaneshwar (2015a) have reviewed a large number of scholarly definitions or taxonomies and it turns out that the criteria put forward by experts are quite similar. If a condensate were to be written, it would be very similar to Mieder’s summary. This shows that perception does play an important role in many definitions. In his chapter on proverb definition, Norrick (2015: 14) even argues that proverbiality should be viewed as “a matter of *prototypicality*”. According to the author, a statement should be considered proverbial if it contains a certain number of proverbial markers such as metaphor, rhyme, or parallelism.

Despite the absence of clear consensus on proverb definition in specialised literature, it is possible to observe a consensus on certain definition *criteria*. This is particularly true in articles, chapters, and books focusing on definition. Thus, criteria may be arranged into a **scale of consensus**¹, as follows:

- Criteria non-grata: structural implication, humour, ancientness, formal archaism.

¹ Naturally, this notion does not depend only on the *frequency* of such criteria in proverb definitions. Although currency, brevity, fixedness, truth and wisdom are the most *cited*, they are not necessarily the most undisputed criteria in works and studies on proverb definition.

- Controversial criteria: metaphor and figurativeness, truth, prescriptiveness, wisdom, concision, semantic implication, rhythmic traits, fixedness and “frozenness”.
- Criteria with low frequency but high ratio (rarely cited but often considered obligatory once taken into account): human activities as a theme, collective anonymity².
- High-consensus criteria: grammatical autonomy, generic meaning, preconstruction or “currency” (also known as “commonness”, “conventionality”, etc.).

Among the most undisputed criteria, grammatical autonomy implies that proverbs are full statements as opposed to mere syntagmas or verb phrases such as *to spill the beans*, which are usually referred to as idioms. Scholars who have a more conversational approach, like Norrick (1985), prefer the label “free conversational turns”. Generic meaning indicates – from a semantic point of view – that proverbs contain generalisations as opposed to expressions that are bound to a specific situation, e.g. *That’s the way the cookie crumbles*. Norrick (2015: 11), who chooses a different angle, refers to the generalising quality of proverbs as their “didactic value”. Lastly, currency implies that proverbs are used in a speech community or folk group. This, in turn, entails, from a psycholinguistic point of view, that they are *preconstructed*, i.e. not invented as we speak, and retrieved from memory (hence the frequent use of the label “reproducible”). Many other labels have been given to this aspect: some entail a cultural or ethnographic approach, such as “conventional”, “traditional”, or “culturally confirmed” while more formal approaches focus on the ensuing notions of “stability” or “fixedness³”. The three high-consensus criteria from the list, along with the two criteria with low frequency but high ratio, are those chosen in the present article, after being deemed the most relevant in a doctoral thesis on proverb definition by Villers (2014).

² This notion implies that a proverb is not *associated with* an author regardless of actual or provable authorship.

³ The notion of fixedness is controversial if it is understood as absolute frozenness. Formal stability should be understood as a set of combinations or variants that evolve with time, while discourse variation can be apprehended as a case of deproverbialisation (cf. Villers 2014).

Ultimately, Norrick's statement about the lack of "single proverbiality" holds true (2015: 14). Even the consensus on some definition criteria will not be enough to unite all scholars. However, this article is in no way part of the "pessimistic" current spearheaded by Archer Taylor. Rather, it embraces an "optimistic", interdisciplinary, analytical view of proverb definition. This is why it defends a simple compromise: if it is not possible to agree on a single definition, then we should start by trying to find an agreement on definition **methodology**.

3. Towards methodology principles for proverb definition

Since it is not scientifically possible to prove that a proverb must contain this or that feature, and since a universal consensus is not possible, the best option is to focus on methodology. In order to obtain the most functional, objective, and legitimate definition, it is necessary to take into account several pitfalls and principles, which may be labelled as follows.

