

Bis dat, qui cito dat

Gegengabe in Pareminology, Folklore, Language, and Literature

Honoring Wolfgang Mieder

on His Seventieth Birthday

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A Cognitive Stylistic Perspective of Use of Proverbs

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A proverb in the hand is often worth a thousand words.¹

1. Introduction: A cognitive perspective

A cognitive perspective of proverbs means that as part of the system of language² proverbs are viewed as one of the modes of reflecting thought and conceptualisation, grounded in sensory perception, embodied experiences³ and the external world. In the cognitive view, proverbs arise from figurative thought and human ability to think figuratively, including the cognitive skills of abstraction and generalisation. Stylistic use of proverbs in discourse reveals change and development of human thought. Our thoughts are not static; they are dynamic. In discourse they form a flow of thoughts, disclosing a new perception and comprehension as a reaction to changes in our own sensory perception and to political, social and cultural factors, creating a new form and meaning, and forming figurative networks in discourse.

2. Mieder's contribution to stylistic use of proverbs

Wolfgang Mieder is a prolific scholar who has made a huge contribution to the development of paremiology in numerous aspects. This contribution is invaluable not only for the general advancement of paremiology as a special field of research but has also provided motivation and encouragement to many researchers in various areas of paremiology. As Archer Taylor is called the father of paremiological research (see, for instance, Taylor's famous book, 1931), so Mieder is truly the father of modern paremiology. In this short article I would like to give a brief outline of Wolfgang Mieder's contribution to the further development of paremiology only in one aspect: stylistic use of proverbs. His merits are manifold.

2.1 Juxtaposition of traditional form of proverbs and innovative variations

A crucial breakthrough was achieved in 1982 when Mieder published his book *Antisprichtwörter* (Anti-proverbs) that introduced a new trend in stylistic exploration of proverbs. The term has been accepted by proverb scholars to denote innovative changes to proverbs in use. The most common types of anti-proverb have been singled out: replacement of a single word or several words in the proverb, changing the second part of the proverb, adding new words, punning and a number of other less frequent types (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006: 17–25). Indeed, this approach works very well in the above types of stylistic use. By way of illustration I would like to give the following example:

A cat in gloves catches no mice⁴

Very true! Then, my dear, we have no mother, and we have a Mrs General. And I tell you again, darling, that Mrs General, if I may reverse a common proverb and adapt it to her, is a cat in gloves who WILL catch mice. That woman, I am quite sure and confident, will be our mother-in-law.

Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*

However, my empirical studies reveal that the theory of anti-proverbs does not cover the whole range or the infinite diversity of stylistic use of proverbs. I would argue for the term *instantial stylistic use* to denote a particular instance of a unique stylistic application of a proverb in discourse resulting in significant changes to its form and meaning (Naciscione, 2010, 2013). For example:

When the cat's away, the mice will play

"Cat's away, mouse doth play," he said. "The cat's been away too long."

Glen Petrie, *Hand of Glory*

In this stylistic instantiation the theory of anti-proverbs is not applicable as it does not capture the extended metaphor that forms another sentence in direct speech after the reporting verb. This refers to all cases when the metaphorical extension crosses sentence boundaries or covers a large stretch of text.⁵ Another instance of extended metaphor:

A cat in gloves catches no mice

There is hardly one [cat] but flings back the lie in the face of the old saying that **a cat in gloves catches no mice**. Why dirty your paws when your servants will do it for you?

Country Life, 21 June, 1979

In their base form, proverbs never exceed sentence boundaries. However, instantial stylistic use frequently covers more than one sentence as figurative thought does not stop at the end of the sentence. The metaphorical extension is linked to the proverb by metonymic ties. The metaphorical sub-image *paws* relates to the main notional constituent of the proverb *cat* by associations of contiguity.

The stylistic pattern of extended metaphor may acquire a complicated structure and may form a ramified figurative network of metaphorical sub-images, linking metonymically to the base form of the proverb, e.g.:

A rolling stone gathers no moss

He had been **a rolling stone** too long to sit down in one place, breed cattle and wait for them to grow. **A rolling stone gathers no moss**, he said, but a sitting hen loses feathers. Now he was old and could roll no more, his only desire was to sit down on Wytaliba and moult peacefully.

Katharine S. Prichard, *Coonardoo*

This is a unique case of stylistic use created by a particular author in a specific text, in this case, by Katharine Prichard in her novel *Coonardoo*. It is under copyright, that is,

it may not be used without a reference. It belongs to the author as it takes imagination and creativity to produce a new instantial form.

