Speech is silver, silence is golden

"Speech is silver, silence is golden" is a proverb extolling the value of silence over speech. Its modern form most likely originated in Arabic culture, where it was used as early as the 9th century.

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Meaning

"Speech is silver, silence is golden" has been described as "perhaps the best known of the proverbs concerned with silence". [1]:239 Similar proverbs in English include "Still waters run deep" and "Empty vessels make the most sound." [2]

There have been like proverbs in other languages, for example the Talmudic 1]:241 proverb in the Aramaic language, "if a word be worth one shekel, silence is worth two", which was translated into English in the 17th century. Praise of silence can also be found in much older

works, including the Bible, for example, "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin, but he that refraineth his lips is wise." (Proverbs, 10:10). [1]:239–240

SARTOR RESARTUS

own mean perplexities, do thou thyself but hold thy isangur for one day; on the morrow, how much clearer are thy purposes and duties; what wreck and rubbish have those mute workmen within the swept away, when intrusive moises were shut out! Speech is too often not, as the Frenchman defined it, the art of concealing Thought; but of quite stiffing and suspending Thought; but of quite stiffing and suspending Thought, so that there is none to conceal. Speech too is great, but not the greatest. As the Swiss Inscription says: Sprecker is stillern, Schwarigen is guiden (Speech is silvern, Silence is golden); or as I might rather express it: Speech is of Time, Silence is of Eternity.

"Bees will not work except in darkness; Thought will not work except in Silence; neither will Virtue work except in Secrecy. Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth! Neither shalt thou prate even to thy own heart of "those secrets known to all." Is not Shame the soil of all Virtue, of all good manners and good morals? Like other plants, Virtue will not grow unless its root be hidden, buried from the eye of the sun. Let the sun shine on it, nay do but look at it privily thyself, the root withers, and no flower will glad thee. O my Friends, when we view the fair clustering flowers that overwreathe, for example, the Marriage-bower, and encircle man's life with the fragrance and hues of Heaven, what hand will not smite the foul plunderer that grubs them up by the roots, and with granning, granting satisfaction, shows us the dung they flourish in! Men speak much of the Printing-Press with its Newspapers: 2st Himsel! what are these to Clothes and the Tailor's Goose?"

"Of kin to the so incalculable influences of Concealment, and connected with still greater things, is the wondrous agency of Symbols. In a Symbol there is concealment and yet revelation: here therefore, by Silence and by Speech acting together, comes a double significance. And if both the Speech be itself high, and the Silence and by Speech acting together, comes a do

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Page from Thomas Carlyle's 1836

Sartor Resartus (1901 edition)

quoting the proverb. This is one of the proverb's earliest known uses in English.

Origins and spread

In 1932 Richard Jente described the "silver"-and-"gold" proverb as being "of Eastern origin". [3] In 1999 David J. Wasserstein remarked that the "Eastern origin" mentioned by a number of earlier writers was most likely the Aramaic "shekels" proverb, as it connects speech, silence, and monetary value. [1]:241 Wasserstein argued, however, that the Aramaic "shekels" proverb – which had been already published in English by John Ray in a 1678 Collection of English Proverbs – was related, perhaps sharing the same ancient origin, but differed from the version in European culture that uses the terms "silver" and "gold". [1]:240-241 Wasserstein traced the latter version to Arabic culture, observing that it had been widely used in Arabic for centuries, having been recorded in the writings of the 11th-century Muslim scholar Al-Raghib al-Isfahani and the 9thcentury writer Al-Jahiz (the latter wrote that, "if speech were of silver, then silence would be of gold").[1]:244-247 The "silver"-and-"gold" proverb was also known in Islamic Spain, where it was recorded in the 11th century by Ibn Havvan of Cordoba. [1]:254

In some Arabic works the proverb has been attributed to <u>King Solomon</u>, but Wasserstein writes that there is no verifiable evidence for such an origin, as no ancient Jewish version of the proverb using the terms "silver" and "gold" has been found. He also notes that some other Arabic works, again with no verifiable evidence, have attributed the "silver"—and—"gold" proverb to <u>Luqman the Wise</u>, and Wasserstein concludes that the real origin is likely lost to history, while the oldest surviving sources have simply attributed the proverb to "wise men of old". [1]:247–248

According to Wasserstein, the proverb, in its "silver"—and—"gold" version, most likely entered <u>Western culture</u> through the work of a 14th-century <u>Spanish Jew</u>, <u>Santob de Carrion</u>, also known as Shem Tob ben Isaac Ardutiel, a <u>Hebrew</u> writer and translator of Arabic texts; and over the next centuries came to be used in Spanish and eventually also in other European languages. [1]:257–258

According to Jente, the proverb became popular in <u>Germany</u> in the early 19th century, then spread to the English language, possibly through <u>German immigrants in the United States. [3]</u> Wasserstein writes that its first recorded use in English was in the 1836 novel, <u>Sartor Resartus</u>, by the Scottish writer <u>Thomas Carlyle</u>, who for reasons unknown attributed it to a "<u>Swiss</u> inscription". 11:239 A similar saying, however, "discourse is silver, silence is gold", and attributed as a "<u>Greek proverb</u>", was printed in English as early as 1818 in a collection that reprinted material from the *Researches in Greece* (1814) of <u>William Martin Leake</u>.

The proverb's origins and history of its earliest English-language appearances were already of interest to the English public by the second half of the 19th century, when the matter was discussed in a series of exchanges in the literary journal, *Notes and Queries*, in which several contributors commented on the question in the context of Carlyle's book. (1):242

See also

• Silence Is Golden, a disambiguation for entities with similar name

References

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External links

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