A PERSPECTIVA COGNITIVA ESTILÍSTICA DOS PROVÉRBIOS: UMA ABORDAGEM BASEADA NO DISCURSO

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Resumo

O meu objectivo é explorar os provérbios a partir de um ponto de vista cognitivo estilístico.Os provérbios são unidades figurativas estáveis da linguagem; eles são parte da memória de longo prazo colectiva de uma nação. Na perspectiva cognitiva, os provérbios surgem do pensamento figurativo; são manifestações linguísticas de um pensamento figurativo, quer na utilização do núcleo ou na utilização estilística instancial. Quais são as características que são comuns ao uso estilístico dos provérbios, apesar da sua diversidade admirável e infinita em diferentes tipos de discursos ao longo dos séculos? Inúmeras mudanças estilísticas desde OE comprovam não só para a sua estabilidade diacrónica mas também a estabilidade estilística, que se manifesta na preservação da mesma imagem e tipo de figuração ambos no sistema da linguagem e do uso actual. O funcionamento dos provérbios apresenta uma grande variedade de padrões de uso estilístico, que são parte do sistema da linguagem e por isso reprodutível (e.g., metáfora ampliada, trocadilho, inserção, substituição, alusão, e outros), ou suas combinações. Uma instância de alusão:

> **Um homem que se está a afogar agarrar-se-á a uma palha**
>
> Nós <u>flutuamos</u> no tempo, **agarrando-se às palhas.** Mas que bem faz um tijolo a um homem que
>
> se está a afogar? (T. Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*)

São os processos cognitivos que determinam as mudanças estilísticas dos provérbios no discurso. A minha palestra preocupa-se com o uso estilístico dos provérbios como um dos modos de reflectir o pensamento figurativo e o seu desenvolvimento no discurso. Uma abordagem cognitiva estilística é uma pesquisa interdisciplinar; é um novo caminho para uma maior exploração de provérbios no uso estilístico.

Palavras-chave: provérbio, abordagem cognitiva, discurso, uso estilístico instancial, um padrão estilístico.

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A COGNITIVE STYLISTIC PERSPECTIVE OF PROVERBS: A DISCOURSE-BASED APPROACH

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Abstract

My aim is to explore proverbs from a cognitive linguistic point of view. Proverbs are stable figurative language units; they form part of the collective long-term memory of a nation. In the cognitive view, proverbs arise from figurative thought; they are linguistic manifestations of figurative thought, either in core use or instantial stylistic

use. What is the stylistic potential of proverbs in their base form? What features are in common to stylistic use of proverbs, despite their admirable infinite diversity in different types of discourse over centuries? Innumerable stylistic changes in discourse testify not only to their diachronic stability but also to their stylistic stability, which is manifest in the preservation of the same image and type of figurativeness both in the system of language and in actual use. The functioning of proverbs presents a great variety of patterns of stylistic use, which form part of the language system and are hence reproducible (e.g., extended metaphor, metonymy, pun, allusion and others). These stylistic patterns are used not only in verbal discourse but also in visual representation where the verbal and the visual function together in instantial stylistic use. As figurative thought motivates stylistic use, it is the cognitive processes that determine stylistic changes of proverbs in discourse. Cognitive access to the base form of the proverb and knowledge of the pattern provide for the perception, identification and interpretation of the semantic and stylistic subtleties of the new instantiation that has emerged in discourse.

Keywords: base form, core use, instantial stylistic use.

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This article is an attempt to gain a closer insight into proverbs as part of the system of language and their functioning in actual use. When studying the admirable variety of proverbs in authentic texts, we are reminded of the proverb *Nothing is permanent but change*. What is permanent and what changes? How to explain all the innumerable stylistic changes in proverb use? In order to analyse stylistic use, it is essential to understand proverbs from the linguistic point of view. Proverbs do not constitute a chaotic area, and a dictionary of proverbs is not a book of quotations where the system is hard to discover because it just does not exist there.

I would argue that, as language units, proverbs belong to phraseology. I believe that linguistically a proverb is a stable, cohesive combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning[1] (Naciscione, 2010: 19). There is no denying that proverbs form part of the word stock of any language, while at the same time significant differences exist between proverbs and separate words as language units. One area that has not been fully researched is a linguistic approach to proverbs and their functioning in discourse[2] in particular. Empirical material reveals that proverbs present the same types of figurative meaning as phraseological units in their base form, while the functioning of proverbs displays a great variety of patterns of stylistic use, the same as other types of phraseological unit (op. cit.: 19, 36).

