Translation Studies: Retrospective and Prospective Views **ISSN 2065-3514**
(2009) Year II, Issue 5
Galaţi University Press
Editors: Elena Croitoru & Floriana Popescu
Proceedings of the 4th Conference *Translation Studies: Retrospective and Prospective Views*
8-9 October 2009, "Dunărea de Jos" University, Galaţi, ROMÂNIA
pp. 119-125

ON THE CLASSIFICATION OF PROVERBS

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Introduction

A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical fixed form and which is handed down from generation to generation. The definition of a proverb has caused scholars from many disciplines a lot of debate over the centuries. Thus, many attempts at definition have been made from Aristotle to the present time, ranging from philosophical considerations to lexicographical definitions. Archer Taylor (1931) begins his analysis of proverbs with the claim that it is impossible to give a full definition of the genre. Furthermore, he goes on explaining in much detail what proverbs are all about:

> ''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. Those who do not speak a language can never recognize all its proverbs, and similarly much that is truly proverbial escapes us in Elizabethan and older English. Let us be content with recognizing that a proverb is a saying current among the folk. At least so much of a definition is indisputable''. (Taylor 1931: 3)

The importance of proverbial usage is clearly acknowledged in the biblical *Book of Proverbs* itself: e.g. *Like a lame man's legs that hang limp is a proverb in the mouth of a fool* (Prov. 26: 7, 9).

Modern studies have revealed that proverbs are spoken usually by elders and rarely by the young (Finegan 1981: 15, Obelkevich 1994: 220-223). From a cognitive perspective, Honek (1997) notes that proverb use among children below the age of ten is unheard because citing a proverb is an indirect way of *accomplishing social goals*. The linguist Norrick (1985) observes that older speakers usually employ proverbs when speaking authoritatively with didactic intent. Not only should the content of what is said be understood (**the illocutionary act**) but also the actual impact of the statement on the listener should be carefully noted (**the perlocutionary act)**. For example, the perlocutionary effect of Proverbs 10 : 1b, *A foolish son is a grief to his mother* may be consolation, encouragement, rebuke, warning, or even humour depending on who the speaker is and to whom it was spoken (wife to a husband, husband to a wife, parent to a child, parent to another parent, grandparent to a parent, etc.). A proverb may be used to highlight ideals that are either confirmed or disconfirmed.

Culture also plays a role in determining how a proverb is to be understood. In Scotland, *a rolling stone gathers no moss* indicates the need to keep up with modern trends lest undesirable moss grows and reveals a lack of mental vitality. Thus the rolling stone/moss (keeping current) is the ideal confirmed. In England, on the other hand, the same proverb

means that if things are continually in flux desirable traits (moss) will not have sufficient stability to thrive (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1981: 111-122). Here the rolling stone/moss (lack of stability) ideal is disconfirmed. The image of the moss is culturally understood in two very different ways, one desirable, and the other undesirable.

An African folklorist Kirshenblatt observes that Akan speakers of Ghana use proverbs as an indirect means of saving face, avoiding crises, and preserving politeness. The proverb is cited as coming from a wider community rather than as originating with a specific author. Proverbs also function to establish, maintain and restore social relationships and to reinforce solidarity within a community.

If an accurate definition of proverbs seems almost impossible, one means of differentiating proverbs would be classifying them according to different criteria, such as: metaphor and reality, pairs of contradicting proverbs, the continuous distribution of proverbs, perfect truth, part of the truth, and total departure from reality.

1. Metaphor and Reality

In case of metaphorical proverbs, the metaphor may be realistic or non-realistic and this is not dependent on the reality of the abstract meaning connected with it. As a matter of fact, in some cases the metaphor is very realistic, e.g. *Strike while the iron is hot* or *Look not a gift horse in the mouth* both known in many European languages. In a number of cases, however, the metaphor is unrealistic, it does not occur in reality.

It is hardly likely that one had ever *shot at sparrows with a high caliber gun*, as a German, a Hungarian and a Russian proverb is evident. It is the same as that of its Far-Eastern counterpart, which is also not too realistic: *To kill a bird with an ox-butchering knife* as used in Chinese.

