



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

Structural Aspects of Proverbs

Mac Coinnigh, M. (2015). Structural Aspects of Proverbs. In H. Hrisztova-Gotthardt, & M. Aleksa Varga (Eds.), *Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies* (pp. 112-132). Berlin: de Gruyter.

Published in:

Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights

© 2014 Marcas Mac Coinnigh

This is an open access article published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits distribution and reproduction for non-commercial purposes, provided the author and source are cited.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Marcas Mac Coinnigh

5 Structural Aspects of Proverbs

5.1 Structure and Style

The challenge of defining the proverb is one that has defied the will, patience, and intellect of scholars for millenia– from Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and other classical scholars, to more recent pioneers in the field, such as Archer Taylor, Bartlett Jere Whiting, Lutz Röhrich, and Wolfgang Mieder. Attempts at providing a definition have yielded varied results, but Taylor’s (1962: 3) now infamous quotation still holds relatively true: “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.” This quotation is important, I believe, not for the acknowledgment that a finite definition isn’t possible – as a “proverb is not a species with its *genus proximum* and its *differentia specifica* as in a systemised science” (Guershoon, 1941: 15) – but because Taylor first raised the question of “an incommunicable quality”. In recent years, scholars have begun to investigate this abstract concept by identifying certain poetic and structural features that appear frequently in proverbs and which constitute, in very broad terms, the concept of proverbial style or what Shirley Arora (1984) has termed *proverbiality*. These devices are a veritable checklist for proverbial status: the more of these stylistic features a sentence possesses, the higher the level of proverbiality, and the greater the probability that the sentence is, or will be identified, as a proverb.³⁹

The phonological, semantic, and syntactic devices that occur frequently in proverbs across languages may be termed *proverbial markers*. These internal and external markers are warning signs that indicate that a particular sentence is deviant from the surrounding discourse, in that it exhibits stylistic and structural adornments that are not typically found in naturally-occurring language. Furthermore, from a pragmatic perspective, it alerts the listener that the expression is important in some regard, be that in terms of its use, function, or meaning. Scholars have identified a range of devices which operate in ensemble to effect the concept of proverbial style, amongst which the most important are parallelism, ellipsis, alliteration, rhyme, metaphor, personification, paradox, and hyperbole (Mieder, 2004: 7). Structural elements are amongst the most universal and easily identifiable proverbial markers, and feature with high frequencies across world languages, both in terms of (i) the traditional fixed

³⁹ “It stands to reason that the more markers a given saying possesses, the greater its chances of being perceived as a proverb at initial hearing; and conversely, a *genuinely traditional* but unmarked saying may well fail as a proverb the first time it is heard, merely because the listener does not recognise it as such.” (Arora 1984: 13)

formulae, and (ii) the set of optional syntactic devices that occur in proverbs, particularly syntactic parallelism, parataxis, and inverted word order in its various manifestations. Language-specific analyses of the use of proverbial markers have focussed on these structural elements in a wide number of languages, including Ancient Greek, Ancient Egyptian, (Cairene) Arabic, English, Esperanto, French, Hebrew, Hausa, Hungarian, Igbo, Irish, Italian, Latin, Russian, Spanish, Tamil, Welsh, Yoruba, and numerous other African languages.⁴⁰

The aim of this chapter is to provide a general overview of the unique architecture of proverbs across a range of languages. The first section will deal with the role of different sentence types in proverbs, both in terms of their linguistic structure and also their associated functions; the second section will outline the most common proverbial formulae, including some of the traditional and modern patterns; and finally, the various optional syntactic devices (or markers) will be described, particularly parallelism, inverted word order, and parataxis. As a means of showing the universality of proverb architecture, examples will be taken from a range of languages (together with an English translation), although the majority will be from the major English sources.

5.2 Sentences and Phrases

5.2.1 Sentence Type

Proverbs appear in a variety of different sentence types; from a syntactic perspective, these sentences may be classified into four distinct types according to the number of clauses and sub-clauses they contain. These sentence types are: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. (i) The most basic sentence is the *simple sentence*, which contains one main clause (subject and predicate) and no subclauses. They are typically simple, declarative, non-oppositional, and stylistically unmarked i.e. they

⁴⁰ Guershon (1941) [Russian], Kilimenko (1946) [Russian], Mahgoub (1968) [Cairene Arabic], Rothstein (1968) [aspects of Russian, French, Latin], Levin (1968) [Russian], Thompson (1974) [Hebrew, Arabic], Silverman-Weinreich (1981) [Yiddish], Hasan-Rokem (1982) [Hebrew], Russo (1983) [Ancient Greek], Arora (1984) [Spanish], Sorrentino (1989) [Tamil], Tóthné Litovkina (1990) [Hungarian, Russian], Norrick (1991) [English], Tóthné Litovkina and Csábi (2002) [American English], Jang (2002) [Hausa], Valdaeva (2003) [English], Osoba (2005) [Yoruba], Agozzino (2007) [Welsh], Ezejideaku and Okechukwu (2008) [Igbo], Fiedler (2010) [Esperanto], Grandl (2010) [Ancient Egyptian], and Mac Coinnigh (2012; 2013) [Irish].

do not contain many stylistic markers.⁴¹ They appear in both affirmative and negative form as can be seen in the examples (1-2) below:

(1) *Acqua cheta rovina i ponti.* (Italian) Affirmative (+)
[*Silent waters run deep.*]

(2) *Comparaison n'est pas raison.* (French) Negative (-)
[*Comparison is no reason.*]

(ii) *Complex sentences* contain one clause and one or more subclauses; the subclauses may be adjectival, nominal, or adverbial. The structural balance in these proverbs is asymmetrical, with the subclause being dependant on the main clause as can be seen in No. 3 below, i.e. the subclause *that will take no colour* cannot stand alone grammatically, and is tied to the main clause in which the subject *bad cloth* is contained. The subordinate clause often features a WH-subclause, which in English begins with one of the following: *what, where, who, why, or when* (see No. 4-5). A stylistic feature of these proverbs is the repositioning of the subclause into sentence-initial position, usually for the purposes of emphasis as also can be seen in No. 4-5.