3.1 The Analytical Principle

The analytical principle holds that proverb definition should be based on an *analytical approach*, with a specific set of criteria, and **not on perception** or intuition as is the case with the prototypical and the emic or "personal" approaches described above. The latter relies on the notions of cultural "insiders" and "outsiders". However, in the case of proverbs, scholars (outsiders) are not just cultureless observers; they are proverb users who belong to a cultural group. Secondly, both approaches rely on the expertise of non-experts, who are often not interested in proverb definition and not competent⁴ for such a task. Finally, these approaches are too prone to cognitive bias as they rely heavily on the perception of proverbiality. In the case of proverbs, perception greatly depends on appearances. As we all know, appearances are deceptive. Surveys and tests conducted by Arora (1984),

⁴ Although anthropologists such as Kenneth Pike – the father of the emic / epic distinction – and Marvin Harris consider non-experts to be as competent as "outsiders" (scholars) to *give an account of their culture*, it must be noted that writing a definition is a very complex task that requires specific skills.

Litovkina (1994), and Villers (2014) reveal that the presence of proverbial markers or “poetic features” – such as rhyme or metaphor – is enough to deceive respondents into believing that sentences fabricated for the surveys are more “proverbial” than attested proverbs. It has been argued in Villers (2017) that this heavy dependence on proverbial markers is due to their primary function of replication boosters⁵.

The drawback of that principle is that even a scholar, if presented with a formula they do not know, cannot immediately tell if it is a proverb or not. Before reaching a conclusion, they would need to verify several elements, including whether the formula is or has been used in a folk group or if it is associated with a specific author. This may sound disappointing, but the easiest solution is not always the best one.

3.2 *The Distinction or “Discrimination” Principle*

The distinction principle asserts that a good definition should not just explain or describe things. It should also **set boundaries**. Therefore, the chosen definition criteria should be a set of obligatory features instead of common attributes. As a consequence, gradation, frequency, or approximation adverbs should be avoided: claiming that proverbs are “rather” short, “more or less” ancient, or “often” metaphorical is no definition. It is merely a description, which can be helpful, but not sufficient. The distinction principle also entails that subjective or fuzzy notions should not be used to define proverbs. Notions such as catchiness or brevity may be very appealing but they make it very difficult to decide which candidates qualify as proverbs and which do not. The same applies to notions like wisdom, which would grant the proverbial status to a vast range of sayings despite vastly different features. Unsurprisingly, this principle is completely incompatible with the prototypical view of proverb definition, where sayings gain their proverbial label if they reach a certain – yet very uncertain – “degree” of proverbial veneer.

⁵ This term, which draws from memetics – the study of how cultural units spread – means that proverbial markers help proverbs gain and maintain their status by making them “fitter” for survival.

3.3 *The Systemic Principle*

The systemic principle, which derives from the previous one, implies that the class of proverbs should be clearly separated from its close “neighbours” in order to locate where the proverb stands in a **broader typology** of preconstructed polylexical units. This is why definition criteria are important: not only do they define what a proverb is, but they also indicate what it is not. Thus, currency / preconstruction separates proverbs from spontaneous proverb parodies or personal creations and maxims. Autonomy separates proverbs from verb phrases (to spill the beans), noun phrases (a wet blanket), similes (as blind as a bat) and many other types – traditionally considered idioms – as well as truncated proverbs. Their generalising meaning separates proverbs from sentence-type idioms such as “That’s another pair of shoes” or conventional formulae like “Nice to meet you”. As for the Human criterion, it separates proverbs from weather sayings and superstitions, while anonymity distinguishes them from famous quotations, winged words, and apothegms.

The same distinctions can be operated with more controversial criteria. For instance, metaphor is sometimes used to separate “true” proverbs from maxims or aphorisms. Whatever criteria are chosen, incorporating the proverbial class in a typology greatly increases the understanding of an author’s viewpoint.

