

A Slovak View of Proverbs

Frances Bathgate

'*From proverbs pours wisdom*' (Svetozár Hurban Vajanský, Slovak writer and literary critic)

The Slovak language distinguishes between '*prislovia*', which are proverbs (maxims) with an ethical or didactic message, and '*porekladla*' which have a weaker moral message but express generally accepted truths.

The famous Slovak translator and author Dr. Blahoslav Hečko in his book '*Do Not Cast Your Pearls Before Swine*' describes proverbs as 'the pearls of the language', combining meaning, form and sound. 'Externally they are characterised by brevity, density, pithiness and conciseness, and internally by a poetic approach to language, wit, far-sightedness and metaphor.' (Hecko, 2005, p. v)

For the purpose of comparing proverbs across languages, Dr. Blahoslav Hečko divides proverbs into three groups:

1. Proverbs that have clear equivalents in all Indo-European languages concerning form, content and imagery. He cites the originally Sumerian proverb, '*one hand washes the other*' as an example and charts its journey into Greek and then Latin and then into all European languages.
2. Proverbs that use equivalent content and imagery, but diverge lexically and syntactically, for example, '*a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*', which in Slovak is '*a sparrow in the palm of the hand is better than a pigeon on the roof*.'
3. Proverbs that are equivalent in terms of content, but which contain great differences in lexis, syntax and style. For example, in English there is a proverb, '*There's more than one way to skin a cat*', but in Slovak the equivalent is '*Who wants to beat a dog, will find a stick*'.

Proverbs can therefore be both culturally and linguistically specific, but also point to the enormous fund of shared cultural heritage in Europe. They are rich and varied in their sources, which include both the folk wisdom of rural people preserved through oral traditions and the sophisticated, usually urban, contributions found in the literature of the ancient Greeks and Romans. However, it is the individual who makes meanings from these proverbs, enjoys them, plays with them, applies them to his or her own life and thereby continues and enriches a tradition that reaches back across millennia.

Bibliography

Hečko, Blahoslav: *Do Not Cast Your Pearls Before Swine*. VEDA, Bratislava 2005. ISBN 80 224 0820 4