(3) [*It is a bad cloth*] [that will take no colour].
[Clause] + [Subclause]

(4) [*Quand le vin est tiré*], [*il faut le boire*]. (French)
When the wine is drawn, one must drink it.
[Subclause] + [Clause]

(5) [*Wer anderen eine Grube gräbt*], [*fällt selbst hinein*]. (German)
Who digs a pit for other falls into it himself.
[Subclause] + [Clause]

(iii) *Compound sentences* possess multiple independent clauses which are separated by a coordinator (in English these are *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*). There is a grammatical equality in these sentences, which balances the two clauses against one another through a central fulcrum in the shape of the coordinator. These examples often display a type of semantic equality or contrast, which is created through the replication of the syntactic pattern. In No. 6 below we can see the two independent

⁴¹ Recent corpus studies by Mac Coinnigh (2012) and Tóthné Litovkina (1990) have shown this type of sentence to be the most prevalent in Russian, Hungarian, and Irish-language proverbs. Whilst Wolfgang Mieder (2012: 144) has stated that most modern Anglo-American proverbs are now straightforward indicative sentences also.

clauses *Falseness lasts an hour and truth lasts till the end of time* located contiguously with the conjunction *and* acting as the central pivot.

(6) *ةعاسلا مابق علإ قحلا ؤلوجو ؤعاس لظابلأ ؤلوج* (Arabic)

[*Falseness lasts an hour and truth lasts till the end of time.*]

[Clause] + [coordinator – *and*] + [Clause]

Often verbs are omitted from these proverbs and instead phrases are simply structurally juxtaposed with the implicit suggestion that there is an underlying semantic relationship (I will discuss this in more detail later in the paper when dealing with asyndetic coordination and parataxis).

(iv) The *compound–complex sentence* is the most syntactically complicated type as it often features a multiplicity of clauses and subclauses. The minimum syntactic requirement is for at least two clauses and one subclause. The complex, extended structure is prohibitive to proverb composition, presumably because they are more difficult to memorise and recall in speech situations:

(7) *When the oak is before the ash, then you will only get a splash; when the ash is before the oak, then you may expect an oak.*

[Adverbial subclause] + [Clause] ; [Adverbial subclause] + [Clause]

Closely related to the aforementioned sentence types is the *nominal sentence*. This refers to a type of sentence with a predicate lacking a finite verb. Words and phrases are juxtaposed for the purposes of emphasis and intensity, but either there is no explicit grammatical connection between these phrases or the verbal construct has become redundant over time and is omitted. An oft-cited example of a nominal sentence is the proverb in No. 8 in which the substantive verb *to be* is omitted:

(8) *The more – the merrier.*

5.2.2 Sentence Function

Sentences typically have four different functions: declarative (or indicative); interrogative; imperative; and exclamatory, which can be drawn together into two larger main groups: Affirmative and Communicative. Proverbs exhibit all these different functions, although some may be more frequently used than others. The first function is declarative (or indicative) which is a favoured one in proverbs – as it is in natural speech – as it conveys information or ideas in the form of a statement (No. 9). Interrogative sentences, on the other hand, take the form of a question. The two most common types in proverbs are (i) the *Yes/No Interrogative*, which can either

elicit a yes or no response (No. 10), and (ii) the *WH-Interrogative*, which elicits an open-ended response. These may, of course, be used rhetorically in proverbs, so that a response is not required as in example (No. 11).

Affirmative

declarative/indicative

(9) *Bad news travels fast.*

interrogative

(10) *Does a chicken have lips?*

Yes/No Interrogative

(11) *What would you expect from a pig but a grunt?*

WH-Interrogative

The *communicative* sentences types feature the imperative form in which an order is given. These, as we can imagine, were extremely common – although Mieder (2012: 147) has recently shown that this is no longer the case – as proverbs often give advice, counsel and instructions on how individuals should behave in both specific contexts and in general life. Once again, the affirmative and negative imperative patterns are found frequently (No. 12-13). The exclamatory sentence expresses strong emotion such as anger, surprise, frustration, confusion, elation, joy, love, sorrow, etc. From a grammatical perspective, formal English requires that it begin with either *what* or *how* (e.g. No. 14), but in reality any declarative sentence can become exclamatory in natural speech, and this is reflected in writing by the inclusion of an exclamation mark at the end of the structure (No. 15).