3.4 *The Sub-class or “Hyponym” Principle*

This principle, which complements the previous one, implies that the term *proverb* should not be used as an umbrella term or hypernym to refer to all types of preconstructed sentence-type formulae with a generalising meaning (paremias). It is more productive and logical to view it as a hyponym, i.e. a **subtype** of paremias, for two reasons. Firstly, the “loose” usage of the term *proverb* may result in a lack of precision and may therefore cause misunderstandings. Secondly, the loose or hypernymic usage is needlessly redundant with many generic terms that already exist: specialists traditionally use labels such as “paremia/paroemia” or “sapiential forms” while non-specialists generally use the word *sayings*.

As for the even broader category of preconstructed phrases, there is already an even greater profusion of terms. The most common umbrella terms include “phraseme”, “phraseological unit”, “set phrase”, “multi-word unit”, or “formulaic language” (cf. Villers 2020 for a more comprehensive review of labels).

3.5 The Interdisciplinary Principle

The interdisciplinary principle holds that proverb definition should not be tackled with a single approach but from a **variety of angles**, in order to evaluate the relevance and weight of an optimal number of criteria. This requirement arises from the multifaceted nature of proverbs. Take for example the linguistic approach. It may be the most common one and it may take into account several important features (grammatical autonomy, generic meaning, etc.) but it relies too much on formal – and controversial – criteria such as frozenness or stylistic features. Besides, it often overlooks the key notion of currency. Conversely, the folkloristic approach may focus on the more consensual notion of currency or “conventionality” but it rarely heeds criteria such as generic meaning or grammatical autonomy. As for the Human criterion, very few approaches take it into account. This is why all potential criteria should be assessed even if most of them are eventually discarded.

Fortunately, this principle seems to manifest in several definition attempts, even if is often only partial. Bhuvaneshwar (2015b: 78) laments about this situation: “mainstream linguists are all partially blind. Formal linguists are functionally myopic; functional linguists are formally hypermetropic; cognitive linguists are formally and functionally astigmatic; and anthropological linguists are culturally jaundiced. Finally, all the linguists are *ka:rmikally* blind”. Despite the necessity of an interdisciplinary – and not just linguistic – approach, it is important to point out that some viewpoints are less productive and transferrable than others, especially if they are too abstract or subjective. Thus, a philosophical or moral approach to proverb definition would not be very exploitable in most contexts.

3.6 *The Comprehensive Principle*

The comprehensive principle holds that proverb typologies and definitions should account for all commonly recognised proverbs and **assign them a category** in case they are denied the proverbial status. This principle is all the more important when the rejected candidate is traditionally considered proverbial. The typology designed by Anscombe (2008: 256) is a case in point for this difficulty. The author makes “rhythmic traits” an obligatory criterion and therefore rejects non-rhythmic paremias from the class of proverbs. However, his typology does not account for the rejected candidates and simply places them in a junk category named “others”, which begs the question: what are they? Ultimately, this incentive to process all proverbial candidates is an opportunity to test the soundness and robustness of the typology and the pre-existing definition criteria.

3.7 *The Clear-Terminology Principle*

This principle holds that proverb definitions should be as **clear and simple** as possible. Thus, pejorative and subjective terms such as “clichés” should not be used to define them, even if it is already often⁶ the case. The same goes for abstract or complex concepts or terms with extreme connotations (e.g. “frozenness” for fixedness, or “anti-proverb” for proverb parodies). The “kar:mic linguistic” approach chosen by Bhuvaneswar (2015a; 2015b) is a very interesting dilemma. The author, who is one of the most prolific and innovative on proverb definition, uses concepts from traditional Indian philosophy, astrology-inspired diagrams, and Hindi terms to describe proverbs. While his simplified definition is much easier to grasp (“a proverb is a culturally confirmed frozen prototypical illocution as a text”⁷ (2015a: 31)), such a sophisticated and creative approach may appear daunting.