In reality, no ''*ass*'' was ever *''wearing a lion's skin''* as found in Ancient Greek, consequently found as an English *An ass in a lion's skin* and its equivalent in Romanian *O oaie in haina de lup*. (Millio 1999: 52)

The same holds true for their Far-Eastern equivalent first recorded in Sanskrit in the Panchatantra: *The ass wearing the tiger's hide*: *The ass was safe, but wearing a tiger's hide, became frightening then due to his voice he was recognized and killed*. In the corresponding Chinese, Korean and Japanese proverbs the ass is replaced by a sheep or goat: *Sheep's nature, tiger's skin*.

There is no doubt that no ''owl" has ever ''told the sparrow that her '' (i.e. the sparrow's) ''head is big'', as a Hungarian proverb puts it and it is equally unlikely that any one had ever ''read a sutra into an ear of an ox or a horse'', found in the text of a Korean but the abstract meaning of them is clear and realistic.

The European proverb *You see a mote in another's eye but cannot see a beam in your own,* based on a Biblical text (Luke 6, 41-42) is known in 46 languages in Europe. The Romanian equivalent of the above mentioned proverb is *Nu-ți vezi bârna din ochiul tău* (Lefter 1974). Although the second part of this proverb is most unrealistic, its message is obvious. Its realistic Far-Eastern equivalent is: *One's eyes do not see the eyelashes* in Chinese.

2. Pairs of ''Contradicting Proverbs''

A particular group of virtual deviations is formed by the so-called ''***contradicting proverbs***'' (Keene 1980: 147). In this respect, researchers stressed the importance of social context. ''The existence of these proverbs really proves that they properly represent the contradicting phenomena that do exist in nature and society'' (Keene 1980: 147). A proper investigation can prove that each of the contradicting pairs of proverbs is right in a particular level and context, just as in case of a ''problem with blood pressure'' a more detailed investigation clearly shows that in one case a medicine lowers blood pressure, while in another, a ''contradicting one'', "raises the blood pressure" is the proper choice. ''Contradictions'' may

result from the different distribution of events. There may be a *binary distribution*, as in the case of tossing a coin, when one of two possible outcomes may result. In these cases, a proper investigation of the conditions shows that one or the other ''contradicting'' proverb is the good choice.

There are quick processes both in nature and society where a swift action is needed to achieve a required result. In these cases, quoting *Strike the iron while it is hot* known in 47 European languages and also in Chinese is appropriate. In contrast, sometimes the course of events cannot be influenced and the only reasonable behaviour is to wait for a favourable situation to come, like in the case of angling. If this is the case, the following ''contradicting'' German and Hungarian proverb: *Patience brings roses*, the English proverb: *All things come to those who wait*, the Japanese one: *For good luck sleep and wait* apply. The Romanian variants of these proverbs are: *Bate fierul până e cald, că de se va răci, în zadar vei munci – Cu răbdarea treci şi marea* may be good variants. (Lefter 1974)

Furthermore, the contradicting pair *Clothes make the man* and *Clothes do not make the man* may represent another example that sustains the same idea. In some cases, for instance due to lack of time or proper means, one has to make a decision, to judge something or somebody based on the appearance only. It is commonplace that most of the buyers *buy with their eyes*, the appearance being more important in the decision than the real content. There is also a corresponding Romanian proverb: *Haina face omul* (Botezatu 2001) and its Japanese equivalent: *Decorate with flowers the article for sale*. It is equally known that voters in an election often vote rather on well-sounding slogans, than well-founded programs and truly reliable personalities. In armies, those having a lower rank must always respect somebody having a higher rank marked on the uniform. In these cases the English proverb *The tailor makes the man* and the German, Estonian and Hungarian ones *Clothes make the man* or the Japanese one: *Fine clothes suit even an ostler* are appropriate. If however, there is time to have a close look at somebody or something; to study the composition of a material, the implications of a text, the behaviour, way of thinking, customs, preferences and dislikes of a man, then certainly the outside appearance, the first impression based on the packing material, nice words, or the clothes worn will not be decisive in making a final assessment. In this case, the proverbs: *Clothes do not make the man* in German and Hungarian, or the English *The cowl does not make the monk*, Romanian *Omul cinsteşte haina, nu haina pe om* or the Japanese *The robe/rosary does not make the bronze* are correct (Botezatu 2001). The fact should be mentioned that proverbs about the danger of judging by appearance are more frequent than the ''contradicting'' ones.

