

Proverbs

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Introduction to Proverbs

**“The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay
the undertaking.” - Proverb and Riddle Scholar
Archer Taylor**

Introduction to Proverbs

- Proverbs:
 - Offer wisdom
 - Are generally short
 - “Socially sanctioned advice”
 - Truths, morals, or views of a culture

Introduction to Proverbs

General Features

- About people & real life
- Use metaphor: the situation in the proverb is related to the situation of the receiver or speaker of the proverb
- Classify situations and propose strategies to resolve them

Purpose

- Alleviate social tension and provide advice

Our Proverbs

- Proverbs about: friends, families, relationships, etc.
- Subgroups:
 - Catholic Proverbs
 - Jewish/Yiddish Proverbs
 - Spanish Proverbs
 - Chinese Proverbs
 - Russian Proverbs

Analysis

1. Formula (Alan Dundes' *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb*)
 - Better ____ than _____. Ex: "Better late than never."
 - A _____ is a _____. Ex: "A proverb is a true word."
 - _____ never _____. Ex: "Barking dogs never bite."
 - _____ or _____. Ex: "Live free or die."
2. Image
 - Humorous, serious, sad.
3. Message
 - The interpretation and use of the proverb

Catholic Proverbs

Informants:

- Dartmouth College Catholic students/ administrators
- All Americans
- All “Cradle Catholics”

Trends:

- Serious proverbs focused on living out church teachings
- Humorous proverbs poking fun at religious topics



Catholic Proverbs

It's hardest to be a saint around your family.

- Formula: Two part proverb, with a statement and a condition
 - Image: Humorous, but serious implications
 - Message: Importance of sainthood to Catholics
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- Informant emphasized usage in his own family
 - Was inherited from several people separately (ubiquity of proverb)

Catholic Proverbs

It takes a martyr to live with a saint.

- Formula: Two parts, with a statement and a condition
 - Image: Humorous
 - Message: Uses metaphors of Catholicism to diffuse tension, inject humor, and poke fun at humility
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- Informant cited application of this proverb in her own marriage

Catholic Proverbs

Widely known version:

Blood is thicker than water.

Catholic expanded version:

The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.

- Formula: Two part proverb that relies on comparison
- Image: Serious reflection on the church's tenets
- Message: Contradicts the meaning as interpreted by secular culture, and instead preferences church family above "blood" relations.



Catholic Proverbs

There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

- Formula: A “than” comparison proverb
 - Image: Serious (but colloquially is softened)
 - Message: Uses a callback to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, compares that to the love between friends
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- Informant uses this proverb informally, to express affection among family and friends

Spanish Proverbs

Informant Demographics:

Mexican, El Salvadoran, Honduran, Spanish, Argentinian; immigrants and nonimmigrants (first-generation and non-first-generation, students and professors)

- Informants were aware of the other Spanish proverbs collected



Spanish Proverbs: Trends

- Metaphor using animals/characters
- Proverbs were more serious than humorous
- Maternal figures often sharing proverbs with children
 - Reinforces the idea that family comes first/unconditional familial support (theme)
 - Shows that proverbs are used to teach values to children
- Interpretation and context alters meaning of proverb (to informant) from more general meaning
 - General proverbs allow for flexibility in interpretation and to be applied to different situations
- Structure within Spanish culture - emphasizes traditional views and practices
- Themes:
 - Importance of Family - Family Comes First
 - Values in Friendship - Like Attracts Like
 - Expected Behaviors and Practices

Spanish Proverbs: Family Comes First

Orally transmitted proverb: “Una onza de sangre vale más que una libra de amistad”

Translation: “An ounce of blood is worth more than a pound of friendship”

Meaning: The bond between family members is stronger and more significant than the bond between friends.

Analysis:

- 2 part structure and comparison
- Family is more valuable than friendship

Spanish Proverbs: Like Attracts Like and Proper Behavior

Orally transmitted proverb: “El burro hablando de orejas.”



Translation: “The donkey is talking about ears.”

Meaning: It is ironic and hypocritical when friends gossip about each other (because, as friends, they are similar people).