⁶ This term is used as a hypernym by Permyakov (1970) and for subgenres by Mel’cuk (2015), Norrick (2015), or Schapira (1999). Although it is used in its original meaning, i.e. a plate used in printing, it is hard to dissociate it from its pejorative connotations. Besides, using it to refer to a subtype of PU is an arbitrary choice.

⁷ This definition actually implies four criteria: frozenness, cultural confirmation (i.e. currency), illocutionary function (i.e. speech act) and prototypical-categorical instantiation (i.e. generalisation).

This principle also entails that terms referring to disputed categories should not be used to define proverbs, as is the case with dictionaries, in which a proverb is at times defined as a sort of maxim or aphorism (Villers 2014: 19).

3.8 *The Redundancy Principle*

The redundancy principle holds that proverb definitions should not contain criteria that are **redundant or repetitive** with another more obvious or objective criterion. In other words, when two obligatory criteria are interconnected, only one should appear in the definition. The notion of fixedness is a good example for this situation. If one chooses to include currency in the definition, then it is not necessary to include fixedness, since the former implies the latter. Similarly, fixedness requires preconstruction. However, preconstruction and fixedness do not necessarily entail currency or conventionality.

In specialised literature, many scholars present “new” features as the solution to the mystery of proverb definition, although these features actually derive from more famous ones. For instance, if proverbs are defined as complete sentences, it is neither necessary nor sufficient to define them as topic-comment structures, as in Dundes (1975). The same may be said of the definition proposed by Milner (1969: 54), who claims proverbs are “quadripartite” structures, although his – rather subjective – segmentation can be applied to numerous non-proverbial sentences. Gomez Jordana Ferary (2012) foregrounds a similar point. In her linguistic approach – and doctoral thesis – to proverb definition, she claims that proverbs can be defined⁸ by their rhythmic features and concludes that there are seven main proverbial patterns, such as “Subject Verb Object” (ibid. p. 139). However, such patterns, along with other features – didactic value, speech acts, etc. – are features that are common to many types of non-proverbial sentences with a generalising meaning.

⁸ In her conclusion (ibid. p. 360), she retains the following criteria: the “absence” of author (which is an ambiguous wording), the proverbial “pattern” (which is a redundant criterion), the generic meaning, the semantic structure P→Q (which is controversial but also redundant as it derives from the generic meaning). She does not include criteria such as currency insofar as her approach is purely linguistic.

3.9 *The Corpus Scope Principle*

This principle holds that the quality or “scope” of a corpus is correlated to the legitimacy of the proverb definition it backs. In other words, a very **limited corpus** cannot lead to a generally valid definition. For instance, Russo (1983) and Guiraud (1984) try to define the proverbial genre by underlining their stylistic or poetic features while their corpora are only composed of Latin and Ancient Greek proverbs. As a consequence, their definitions can only be valid for Latin or Ancient Greek proverbs, not for modern ones. This principle – along with the inclusion principle – also warrants that the corpus should not be frozen but evolve and adapt as new candidates or criteria are considered or discarded.

3.10 *The Hybridity Principle*

The hybridity principle holds that definitions and typology should take into account the hybridity of certain formulae. Depending on the way they are used or the angle from which they are observed, proverbs and many other types of phrasemes may **shift to another category** or receive different labels. For instance, a proverb may be reduced to a proverbial phrase (*Don't put the cart before the horse* → He's *putting the cart before the horse*), used as a precept to offer guidance or as an adage in a trade, or viewed as an aphorism (because of its descriptive structure) or even as a quotation, provided the user knows its creator. This phenomenon of “genre-shifting” is inevitable and should therefore be integrated into typologies, instead of being discarded as a grey area or an anomaly.

3.11 *The Transparency Principle*

The transparency principle is the simplest and yet most essential principle of all. It can shield scholars from unwanted criticism and can also prevent terminology from leading the reader away from the more important issues. It involves two easy steps: first, acknowledging that there is no universal consensus on proverb definition; secondly, **stating your position** on the matter. In other words, “I know that it is subject to debate but here is what I mean when I say *proverb*”.