There are many proverbs in different languages referring to *the advantage of being silent.* This is justified by the frequent experience that many people are inclined to speak without proper information of a matter, without considering the situation and the consequences of their talk, seeing everything from their own angle only. Thus, they do harm to themselves, as indicated by the Hungarian proverb: *Tell the truth and your head will be broken*, and the Romanian *Tăcerea e de aur* (Millio 1999). In these cases *Silence is golden*, known in 38 European languages or its Japanese equivalents: *It is better not to speak than to speak* or *Not to speak is flower* i.e. *'it is better left unsaid* can be quoted.

In other cases, at an appropriate time, a ward or an intervention is needed to get something, perhaps help, or to withhold somebody from a dangerous action. The corresponding proverbs: *'Dumb men get no land* and *Even the mother cannot understand the words of a dumb child* – Hungarian proverb or *One cannot help a silent mouth*– German proverb.

More proverbs are found indicating *the necessity of keeping silence than those urging to speak.* This might be due to the fact that people are less reluctant to speak if their interests require it, than to speak without due regarding to the justified interests and respectable views of others.

A careful consideration of the following two sayings: *Many hands make light work* and *Among many midwives the child is lost* reveals that the two ''contradicting'' proverbs refer to different situations. The first refers to *the combined and well-organised effort of several or many people, thus achieving much.* In this case, the following proverbs apply: *Many hands make light work* and *Many hands get quickly to the end* in German; *Many hands are quickly ready* in Hungarian; *Unde-s mulți puterea creşte* (Botezatu 2001) in Romanian; *Even dust, if collected, becomes a mountain* in Japanese and Korean.

The other proverbs refer to the situation *when several people intend or are expected to command,* and in consequence of it either both contradicting commands are given, or alternatively *none of them provides a proper guidance* expecting the others to do it. The corresponding proverbs are: *Many shepherds, bad protection (of the flock)* and *Too many cooks spoil the broth* in German; *Many cooks put too much salt into the soup* and *Among many midwives the child is lost* in Hungarian; *If there are many captains, the boat will go up the mountain* in Japanese; *Seven nurses have a child without an eye* in Russian.

Moreover, the following two contradicting proverbs sustain the same idea: *One good turn deserves another* and *Ingratitude is the way of the world*. The former refers to normal conditions, where the norm of the rule of reciprocity is respected. This holds true especially among people mutually known to one another. Some of the proverbs telling about *receiving good for a good deed*: *A good deed brings profit* and *No good deed remains without a reward* in German; *Expect good in return for a good deed* in Hungarian; *Good has good reward, evil has evil reward* in Chinese; *Good deeds are not only for other people* in Japanese. The latter refers to indifferent or evil-minded people and their groups or communities. A lack of reciprocal good action is also often experienced from strangers. In this connection a Hungarian and a Japanese proverb can be quoted: *Do not expect good in return for a good deed* and *To repay obligation with revenge***.**

3. Continuous Distributions of Proverbs

According to Mieder (1993: 202), ''Many proverbs related to continuous distributions refer either to the average or to the exceptions, appearing in small numbers but being often striking, as contradictions to the general rule''. Certainly proverbs related to each of these areas are true ones corresponding to reality. In the majority of cases we find proverbs related either to the average, or to the exceptional case, but occasionally proverbs related to both parts of the same set of phenomena are also found.

The proverb *Like mother like daughter* corresponds to the general experience and it is known in 48 European languages. The Japanese equivalent reads: *Rather than looking at the daughter, look at the mother*; Russians say that *If you want to know what your wife will become - look at her mother*. The text of this proverb can be found in the Bible and in the Talmud as well.

In contrast to the common finding, there is a Hungarian proverb related to the exceptional, i.e. ''contradicting case'': *Mother and daughter are different***.**

A proverb such as: *The apple never falls far from the tree* is known in 42 languages in Europe. The German, Hungarian and Russian equivalents are not as categorical as the English one, as they simply state: *The apple does not fall far from the tree*; Romanians use the following proverb: *Aşchia nu sare departe de trunchi* (Millio 1999). In this case too, there is a Hungarian variant, referring to acorn instead of apple, which includes the *exceptional case* as well: *The acorn does not fall far from the tree, if it falls, then it falls very far from it.*

The Russian proverb *Out of a foolish hole a foolish wind blows* (i.e. fools tell foolish things) obviously corresponds to *general experience*. In this connection there are proverbs referring to the exceptional case: *Even a fool can tell a wise thing* in Hungarian and *Of one thousand ideas of a fool there is a sound one* in Japanese.