General meaning: The accuser is pointing out a fault of someone else in which they also share.

Analysis:

- Tradition/culture: disapproval of gossiping
- Metaphor using animals
- Assumes that friends are similar; like attracts like (based on informant interpretations)

Spanish Proverbs: Proper Behavior

Proverb: “Más sabe el diablo por viejo que por diablo.”

Translation: “The devil knows more through being old than through being a devil.”

Meaning: Elders must be respected and their wisdom must not be taken for granted.

General meaning: Wisdom comes with age.

Analysis:

- Tradition/culture: emphasizes importance of respecting and listening to elders
- Structure: cause and effect
- Metaphor using character



Spanish Proverbs: Proper Behavior

Orally Transmitted Proverb: “Un caballo regalado no se le mira el diente”

Translation: “A horse given as a gift you shouldn’t look at its teeth.”

Meaning: Appreciate a gift you receive rather than being ungrateful and looking for inadequacies in the gift.

Analysis:

- Tradition/Culture: Gifts should be valued on the thought put into them, not superficially.
- Horse teeth used as metaphor for flaws in a gift
- Metaphor using character

Jewish/Yiddish Proverbs

Contextual Information:

- Interviewed rabbis, professors, and other adults and students
- Yiddish is spoken primarily in Israel, Russia and the US
 - Where all of our informants were from
- Not many Dartmouth students knew proverbs
- Often learned from parents/grandparents or religious studies
 - Yiddish tends to be spoken by only older generations in the US

Trends:

1. Biblical Proverbs: very serious, often a commandment or rule
 - a. One of the main source of wisdom comes from religious sources
 - i. Demonstrates the importance of religious learning and rabbinical wisdom in Jewish culture
2. Casual Proverbs: humorous, very blunt, often Yiddish



Jewish/Yiddish Proverbs

Original Text: (Yiddish)

Translation: “When your cock is standing, your head is in the ground”

Informant: Professor Bernard Avishai

Message: When a man is attracted to a woman, he acts irrationally

Context/Analysis:

- The image is meant to be absurd and humorous
- Often used by older men in a joking manner
- Professor Avishai emphasized how unoriginal the message of this proverb is, which illustrates how proverbs are fundamentally about the typical



Jewish/Yiddish Proverbs

Original Text: לִפְנֵי עִוֵּר לֹא תָתִין מִכָּשָׁל

Translation: “Do not place a stumbling block before the blind.”

Informant: Rabbi Meir Cohen Goldstein (Hillel Rabbi)

Analysis:

- Structure is not one of those listed by Dundes- more like a commandment
- Biblical with serious imagery
- Yet often used in a joking or teasing way



Jewish/Yiddish Proverbs

Original Text: (Hebrew)

Translation: “Poverty in one’s home is worse than 50 plagues.”

Informant: Rabbi Moshe Gray (Chabad Rabbi)

Message: financial troubles are the worst thing for relationships

Context/Analysis:

- Structure: comparing two things in terms of negative effect
- Religious origin: from the Talmud and references Job in the Bible (serious imagery)
- Finances are not as commonplace to discuss socially, so easier to act as if it is common wisdom (relieves the blame)



Jewish/Yiddish Proverbs

Original Text: “Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t!”

Translation: “Besser mitn taivel vos m’ken eider mitn taivel vos, ‘ken im nit!”

Informant: myself

Analysis:

- Structure: Better _____ than _____
- Casual proverb, originally in Yiddish
- Humorous imagery and often used to dispel tension.



Chinese Proverbs

Interviewee Demographics

- primarily Chinese-American students
- native speakers from mainland China
- learned proverbs from parents/Chinese school
 - reflects lack of cultural immersion ⇒ need for institutional learning/diffusion

Trends/Analysis

- primarily object comparisons/metaphorical situations
- structure = 2 clauses (A and B structure)
- Common themes: hardship, providing support

Chinese Proverbs

一個籬笆三個樁，一個好漢三個幫

(yí gè líba sān gè zhuāng, yí gè hǎohàn sān gè bāng.)