Communicative

imperative

(12) *Look before you leap.*

(13) *Entre l'arbe et l'écorce il ne faut pas mettre le doigt.* (French)

[*Don't go between the tree and the bark.*]

exclamatory

(14) *What goes around comes around!*

(15) *All's fair in love and war!*

5.3 Syntax and Structure

5.3.1 Proverbial Formulae

All languages possess certain structural formulae that exhibit a high degree of peculiarity towards the proverb as a linguistic form, as Archer Taylor (1962, 16) states “New proverbs have often been made on old models. Certain frames lend themselves readily to the insertion of entirely new ideas”. Studies have shown that these structural formulae are common to a wide range of languages, which is evidence that proverbs generally have a shared syntactic architecture as well as a similar core-set of values and morals. A few of the most salient traditional formulae that are to be found internationally are *He who..., ...; If/when,... (then); Like ..., ...; Better ... , than ...; Every ... has its own...* (Krikmann, 1998: 52). For example, the form *Better X than Y* is one of the most widely dispersed and can be seen in the following examples:

(16) *Más vale un presente que dos después.* (Spanish)
[*Better one now than two in the future.*]

(17) *Besser arm in Ehren als reich in Schanden.* (German)
[*Better a good name than riches.*]

(18) *Parempi karvas totuus kuin makea valhe.* (Finnish)
[*Better a bitter truth than a sweet lie.*]

The high incidence of these particular formulae in international collections of proverbs is undoubtedly related to the fact that proverbs were distributed throughout Europe and beyond in four major periods of linguistic borrowing: (i) the dissemination of proverbial forms from classical antiquity through the Latin language, especially the medieval Latin proverb tradition, pioneered by Erasmus of Rotterdam’s *Adagia*, which witnessed the translation of proverbs into European languages; (ii) the translation of the Bible in Europe and beyond, which dispersed both formulae from classical antiquity and metrical patterns associated with wisdom literature; (iii) the creation and distribution of new proverbs in medieval Latin, the lingua franca of the Middle Ages; and (iv) the spread of literature in the globalized age through the mass media (see Mieder, 2004: 10-13). As well as universal proverbs emanating from these sources, there are also indigenous proverbs peculiar to one or more languages, which sometimes appear later as loan proverbs in a neighbouring country’s repertoire. The transferal and borrowing of proverbs formulae in these periods are best viewed in cross-linguistic studies, particularly Paczolay’s *European Proverbs* (1997) and Emanuel Strauss’ *Dictionary of World Proverbs* (1994) which provide numerous examples of similar structures throughout the proverbs of many world languages.

Just as languages evolve and change, the nature of the proverb also alters to suit changing times and circumstances. From a diachronic perspective, we can look back at proverbs over the centuries and see that, from a structural vista, the vicissitudes of linguistic development caused certain formulae to rise to prominence at certain times whilst, on the other hand, some popular forms gradually became redundant on account of lack of use. For example, as recently as 1931 Taylor mentions the international form *Young X, old Y* as a common template, but in modern times this form is extremely rare— only having one example in the *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (Speake, 2003: 344).⁴² In spite of the conventional belief that proverbs are based on a small number of traditional formulaic structures, Wolfgang Mieder's (2012) most recent study of modern Anglo-American Proverbs – and by modern we mean after 1900 – has shown that this is not actually true in the modern age. Traditional formulae are no longer prevalent in the process of composition and promulgation of new proverbs. His data shows that ten of the traditional formulae each occur in less than 1.7% of modern Anglo-American proverbs and, more significantly, eight of these occur in less than 1% of the corpus. These traditional formulae can be seen below where I have added some other languages as a means of explicating the material:⁴³

X is Y

(19) *Aeg on raha.* (Estonian)

[*Time is money.*]

X is better than Y / Better X than Y

(20) *Bättre tiga än illa tala.* (Swedish).

[*Better to keep quiet than to speak badly (of someone).*]

It's not X, it's (but) Y

(21) *It's not what you know, it's who you know.*

When you X, (you) X

(22) *When you're good, you're good.*

also

When you X (you) (Y)

Kun menee sutta pakoon, tulee karhu vastaan. (Finnish)

[*When you flee from a wolf, you run into a bear.*]

⁴² Young saint, old devil

⁴³ I have combined the type *X is better than Y* and *Better X than Y* as, from a structural perspective, the latter is a merely an emphatic form of the former base sentence type.

No X, no Y

(23) *Ei ole huult, ei ole huunid.* (Estonian)⁴⁴

[*No care, no buildings.*]

X is (are) X

(24) *A deal is a deal.*

There is no such thing as X

(25) *There's no such thing as bad publicity.*

There are no X, only (just) Y

(26) *Det finns inget dåligt väder, bara dåliga kläder.* (Swedish)

[*There is no bad weather, only bad clothing.*]

One man's X is another man's Y

(27) *One man's meat is another man's poison.*

Modern Anglo-American proverbs, according to Wolfgang Mieder (2012: 144-147), now favour straight-forward indicative formulae, which appear to be void of many of the traditional proverbial markers, especially syntactic and phonological devices. The modern structures appear to be simplified, reduced formulae as can be seen from the six classes mentioned in his study:

A(n) / noun / verb...

(28) *A diamond is forever.*

A(n) / adjective / noun / verb ...

(29) *A wise head is better than a pretty face.*

The / noun / verb ...

(30) *The world hates a quitter*

You can't (cannot) / verb ...

(31) *You can't unscramble eggs.*

Don't (do not) / verb ...

(32) *Don't believe everything you think.*

⁴⁴ Sincere thanks to Professor Arvo Krikmann who furnished me with a comprehensive list of Estonian and Russian examples.

Never / verb ...

(33) *Never work with children or animals.*

5.3.2 The Wellerism

In Alan Dundes' article „*On the Structure of the Proverb*” (1975), he notes that “there appears to be a finite number of proverb compositional or architectural formulas”, and amongst these structures he notes the wellerism. The wellerism is a proverbial subtype that has a distinctive syntactic formula and is used for purposes of irony or humour. Typically the formula is triadic with three distinct parts: *a statement (often a proverb) + a speaker + context (phrase or subclause)* as in No. 34. The context may also be replaced by inserting another individual to whom the speaker is addressing the statement: *a statement (often a proverb) + a speaker + a listener* as in No. 35.

