

## • LINGUISTIC STEREOTYPES: CROSSCULTURAL ANALYSIS OF PROVERBS

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The aim of this paper is to analyse proverbs as linguistic stereotypes from a semantic point of view. The sample of proverbs is randomly chosen from 3 national collections: Croatian, English and Italian.

The results of the analysis show that quite a small number of proverbs (about 10%) reflect traditional values and customs which are specific to one culture only. It seems that their universal character makes an ethnocentric approach nearly unacceptable.

A high percentage of proverbs (90%) share a very strong mutual resemblance, despite all the differences stemming from ethnic, geographic, historical and language factors.

The prevalence of equivalent, synonymous proverbs over specific ones is evident. They differ only in their imagery, in local realia and concepts, but the logical formula of their content is identical.

The most frequent sentence structure of the proverbs with universal distribution is the quadripartite structure and its main feature is symmetry. Does it mean that such sentences can be considered as some kind of kernel sentences? This question asks for additional research.

Finally, we can make a conclusion that the universality and transferability are the most prominent features of the proverbs.

### 1. *Introduction*

It is generally accepted that proverbs represent the smallest verbal folklore genre, but they can be viewed as linguistic units, too. They are used in everyday conversation, journalistic writing, advertising, speeches of all types, in sermons, literature, slogans, songs, and other forms of human communications. By

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implying proverbs in our speech we wish to strengthen our arguments, express certain generalizations, influence or manipulate other people.

Among hundreds of different definitions as a starting point of this work we have chosen a definition of a proverb given by Permyakov (1979; 20) who says: *...proverbs and proverbial phrases are signs of situations or of a certain type of relationships between objects*. It corresponds to K. Burke's (1957) definition: "Proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations." The fact is that certain situations happened to be similar or identical in different speech communities and we presume that they are represented with identical or similar linguistic stereotypes. If we rely on previous definitions which define a proverb as a complex linguistic sign relevant for a certain situation we ought to explain whether there are any linguistic constraints on proverbial form regarding the proverbs of different languages. The results of the crosscultural analysis of proverbs show that there are many proverbs which are quite similar in their meaning and structure.

In other words, as our experience is structured by the language it is likely that similar experience is framed with similar logical relations expressed with similar or identical linguistic structure. Consequently, it may be quite mistaken to view the forms that proverbs may take as entirely arbitrary. They are probably constrained by language-universal influences and human experience.

It seems rather challenging task to analyse proverbs of different languages especially those which are widely accepted in different ages, languages and cultures. We are proceeding on the supposition that all cultures which have proverbs, have the same proverb structural types. This article seeks to show that such a general basis does in fact exist. In order to achieve that goal we intend to find out similarities and differences in proverbs which belong to 3 different languages: Italian (Romance), English (Germanic) and Croatian (Slavic). Preliminary results of the contrastive analysis show that quite a small number of proverbs (10%) has no semantic equivalent in other language. It is evident that a high percentage of proverbs (90%) share a very strong mutual resemblance, despite all the differences stemming from ethnic, geographic, historical and language factors. The prevalence of equivalent, synonymous proverbs over specific ones imposes questions like the following: What is common to all languages in the proverb tradition? What kind of features make them so transferable and acceptable in different ages and cultures? We have chosen a linguistic approach or the study of formal structure to answer these questions.

## 2. Linguistic description of proverbs (Grammar of proverbs)

What follows is based on a structural analysis of 300 (100 + 100 + 100) proverbs chosen from 3 different languages. Detailed analysis of the corpus (which includes lexical, syntactic, semantic and stylistic level) shows that those languages share some common characteristics and that they differ very little in their basic structure.

Universal characteristics relevant for all included proverbs can be divided in 3 groups: grammatical markers, semantic features and phonic devices.

### 2.1. Grammatical markers

- A proverb uses the sentence as its linguistic frame. Sentence structure of a proverb has a form of a fixed, frozen formulae with no redundant elements. The smallest form consists of two words, e. g. Time flies. *Vrijeme leti*.

- They show a special temporal category which refers to an action that might be applied in any time. It means that past is always future and always ready to be present. The most frequent grammatical tense is present, eg. The gown *does not make* a friar. *L'abito non fa* il monaco. *Odjeća ne čini* čovjeka.

- Proverbs bear the weight of tradition. The speaker is linking his sayings to the past using archaic words, archaic structures, dialectal words and rustic pictures, e. g. Physician, heal *thysself*. *Hackney* mistress, *hackney* maid. *Dogs bark, but the caravan goes on*. (rustic picture). By doing so, the speaker shifts the responsibility of his claim to past traditions and authorities whose wisdom cannot be questioned.

