

PROVERBS: CULTURALLY DISTINCTIVE LINGUISTIC FORMS OF IDENTITY IN TRANSLATION

Elena CROITORU

Introduction

Language and communication are aspects of the production of a wide variety of identities expressed at many levels. Identities are linguistically constructed through the use of particular linguistic forms associated with specific national, ethnic, or other identities, and through the use of communicative practices.

A specific area is that of proverbs, which are culturally distinctive linguistic forms of expressing identity. The study of proverbs is closely connected with language ideology since they link verbal peculiarities to specific social, historical and cultural contexts. In this respect, "ideology stands in useful contrast to framings of talk as social practice to deal with situated interactional perspective and social values, which can vary and shift between contexts and communities. This is a particularly important issue in scenes of social and linguistic contact, conflict, and change, where unrecognized and misrecognized differences in modes of interactional engagement arise" (Errington 2001, in Duranti 2001: 111).

It is a well-known fact that proverbs couch conventional wisdom in concise pleasing forms. For each culture, the ideas conveyed by proverbs have been sanctioned by tradition. Proverbs and sayings belong to the community treasury due to the fact that they express truths confirmed and believed by others over time. In other words, people believe in proverbs and use them, i.e. they apply the truth expressed by them, in plenty of various situations. There is much truth in a proverb like *He who does not listen to proverbs remains screaming for help*. Therefore, there are real-life 'lessons' embedded in proverbs, and this makes them means of education as well.

In some cultures, proverbs are considered to be 'the drum of God', whereas in other cultures proverb authorship is ascribed to elders due to their wisdom, responsibility and morality. Most often introduced by an impersonal construction e.g. *They say*, it is generally accepted that the source of proverbs is indefinite. A 'factivity' formula such as *you know that...*, *Remember that ...* may also be used. This means that the truth or the cultural aspect expressed cannot be denied.

To grasp the full semantic content and nuances in social interaction needs considerable cultural knowledge and sensitivity. In addition, the fact should be pointed out that "in various societies, proverb use is governed by specific social norms; and a good proverb speaker does not only know its logical application and meaning, but also its appropriate social uses: which proverb imagery to select or avoid in what social situations" (Errington 2001, in Duranti 2001: 111).

Therefore, it is extremely challenging to study proverbs and sayings that concentrate so much wisdom and folk intelligence in such short word combinations. As it is generally accepted, proverbs are closely related to the society which produced them having great authority within that society for an indefinite period of time. "Grounded upon years of experience and close observation of life and natural phenomena, the proverb, through

metaphorical language, may warn, advise, or reprimand by drawing attention to the moral or ethical consequences of human behaviour” (Yankah 2001, in Duranti 2001: 201).

Thus, proverbs have been used for centuries in the current language, i.e. specific to a certain time, to give a word of advice, to praise or to criticize somebody, to express irony, sarcasm. Moreover, they may advocate cooperation, perseverance, patience or they may repudiate greed and selfishness. They may also express persuasion in social interaction.

It may seem really fascinating to bilinguals, and even more to those who speak more than two languages, how different nations share almost the same proverbs, or (very) similar ones, despite their historical, social, political and cultural backgrounds, or the geographical area they lie in, on the one hand, and the forms in which these bits of wisdom are expressed, on the other.

Nevertheless, there are as many differences as there are similarities between the proverbs expressed in two different (especially very different) languages due to the historical, social, political and cultural circumstances, under which they were produced.

1. The functions of proverbs

1.1. Proverbs have always been considered to represent codes of moral behaviour. Thus, they express people’s way of thinking about the surrounding world. This proves the fact that they were created by the community belonging to a certain culture, being specific to that culture. In other words, they reflect the realities of the respective culture and those people’s way of thinking. This accounts for the cultural differences between two different speech communities.

On the other hand, despite the cultural differences, there may be similar aspects of reality. Hence, one and the same proverb might have been independently created by people belonging to different speech communities.