(34) “*Much noise and little wool,*” *said the Devil when he sheared a pig.*

[statement/proverb] + [speaker] + [context i.e. subclause]

(35) “*Two heads are better than one,*” *as the cabbage-head said to the lawyer.*

[statement/proverb] + [speaker] + [listener]

Often the third *contextual* element is not required as there is sufficient incongruence between the speaker's characteristics and the statement to facilitate humour or irony. For example, the phrase *I see* can be used literally in its primary semantic form, i.e. *I perceive with my two eyes*, or it can also be figuratively invoked to mean *I understand*. This ambiguity creates an incongruity with the adjective *blind*, which is the source of the irony as can be seen in No. 36. These do not often feature proverbs as the statement, however.

(36) “*I see,*” *said the blind man.*

[statement] + [speaker]

Structurally, it is also possible to place the speaker at the start of the sentence and then insert the statement, but this form is much less common than the canonical form.

(37) *For as the old maid remarked about kissing the cow, “It's all a matter of taste.”*

[speaker] + [context] + [statement/proverb]⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Mieder and Kingsbury (1994: 135).

Two major collections of wellerisms are well worth consulting for a more complete overview of the genre, namely: *A Dictionary of Wellerisms* by W. Mieder and S. A. Kingsbury, and *Wellerisms in Ireland: Towards a Corpus from Oral and Literary Sources* by Fionnuala Carson Williams.

5.3.3 Anti-proverbs

The formulation of *anti-proverbs*⁴⁶ (Mieder, 1982) is also responsible for the perpetuation of traditional formulae. We may define an anti-proverb as “an allusive distortion, parody, misapplication, or unexpected contextualization of a recognized proverb, usually for comic or satiric effect” (Doyle, Mieder & Shapiro, 2012: XI). One of the methods for creating an anti-proverb is to amend one element of an existing proverb e.g. a noun, an adjective, a verb, etc. by replacing it with another item from the same grammatical category.⁴⁷ The item may be a homonym or homophone, but these pairs are limited, and it more likely is a word that phonologically resembles the sound of the original (e.g. No. 38), where *here* is replaced by *hair*. Often the alteration merely involves the substitution of one letter for another to affect a pun (No. 39-40), the addition of an extra letter (No. 41), or the substitution of a word (No. 42). What is important to note in all these examples is that the syntactic structure is not changed. This is a method by which new life can be breathed into older structures so that they may enjoy another period of currency. Here are a few examples from the largest collection of anti-proverbs, *Old Proverbs Never Die, They Just Diversify: A Collection of Anti-Proverbs*, by T. Litovkina and Mieder’s (2006: 18) collection:

(38) **Hair** today, gone tomorrow < Here today, gone tomorrow.

(39) The **pun** is mightier than the sword < The pen is mightier than the sword.

(40) A good beginning is half the **bottle** < A good beginning is half the battle.

(41) Strike while the **irony** is hot < Strike while the iron is hot.

(42) Great **aches** from little **corns** grow < Great acorns from little acorns grow.

⁴⁶ Originally coined as *Antispruchwort* (anti-proverb).

⁴⁷ See Mieder and Litovkina (2006: 17-26) for a discussion of the various types of proverb transformations responsible for anti-proverbs.

5.4 Structural Markers

5.4.1 Syntactic Parallelism

Linguistic studies on the stylistic markers that feature in proverbs, by scholars such as Taylor (1931),⁴⁸ Mahgoub (1968), Silverman-Weinreich (1981)⁴⁹ Arora (1984), Jang (2002), and Mac Coinnigh (2012), have shown that parallelism – both structural parallelism and semantic parallelism – is one of the most significant and frequently occurring internal devices in proverbs. Rothstein has argued that it fulfils three main functions in proverbs. Structural or syntactic parallelism is a rhetorical device used for the purpose of emphasis or foregrounding. It involves the contiguous juxtaposition of syntactically parallel elements of the proverb text, such as individual lexical items, phrases, clauses, or sentences, for the purpose of suggesting analogical relationships or comparisons (see Rothstein, 1968: 269). For example in No. 43, the first half of the structure – *The dead to the tomb* – is directly parallel to the second half – the living to the rumba. The conjunction *and* separates the two parallel structures in medial position and invites an interpretation that will contrast the two phrases i.e. that the natural order dictates that when one is dead the tomb is where he/she should be, and that when one is alive, he/she should be at the rumba. It is essentially an exhortation to enjoy life.

(43) *El muerto a la tumba y el vivo a la rumba.* (Spanish)⁵⁰
[*The dead to the tomb and the living to the rumba (=dance).*]

There are two main methods by which the elements can be placed in parallel (i) *Syndetic coordination*, and (ii) *Asyndetic coordination*. In syndetic coordination the terms are explicitly linked by conjunctions such as *and*, *or*, and *but*, and the elements of the proverb are bound together in a cohesive grammatical unit (No. 44). Whilst in asyndetic coordination the conjunctions are absent, but the conjoins are syntactically mirrored or coordinated so as to suggest an analogical relationship between the elements (No. 45).

Syndetic coordination

(44) *Ein Feind ist zuviel, und hundert Freunde nicht genug.* (German)

⁴⁸ “A rhetorical trait which is found in parallelism of structure with its almost inevitable accompaniment, contrast.” (Taylor, 1931: 143)

⁴⁹ “Ellipsis of the verb (usually accompanied by other stylistics features such as parallelism or contrast) is another important grammatical clue (of proverbiality).” (Silverman-Weinreich, 1981: 77)

⁵⁰ Arora (1984: 28).

