



Davor Nikolić

University of Zagreb

dnikoli@ffzg.unizg.hr

WISE PEOPLE CREATE PROVERBS AND PROVERBS CREATE WISE PEOPLE – ON RHETORIC OF PROVERBS AND PROVERBS IN RHETORIC

<https://doi.org/10.17234/9789533793337.07>

Abstract

*Proverbs, being “the wisdom of many and the wit of one”, have long been recognized by rhetoricians as a powerful expressive tool. Nevertheless there are no strict or even very general set of rules governing the appropriate and successful use of certain proverb in certain rhetorical situation. Opinions are divided on the usage and the frequency of proverbs in public discourse, especially among politicians, especially having in mind the rise of politicians and public leaders in recent decades who embrace the populist strategies. Appeal to “common wisdom” or even more specifically “folk wisdom” in many cases undoubtedly represents an example of **ad populum** fallacy. However it can be argued that the surface structure of proverbs (rhyme, parallelism, contrast) offers the material for such (mis)use because many political slogans tend to imitate these typical features. The paper will focus on these rhetorical traits of proverbs as well as analyzing their occurrence in contemporary Croatian parliamentary debates.*

Keywords: *maxim, politics, proverb, rhetoric*



1. Introduction

Archer Taylor's (1962) famous remark: definition of the proverb is too difficult to reward the effort traditional, pithy, often formulaic and/or figurative, fairly stable and generally recognizable units (Norrick 2014) forming a complete utterance, making a complete conversational contribution and/or performing a speech act in a speech event making apodictic (expressed as undeniable truth) statements or evoking a scenario applicable to a range of analogous situations for *folklorists*, proverbs exist as items of folklore alongside riddles, proverbial phrases and jokes they provide highly recognizable, (relatively) fixed textual building blocks with unique rhetorical potential; they are valued as folk wisdom and bearers of traditional lore for *linguists*, proverbs unite features of the lexeme, sentence, set phrase, collocation, text and quote they illustrate interesting patterns of prosody, parallelism, syntax, lexis and imagery for *lexicographers*, proverbs are items to be collected, categorized and catalogued with information on their origins and distribution along with appropriate links to other proverbs, proverbial phrases, idioms and so on within and across linguistic communities proverbs contain "wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views" (Mieder 1996, 4).

Most proverbs exhibit either direct didactic tendency as items of advice (*Put your best foot forward*), or indirect didactic tendency as potential advice summarizing past experience (*First come, first served*); others can be used with didactic intentions under appropriate conditions (*Little pitchers have big ears*) proverbs can be introduced with *frames* (**You should** *strike while the iron is hot* or **Always** *look before you leap*) and introduced or followed by *proverbial affixes* (Norrick 1981) (*as the saying goes, as they say, it is said*) proverbs are both comparatively rare and variable in everyday discourse, but they remain recognizable to members of the language community due to their high salience (Moon 1998) metaphoricity (imagery): required/common attribute of proverbs surface features: rhyme (*Birds of a feather flock together*), alliteration (*Live and let live*), assonance (*Strike while the iron is hot*), metrical patterns and parallelism (both structural and semantic) the communicative potential of proverbs is founded in the first place in their rhetorical form (Sandig 2007, 161).

2. Classical rhetorical texts on proverbs

Ancient rhetoricians were dealing with proverbs along with similar and related terms, such as maxims and aphorisms. Anaximenes of Lampsacus in his *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (11) classifies maxims (γνῶμαι) into two kinds, that generally accepted (ἔνδοξος) and that counter to common opinion (παράδοξος). Anaximenes classifies three sources: i) ἐκ τῆς ἰδίας φύσεως (by nature itself), ii) ἐξ ὑπερβολῆς (exaggeration), iii) ἐκ παρομοιώσεως (comparison) (Anderson 2000, 30).

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 2.21 is devoted to the maxim (γνῶμη). Aristotle defines it as a declaration concerning a general matter related to human action, or as the major premise or conclusion of a rhetorical syllogism (ἐνθύμημα) standing alone (i.e. a single proposition).¹ He distinguishes four forms (in two categories): Those that are παράδοξοι or ἀμφισβητούμενοι and need an explanation, of which some become ἐνθύμηματικαί but others merely add a reason (αἴτιον). He considers the latter the most popular. The second category are those which are quite clear and thus need no appendage, of which some are known beforehand and others are self-evident. Riddles or enigmatic expressions may also be used as γνῶμαι though the explanation should be short. Aristotle

¹ Kennedy (2007: 102) notes that in Athens orators sometimes quoted poets, oracles, or proverbs as "witnesses".



recommends that γνῶμαι should be used for older audiences and concerning subjects they are familiar with. When complaining or exaggerating one may use generalising statements (γνῶμαι) which are only partially true. Aristotle also notes that some proverbs (παροιμιαί) are also γνῶμαι. One may also deliberately contradict well-known γνῶμαι with effect, but a reason must be added (cf. Arist. *Rh.* 2.21.13 where two ways of doing this are suggested) (Anderson 2000: 31).