I would argue against the general idea that anti-proverbs create new language units. This statement should be taken with a pinch of salt. Tatiana Valdaeva writes that “[...] some anti-proverbs are not ANTI-proverbs but can be considered to be new communicative phraseological units of the English language alongside with traditional English proverbs” (2003: 390). Of about 40 anti-proverbs that Valdaeva discusses in her article, almost all are cases of stylistic use and hence do not qualify as new proverbs. These discursal forms could become proverbs provided they acquired stability at syntactical, lexical, semantic⁶ and stylistic⁷ levels. At the present level of development, they are not part of the paremiological stock of the English language. However, there is one exception: on p. 381 Valdaeva analyses *Beauty is in the ear of the beholder*, and treats it as an anti-proverb, used in a *Sony* advertisement. Valdaeva believes that the anti-proverb is based on the proverb *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. A closer look at the stock of English proverbs reveals that four variants⁸ of the same proverb: *Beauty is in the eye/ear/heart/mind of the beholder*, are registered in the system of language.⁹ Thus, we are not dealing with a case of innovative stylistic use in discourse but with another variant of the same proverb. In exceptional cases, the instantial form of a proverb may acquire stability and become a proverb in its own right. Identifying the base form of a proverb calls for meticulous diachronic exploration of texts and dictionary attestations to support the claim. Only juxtaposition of the base form and textual use can establish whether it is core use¹⁰ or instantial stylistic use.

Let me turn to the stylistic pattern of allusion¹¹ that can boast a great diversity of expression in actual use. Allusion frequently emerges in stylistic use of proverbs. When speaking about proverbs in the modern age, Mieder calls it “old wisdom in new clothing”. More often than not proverbs are used innovatively: they are changed and twisted until they fit the demands of our modern age (Mieder, 1993: 58). Authors do not necessarily always quote the entire proverb text, but a mere allusion often suffices to bring to mind the whole proverb and complete the communication process (Mieder, 1989: 148). This technique is most common in the instantiation of long proverbs with a more complicated syntactical structure.

Allusion functions as a mental reference to the image of the proverb. It is based on metaphorical and metonymic associations that relate separate explicit constituents and help to retrieve the proverb in stylistic use. The base form of the proverb is stored in the long-term memory of the language user. The base form serves as a yardstick that helps to interpret the instantiation and bring out the novel meaning, e.g.:

you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs

The ‘radiant future’ promised in Lenin’s name simply failed to materialise. The eggs were broken, but with no omelette to show for the shells. Yet for decades the ghastly reality was camouflaged in an endless tissue of official lies [...]

Brian Crozier, *Free Agent: The Unseen War, 1941-1991*

Traditional proverbial wisdom acquires a new semantic shade: the instantial form of the proverb makes an implicit sarcastic statement about the radiant future of communism.

The syntactical structure of the base form of the proverb has been substantially changed, and semantic relationships rely on associations of contiguity to provide for semantic cohesion in context.

The stylistic pattern of allusion has existed throughout the history of language along with other patterns of stylistic use (see Mieder, 2004). However, it becomes a prolific pattern in Shakespeare's plays, which abound in cases of subtle allusion, e.g.:

birds of a feather flock together

Warwick: The proud insulting Queen,
 With Clifford and the haught Northumberland,
 And of their feather many more proud birds,
 Have wrought the easy-melting King like wax.

William Shakespeare, *Henry VI*, Act II, Sc. 1

The explicit image-bearing constituents *feather* and *birds* perform a metonymic function, alluding to the proverb, enabling readers or audience to see beyond the words. It is important to comprehend and identify both the stylistic pattern and the base form of the proverb to be able to comprehend and interpret the instantiation.

Study of the empirical material reveals an enormous diversity and complexity of textual manifestation of the pattern of allusion. It is clear that by its very definition and contextual manifestations, allusion does not easily lend itself to analysis on the theoretical basis of anti-proverbs. A collection of allusions to proverbs would invariably turn into a book of quotations.

2.2 A discourse dimension: Mieder's study of texts and contexts

Another essential aspect of Mieder's contribution to the study of stylistic use of proverbs is emphasis on the significance of exploration of contextual use instead of merely dealing with out-of-context examples. This becomes evident in his works starting from the very beginning of his research career in the 1970ies. During subsequent decades Mieder has written many prominent works devoted to contextual analysis of proverbs based on literary, philosophical and political texts (e.g., Mieder, 1993, 2000; Nolte & Mieder, 2012).

Among numerous works by Mieder I would like to single out two enlightening books. *American Proverbs: A Study of Texts and Contexts* (Mieder, 1989) is a seminal book, a fascinating study of how proverbs are used today in various literary genres. It presents a detailed analysis of proverbs that undergo stylistic changes in use, always referring to social situations. Mieder points out that it is social context that gives meaning to a particular case of use, for "a proverb in a collection which merely enumerates uncontextualized proverb texts is for all general purposes meaningless" (1989: 20).