[*One enemy is one too many, and hundred friends are not enough.*]

Aysndetic coordination

(45) *Nemico diviso, mezzo vinto.* (Italian)

[*Enemy divided, half won.*]

Other related structural features that increase the level of the analogy or comparison often buttress syntactic parallelism. The first is *grammatical parallelism*, which is a more rigid form of syntactic repetition in which the grammatical class of each individual element is mirrored in the bipartite structure that follows. This is extremely common in short phrases where the grammatical structure is quite basic, often relating to a simple Noun Phrase (NP) involving *Noun + Adjective* (No. 46) or the *Noun + Verb* structure (No. 47). Extended forms of grammatical parallelism are also found, however, as in No. 48 where the parallelism is linked at a grammatical level to the pattern which features in both halves of the structure, although it is separated by the conjunction *but*: *NP plural + verb (present tense) + NP plural + infinite verb + NP plural*. The second feature is that of *lexical repetition*, where lexical items are duplicated in the structure. This is an integral part of syntactic parallelism that is almost impossible to examine in isolation. The examples below show how individual lexical matches in the proverbs (i.e. *other, God, young folks/old folks/fools*) are used for comparative purposes, as it invites a focussed contrastive reading of the non-identical elements.

(46) *Andere Länder, andere Sitten.* (German)

[Other countries, other customs.]

(47) *Бог дал, Бог и взял.* (Russian)

[God has given, God has taken.]

(48) *Young folks think old folks to be fools, but old folks know young folks to be fools.*

In some instances the parallel noun-phrase or clause may be syntactically reversed in the second half of the proverb, what we may term inverted parallelism, as in the formula $A^1 A^2: B^2 B^1$. This is a rhetorical device from classical times called chiasmus (sometimes referred to as the Criss-Cross Pattern), which adds both a poetic rhythm and semantic contrast to the proverb (see Taylor, 1931: 140; Norrick 1991: 121). The following example (No. 49) from the Irish language is an example of chiasmus:

(49) *Is fearr eolas an oilc ná an t-olc gan eolas.*

A¹ A² B² B¹

[*Better the knowledge of misfortune than misfortune without knowledge.*]

A¹ A² B² B¹

Another feature associated with syntactic parallelism is medial ellipsis or *gapping* (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990: 279; Fabb, 1997: 147). This is the omission of a lexical element, usually a verb, in the second half of the binary structure.⁵¹ The implication being that it is so implicitly understood from the initial corresponding element that it becomes redundant in the second or subsequent element of the proverb. Gapping is to be found in a number of proverbs containing asyndetic coordination as can be seen in the following example (No. 50) where both the relativized form of the verb *gets* [*a fhaigheann*] and the object *cold* [*fuair*] are both present in the first sentence, whilst they are absent, yet implicitly understood, in the subsequent conjoin. The reader must elicit the missing element i.e. the verb and adjective from the first colon. The same is true in No. 51, where the substantive verb [*will be*] is omitted but implicitly suggested.

(50) *As a ceann a fhaigheann an bhean fuacht; as a chosa an fear.* (Irish)
[Out of her head gets the woman cold; out of his feet *gets* the man *cold*].

(51) *The last will be first, and the first *will be* last.*

It is worth mentioning at this stage that a closely associated feature of syntactic parallelism is that of semantic parallelism, in which the meaning of the parallel elements exhibit a semantic relationship – either synonymous or antithetical. In synonymous parallelism the parallel elements of the proverb express a similar (or tautological) meaning; the second element essentially reiterates the meaning of the first “in different but equivalent terms”.⁵² For example in No. 52, the parallel elements *far-fetched* and *dear-bought* both relate to the aspects of the exquisite tastes of certain ladies i.e. that articles should be expensive and exotic. The two adjectives essentially express a similar quality in different terms. Whilst in antithetical parallelism the second element expresses the opposite of the first. This may occur in rigidly structured antonymic way where each lexical item is directly in apposition to the first e.g. in No. 53 the verbs *marry* vs *repent*, and the adjectives *haste* vs *leisure*, are in direct opposition; or in more a broader way, where the general meaning or sentiment is reversed, as in No. 54 where it is suggested that the person physically closest to the church *nearer the church*, is the least devout, using the figurative expression *farther from God*.

[A] vs [B]

(52) [*Far-fetched*] and [*dear-bought*] is good for ladies.

⁵¹ This is termed forward/right gapping and is the more common than backward/left gapping.

⁵² These terms are borrowed from Robert Lowth, who first introduced the concept of parallelism to the field of poetics in his translation of *Isaiah* (London, 1779).

(53) [*Marry in haste*] and [*repent in leisure*].

(54) [*The nearer the church*], [*the farther from God*].

5.5 Emphatic Word Order

Emphatic word order is a device for rearranging the structure of a sentence so that particular constituent elements can be foregrounded for the purposes of emphasis. There are a number of different methods through which syntax may be rearranged in proverbs for this purpose of which the most common are: clefting, left dislocation, topicalisation, and sub-clausal fronting.