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

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

New broom / sweep clean.  
 A fair exchange / is no robbery.  
 Cold hands / warm heart.  
 A friend in need is a friend indeed.  
 Soon ripe / soon rotten.  
 Nothing ventured / nothing gained.

Kakav otac, / takav sin.  
 Kakva mladost, / takva starost.  
 Daleko od očiju, / daleko od srca.

Freddo di mano / caldo cuore.  
 Chi matto manda / matto aspetta.  
 Chi troppo abbraccia / nulla stringe.

Milner also (1970) suggested that the basis of at least a large number of traditional sayings is quadripartite structure employing culturally valued elements. (We should not seek to force all traditional sayings into the form of quadripartite structure.)

It is supposed that this structure is not arbitrary. Bearing in mind that such proverbs are known to be extremely long-lived and widely spread, it is likely that their basic structure corresponds to some kind of *kernel sentences* which are universally acceptable. This hypothesis is based on some previous works, too. Odlin (1986) says: "...there is probably something akin to a law of natural selection which tends to promote the remembering of proverbs that have certain characteristics...". It seems that binary or quadripartite structure (the most frequent form of proverbs), and other above mentioned formal characteristics correspond to that 'natural selection'. It has also long been known from the writings of Jung that quadripartite structures are of special interest for the study of the deep structure of human mind.

## 2.2. *Semantic markers*

- Polisemy is the basic feature of proverbs. They usually take the form of abstract statements expressing general truths, which can be applied in any situation, eg. *Absence makes the heart grow fonder*.

Metaphors, metonymy, personification, paradox, sharp contrasts - these are all devices which are often found in proverbs in general. A method of reasoning from particulars to generalization or universals is so frequent in proverbs. A proverb *The lone sheep is in danger of the wolf* in its literal sense uses a particular situation with its natural characters. But the message of this statement has to be reinterpreted and transferred into figurative level. Its final meaning is more general, universal. Figurative language which includes a relationship "a minori ad majus" is dominant feature of proverbial language.

### 2.3. *Phonic devices*

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

Although these parameters are all logically independent of one another, it turns out that there is a high degree of correlation among them, leading in some instances to the statement of absolute implicational universals.

Some of these factors probably account for the popularity and nearly universal distribution of proverbs throughout the world, irrespective of time, place, level of technical and economic development, language or culture. It seems that proverbial form is transcultural and its imagery is monocultural.

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

- They could be due to chance;
- There is also functional and pragmatic explanation according to which certain universals serve to make language more functional, while any universals of phonetic structure are determined by the nature of human auditory perception. Proverbs are constrained by phonetic structures in order to be memorized easily;
- There is no denying the fact that nations speaking cognate languages have more verbally similar proverbs than those belonging to different language

families, e. g. If the goat lies the corns do not lie. This proverb is used in Russian and Croatian and as far as it is known to the author of this article and it does not exist in Western cultures.

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

- Yet even nations with no affinity, which have never had any direct contacts with each other and are at different stages of social development have many proverbs of similar meaning. Similarity of such proverbs is probably due to language universal tendencies, e. g.

Croatian: Od *magarca* ne stvori *konja*.

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

Italian: Di *coda di asino* non si può fare *staccio*.

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

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

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

### 3. Cultural aspect of proverb analysis

Quite a small number of proverbs (10%) have no equivalent form in any other culture. They express specific situation relevant for one culture only, e. g. *Where MacGregor sits is the head of the table. Hercegovina sve zemlje naseli, a sebe ne raseli.*

As we already mentioned proverbs are remarkably similar in their structure and meaning. Culturally valued elements fit into universally acceptable structure. Such elements reflect in a vivid and specific way the life, morals, customs and specific qualities of the peoples who use them. F. Bacon says: "*The genius, wit, and the spirit of a nation are discovered in its proverbs.*"

### 4. Conclusion

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

English: The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

Croatian: Another man's cow gives a good milk.

Korean: The beans are larger in another's soup.

Japanese: A neighbour's flowers are more beautiful.

Turk: A neighbour's hen always looks as big as a goose.

Chinese: It seems from this mountain that the other mountain is high.

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

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*Danica Škara: POSLOVICE KAO JEZIČNI STEREOTIP: INTERKULTURALNA  
ANALIZA POSLOVICA*

*S a ž e t a k*

Polazišnu osnovu ovoga rada čine rezultati kontrastivne analize poslovice koje pripadaju različitim jezicima i kulturama.

Ispitivanja rečenične strukture poslovice pokazuju da različiti jezici dijele neke zajedničke karakteristike. Sve to upućuje na postojanje jedne univerzalne strukture koja je imanetna poslovičnom načinu izražavanja.

Zadatak je ovoga rada istražiti moguće univerzalije kao i specifičnosti koje su uvjetovane jezičnim i kulturnim nasljedem.