Some other well-known proverbs referring to the general experience, i.e. the average: *Like father, like son*, *As you sow, so will you reap*, *He that seeks, finds*, *A barking dog does not bite* are met in German, Russian and Ukrainian. Proverbs related to the exceptions have already been seen as they appeared together with those belonging to the common experience, i.e. the average. There are some additions: *A horse may stumble that has four legs*, saying that is known in 46 European languages. *Even the best horse….* in German; Romanians say *Calul de e cal, şi tot se poticneşte* (Lefter 1974). Chinese and Japanese equivalents state that *Even the monkey falls from tree.*

The same idea is sustained by the English proverb: *Homer sometimes nods*, with the Hungarian equivalent: *At times even a good priest makes an error in the evening sermon*, the Chinese variant: *Even an old hand sometimes makes a mistake* and the Japanese one: *Even Kobo made an error with his bush* (Kobo Daishi was a famous Buddhist priest and calligrapher).

Furthermore, the same distribution is available for the following proverbs: the English *A blind man may sometimes hit the mark* with its equivalents in German, Hungarian and Japanese: *Even a blind hen finds a grain of corn*, in Russian: *Even a poor shooter can hit the mark shooting much*. A close example is represented by the saying: *Fortune favours fools*, which has as variant in German, Italian and Japanese: *Fools have good luck'* and in Romanian: *Prost să fii, noroc să ai* (Lefter 1974).

4. Perfect Truth

In this case, there is no departure from truth, i.e. we have zero deviation. In these proverbs, the meaning and the text of the proverb constitute a perfect representation of reality. Some general statements valid without exception and proverbs of the form *Not all that…are* or *All that...are not…* belong to this category as these forms themselves allow for the appearance of the exceptions. Examples of the above mentioned idea are the next two proverbs: *So many men, so many minds/options* and *People are different both in their ideas and physical characteristics***.**

A close enough scrutiny is able to detect few differences even between identical twins. The corresponding proverbs exist in German, French, Russian, etc. In Romanian: *Câte bordee, atâtea obiceiuri* (Lefter 1974) in Chinese: *Many people, many opinions*, in Korean: *Each man, each colour*, in Japanese: *Ten people, ten colours* or *Ten people, ten bellies*. The same idea is expressed by the proverb: *(Even) our fingers are different.* This famous saying is known in 42 languages including German, Hungarian, Turkish, Persian, Bengali, Hindustani, Marathi, Sindhi, Sinhalese, Uigur, Uzbek and Chinese.

The proverb: *All that glitters is not gold* means that not everything is as good as it seems to be and it is known in 46 European languages. Its equivalent in Romanian is: *Nu tot ce sclipeşte e aur*, in Chinese: *Mix up fisheyes with pearls*, in Japanese: *Emerald-or lapis lazuli- and glass shine equally on light*.

The following three English sayings: *Every man has his faults***,** *He is lifeless, that is faultless* and *Nobody is without fault* can have as correspondents in German: *There is no man without fault*, in Romanian: *A greşi e omeneşte* (Millio 1999) in Chinese: *Under the Heaven* **–** i.e. in the Chinese empire **–** *There is no perfect man* and *There is no red gold, there is no perfect man*.

Nothing comes out of nothing is the English variant for the German and Hungarian: *The end crowns the work* or *All's well that ends well***.** These last two variants are the same in Bulgarian, German and Russian, while the Romanian equivalent reads: *Totul e bine când se termină cu bine* (Millio 1999) and the Japanese one: *The end is a big - i.e. important – thing*.

One last example brings forth the English sayings: *Death defies the doctor* and *No herb has grown against death*, which has as German correspondent: *There is no medicine against death* and Japanese: *There is no medicine against ageing and death*.

5. Part of the Truth

''The wording of some proverbs is a positive or negative statement of – occasionally implied – general validity. On closer inspection, however, the general validity cannot be proved, although they are found to be true in most cases or in the majority of cases, but certainly not in all occasions'' (Furnham 1987: 49-55).

