

## What is a Proverb? Theoretical Remarks

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### Introduction

In order to find an adequate definition for proverbs and shed light on proverbial phenomena in general, it is essential to take a closer look at the terms *phraseology* (the study of phrases) and *phraseologism*. *Phraseology* is a branch of linguistics which deals with all kinds of formulaic language and phrasal collocations (a regular combination of words). It is therefore undoubtedly a wide-ranging term. Thus the scholarly term *phraseology* serves as an umbrella or generic term for *sayings, proverbs, idiomatic expressions, set phrases, truisms, aphoristic quotations*, and other metaphorical phrases and suchlike. And yet, the scholarly literature holds conflicting views on how the above-mentioned terms may be defined and classified. For our purposes it is, nevertheless, important to note that *proverbs* in general are considered to be special phraseological units.

In this context, it is essential to point out that research on proverbs has not only been carried out within *phraseology*, but also in other scholarly branches. Thus in the field of *paremiology* (paremia = proverb), the scholarly field that deals with proverbs, much research has been conducted over the centuries. Moreover, in comparison to *phraseology*, *paremiology* has a far longer tradition. *Paremiology* mainly deals with collecting and classifying proverbs as well as tracing the nature and origin of individual proverbs and investigating their socio-historical significance (cf. Burger 2003, p. 101). Thus “paremiologists usually look at proverbs from a more inclusive point of view as they draw on such fields as anthropology, art, communication, culture, folklore, history, literature, philology, psychology, religion, and sociology” (Mieder 2004, p. 13).

Literature on *phraseology* as well as *paremiology* suggests that throughout history numerous attempts have been made by scholars around the globe to grasp and define a proverb as such. And yet, it has proved that a comprehensive characterization which may incorporate all noteworthy aspects of proverbial phenomena can not be verbalized in a single definition.

Mieder (1993), who has published numerous distinguished books on proverbs, describes the reason for a lack of an all-encompassing definition of proverbs as follows:

“The reason for not being able to formulate a universal proverb definition lies primarily in the central ingredient that must be part of any proverb definition – traditionality. The term ‚traditionality‘ includes both aspects of age and currency that a statement must have to be considered a proverb. But while we can describe the structure, style, form, and so on, of proverbs in great detail, we cannot determine whether a statement has a certain age or currency among the population by the text itself. It will always take external research work to establish the traditionality of a text, and this means that even the most precise definition attempt will always be incomplete” (Mieder 1993, p. 6).

Considering the above-mentioned difficulties in formulating an all-embracing broad definition a selection of some widespread and concise definitions of proverbs will be presented below. In this context key characteristic features of proverbs that help distinguish them from other phraseological units will also be given.

### **Selected Definitions**

On the basis of studies, in which selected groups of “nonspecialists”, but also the general public who have been asked to state their view on how a proverb may be defined, Mieder (1993) presents the following, commonly quoted definitions:

„A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” (Mieder 1993, p. 5 and 24f.).

“A proverb is a short sentence of wisdom” (Mieder 1993, p. 5 and 24f.).

According to Norrick’s findings (1985) the following definition is applicable (at least for the Anglo-American culture):

„The proverb is a traditional, conversational, didactic genre with general meaning, a potential free conversational turn, preferably with figurative meaning” (Norrick 1985, S. 78).

The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Proverbs* (1998) postulates in its introductory remarks the following definition:

„A proverb is a traditional saying which offers advice or presents a moral in a short and pithy manner” (Simpson/Speake 1998).

In an attempt to categorize proverbs in three main groups, the above-mentioned authors state:

“Proverbs fall readily into three main categories. Those of the first type take the form of abstract statements expressing general truths, such as *Absence makes the heart grow fonder* [...]. Proverbs of the second type, which include many of the more colourful examples, use specific observations from everyday experience to make a point which is general; for instance, *You can take a horse to water, but you can't make him drink* and *Don't put all your eggs in one basket*. The third type of proverb comprises sayings from particular areas of traditional wisdom and folklore. In this category are found, for example, the health proverbs *After dinner rest a while, after supper walk a mile* [...]. In addition, there are traditional country proverbs which relate to husbandry, the seasons, and the weather, such as *Red sky at night, shepherd's delight; red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning* and *When the wind is in the east, 'tis neither good for man nor beast*” (Simpson/Speake 1998).

