

Proverb

Regarded as “the wit of one and the wisdom of many,” the proverb is a terse and witty philosophical saying that conveys a lesson. It couches conventional wisdom in a poetic capsule, making it esthetically pleasing and memorable. Over time, individuals invent such nuggets of wisdom, using traditionally sanctioned ideas and ways of speaking. The sayings, when repeated and applied by others over time, may win acceptance and gain admission into the community’s treasury. The proverb is widespread, but surprisingly missing among a few cultures including Australian Aborigines, American Indians, and Bushmen in Southern Africa.

Grounded upon years of experience and close observation of life and natural phenomena, the proverb, through metaphorical language, may warn, advise, or reprimand by drawing attention to the moral or ethical consequences of human behavior. It may advocate patience, co-operation, and perseverance, and repudiate greed, and selfishness. A Turkish proverb says “He who does not listen to proverbs remains screaming for help”; according to Russians, “For the sake of a proverb, a peasant walks to Moscow”; and the Yoruba of Nigeria would say, “The man who knows proverbs reconciles difficulties.”

The lessons often embedded in proverbs make them tools for moral education. In actual fact, however, it is only in rare instances that proverbs are ostensibly used to educate, for proverbs are generally not used in isolation. Instances of didactic uses of proverbs as an end in itself may be found among the Chaga and a few other societies in Africa. Among the Chaga, proverbs may be used as a mode of instruction during initiation ceremonies. The Maori of New Zealand offer another example of the proverb as an agent for tuition. To ensure that valuable facts about economic lore in the environment are grasped, various proverbs are repeated to the youth by elders side by side with instruction; and in parts of West Africa, proverb icons staked serially on a string may be held by itinerant griots, who educate

the public with their inherent philosophies. Other than that, the element of education in proverb use can be subsumed under the rhetorical function, the proverb as a tool for persuasion in social interaction. The proverb user seeks to alter or reinforce the listener's conviction by referring him to timeless parallels within the proverb universe. By getting the addressee to agree with the moral precept in the proverb, the speaker thereby hopes to win him over. An Akan mother in Africa may thus cite the proverb "The chicken nearer to its mother eats the thigh of the grasshopper" to a truant child who has missed a delicious dinner. And an eloquent litigant among the Anang of Nigeria may seek to persuade a jury about an accused's guilt as a thief with the proverb "If a dog plucks palm fruits from a cluster, he does not fear a porcupine" as a reminder that the defendant has a previous conviction.

Part of the rhetorical power of the proverb derives from its authoritative outlook, or rather its notional ascription to authoritative sources. Among the Punjabi of India proverbs are "the drum of God," and in Turkey proverbs from the prophets are said to have originated from the Quran and Hadith holy traditions. In several African cultures, proverb authorship is ascribed to elders and ancestors. Even though proverbs may also be attributed to specific individuals, and sometimes to non-human entities, the collective category considered responsible for proverbs are elders, to whom the qualities of wisdom, responsibility, and exemplary behavior are attributed. "The elders say . . ." is the prefatory formula that triggers the proverb in several African cultures. The belief in the prophetic power of words spoken by elders is supported by the Ba-Congo saying "Water drawn by old men quenches thirst." In several Western cultures, though, the proverb is prefaced with a formula attributing it to an indefinite source: "They say . . ." Besides the use of a "source" formula to enhance a proverb's rhetorical force, a "factivity" formula may also be used, such as "You know that . . ." or "Remember that . . ." to imply that the impending pithy statement is conventional wisdom or a cultural fact or truth that should not be contested.

Societies where proverbs are intensely used also recognize their high esthetic value, their role as discourse ornaments. The proverb is a "lamp of the word" among the Arabs and an "ornament of speech" in Iran. According to the Somali, proverbs "put spice into speech." The Igbo say that "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten," implying that words are hard to swallow without a proverb lubricant. The proverb's vitality in speech is marked by the observation among the Yoruba that it is "the horse of conversation—when the conversation droops, the proverb picks it up."

In various societies, proverb use is governed by specific social norms; and a good proverb speaker does not only know its logical application and meaning, but also its appropriate social uses: which proverb imagery to select or avoid in what social situations. Sometimes proverbs are used among peer groups or by social superiors speaking to subordinates. If a proverb should be used by one addressing a social superior, the speaker may either use an apologetic formula disclaiming a didactic intent or incorporate his audience in the collective authorship, "It is you elders that said . . ." This mitigates any possibility of patronizing a cultivated audience.

Even though proverbs are mostly spoken, other channels may be used for their expression. These include the talking drum, particularly in societies whose languages are tonal. Akan and Yoruba drum proverbs are well known. These are proverb verses that are uniquely identified with the drum and are uncommon in speech. Also common are visual proverbs on umbrella tops, orators' staffs, and as gold weights and textile design in Africa, as well as proverb drawings and paintings in Japan. The proverb in certain parts of the world may even be danced or dramatized.

Regardless of the proverb's channel of expression, it takes considerable cultural sensitivity to grasp its full semantic nuances in social interaction.

(See also *act, agency, body, genre, healing, humor, music, orality, participation, performativity, poetry, power, style, theater, voice*)

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