4. *The impact of proverb definition on paremiology*

The absence of consensus on proverb definition – and therefore terminology – is not simply a petty squabble for picky linguists. It may lead to misunderstandings and has a major impact on numerous fields of paremiology, including the most notorious ones. The following part aims to present a short sample.

4.1 *Paremiography*

Paremiography, which studies the collection and writing of proverbs, is a very prominent field at the crossroads of lexicography and paremiology. Its main application is the creation of proverb dictionaries. The main difficulty of such a task is to accurately describe the meaning and usage of proverbs despite the numerous functions and situational meanings they can have. Another difficulty lies in choosing which “proverbs” should be included in a collection (Kispál 2015). Indeed, the contents of a proverb dictionary greatly depend on the *definition* it is based on. Very often, the term *proverb* is used very loosely as dictionaries include a large proportion of preconstructed syntagmas containing metaphors, often labelled as idioms. It is the case with the *Wordsworth Dictionary of Proverbs* (2006 edition), or *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* (1970 edition) before it was compiled again and condensed into the much more proverbial *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (from 1982 onwards). If a linguist decided to choose the former dictionaries as a corpus for their study on proverbial features, the results would assuredly be different from a study based on the more recent Oxford edition.

Even dictionaries that filter idioms contain a significant number of sayings that would be denied the proverbial label in one approach or another. For example, a stylistic approach based on rhythmic or poetic features would lead to discarding many proverbs contained in the excellent *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (2015 edition), even though it puts currency – the most consensual criterion in proverb studies – in the forefront. Conversely, a dictionary focusing on “true” proverbs that are still in use would not be of much help to scholars looking to examine “fallen” proverbs. In a similar manner, the *Penguin Dic-*

tionary of Proverbs (1987 edition) would be of no use to scholars looking for proverbs that are still in use, as most of them show no currency at all in any period of time. This dictionary may thus be viewed as a mere list of aphorisms but its classification system may prove very useful to readers looking for sayings on specific themes such as fear, love, or honesty. However, using it as a corpus to draw culturally relevant conclusions may not be the safest option.

In extreme cases, even entire dictionaries of proverbs may be called into question. Take for instance Charles Clay Doyle, Wolfgang Mieder, and Fred Schapiro's *Dictionary of Modern Proverbs*, which centres on sayings that are less than 100 years old. Although ancientness is rarely considered an obligatory criterion, those who choose this controversial approach based on the supposed age of proverbs will deny modern "proverbs" their proverbial status. As a result, they are likely to disagree with the claims made by a linguist who used this dictionary as their corpus. In a nutshell, some approaches may deem some dictionaries as flawed, hence the importance to identify their angle before choosing them as a corpus.

4.2 Corpus linguistics and variation

Corpus linguistics is an extremely popular approach where tools based on large corpora (Google Books' n-gram viewer, Sketch Engine, or NOW and iWeb on English-corpora.org, etc.) are used to study aspects such as variation or frequency. Take for example the well-known proverb *The early bird gets the worm*. A search based on collocates (combinations for *bird + worm*) with some of these tools will reveal a high number of combinations. A concordance check for some of the resulting combinations will give the following numbers:

Table 1. Variation patterns for *The early bird gets the worm* in large corpora (26 Sept. 2020).

	iWeb	NOW	Google Books
1. The early bird gets the worm	439	128	9,730
2. The early bird catches the worm	279	153	15,900
3. The early bird does get the worm	4	6	155

4. It is the early bird that gets the worm	15	0	458
5. The early bird got / getting the worm	5	5	1,013
6. To be an early bird (+ is an early bird)	140	80	7,070
7. An early bird / early-bird discount	1,088	469	4,620
8. An early bird / early-bird offer	255	248	954
9. Early bird / early-bird tickets	1,196	1,355	737
10. The early worm gets the bird	8	1	2,760
11. The early bird may get the worm but...	17	1	875