5.5.1 Clefting

Clefting involves re-arranging the basic word order of an unmarked sentence, and fronting constituents, such as nouns, adverbs, and adjectives, to sentence initial position. The clefting of basic sentences is one of the main ways to achieve emphasis or foregrounding of a particular constituent. This type of alteration may be invoked in the proverb for emphatic, exclamatory or contrastive purposes. When it occurs with other optional stylistic and poetic markers, it has the effect of increasing the level of *proverbiality* of an expression.⁵³ In English the fronted element follows an introductory structure such as: *It is/was...*

(55) *It's **an ill bird** that fouls its own nest.* [clefted sentence]
An ill bird fouls its own nest. [canonical sentence]

(56) *It's **a good horse** that never stumbles* [clefted sentence]
A good horse never stumbles. [canonical sentence]

5.5.2 Left-dislocation

Left-dislocation is a feature of spontaneous or narrative style and is used for purposes of emphasis or to clarify ambiguity in cases where the topic contains a lengthy relative clause. It involves placing the constituent element in sentence-initial position and an anaphoric pronominal coreferent placed in its canonical position in the following

⁵³ See Arora (1984), Silverman-Weinreich (1981:75), and Mac Coinnigh (2012) for treatments of *emphatic word order*.

main clause. In No. 57 the subject of the sentence contains a subclause i.e. *who lies with dogs*, so the entire subject is foregrounded in sentence initial position, and then the prepositional pronoun *he* used as a coreferent in the following clause. Repetition of the topic through left dislocation is one of the most salient structural alterations found in proverbs.

(57) *An té a luíonn leis na madraí, éireoidh sé leis na dreancaidí.* (Irish)
[He who lies with the dogs, he will rise with the fleas.]

5.5.3 Topicalisation

In topicalization, the constituent element is clefted into sentence initial position and a gap left in the main clauses which it is construed as filling (Gregory & Michaelis, 2001: 1665).

In No. 58, the Biblical proverb from Matthew XII. 34 (Authorized Version) is an example where the basic sentence is reconstructed and the noun phrase *out of the fullness of the heart* is placed in initial position for the purposes of emphasis. Similarly, the object of the Yiddish proverb – a counterfeit coin – is fronted in No. 59.

(58) *Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks.* marked
The mouth speaks out of the fullness of the heart. unmarked

(59) *a falshe matbeye farlirt men nit.* (Yiddish) marked
[a counterfeit coin – one doesn't loose]⁵⁴

5.5.4 Sub-Clausal Fronting

Subordinating subclauses are fronted in many proverbs for emphasis, especially conditional and adverbial subclauses. It is widely believed that the initial elements of sentences are regarded as more important than latter ones, and in these examples the foregrounding creates a sense of apprehension or expectation, which is then completed in the main clause that follows.

(60) *Quando il gatto non c'è il topo balla.* (Italian)
[When the cat's away, the mice will play.]

⁵⁴ Silverman-Weinreich (1981: 75).

(61) *Wenn das Haupt krank ist, trauern alle Glieder.* (German)
[When the head is sick, all members mourn.]

(62) *En la duda, abstente.* (Spanish)
[When in doubt, abstain.]

5.6 Parataxis

Parataxis (equal *para* arrangement *taxis*) is one of the most frequently occurring syntactic features in proverbs. This term refers to the linking of constructions of the same grammatical and semantic level through juxtaposition or punctuation, instead of using formal conjunctions, either coordinating conjunctions (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) or subordinating conjunctions (*although, because, since, unless*). When constructions are linked together in close proximity, a semantic relationship between them is inferred through other methods e.g. logical, temporal, or causal connections, or through manner (Wales, 2001: 285). The coordination challenges the listener to interpret the grammatical and semantic relationships to infer a meaning. Ordinary naturally occurring speech is peppered by paratactic constructions and it is no coincidence that it is also found in proverbs.⁵⁵

Parataxis can occur at the level of the individual lexical item, the phrase, or indeed the clause, but there is a clear preference for simple phrases. In speech, of course, there would be a caesura between the binary elements to clearly delineate the introduction of a second structure. In printed collections of proverbs, this caesura is indicated by the use of punctuation marks to indicate a fulcrum separating the elements. Phrases are the most commonly found structure located in parataxis, but sentences are also found as can be seen in the examples below. In English, ellipsis of the verb, most often the substantive verb *to be*, is frequently found in these paratactic constructions:

(63) *A mali estremi, estremi remedi.* (Italian)
[Extreme disease, extreme treatment.]

(64) *El poeta nace, el orador se hace.* (Spanish)
[The poet is born, the orator is made.]

⁵⁵ It is found in international collections proverbs in languages including, Ancient Greek, Arabic, Czech, English, French, German, Latin, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Yiddish, yet statistical analyses such as Maghoub (1968: 37), Silverman-Weinreich (1981: 76) and my own study of Irish proverbs (Mac Coinnigh 2012, 2013) show that it is not amongst the primary proverbial markers.

(65) *Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on you.*

Parataxis does not only occur in binary constructions however, and a particular type of proverbial comparison, or enumerative proverb, links multiple constituent units together like the example in No. 66 below:

(66) *For want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; for want of a horse the man was lost.*

Hauser (1980: 26) has contended that parataxis often displays a paucity of “conspicuous links” between the juxtaposed constituents. This is not true of proverbs, however, as there are, more than not, other syntactic, phonemic, or semantic markers which emphasise the connection between the elements. Amongst the most important are semantic parallelism (antithetical and synonymic), rigid grammatical parallelism, lexical repetition (word category repetition), and phonemic devices such as rhyme and alliteration. The proverb *After dinner rest a while, after supper walk a mile* is an example of this type of successful parataxis.

After¹ – dinner² – rest³ – a while⁴ || after¹ – supper² – walk³ – a mile⁴.