The authors Beyer/Beyer (1985) of yet another dictionary of proverbs suggest the following definition, which tries to cover a wide range of aspects such as linguistic, sociological as well as literary and define a proverb as follows:

„Sprichwörter sind allgemein oder zumindest weithin bekannt, fest und dauerhaft geprägte Sätze, die eine prägnant formulierte Lebensregel bzw. verallgemeinerte Lebenserfahrung enthalten. In ihrer komplexen Aussage und ausgefeilten Gestalt bilden sie zugleich Miniaturtexte von manchmal großem poetischem Reiz. Prägnanz und Volkstümlichkeit nach Inhalt und Form sind unerlässliche Voraussetzungen für die Geläufigkeit des Sprichworts und für eine weitgehend mündliche oft über die Jahrhunderte reichende Überlieferung“ (Beyer / Beyer 1985, p. 7).

### **Function and Usage of Proverbs**

The usage of a proverb can bear manifold communicative-pragmatic, social and also other functions, which is true for interactional situations as well different genres of written and oral texts. Moreover it seems important to underline that proverbs not only serve as a disseminator of traditional wisdom, knowledge and apparent truths handed down from generation to generation, but, apart from aspects already mentioned, bear to some extent a rather serious dimension, too. This is particularly true when they are deliberately misused in order to express or propagate certain views and beliefs. Thus proverbs may contribute to spread and reinforce prejudices and stereotypes of any kind. As such, proverbs have often been applied for instance in political speech and propaganda (cf. Röhrich 2003, p. 20). To the complex aspects set out above, it is equally vital to note that proverbs do not exist in a cultural vacuum, but, depending on the language of its usage, can be highly culture-bound and contain components which may be restricted to a specific culture or region. However, a detailed discussion of all these aspects would go beyond the scope of this project and encumber the search for an adequate definition for proverbs. With this in mind, the below-mentioned remarks should suffice to meet the requirements of the project in question. As such, the

following remarks are attempted towards depicting significant functions and usages of proverbs in the modern age without taking its culture-bound aspects and suchlike into account.

Looking at the usage of proverbs from the perspective of its users, it can be postulated that proverbs are mostly intentionally used to describe, classify, or judge a given situation. In addition proverbs are often used to claim for certain norms and principles, but also to emphasize moral and ethical recommendations.

Studies dealing with proverbs and their usage prove that even though proverbs in their original form are barely used in everyday conversations nowadays, they nevertheless remarkably often occur in written texts, oral speeches, horoscopes, as well as in headlines of newspapers and magazines. It seems, however, interesting to note that in recent times the traditional patterns of usage and wording are increasingly disappearing in favour of playful and innovative forms (cf. Burger 2003, p. 118f. and Mieder 1993, p. 90). In other words, well-known proverbs are often only partially cited, modified or simply implied rather than stated explicitly. They may, moreover, be parodied and combined with different phraseological elements. It seems worth mentioning that such modifications, playing and punning with proverbs are mainly possible, because of the underlying assumption that native speakers of a given language are not only intrinsically familiar with the original proverb, but are also well aware of the hidden associations and allusions.

### **Characteristic Elements of Proverbs**

For a statement to gain proverbial status and be perceived as a recognized proverb it needs to exhibit certain characteristic features and fulfill a set of formal criteria, some of which are elucidated below.

- A proverb is always articulated as a complete and comprehensive grammatically accurate statement.
- Proverbs are not ad hoc pieces of language, but are pre-formulated and pre-fabricated generalized statements. They are therefore unalterable in their style and structure. As such, they neither need to be adapted to a given textual context nor do they require a specific textual surrounding to be fully comprehensible.

- Proverbs feature through a high name recognition, whereas the origin or the founder of a proverb is rarely ever known.
- Due to their simple sentence structure and metaphorical language, in which rhetorical figures such as alliterations, rhythm, rhyme, etc. frequently occur, proverbs are fairly easy to memorize and easily retrievable from memory.
- Against the background that many traditional proverbs draw upon a collective human experience or traditional wisdom they are often considered to be prescriptive as well as didactic reflecting some sort of moral teaching.
- Proverbs can, apart from containing diverse levels of idiomacity, “exhibit a kind of semantic indefiniteness because of their hetero situationality, poly-functionality, and poly-semanticity” (Mieder 1993, p. xi).

Some of the above-mentioned attributes can be admittedly applied to other phrasal or metaphorical units, such as *truisms* (irrefutable, always true sentences), too. However, those phrasal units differ from proverbs in so far that they do not communicate any recognizable deeper insight, but are mostly trivial and insignificant set phrases (cf. Burger, 2003, p. 40f). Moreover, in comparison to proverbs, such set phrases are less moralising and didactic and feature common human experiences in a colloquially expressed language. Against this background they are way too trivial and banal to qualify as a proverb in the traditional sense. Finally, it needs to be mentioned that *aphorisms* and suchlike, which have evolved from familiar proverbs, do not seem suitable or applicable for our purpose. Thus only proverbs taken from renowned proverb collections or journals will found the basis of the project in question.

## Literature

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