Several questions may spring to mind. Is the main variant 1 or 2? Does example 10 have real currency or is it just a pun with coincidentally high frequency? Is the currency in 6 sufficient to grant it the proverbial label? In these cases, proverb definition is even more important than the corpus chosen. Scholars who study variation but use the term *proverb* in a loose manner may use these results to posit that proverbs vary greatly and offer too many combinations to be fixed. They consequently refuse to view fixedness as an obligatory criterion (Anscombe 2008, Gomez Jordana Ferary 2012) or they make it relative at best. However, a scholar with a more analytical definition will argue that it is imperative to differentiate between the phenomenon of *variation* and a specific *variant*. While 1 and 2 may be seen as true variants, the other variations are not compatible with the consensual proverb definition criteria presented in the first part. Therefore, 3 to 11 may be viewed as cases of *deproverbialisation*, where the loss of one obligatory criterion causes the utterance to shift to other categories such as proverbial commentaries (3 and 4), proverbial phrases (5 to 9), or proverb parodies (10 and potentially 11). Ultimately, the latter approach puts variation into perspective and makes fixedness or stability less controversial as a criterion.

4.3 The definition of paremiology

The delimitation of paremiology is, like proverb definition: subject to debate. Its Greek etymology (“along the road”, *para* + *oimos*) is of little help. The only consensus on the matter is that proverbs form its core. Thus, it is no surprise that several con-

ceptions of paremiology coexist. The main ones may be summarised as follows:

- The narrow conception, which reduces paremiology to the study of proverbs only. This view is present in the impressive *Introduction to Paremiology* (2015, p. 358) but can also be found in most dictionaries that incorporate the term. To avoid confusion, some scholars choose the label *proverb studies* while others argue in favour of the more transparent term *proverbiology* (Bhuvanewar 2015a).
- The intermediate conception, which is the most common one, where paremiology is limited to sentence-type phrasemes or “paremias” (proverbs, famous quotations, weather sayings, Wellerisms, aphorisms, maxims, proverb parodies, etc.), excluding phrases that are not complete sentences. It may either exclude or include sayings that are not preconstructed or conventional, making it either a *subfield* of phraseology or only partly comprised in it.
- The broad or “loose” conception, where paremiology encompasses nearly all types of sayings and phrasemes, making it a near or true synonym for *phraseology*. This approach is not uncommon among folklorists, who often use the term *proverb* in a loose or hypernymic manner. Thus, because of their conventionality, idioms or similes (e.g. “mad as a hatter”) may be referred to as “proverbial phrases” (Taylor 1962: 184) or “proverbial comparisons” (Mieder⁹ 2004: 12-13, Norrick 2015: 8). Such a hypernymic usage of the adjective *proverbial* entails a terminological encroachment of paremiology on phraseology and may lead to misunderstandings and unnecessary complications. Many linguists argue against such a broad conception of paremiology, including Burger et al (2007: 11).

5. Conclusion

It is evident that achieving a global or absolute consensus on proverb definition is unattainable in light of the vast number of fields, goals, terminologies, cultures, and methods among schol-

⁹ Despite his hypernymic use of the adjective “proverbial”, he acknowledges that phraseology should be seen as a “broader area” (Mieder 2004: 118).

ars. However, this endeavour is far from being impossible or futile. The present article may be viewed as a plea in favour of an analytical definition of proverbs, as opposed to the prototypical or emic approaches. After presenting the main angles and challenges to proverb definition, it proposes methodological principles to tackle this task. It may indeed be argued that definition attempts will never be entirely “scientific” – they will always include a part of subjectivity as they will always entail the choice of a specific perspective or terminology. Nevertheless, the proposed safety measures ensure a more objective, transferrable, and legitimate definition. As demonstrated in the fourth section, terminological accuracy can greatly influence various types of studies and their results. Therefore, it is crucial to keep terminological relativity in mind so that proverb definition does not turn into the trees hiding the forest.

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