Aristotle notes two general uses of γνῶμαι. Firstly, the effect of a speech is greatly increased when the audience can (at least partially) sympathise with the sentiment expressed in the γνῶμη. This should therefore be aimed for. Secondly, γνῶμαι give speeches an ethical character because they make the moral choice or purpose clear (Anderson 2000: 31).

In 1.2.2 Aristotle divided the means of persuasion into artistic techniques—use of paradigms and enthymemes—and non-artistic pisteis that an orator uses but does not invent. The latter are described in the following chapter and consist largely of documentary evidence that can support or weaken a case at law. (Kennedy 2007: 102)

Quintilian deals with γνῶμαι in a similar manner in his *Institutio Oratoriae* (8.5.1–8), preferring a division into simple γνῶμαι and those requiring the addition of a reason. He also notes the common practice of introducing *sententiae* at the close of passages (cf. *Inst.* 8.5.11, 13–14). Demetrius in *De Elocutione* (110–11) also clearly implies that γνῶμαι were often placed last in an argumentative context. At 170 he argues that in certain contexts (e.g. loose parties) the γελοῖον can take the place of the γνῶμη and χρεῖα (Anderson 2000: 31).

Rhet. Her. 4.24 (*sententia*) notes the use of antithetical maxims (with or without a reason attached). He pleads for a sparse use, variously interspersed (thus not specifically as the conclusion of an argument).

Sen. *Ep.* 33.7 notes that boys were expected to learn both *sententiae* and χρεῖαι by heart.

For γνῶμαι used in jesting, see Cic. *de Orat.* 2.286.

The term is found frequently in the works of Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

2.2. Aristotle on proverbs (Kennedy)

Also proverbs, [where the phrase] “as has been said” is a form of testimony; for example, if someone were to advise against making a friend of an old man, the proverb “Never do good to an old man” bears testimony to it. And [if someone advises] killing sons whose fathers have already been killed, [he may say] “Foolish he who after killing the father leaves behind the son.” 256 (105)

3. Stylistic Features of Proverbs

Even a casual glance at folklore genres detects a certain order and structure in their sound and syllable organization, while a more focused analysis reveals that some genres are more structured than others, primarily when looking at sound and syllable repetition. The original purpose of this dataset and the tools which were used to create it was to measure the levels of sound repetition with the purpose of determining euphony in poetic expression of named poets such as A. G. Matoš (Nikolić and Bakarić 2018).

The first observed stylistic feature group was the repetition coefficient of sounds. The method used to measure the coefficient requires that the segments of the analysed corpora be of similar size for the comparison of results to be meaningful. It is impossible and thankless to talk about



constants because the repetition coefficient only makes sense when observed in relation (due to the mathematical model). It can further be divided into two approaches to measuring repetition; n-gram repetition which observes sounds (or the approximation of sounds through characters) and syllable repetition. N-gram repetition is independent of any kind of prosodic knowledge and therefore much simpler to measure. Syllable repetition requires that the text is separated into syllables, which is not a trivial task for Croatian language. The problem of syllabification has several levels but can be described by a rule-based algorithm which first solves specific and rare syllable border problems and then moves on to more general and common syllable types. Issues that affect the syllabification results are related to the difference between spoken and written text and, even though Croatian spelling is mostly phonetic, this should be taken into consideration when preparing the input text. Repetition of sounds adds to the euphony as alliteration, assonance and rhyme (Bishop 1985: 345) and is a distinguishing feature when comparing and classifying text.

An additional stylistic feature used to detect levels of euphony is the pronunciation difficulty coefficient. This feature looks at two phenomena which add to the difficulty of pronunciation within a given text. The authors focused on the syllabic r and consonant clusters within syllables. Reporting the occurrence of these phenomena also requires syllabification and additional analysis of syllable quality which is an integral part of the syllabification algorithm. The pronunciation difficulty coefficient, although essentially quantitative, still includes some qualitative elements. This concerns the counting of specific elements previously recognized as non-euphonic (syllabic r and consonant groups), but still neglects the vocal composition within the consonant groups. The coefficient does not differentiate between sets of voiceless and sets of voiced consonants. A thorough analysis of tongue twisters confirmed a high proportion of sets with voiceless consonants (Nikolić 2013: 119–120; Nikolić 2019: 200), which is an indisputable indicator of pronunciation difficulty and affects the overall reduced impression of euphony.