In paremiological research, it is essential to identify the base form of the proverb. By the base form[3] I understand the form to which other forms of the proverb can be related and with which they can be compared. In practice, this is the dictionary form and meaning: the form of the proverb outside discourse, or in other words, out of context. In this form the proverb is stored in the collective long-term memory of the language user. It is a language unit which

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can be recalled when a discourse situation so requires. The base form is a cohesive entity as such which secures the existence and use of the proverb in discourse.

A linguistic view involves syntactic, semantic and stylistic aspects of proverbs as language units. As a base form, the proverb is an integrated whole, a unit that is unbroken and intact. Syntactically, proverbs never exceed sentence boundaries in their base form. Their syntactic structure may constitute simple sentences (declarative, interrogative or exclamatory), e.g., *The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence; What does the moon care if the dogs bark at her?; Hear, hear!; Bad scran to you!*; compound sentences, e.g., *Fools build houses and wise men live in them*; complex sentences, e.g., *Don't count your chickens before they are hatched*. Interrogative sentences have an additional stylistic charge as they are usually used as rhetorical questions, e.g., *With friends like these, who needs enemies?; What can you expect from a pig but a grunt?*

Semantically, proverbs comply with the two main categorical properties of phraseological units: stability and figuration. Stability is one of the basic linguistic concepts in paremiology. The concept of stability was worked out by Kunin at the beginning of the 1960s. His theory of stability includes: stability of use, structural-semantic stability, lexical stability, morphological stability, and syntactical stability (Kunin, 1964, 1970). Apart from these aspects of stability, I would also single out, firstly, stylistic stability, which is manifest in preservation of the same image and type of figurativeness in their meaning, and other stylistic properties both in the system of language and in actual use, and, secondly, diachronic stability of PUs, that is, their stability across decades and centuries. Importantly, stability does not contradict the innumerable dynamic changes that proverbs undergo in discourse. Nor does stability go against the natural diachronic changes that affect language units, proverbs included: proverbs frequently undergo structural, lexical, semantic and stylistic changes in the course of their historical development, that is, changes in their form and meaning over a period of time.

By definition proverbs can be fully figurative, e.g., *A burnt child dreads the fire; A cat in gloves catches no mice.* Or proverbs may have a partially figurative meaning, e.g., *Accidents happen in the best regulated families; Life begins at forty.*

All the examples so far are in their base form. In my understanding, the base form of a proverb is:

> ➢ the form of the proverb outside discourse;
> ➢ the form in which proverbs are stored in the long-term memory of a nation as reproducible language units;

> ➤ diachronically stable;
> ➤ accessed when a discourse situation calls for it.

The base form of proverbs has been researched thoroughly on the basis of different languages of the world from many points of view: ethnography, anthropology, etymology, ethics, philosophy, social sciences and many others. A stylistic perspective is equally important.

Stylistically, the base form of proverbs does not constitute a void. It may contain different types of figurative meaning[4] or a combination of them. As proverbs are fully or partially figurative language units, their base form is characterised by a set of distinctive stylistic features[5]. The main types of figurative meaning encased in the base form of proverbs are as follows:

> ➤ metaphor, e.g., *The cat is out of the bag; Fish where the fish are;*
> ➤ metonymy, e.g., *Two heads are better than one; Words fail me;*
> ➤ allusion, e.g., *All roads lead to Rome; It's all Greek to me;*
> ➤ periphrasis, e.g., *When pigs fly; Adam's ale is the best brew;*
> ➤ personification, e.g., *Money talks; Love is blind;*
> ➤ pun, e.g., *Life is a bitch, and then you marry one;*
> ➤ paradox, e.g., *Nothing is permanent but change; Less is more;*
> ➤ hyperbole, e.g., *A watched pot never boils; You could have knocked me over with a feather;*
> ➤ antithesis, e.g., *Little lie, big lie; Less is the new more;*
> ➤ irony, e.g., *All his geese are swans; Were you born in a barn?*

The base form of proverbs may contain two or several stylistic features, e.g.: *There is more than meets the eye* (metaphor, metonymy); *When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?* (metaphor, allusion, inner rhyme, rhetorical question); *Out of sight, out of mind* (metaphor, metonymy, parallelism, assonance, anapaest). Thus, figurative meaning is a compulsory part of proverbs, the same as all phraseological units.

In actual use, proverbs frequently appear in their most common form and meaning. I have introduced the term *core use* to denote this type of use. In their core use proverbs do not exceed the limits of one sentence, the same as the base form. Importantly, in core use they do not acquire additional stylistic features. Core use brings out the meaning and essential stylistic qualities of the base form of the proverb. For instance,

Revenge is sweet[6]

> He came to the conclusion that though **revenge may be sweet**, knowledge .. is better than money in the bank.
>
> <div align="right">J. Porter, Dover Beats Band</div>

The term *core use* draws a distinction between the stock of proverbs, which is best represented in a dictionary of proverbs where all proverbs are recorded in their base form, and proverbs used in context without any additional stylistic effect.