Another handbook for anyone who would like to go in for stylistic use of proverbs is *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season: Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age* (Mieder, 1993). This convincingly reveals the adaptability of proverbial structures in stylistic use. Contextual variation of standard proverbs is a useful tool in advertising, oral speech, political rhetoric, newspapers and books.

Indeed, the true nature of stylistic use of proverbs may be disclosed only in discourse. In stylistic use, the figurative meaning of a proverb may cross not only sentence boundaries but also paragraphs and chapters, or in poetry a proverb may encompass a whole poetic text, acquiring a discourse dimension.¹² Mieder aptly points out that, in the past, lyrical verses were considered to be inappropriate for use of proverbs. However, more recent research has shown the existence of a considerable amount of proverbial poetry, or paremiological verse in many languages (1989: 171).

The text of Dickinson's poem *Which is Best?* is given by Mieder (op. cit.: 182) as an example of paremiological verse. The poem is included in the chapter *Proverb Poems* (op. cit.: 171–193). When analysing the contents of the poem *Which is best?* Mieder concludes that Dickinson questions the wisdom of the proverb *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush* and to a certain degree prefigures “the critical stance vis-à-vis proverbs by many modern poets” (op. cit.: 171).

A closer look at the poem from the stylistic point of view reveals a wealth of stylistic insights:

kingdom come¹³

a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush¹⁴

Which is best? Heaven –
Or only Heaven to come
With that old Codicil of Doubt?
I cannot help esteem

The “**Bird within the Hand**”
Superior to the one
The “**Bush**” may yield me
Or may not
Too late to choose again.

Emily Dickinson, [Which is best?] (1865)

In Verse 1 *kingdom* has been replaced by *heaven* in the phraseological unit *kingdom come*, bringing out its meaning: heaven, which appears in the preceding line followed by a dash, signifying a meaningful pause.

Use of the proverb *a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush* in Verse 2 cannot by any means be analysed as an anti-proverb. It is a subtle case of allusion¹⁵ to the proverb represented by three explicit image-bearing constituents in poetic discourse, evoking associations with the whole proverb and enabling retrieval of the base form, even though the syntactical structure of the proverb has not been preserved. Allusion is achieved as the explicit constituents bring to mind the complete semantic and stylistic information of the proverb.

The explicit constituents of the proverb have been placed in inverted commas, a tradition that existed in English in the 19th century and to a great extent in the first half of the 20th century.¹⁶ Use of initial capitals for nouns is another way of foregrounding, signalling abstraction and hence figurative meaning.

Absence of traditional punctuation and use of run-on lines (or enjambment) is a striking feature in the poem, lending continuity to thought and emotions.

Abundance of stylistic means in this short poem conveys intensity of feeling and underscores the personal involvement and preoccupation of the poetess, revealing her viewpoint.

As this case study has shown, proverbial poetry presents interesting material for further investigation of stylistic use.

2.3 Analysis of visual representation of proverbs

Mieder's contribution to visual representation of paremiological thought lies in a detailed and exciting account of the use of proverbs in visual representation, their context and purpose (1989: 301–315, 326–332; 1993: 158–164). Mieder states that “metaphorical proverbs can be described as verbalized pictures, and it is only natural that modern artists will continue to translate the images into effective pictures commenting on the concerns of our time” (1989: 282).

Mieder's works present cases of striking and innovative use of proverbs in advertisements, including creative headlines and effective advertising slogans. When discussing use of proverbs in the ever growing world of advertising, he points out that many advertisements are built on proverbial structures (op. cit.: 298). Advertisers often introduce changes to standard proverbs in an effort to promote their product and make it memorable and recognisable (op. cit.: 296). With advertising growing fast, resorting to new means and modes of visual representation¹⁷, it opens up a vast field of investigation for paremiologists.

2.4 Cognitive observations in Mieder's research

Upon careful reading of Mieder's works, we may discover keen observations and outstanding linguistic judgements on proverb use that, in my opinion, imply and foreshadow a cognitive approach to use of proverbs, even though the term itself is not used. This aspect of Mieder's contribution could be a piece of research in its own right.

Mieder argues that metaphorical proverbs enable us to communicate figuratively. By translating a realistic situation into a metaphorical proverb, we can generalise a unique problem and express it as a common phenomenon of life (1989: 20). As we know, perceptual generalisation lies at the basis of conceptualisation. Following Ralf Waldo Emerson, a 19th century American author, Mieder believes that proverbs are “metaphor[s] of the human mind” (op. cit.: 147). This is how proverbs “become a most effective verbalization of human and societal concerns” (1993: 59). Mieder is genuinely interested in thought and its reflection in proverbial lore. He writes, “Proverbs belong to our common stock of ready-made formulas that will come to mind as part of our thinking process” (op. cit.: 90). Proverbs function in texts to reveal solid insights into concerns and emotions of people (1989: 199). Mieder's conclusion is that there are no limits to use of proverbs. In diverse contexts, proverbs “mirror life in all of its expressions” (op. cit.: 148).