Computational stylistic is described as a data-driven field which promises new insights into text through digital methods (Herrmann et al. 2021). However, for its contribution in the analyses of euphony to be more interesting and useful to literary historians and prosodists, it is necessary to link the results of objective measurements at the phonetic level of the text with the content level. The results of such research would confirm (or perhaps refute) euphony as a distinguishing feature between genres or perhaps even individual authors of written literature. Using a dataset such as the one presented here as a distant reading tool can assist in detecting phenomena which can then be focused on and further analysed.

Aristotle's definition of maxim/proverb (*gnōmē*): a universal statement about which actions should be chosen and which avoided (*Rhet.* 1394a22–29)

Aristotle assigns maxims a crucial role in the practice of the rhetorical art (DiLeo 2020, 371)

proverbs represent generalizing statements “about factual and normative regularities (in the broad sense), which can act as argumentative warrants” (Kindt 2002: 280)

they function as generalized advice, instructions how to act, justifications of actions, or explanations of actions

particular persuasive power due to which they serve as convincing arguments in relevant contexts (Wirrer 2007, 175)

The argumentative function of proverbs is based on their syntactic-logical structure

The argumentative function of proverbs is based on their occurrence in syllogistic structures

The argumentative function of proverbs is based on the fact that they verbalize topoi



semantic ambiguity of proverbs results to a large degree from their being used in various contexts with different functions (Jason 1971)

proverbs also act as analogies, which adds to the complexity of understanding their precise meaning in a particular speech act (Mieder 2004, 133)

proverbs are not universal truths but rather limited pieces of folk wisdom that are valid only in certain situations

in contextual usage proverbs function effectively as social strategies (cf. Yankah 1984)

proverbial stereotypes used as nationalist, racial and/or colonial slurs (Dundes 1975; Mieder 1982; Nwachukwu-Agbada 1988; Arora 1994; Mieder 2002)

proverbs and the politics: Mieder 1997; 2000; 2003

apresidents try to express their political messages in a language that is accessible to all the American people, no matter what their ethnic, social, or intellectual background might be.

proverbs: the “common denominator” of wisdom of a nation (inaugural addresses)

4. Conclusion

Proverbs for being concise, having explicit message, being instructive and affecting addressee have been applied since long among different generations. Literary genres including epic, lyric literature and didactic literature also benefited from proverbs in various forms. but in epic literature for its topic and meter benefits from proverbs more at the end of story are when compiler or author wants to emphasize on addressee and advice.

In lyric literature since we can face up more to personal emotions of poet it is seem less proverb and proverbs mainly refer to personal issues like love and separation. But didactic literature specially if it have social aspect, is the place of appearance of proverbs types with different themes and observance of all features of a proverb, so didactic literature for application of proverb is comparable none of the both epic and lyric. In the new literary genres, short story and novel for more attention to social issues and being ritten in prose, are the places of proverbs appearances.

Acknowledgement: This paper was written as a part of the institutional research project *From Scandal to Normalization: A Theoretical and Empirical Study of Hate Speech in Contemporary Public Discourse* at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences; funded by European Union – NextGeneration EU.

References

- Ahmadi, B. 1993. “Structure and hermeneutic of the text.” Tehran: Markaz Publications.
- Akbarian, I. 2010. “A spice of classroom: Incorporating proverbial expressions in EFL classes.” *Journal of Asia TEFL* 7 (1): 221–238.
- Cuddon, J. A. 1984. *A dictionary of literary terms*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Duff, D. 2000. *Modern genre theory*. Singapore: Longman.
- Makaryk, I R. 1993. *Encyclopedia of contemporary literary theory*.
- Johnson, M. 1987. *The body in the mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



- Lakoff, G. 1987. *Woman, fire, and dangerous things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. 1990. "The invariance hypothesis: Is abstract reason based on image-schemas?" *Cognitive Linguistics* 1: 3–74.
- Lakoff, G., & Turner, M. 1989. *No cool reason: The power of poetic metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McKoon, G., & Ratcliff, R. 1992. "Inferences during reading." *Psychological Review* 99: 440–466.
- Merwin, W. 1973. *Asian jfigures*. New York: Atheneum.
- Mieder, W. 1993. *Proverbs are never out of season*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nayak, N., & Gibbs, R. 1990. "Conceptual knowledge in the interpretation of idioms." *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 119 (3): 15–330.