Linguists and translation theorists are concerned with the ways of rendering the wisdom of proverbs across cultures so much the more that proverbs are the most specific cultural elements. One of the arguments to be set forth in favour of studying proverbs across cultures is that these culture specific elements are more and more frequently used in the media. They are very often rendered as such, or they are adapted and particularized according to the message to be conveyed and according to the context.

The cultural value of every proverb is as important as its **communicative function**, because it expresses a certain way of thinking specific to the people who created it.

I consider that the functions of proverbs can be related to Halliday’s (1978) model of semantic components of language:

| | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| IDEATIONAL | Experiential Logical | - communication of ideas - connections between ideas |
| INTERPERSONAL | Interactional Personal | - interrelationship between speaker and hearer - mood - illocution - modality - attitude |
| TEXTUAL | Theme Information Cohesion | - thematization and thematic patterning - given/new distinction - cohesive structure |

Table – Halliday’s model of text components

On analogy with Halliday's model of text components, the functions of proverbs can be considered: ideational (experiential), interpersonal (reminding of others' experiences), personal (expressing modality, attitude).

Moreover, it would be much more interesting to state these functions on analogy with Moon's (1998: 217-218) descriptions of the functions of fixed expressions and idioms (FEIs). Thus, the functions of FEIs are: 1) to state propositions and convey information (**informational**), e.g. *in the long run*, 2) to convey the speaker's evaluation and attitude (**evaluative**), e.g. *another pair of shoes*, 3) to relate to the extralinguistic context, to respond to a certain situation (**situational**), e.g. *tell it to the marines*, 4) to convey truth values, advice, requests, etc. (**modalizing**) e.g. *to all intents and purposes* and, 5) to organize text (**organizational**) e.g. *by way of illustration*.

1.2. In an attempt of matching the functions of proverbs with the functions of FEIs, I think that proverbs may function as: 1) evaluative (to convey the speaker's evaluation and attitude, e.g. *It is all ill wind that blows nobody any good*; 2) situational (relate to the extralinguistic context, respond to a certain situation, e.g. *Actions speak louder than words*; 3) modalizing (convey truth values, attitudes, advice, request, admiration, e.g. *One good turn deserves another*).

However, the **generalizing function** is prevailing: to convey general truths of a proverbial nature, coming from other people's experiences. Generalizations are obvious in most proverbs:

e.g. *Out of sight, out of mind.*
Old birds are not to be caught with chaff.
No smoke without fire.
Make hay while the sun shines.

According to Moon, by using proverbs, the speaker projects his/her personal interpretation of the situation. On the other hand, the speaker may "persuade the hearer/reader to share his/her orientation towards the situation or to acknowledge the conventionalized cultural interpretation of the situation" (Moon 1998: 24).

Nevertheless, distinctions may become blurred, and it is not always easy to identify the exact nature of evaluation. An example may be the proverb *A rolling stone gathers no moss*. This proverb has two evaluations; 1) people who keep moving around will never acquire wealth, position, etc. and 2) people who keep moving around will never grow stale and dull. The former meaning is used to make a negative evaluation (*moss* – sign of stability = good), whereas the latter is used to make a positive evaluation (*moss* – sign of sluggishness = bad) (Moon 1998: 249).

As Obelkevich (1987: 44) puts it, "[W]hat defines the proverb is not its internal layout, but its external function, and, that, ordinarily, is moral and didactic: people use proverbs to tell others what to do in a given situation or what attitude to take towards it". Furthermore, he considers proverbs to be "strategies for situations", strategies with authority "formulating some part of a society's common sense, its values and ways of doing things. That air of authority is heightened by another feature, their impersonality" (Moon 1998: 249).

Proverbs have a **situational function** when they are responses to or occasioned by the extralinguistic context. Like all fixed expressions and idioms, they may also be illocutionary speech acts. For example, *It is the last straw that breaks the camel's back* (a mere trifle coming as the final culminating point in a series of misfortunes, troubles, bad events, etc. may make a situation unendurable).