English: Like a fence with three stakes, a person needs people to support them

Analysis:

- typical 2 part comparison/character symmetry
- comparison to an ordinary object

Context

- only child w/ parents
- do not be stubborn, learn to rely on others for help



Chinese Proverbs

觀其友，知其人

(guān qí yǒu, zhī qí rén.)

English: You know someone by looking at their friends

Analysis:

- typical 2 part structure
- character symmetry (sounds and number)
 - 其 is the second character in both parts + 3 characters on each side

Context

- thinking about how friends affect your life/behavior
- learned in Chinese school



Chinese Proverbs

和朋友在黑暗裡同行, 好過一人在光明中獨步

(hé péngyou zài hēi'àn lǐ tóngxíng ,

hǎo guò yī rén zài guāngmíng zhōng dú bù)

English: Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light.

Analysis

- 2 part structure
- situational based (walking w/ a friend)

Context

- mother discussion how her friends supported her when she was growing up



Chinese Proverbs

背后說好話，才是真朋友

(Bèihòu shuō hǎohuà, cái shì zhēn péngyǒu)

English: He is a good friend that speaks well of us behind our backs

Analysis:

- Simple language and structure (cause and effect)
- Little imagery but simple message to the point
- Defines what a true friend is and does

Context

- learned from parents
- hard time during elementary school



Russian Proverbs

Interviewee demographics

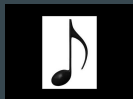
- One American majoring in Russian/Russian camp
- One professor, native to Eastern Europe

Trends:

- Collectivist; things owed to group
- Value of people, known things

Russian Proverbs

КТО НЕ РАБОТАЕТ, ТОТ НЕ ЕСТ.



English: “Whoever doesn’t work, doesn’t eat.”

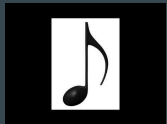
Meaning: Everyone should do their part, and in exchange they will be rewarded.

Analysis:

- Conditional structure: “If not x, then not y”
- Collectivist

Russian Proverbs

Не имей сто рублей, а имей сто друзей.



English: “It’s better to have 100 friends than 100 rubles.”

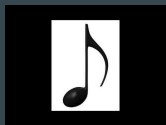
Meaning: Friends are more important than material things.

Analysis:

- Comparison: parallel phrasing of two contrasting things
- People over possessions; importance of groups

Russian Proverbs

Се́меро одного́ не ждут.



English: “Seven will not wait for one.”

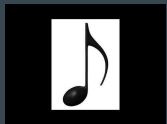
Meaning: The group as a whole should not suffer for an individual.

Analysis:

- Statement of fact; “will” vs “should”
- More collectivism; well-being of group

Russian Proverbs

Одна́ голова́ -- хоро́шо, а две -- лу́чше.



English: “One head is good, but two heads are better.”

Meaning: You can do more by collaborating than by working alone

Analysis:

- Comparative statement, parallel structure
- Importance of other people; cannot succeed alone

Conclusions

- Students tended not to know as many proverbs as adults and professionals.
- Religious proverbs: Biblical to humorous
 - The Hebrew Proverb, “Do not rejoice at your enemy’s downfall.” vs the Yiddish Proverb “Do not rejoice at your enemy’s downfall, but also do not help them get up.”
 - The Catholic Proverb, “There is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friend.” vs. its usage in a less literal context
- In diasporic communities, proverbs also serve to teach children about family’s heritage culture.
 - learned in more formal contexts such as language schools or from religious instructors as seen with Spanish, Chinese, and Jewish proverbs
 - Seen in Russian culture to push national ideals

Conclusions

- Friends vs Family
 - Jewish proverbs: equal influence in proverbs
 - Spanish proverbs: family over friends
 - Chinese and Christian proverbs: friends over family
 - Russian proverbs: the group over the individual
- Chinese proverbs follow a formulaic structure and put more emphasis on sounds in certain instances than other proverbs.
- All of the cultures examined had a fair mixture of light, humorous proverbs and serious proverbs, except for those in Chinese.
- Structure of proverbs were more broad than suggested by Dundes