In this short article I have barely scratched the surface of Mieder's enormous contribution to the advancement of paremiology in general and the theory of stylistic use of proverbs in particular. It certainly calls for more extensive study of his works.

3. Conclusion

The cognitive stylistic perspective of proverbs proceeds from the premise that proverbs reflect a figurative mode of thinking which is “a fundamental characteristic of the human mind” (Gibbs, [1994] 1999: 17). Along with lexical and phraseological metaphors, proverbs are manifestations of personal experiences and of political, social and cultural processes. However, it is cognitive processes that determine stylistic changes to proverbs in actual use and the emerging new meaning that reflects our ongoing thoughts.

Interpretation of stylistic use of proverbs in discourse will be enhanced by stylistic awareness and appreciation of the new contextual formation as a natural product of the human mind, and an understanding of the mental processes involved in creating the novel proverbial form and meaning in the given instantiation.

A cognitive stylistic approach is a new pathway for further exploration of proverbs in stylistic use.

Notes:

- [1] For the origin of the innovative blend between the two proverbs *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush* and *A picture is worth a thousand words*, see Mieder, 1993: 149, 151.
- [2] I believe that linguistically a proverb is a stable, cohesive combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning (Naciscione, 2010: 19). The categorical features of stability and figurative meaning were first introduced in phraseology by Kunin in his definition of phraseological units (1970: 210).
- [3] Raymond Gibbs holds that people’s subjective, felt experiences of their bodies in action provide part of the fundamental grounding for language and thought (2006: 9). Figurative thought motivates an individual speaker’s use and understanding of the meaning of words and expressions (Gibbs, [1994] 1999: 18).
- [4] 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; replaced elements are underlined double and spaced. Highlighting helps in the identification process, especially in complicated cases. It is also a methodological tool in teaching: use of non-highlighted text in home assignments and highlighted text in discussion for consolidation purposes.
- [5] For analysis of extension of metaphorical proverbs in discourse, see Naciscione, 2010: 87, 89.
- [6] For stability of use, and syntactical, lexical and semantic stability of phraseological units, proverbs included, see Kunin, 1970: 89–137.
- [7] By stylistic stability I understand preservation of the same image and type of figurativeness in paremiological meaning (Naciscione, 2010: 57).
- [8] Parallel stable forms of a proverb in the system of language are called variants by Kunin (1986: 322–324).
- [9] Even if we take Internet data alone, *Google* has registered the frequency of use of these variants: 5,520,000 cases of use of the proverb *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*, 3,450,000 cases of *Beauty is in the heart of the beholder*, 2,920,000 cases of *Beauty is in the mind of the beholder*, and 657,000 cases of *Beauty is in the ear of the beholder*.
- [10] Core use is use of a proverb in its most common form and meaning that never exceeds the boundaries of one sentence (Naciscione, 2010: 35–39).
- [11] By stylistic pattern of allusion I understand a mental implicit verbal or visual reference to the image of a proverb represented in discourse by one or more explicit image-bearing constituents, and their instantial ties, hinting at the image (Naciscione, 2010: 107–120).

- [12] For the role of proverbs in the web of discourse, acquiring a discourse dimension, see the case study of the proverb *all that glisters is not gold* in Naciscione 2013. This proverb covers a whole scene in William Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, providing semantic and stylistic cohesion and sustaining figurative thought. The form *all that glisters is not gold* was used in EMoE but is obsolete in MoE. The MoE form is *all that glitters is not gold*.
- [13] The PU *kingdom come* means heaven, the next world (Cowie, Mackin & McCaig, [1993] 1994: 334). The origin of the PU is the Bible: "Thy Kingdom come" is a line from the Lord's Prayer, meaning Christ's Kingdom after the Day of Judgement.
- [14] For stylistic analysis of the proverb *a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*, see Naciscione, 2010: 161–162. Its instantiation covers the whole fable *The Hunter and the Elephant* by James Thurber.
- [15] Interestingly, Mieder himself discusses many cases of allusion to proverbs in text in his works, for instance, 1989: 148, 197-198; 1993: 8, 111, 121, 139.
- [16] This practice still exists in a number of languages, e.g., in some newspaper texts in Latvian, which shows that metaphor is not fully accepted by author and readership alike, or that there is some fear that stylistic use may not be perceived and understood correctly.
- [17] For use of semiotic elements, e.g., symbols, see visual representation of proverbs in Naciscione, 2005: 79–81.

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