Proverbs have an **evaluative function** when they express the speaker's attitude towards a situation and evaluation on some reality, event or happening: e.g. *Blood is thicker than water* (the blood relationship is stronger than that created by friendship, or any other relationship, so relatives should receive better treatment than mere friends or acquaintances).

The **modalizing function** of proverbs is obvious when they are used as or with modalizers, most often epistemic modalizers: e.g. *Every cloud has a silver lining* (Nothing is completely dark, or only bad; there must be some good in every evil; a misfortune is likely to turn into a benefit.); *A stitch in time saves nine* (a little effort at the right time is likely to save much work later).

Proverbs may also function as deontic modalizers expressing lack of willingness, advice, moral obligation, etc.: e.g. *None are so blind as those who won't hear*. (Nobody is so blind as the person who refuses to see what he does not want to see), *One good turn deserves another* (A benefit received ought to be repaid).

A contrastive approach to English and Romanian proverbs would point out three interesting aspects: 1) a larger number of Romanian proverbs as compared to their English corresponding variants, hence a richer synonymy in Romanian, 2) the richness and the greater expressiveness of the Romanian proverbs, and 3) the Romanian proverbs quality of being more balanced as linguistic constructions.

2. Proverbs and synonymy

The semantic relationship of synonymy between similar proverbs may bring about wide debates. Thus, two or more proverbs or even variants of the same proverb may more or less convey the same idea. For example, comparison can be drawn between the English proverbs *Flee from still waters* and *Take heed of still waters, the quick pass away* and the Romanian corresponding variants: a) *De apă mică să-ți fie frică*, b) *Apele line sunt amăgitoare*, c) *Ferește-te de apa liniștită*, d) *Nu-i primejdie mai mare ca apa lină*, e) *Râul care curge liniștit, te-neacă îndată*.

However, there may be misleading synonymy between proverbs. This may hold valid with the two English proverbs above, or with the following ones:

- e.g. 1. *Truth and oil are ever above.*
 2. *It takes many shovelfuls of earth to bury the truth.*
 1. a. *Adevărul iese întotdeauna la suprafață.*
 1. b. *Adevărul iese deasupra ca untdelemnul.*
 1. c. *Adevărul și untdelemnul ies întotdeauna deasupra.*
 2. a. *Dreptatea întotdeauna ca untdelemnul plutește deasupra apei.*
 2. b. *Dreptatea iese ca untdelemnul deasupra apei.*

There may also be misinterpretations with proverbs such as:

- e.g. 3. *He makes a rod for his own back.*
 4. *He that mischief hatcheth, mischief catcheth.*
 5. *Who spits against the wind, it falls in his face.*
 6. *He who sows wind reaps the whirlwind.*
 3/4. a. *Cine sapă groapa altuia, cade în ea.*
 5. a. *Cine scuipă în sus, îi vine/cade scuipatul pe obraz.*
 5. b. *Dacă scuipi în sus, îți vine în ochi.*
 6. a. *Cine seamănă vânt culege furtună.*

Although the surface structure of the two proverbs is in favour of synonymy, the semantic interpretation may be different, depending on the context:

- e.g. 7. *Silence gives consent.*
 8. *He that speaks, sows; and he that holds his peace, gathers.*
 7. a. *Cine tace, primește.*
 8. b. *Cine vorbește, seamănă, cine ascultă, culege.*

In addition, the fact should be pointed out that there may be **semantic contamination** between two or more proverbs:

- e.g. 9. *The dogs bark, but the caravan goes on.*
 9. a. *Câinii latră, caravana trece.*
 9. b. *Câinii latră, vântul bate.*

- 9. c. *Câinii latră, ursul merge.*
- 9. d. *Câinii latră, bivolul paște.*
- 9. e. *Apa trece, pietrele rămân.*

3. Syntactic aspects

3.1. From the syntax point of view, proverbs display various patterns. With quite a number of proverbs, there is no **syntactic parallelism**. For example,

- e.g. 10. *Good finds good.*
- 10.a. *Bine faci, bine găsești.*

The simple sentence in the English proverb is rendered by a complex sentence that may include either a conditional, or a consecutive clause.