However, proverbs are frequently used with contextual semantic and stylistic changes in their paremiological form and meaning. Stylistic use of proverbs is much less researched than other areas in paremiology. Systematic stylistic research of proverbs in English was launched by Kunin in Russia in the first half of the 1960s; he analysed proverbs as one type of phraseological unit.

In the Western world, Mieder is the father of stylistic explorations in paremiology. It was in 1982 that he introduced the term *anti-proverb* for stylistic use of proverbs in his book *Antisprichwörter*. This theory has given rise to a new trend in paremiological studies. It has been accepted by proverb scholars as a general term to denote innovative changes in traditional use of proverbs. Another merit is that it has focused attention on research of proverbs in varied texts and contexts. This approach has added a new dimension to further investigations and disclosed the "unlimited adaptability to ever new contexts" (Mieder, 1993: 59) that is manifest in proverb use.

This approach works very well if the first part of the proverb has been fully or partly preserved in stylistic use, as in cases of replacement, pun, zeugma and others. This also refers to most cases of extended metaphor, provided the extended part follows the proverb. However, I would argue that the theory of anti-proverbs is not applicable to all cases of instantial stylistic use; for instance, allusion that is a stylistic pattern acting as an implicit mental reference to the image of the proverb in discourse. Thus, it does not cover the whole range and diversity of stylistic use of proverbs, as is evident from my illustrations. My aim is to explore stylistic use of proverbs and how proverbs occur in actual use but not how they could occur[7].

The infinite diversity poses a challenge to the researcher in the face of a wealth of empirical material. To cover all cases of stylistic use of proverbs in authentic contexts I have introduced the notion of instantial stylistic use[8]: a particular instance of a unique stylistic application of a proverb in discourse resulting in significant changes in its form and meaning determined by the thought[9] and the context. Let me examine some of the most widespread stylistic patterns of instantial use.

The world is one's oyster

      Falstaff: I will not lend thee a penny.

      Pistol: Why, then **the world's mine oyster**,

<u>Which I with sword will open</u>.

Falstaff: Not a penny.

<div align="right">W. Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* Act II, Sc. 2</div>

The proverb is a metaphor in its base form, denoting ability and freedom to do anything. The structure and all the constituents of the proverb have been preserved. However, this is not a case of core use, as the metaphor has been extended. It has acquired two sub-images[10]: *open* and *with sword*, which have become part of this instantiation. In our mind, an oyster is associated with a closed space: live oysters are normally tightly closed. Pistol is determined to open up a world of opportunity with his sword. Metaphorical extension of the thought is a defining feature of the pattern of extended metaphor.

Another common stylistic pattern is the pun: an instantiation that features both the figurative meaning of the proverb and the literal meaning of a constituent or constituents, creating a humorous effect as a rule. For instance:

<u>I wasn't born yesterday</u>

Janey (the daughter): **<u>I wasn't born yesterday</u>!**

Susan (the mother): I know. <u>I w a s p r e s e n t t h e n</u>.

<div align="right">The British sitcom *My Family*</div>

As proverbs are figurative, cohesive combinations of words, they easily lend themselves to punning, for every figurative constituent invariably has a literal meaning at the same time. This feature lies at the basis of puns, both in verbal and visual discourse. In visual representation[11], the verbal and the visual work together in creating a new meaning, as is the case in the advertisement **<u>Mum's the word</u>**, urging mothers and daughters to go shopping together and purchase classic items to share (*Bella*, 12 March, 1997, p. 5). Clearly, the constituent *Mum* is used in its direct meaning, portraying a mum alongside her daughter. At the same time, *Mum's the word* is a metaphorical proverb, used as a standard way of advising someone to keep a secret. This advertisement is based on a homonymic pun. As part of the proverb, *mum* is onomatopoeic, it mimics a humming sound made with a closed mouth: *mmm*.

Pun is a pattern of thought that is most frequently used in visual discourse[12]. Comprehension of pun relies on the tie between the verbal and the visual in construction of new meaning in any visual figurative conceptualisation.

Let me have a closer look at another instantial stylistic pattern – allusion[13]. This is one of the mental techniques applicable in new figurative thought representations. Allusion frequently

emerges in stylistic use of proverbs. It is common not only in the instantiation of long proverbs with a more complicated syntactical structure but also in short proverbs that are well known to language users. For instance:

It is no use crying over spilt milk

> But she wouldn't **cry**; she was fortified by all the conventional remarks which came automatically
> to her mind about **spilt milk**.