It means that in these cases there is a deviation from the whole truth. The characteristic form of these proverbs is: *All / Every* (this may be implied)**...** or in contrast*: Nobody / Nothing…* with the following examples: *Where there is a will, there is a way*. *Sometimes* there isn't. The same in German: *One can do anything, only will is needed* and in Russian: *Will passes through a rock*.

The content of the following two proverbs is not always true: *Ill luck is good for something* or *Every cloud has a silver lining***.** The German variant is: *Nothing is as bad, it may be useful for something*, the Hungarian one is: *In every bad thing there is a little good*, while the Russian equivalent is: *There is no evil without good*.

Another example of the issue of truth implied in a proverb is: *Better late than never*. In fact, sometimes it happens that something coming too late – i.e. after death – is good for nothing. We have the same saying in 43 European languages, including Russian and Italian. This is the meaning of the Chinese-Korean-Japanese proverb: *To mend the pen, after the sheep was lost / stolen*.

Your own deeds will influence your welfare is the essence of the following proverb: *As you sow, so will you reap*. In most cases this is true, but sometimes outside forces interfere. The proverb is known in 50 European languages, and in several Far-Eastern languages: in Chinese: *He who plants good, reaps good, he who plants evil, reaps evil*.

The English *Misfortunes never come alone* has a debatable essence. Fortunately, sometimes they do come alone. Romanians say: *O nenorocire nu vine niciodată singură* (Lefter 1974), while the German equivalent is less categorical, i.e. it is closer to the truth, stating that *Misfortune does not come alone*, Russians say *When misfortune comes – open the gates* and the Chinese, Korean and Japanese: *In addition to snow – frost*.

There is a group of proverbs including an overstatement, where the reason behind it is a wish for a prompt and necessary negative consequence or any violation of justice and ethical norms, which – unfortunately – is not always the case: *Every sin brings its punishment with it*, in Hungarian: *No crime will remain unpunished.*

The German version for: *God's mill grinds slow but sure* is *These mills grind slow but fine*. Its Japanese equivalent reads: *Heaven's net is of course mesh, but nothing can slip through it*.

The proverb: *He, who digs a pit for others, falls in it himself* is known in 49 European languages. Its Russian equivalent is: *Don't dig a pit for other, for you will fall in it yourself*; Romanians put in the next way: *Cine sapă groapa altcuiva, cade singur în ea*. The Oriental versions have the same essence using other wording: in Chinese **–** *Harming others will turn to harm oneself*, while in Japanese: *A bad deed returns to the doer*.

The English sayings: *Ill-gotten goods never prosper* or *Stolen goods never thrive* have as correspondent in German, Hungarian and Russian: *Goods obtained in a dog's way* **–** i.e. illegally **–** *are lost in the same way*, in Chinese: *Ill-gotten money does not make one wealthy*, or in Japanese: *Ill-gotten money does not stick to one*.

The Russian variant for: *Lies have short legs* is *A liar's hat catches on fire*, while the German one reads: *A liar is caught sooner than a lame dog*.

6. Total Departure from Reality

In this case, there is no real correspondence between the meaning of the proverb and reality. If this is still found in some cases, then it is due to chance, or – occasionally – to the fact that sometimes a belief in something subconsciously contributes to its realization. Proverbs expressing superstitions and part of the weather-proverbs, especially those expressing long-

range forecasts belong to this category: *Talk of the evil and he is sure to appear*. The German variant for the above stated proverb is: *One should not paint the devil on the wall*; the Romanian ones are: *Vorbeşti de lup şi lupul e la uşă*, *Nu desena monştri pe pereți, că o să coboare*; in Japanese: *Gossiping about somebody, his shadow appears* and in Russian: *Don't whistle in the house, for you will call the devil in*.

Although there is no connection between reality and this category of proverbs, their root is in the beliefs, customs and superstitions of the people, which represent an important part of their life.

Conclusions

The proverbs discussed in this paper are only some of the numerous examples of proverbs that cross all the borders of the world, finding correspondents and translations in almost all the languages. This is due to the fact that wisdom is endless and all the peoples of the world have tried to apply them in different situations.

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