- e.g. 10.b. *Dacă faci bine, (bine) găsești (bine).*
- 10. c. *Bine faci, prin (ca) urmare/așadar/ deci bine găsești.*

There may be **partial syntactic parallelism** between this Romanian proverb and the English variant *Do well and have well*.

It is obvious that the surface structure asyndetic coordination in the Romanian proverb and the faulty coordination in the English proverb are misleading. The deep structure of both proverbs includes either a conditional, or a consecutive clause.

In terms of syntactic structure, the last proverbs mentioned above can be related to the **reduction** and **extension** processes:

- reduction:** e.g. *Good finds good.*
Bine faci, bine găsești.
- extension:** e.g. *Do well and have well.*
Binele cu bine se răsplătește.

Furthermore, there may be reduction in the English proverb and extension in the Romanian one:

- e.g. 11. *Much cry, little wool.*
- 11. a. *E bun de gură, dar rău de lucru.*
- 11. b. *Gura-i merge, mâna nu.*
- 11. c. *Numai gura-i de el.*

The extension may be much stronger: e.g. *Cine lucrează și tace./ Mai multă treabă face.*

The synthetic contrast ***much-little*** is rendered by the syntactic extension including positive declarative clauses in Romanian, and three positive verbs: *lucrează*, *tace* and *face* associated with a comparative of superiority *mai multă*.

Most often, the clause elements are different even in case of the proverbs rendered by the same type of clause:

- e.g. 12. *Truth has a scratched face.*
- 12. a. *Adevărul umblă cu capul spart.*

These two proverbs are rendered by a simple independent sentence, but the clause constituents are different: the adjunct of manner in the Romanian proverb *cu capul spart* corresponds to the extensive complement (direct object) *a scratched face* in the English proverb. Moreover, the predicates are rendered by verbs belonging to different classes: a verb of possession, and a dynamic verb, respectively.

In other proverbs, an imperative sentence is rendered by a declarative sentence. In addition, there is double collocability, i.e. *apele liniștite* and *apele liniștite-amăgitoare* in the Romanian proverb corresponding to the English imperative one:

- e.g. 13. *Flee from still waters.*
- 13. a. *Apele liniștite/ line sunt înșelătoare/te înșeală.*

On the contrary, an English declarative sentence can have a corresponding imperative sentence in the Romanian proverb.

- e.g. 14. *You can see a mote in another's eye but cannot see a beam in your own.*

14. a. *Vezi mai întâi gunoiul din ochiul tău și apoi vorbește pe altul de rău.*

The other variants may also be declarative:

e.g. 14. b. *Vede paiul din ochiul altuia și nu vede bârna din ochiul său.*

14. c. *Bârna din ochiul lui n-o vede, dar gunoiul din ochiul altuia îl vede.*

The subject complement in the English proverb rendered by a noun may have a Romanian corresponding subject complement rendered by an adjective:

e.g. 15. *When all men say you are an ass, it is time to bray*

15. a. *Când trei spun că ești beat, du-te de te culcă.*

A variant with the noun *măgar* is by no means accepted by the Romanian language and culture: * *Când toți bărbații spun că ești un măgar, e timpul să ragi.*

Semantically speaking, the Romanian proverb is convincing enough to express higher efficiency by using the numeral *trei*. It sounds more categorical as well. Such variants have their roots in the national specific realities referring to the English meadows, on the one hand, and to the Romanian vineyards, on the other.