The structure is syntactically identical and follows the pattern *preposition¹ – noun² – verb [imperative]³ – indefinite noun⁴* in both sides of the structure. This symmetric framework indicates a semantic correlation. Not only are the grammatical categories identical but we also see that the mood of the verb, i.e. imperative, is the same. From a lexical perspective, there is lexical repetition in the initial position (¹) with the preposition *after*; the verbs *rest* and *walk* are semantically opposed (*antithetical parallelism*) which creates a distinct binary contrast, and the nouns *dinner* and *supper* are semantically linked by being members of the same lexico-semantic category i.e. daily meals. This intricate balance of similarity and contrast in the parallel elements is like a mathematical puzzle, which the listener must decipher to access the meaning. The rhythmic quality, which adds to the memorability of the proverb, is also significant in this example as the nouns *while* and *mile* display perfect rhyme. These phonemic markers occur in conjunction with varying degrees of lexical repetition and syntactic parallelism, and identify the proverbs as salient utterances that are quite distinct from naturally occurring speech patterns.

5.6.1 Relationship Between Juxtaposed Phrases / Clauses

Phrases joined by asyndetic juxtaposition have a relationship that is implied rather than explicitly stated. The semantic connections are not always clear, especially in decontextualised printed collections, yet cultural literacy and experience of proverb

performance enable us to identify some common relationships. These relationships may be classified by three main types: (i) Equality or Identification [X=Y]; (ii) Cause and Effect; and (iii) Antonymy or Contrast.

(i) *Equality or Identification* [X=Y]

Paratactic structures indicate a relationship of equality or similarity between the two phrases i.e. the first is equal, or similar, to the second. The association may be schematically paraphrased by the formula [X = Y]:

(67) *First come, first served.*

(68) *The greater the sinner, the greater the saint.*

(ii) *Cause and Effect*

A causal relationship is also found between the constituents, of the *cause and effect* or “cause-consequence” sequence (Boyle, 1996: 118). In this framework, the realization of the first phrase renders the second phrase a natural consequence. These proverbs may be read by the closely-associated formulae [If there is X, then there is Y] or [If one has A, then one gets/has B]:⁵⁶

(69) *Full cup, steady hand.*

(70) *No pain, no gain.*

(iii) *Contrast and Antonymy*

Phrases are also set against each other for the purpose of contrast and antonymy. The effect is to enhance the overall meaning of the two separate noun phrases by placing them in parallel to one another, so that meaning of the entire proverb is more important than the sum of the overall equal noun phrase constituents. These contrastive proverbs are the most stylised and lyrical and are based on bipartite and quadripartite syntactical repetition:

(71) *Lá brónach dá phósadh, lá deorach dá chur.* (Irish)

[A sad day for one’s marriage; a tearful day for one’s burial.]

(72) *Selon l’argent, la besogne.* (French)

[What pay, such work.]

⁵⁶ For a broader examination of parataxis in fixed expressions, proverbs and sayings in English, including many productive examples, see Culicover (2010).

5.7 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, we can say proverbs of all languages demonstrate a closer resemblance to one another in terms of their structure than they do in aspects of their semantics. We have seen that proverbs features all possible manner of sentence type – simple, compound, compound-complex, and nominal – although some languages display a preference for one over the other. Functions also vary, but there appears to be a clear preference for simple indicative statements over the majority of other forms in modern English-language proverbs. Of particular note, is the disappearance of the imperative forms – as Mieder states (2012: 147) “Perhaps this is due to the fact that people today are less willing to be told what to do or not to do. In other words, the obvious didactic nature of many traditional proverbs appears to be on the decline.” Change is also visible in the proverbial formulae that are used as a skeletal structure for the composition of new proverbs for modern times; old formulae are clearly on the wane. This opens up a new field of investigation for paremiologists as we need to know what formulae have replaced them. Paremiologists can no longer be wed to older published collections of proverbs, but we must actively seek out proverbs and proverbial expressions that are current in today’s world. The analysis of types of proverbial formulae is a necessary accompaniment to such work, as not only will it provide us with a description of our current proverb formulae, but it will also enable us to examine changes that have occurred in individual languages from a diachronic perspective. The stylistic devices used in proverbs may also be changing in accordance with the decline of older formulae and the creation of new forms. The increase in anti-proverbs may to some small extent counteract any major changes in style, but it will be interesting to see if parallelism, parataxis, and emphatic word order continue to feature in proverbs as optional markers. The emphasis on straightforward indicative sentences may leave syntactic devices more redundant than they have been in previous generations, but if this is true then there may be corresponding compensatory rise in other devices, possibly semantic tropes, puns or word-play. Comprehensive linguistic studies of proverb corpora in a wide range of languages are a pre-requisite to the validation of such hypotheses.

References

- Agozzino, M. T. (2007). “Leek and ye shall find”: Locating Structure and Poetics in Welsh-language Proverbs. *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 24, 1-16.
- Arora, S. L. (1984). The Perception of Proverbiality. *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 1, 1-38.
- Boyle, R. (1996). Modelling Oral Presentations. *ELT Journal* 50, 115-126.
- Carson Williams, F. (2002). *Wellerisms in Ireland: Towards a Corpus from Oral and Literary Sources. Supplement Series of Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 12. Burlington: The University of Vermont.