<div align="right">G.Greene, A Gun for Sale</div>

Identification of allusion as a stylistic pattern may cause serious difficulties in text analysis. Cognitive access to the base form of the proverb and knowledge of the pattern of allusion are central to perceiving, identifying and interpreting the semantic and stylistic subtleties of the pattern. These processes require informed stylistic awareness of use of language. For purposes of analysis, it is crucial to distinguish allusion as a pattern of stylistic use and allusion as a stylistic technique in abstraction of the meaning of the base form, e.g., *When in Rome, do as the Romans do; Let George do it!*

As a pattern of stylistic use, allusion forms part of the language system: it has existed and has been used throughout the history of the English language. Hence, it is reproducible[14]. For instance, Shakespeare's plays abound in cases of stylistic use; he is a great master of the pattern of allusion, among many other stylistic techniques:

Brag is a good dog, but Holdfast is better[15]

> Trust none;
> For oaths are straws, men's faiths are wafer-cakes,
> And **Holdfast** i s t h e o n l y **dog**, my duck.

<div align="right">W. Shakespeare, Henry V, Act II, Sc. 3</div>

Without knowledge and comprehension of the base form it is impossible to interpret the instantiation. Allusion shows the strength of cohesion inherent in the proverb: one[16] or more constituents are in a position to evoke associations with the whole proverb, even if the syntactic structure has been changed. The explicit image-bearing constituents of the proverb have a metonymic function; they allude to the proverb, providing a web of associative links. As Mieder puts it, a mere allusion often suffices to bring to mind the whole proverb and complete the communication process (1989: 148).

Even if we have identified the pattern of allusion we may feel baffled by the infinite variety and creativity of instantiations based on this pattern. That is frequently the case when teaching even at the advanced level. Let us explore several cases of stylistic use of the same proverb.

A drowning man will catch/clutch at a straw

> Guildenstern: We drift down time, **clutching at straws**. But w h a t g o o d ' s a b r i c k
>   t o **a drowning man**?

<div align="right">T. Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Act III</div>

And always give 'em a bottle of medicine, *even* if you and the whole Pharmaceutical Society know it's useless – e v e n **a straw**'s a c o m f o r t t o **a drowning man**.

R. Gordon, *Doctor at Large*

The drop in bank base rates to their lowest levels since June 1988 may have given the property industry **a m u c h n e e d e d , i f f r a g i l e , straw to clutch at**.

Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms[17], 1995: 373

The image of the proverb has been extended; however, I would argue that instantiations do not become anti-proverbs[18]. These are unique stylistic applications, or in legal terms, they are copyrighted material. Importantly, the stylistic instantiation does not repeat itself. What repeats itself is: 1) the proverb as a language unit and 2) the stylistic pattern that lies at the basis of the given instantiation. Cognitively, stylistic use reveals the workings of a creative mind: the ability to use the existing stock of language and existing stylistic patterns to create novel inimitable instantiations in discourse.

As may be concluded from the brief insight given in this article, proverbs are stored in their base form either in dictionaries or in our memory while use of proverbs in discourse falls into core use and instantial stylistic use. In core use proverbs emerge in their standard form and meaning. Instantial stylistic use can boast an endless admirable diversity of discoursal forms of proverbs. Despite all the variety in their structure, choice of constituents, and instantial semantic and stylistic modifications in their meaning, they retain stability across time, genres, and modes of expression. So do stylistic patterns employed in instantial stylistic use. They are part of the mental lexicon, stored in the long-term memory of the language user.

The following figure presents proverbs as language units both in language stock and in actual use in discourse:

Proverbs (as language units)
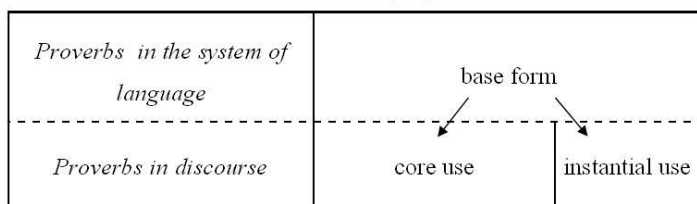
Let me turn to the query raised at the beginning of the article: what is permanent and what changes in instantial use of proverbs? Only detailed analysis of cases of actual use in various types of text and various periods of the development of language can provide a clue to the nature of instantial stylistic use. Even the few examples cited in this article reveal that

changes may affect a number of aspects. Changes may occur 1) in the structure of the proverb and 2) in the choice of constituents that may in turn result 3) in changes of meaning that may be modified, altered or changed in stylistic use. These are semantic and stylistic changes.