Sometimes, an English proverb represented by a simple independent sentence may have a Romanian elliptical sentence as its corresponding variant.

e.g. 16. *Actions speak louder than words.*

16. a. *Fapte, nu vorbe.*

Both of them convey the same message: that a person is known and judged more by his/her actions than by his/her words; actions are more important than words. This proverb may occur as it is in a context, its grammatical status being that of a simple independent sentence: e.g. *What else can be said? He has no excuse whatsoever! Actions speak louder than words.*

This proverb does not undergo tense changes, simple present being used to express a general truth of a proverbial nature. Thus, it is included among the exceptions to the sequence of tenses rules: e.g. *I knew/I had always known that actions speak louder than words.*

Nevertheless, the use of modifiers may entail tense changes, the sequence of tenses rules being observed: e.g. *That his actions spoke louder than his words pleased them all.*

3.2. Tense changes may also occur when special interest is taken in a certain aspect and a passive structure is added: e.g. *Under those circumstances/ in that difficult situation, she was sure that actions would be held to speak louder than words.*

Both lexical and grammatical changes may occur with proverbs such as:

e.g. 17. *There is many a slip between (the) cup and (the) lip.*

17.a. *Să nu zici hop până nu sari.*

Their message is that we should not count on having a thing before actually we are in the possession of it.

At the lexical level, the collocation *chance of loss* may be used: e.g. *Right now I am aware of the fact that between (the) cup and (the) lip lie many chances of loss.*

Grammatically, there is overlap between the verbs *be* and *lie*, or the singular may alternate with the plural in the existential/pleonastic *there is*: e.g. *I am aware that between (the) cup and (the) lip there are many chances of loss.*

Moreover, the sequence of tenses rules are not observed in contexts such as: e.g. *At the bottom of my heart, I really felt that there was many a slip between (the) cup and (the) lip.*

The proverb can also be modalized by using *should* in an if-clause to express uncertainty, supposition or doubt: e.g. *If there should be a slip between the cup and the lip, he was to take sides with Jack.*

Conclusions

Proverbs are used to express the speaker's attitude towards a situation, thing, happening, etc. Proverbs represent the speaker's intervention into the situation by stating a judgement, giving some advice, suggestion, etc., or the speaker's evaluation of the situation correlating

with other people's experience. The speaker's attitude is expressed by proverbs used as epistemic or deontic modalizers.

Consequently, proverbs promote the inherited wisdom of a culture. They appeal to shared knowledge and to shared values, encoding old experience handled down from generation to generation.

References

- Agha, A. (2001) "Register" in A. Duranti (ed.) *Key Terms in Language and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Avădanei, C. (2000) *Construcții idiomatice în limbile română și engleză*. Iași: Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza.
- Cacciari C. and S. Glucksberg (1991) "Understanding idiomatic expressions: The contribution of word meanings" in G. B. Simpson (ed.) *Understanding word and sentence*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 217-240.
- Duranti, A. (2001) *Key Terms in Language and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Errington, J. (2001) "Ideology" in A. Duranti (ed.) *Key Terms in Language and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Gheorghe, G. (1986) *Proverbele românești și proverbele lumii romanice*. București: Editura Albatros.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1978) *Language as Social Semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Lefter, V. (1978) *Dicționar de proverbe roman-englez*. București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică.
- Lefter, V. (1978) *Dicționar de proverbe englez-roman*. București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică.
- Moon, R. (1998) *Fixed Expressions and Idioms in English. A Corpus-Based Approach*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nunberg, G., I. A. Sag and Th. Wasow (1994) "Idioms" in *Language*. 70/3, pp. 491 – 538.
- Obelkevich, J. (1987) "Proverbs in social history" in P. Burke and R. Porter (eds.) *The Social History of Language*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Titone, D. and C. Connine (1999) "On the compositional and non-compositional nature of idiomatic expressions" in *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31/3, pp. 1655-1674.
- Vega- Moreno, R. E. (2001) *Representing and processing Idioms*, *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*. 13, pp. 73-107.
- Yankah, K. (2001) "Proverbs" in A. Duranti (ed.) *Key Terms in Language and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.