- Culicover, P. W. (2010). Parataxis and Simpler Syntax. In M. José Béguelin, M. Avanzi, & G. Corminboeuf (Eds.), *Actes du 1er Colloque International de Macrosyntaxe Vol. 2*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Doyle, C. C., Mieder, W., & Shapiro, F. R. (2012). *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Dundes, A. (1975). On the Structure of the Proverb. *Proverbium*, 25 961-973. (also in W. Mieder and A. Dundes (Eds.). 1981. *The Wisdom of Many. Essays on the Proverb*, (pp. 43-64). New York: Garland Publishing.
- Ezejideaku, E. & Okechukwu O. (2008). A Morpho-syntactic Analysis of Igbo Proverbs. *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 25, 79-93.
- Fabb, N. (1997). *Linguistics and Literature: Language in the Verbal Arts of the World*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Fiedler, S. (2010). Proverbs in Esperanto. In O. Lauhakangas & R. Soares (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 3rd Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs* (pp. 146-156). Tavira: Tipografia Tavirense.
- Grandl, C. (2010). "The Perception of Proverbiality" in Extinct Languages. In O. Lauhakangas & R. Soares (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 3rd Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs* (pp. 146-156). Tavira: Tipografia Tavirense. (NB. Abstract only).
- Greenbaum, S. & Quirk, G. (1990). *A Student's Grammar of the English Language*. Essex: Longman Group.
- Gregory, M. L. & Michaelis, L. A. (2001). Topicalization and Left Dislocation: A Functional Opposition Revisited. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 33 1665-1706.
- Guershoon, A. (1941). *Certain Aspects of Russian Proverbs*. London: Frederick Muller Ltd.
- Hasan-Rokem, G. (1982). *Proverbs in Israeli Folk Narratives: A Structural Semantic Analysis*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.
- Hauser, A. J. (1980). Judges 5: Parataxis in Hebrew Poetry. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99/1, 23-41.
- Jang, T.-S. (2002). Aspects of poetic balance and cohesion in Hausa proverbs. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 15/2, 215-236.
- Klimenko, I. (1946). *Das Russische Sprichwort* (Formen und konstruktive Eigentümlichkeiten). Bern: A. Francke AG Verlag.
- Krikmann, A. (1998). On the Relationships of the Rhetorical, Modal, Logical, and Syntactic Planes in Estonian Proverbs. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 8, 51-99.
- Levin, M. I. (1968). The Structure of the Russian Proverb. In C. Gribble (Ed.), *Studies Presented to Professor Roman Jakobson by his Students* (pp. 180-187). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Slavica Publications.
- Litovkina, A. T. & Csábi, S. (2002). Metaphors we love by: The cognitive models of romantic love in American proverbs. *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 19, 369-398.
- Litovkina, A. T., & Mieder, W. (2006). *Old Proverbs Never Die, They Just Diversify: A Collection of Anti-Proverbs*. Veszprém: University of Veszprém Press.
- Litovkina, A. T. (1990). Hungarian and Russian Proverbs: A Comparative Analysis. *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 7, 241-252.
- Mac Coinnigh, M. (2012). Syntactic Structures in Irish-Language Proverbs. *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 29, 95-136.
- Mac Coinnigh, M. (2013). The Heart of Irish-Language Proverbs? A Linguo-stylistic Analysis of Explicit Metaphor. *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 30, 113-150.
- Mahgoub, F. M. (1968). *A Linguistic Study of Cairene Proverbs*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University.
- Mieder, W. (1982). *Antisprichwörter*. Volume 1. Wiesbaden: Verlag für deutsche Sprache.
- Mieder, W. (2004). *Proverbs: A Handbook*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Mieder, W. (2012). "Think outside the box": Origin, Nature, and Meaning of Modern Anglo-American Proverbs. *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 29, 137-196.

- Mieder, W. & Kingsbury S. A. (1994). *A Dictionary of Wellerisms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Norricks, N. R. (1991). "One is none": Remarks of Repetition in Proverbs. *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 8, 121-128.
- Osoba, G. A. (2005). Words of Elders, Words of Wisdom: A Thematic and Stylistic Study of Some Yoruba Proverbs. *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 22, 273-287.
- Paczolay, G. (1997). *European Proverbs: In 55 Languages, with Equivalents in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese*. Veszprém: Veszprémi Nyomda.
- Russo, J. (1983). The Poetics of The Ancient Greek Proverb. *Journal of Folklore Research (Special Dual Theme Issue: Verbal Folklore of Ancient Greece and French Studies in Oral Literature)* 20/2-3, 121-130.
- Rothstein, R. A. (1968). The Poetics of Proverbs. In C. Gribble (Ed.). *Studies Presented to Professor Roman Jakobson by his Students* (pp. 265-274). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Slavica Publications.
- Silverman-Weinreich, B. (1981). Towards a Structural Analysis of Yiddish Proverbs. In W. Mieder & A. Dundes (eds.). *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb* (pp. 65-85). New York: Garland.
- Speake, J. (Ed.) (2003). *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sorrentino, A. (1989). Folkloristic Structures of Proverbs in the "Tirukkural" *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 6, 129-137.
- Strauss, E. (1994). *Dictionary of European Proverbs*. 3 Vols. New York: Routledge.
- Taylor, A. (1931). *The Proverb*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; rpt. as *The Proverb and an index to The Proverb*. Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, 1962 (also: Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1962).
- Thompson, J. M. (1974). *The Form and Function of Proverbs in Ancient Israel*. The Hague – Paris: Mouton.
- Valdaeva, T. (2003). Anti-proverbs or New Proverbs: The Use of English Anti-proverbs and their Stylistic Analysis. *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 20, 379-390.
- Wales, K. (2001). *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (Second Edition). Essex, London: Pearson Education Limited.
- Whiting, B. J. (1932). The Nature of the Proverb. *Harvard University Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 14, 273-307. Also In J. Harris and W. Mieder. (1994). *When Evensong and Morrowsong Accord: Three Essays on the Proverb*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.