The two basic elements that are permanent in the face of countless stylistic changes in discourse are as follows:

1. The proverb itself retains its stability during its lifetime, that is, the period while it is used by people. It does not matter whether this is since time immemorial or, to be more precise, since the very first writings in English or whether it is a modern proverb. Stability is the cornerstone of the linguistic view of proverbs.

2. The other permanent element is the stylistic pattern that lies at the basis of the instantiation, for example, extended metaphor, pun, allusion, insertion, replacement and others.

Thus, despite the infinite diversity of proverbs in actual stylistic use (in their structure, choice of instantial constituents and changes in their meaning) they retain cross-century stability while stylistic patterns are elements of the language system that can be reproduced the same as proverbs in their base forms. Patterns are also characterised by stability across time and are stored in the long-term memory of the language user. It is the cognitive processes that determine stylistic changes of proverbs in actual use and the emerging new meaning in discourse that reflects our ongoing thoughts.

A linguistic view of proverbs invariably explores linguistic categories and their functioning. However, as an interdisciplinary search it also needs to acquire closer insights into proverbs, drawing on stylistics, cognitive linguistics, history of language, discourse studies and others, all of which open up new avenues for further research and offer vast opportunities for the creative mind of paremiologists. All roads lead to the rich stock of proverbs in the system of language.

Endnotes

1. The categorical features of stability and figurative meaning were first introduced by Kunin in his definition of phraseological units (1970: 2010).

2. By discourse I understand language in use that goes across sentence boundaries and also includes broader social aspects and non-verbal representation (see Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton, 2001: 1).

3. For my understanding of the base form of phraseological units (proverbs included), see Naciscione, 2010: 31–35.

4. Mieder uses the term "internal markers" to denote stylistic patterns contained in the base form of proverbs, such as personification, hyperbole, paradox, metaphor and others (1989: 19–20).

5. It is not my aim here to study the stylistic features of the base form in greater detail, as it is a special area of research in its own right. For a broader insight, see, for instance, Mieder, 1989: 19–24; Fiedler, 2007: 44–47; Norrick, 2007: 382–384; Sandig, 2007: 158–165.

6. In this article, stylistic instantiation has been highlighted for emphasis: **base forms** are marked bold and underlined; i n s t a n t i a l   e l e m e n t s are spaced and underlined; r e p l a c e d   e l e m e n t s are underlined double and spaced; cues are marked with an interrupted line.

7. Charteris-Black, when investigating metaphor in the social world, argues that discourse analysts are interested in use of metaphor in natural settings and not in how metaphor might be used. See Charteris-Black, 2012: 5–7.

8. For detailed analysis of the phenomenon of instantial stylistic use, see Naciscione, 2010: 39–248.

9. This theoretical approach is based on a cognitive understanding of the relationship between thought and language: thought motivates language use. For more on the inextricable link between figurative thought and language use, see Gibbs, [1994] 1999: 11–17.

10. A sub-image is an extension of a proverb directly or through other sub-images.

11. When discussing proverb illustrations and visual representation of stylistic use of proverbs, we should remember that the basic approach and ideas are expressed in Mieder's two books *American Proverbs* (1989) and *Proverbs are Never Out of Season* (1993) that also give wonderful illustrations of stylistic use in advertisements and humorous cartoons.

12. For more on representation of figurative thought in visual discourse, see Naciscione, 2005: 71–83.

13. As a stylistic technique, allusion may be defined as an implicit mental reference to the image of a proverb, represented by one or more explicit image-bearing constituents in discourse, hinting at the image.

14. I would argue that patterns of stylistic use are reproducible elements generating innumerable particular manifestations in discourse (Naciscione 1982, 2010).

15. The meaning of the proverb *Brag is a good dog, but Holdfast is better* is: tenacity and quietness of manner are better than ostentation. Records of this proverb go back to the Early Modern English period. See Simpson [1982] 1992: 29.

16. For illustrations of one explicit base constituent in cases of allusion, see Naciscione, 2010: 111, 114–115, 118–119.

17. This is authentic text from *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (1995), which draws upon the Bank of English.

18. One reason why I do not support use of the term *anti-proverb* is the very meaning of the affix *anti-* that means "against or antagonistic to smth" (*The Oxford English Dictionary,* 2009). I would argue that a stylistically used proverb does not go against its base form. Cognitively, it should be seen as a natural change, a stylistic development of the proverb in discourse, reflecting a development of proverbial thought.

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