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

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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 use and frequency of proverbs in public discourse – particularly among politicians, given the rise of populist leaders in recent decades. 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.

Keywords: *maxim, politics, populism, proverb, rhetoric*



1. Introduction

Famous remark by eminent American folklorist Archer Taylor that “the definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking” (Taylor 1962, 2), emphasizing the inability to list defining features of this oral genre in a single precise definition, became itself proverbial in paremiology (scholarly research on proverbs) (Villers 2024, 155). Although there is no single definition of proverb to which all researchers would adhere to, there is nevertheless a very good understanding of what proverb is both in the community of scholars and among so-called “ordinary people”. Following the assumption that general folk would know intuitively what a proverb represents (because they use proverbs all the time), Wolfgang Mieder, one of the world’s most prominent contemporary paremiologists, deduced the following general description by examining over 50 definition attempts by ordinary citizens:

A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation. (Mieder 2004, 3)

This line of thought can be seen, for instance, in the summarizing definition by paremiologist Neal R. Norrick who defines proverbs as “traditional, pithy, often formulaic and/or figurative, fairly stable and generally recognizable units” (Norrick 2014, 7). Traditionality, recognizability, figurativeness and stability are common features in both definitions, but the emic definition (the one coming from the folk or the tradition bearers) insists as well on wisdom, truth and morals. Combined with other features, in the minds of general speakers (to use more neutral term than *folk*) this gives proverbs a high degree of trustworthiness and infallibility. The act of uttering proverbs can thus be seen as a performance of a “speech act in a speech event making apodictic (expressed as undeniable truth) statements” (Norrick 2014, 7), which makes proverbs a very interesting research subject for rhetoricians and argumentation scholars. This short article serves therefore as a preliminary study of an ongoing project research on the role of proverbs in rhetorical genres, with a special emphasis on proverbs as a tool of populism and a potential hate speech vehicle. The following sections will offer a concise overview of rhetorical literature and its treatment of proverbs and maxims, reminding contemporary rhetoricians of the importance given to proverbial expressions by ancient authors and emphasizing folkloristic and linguistic insights about rhetorical power of proverbs. The paper will also try to offer a methodological frame for further research on rhetorical function of proverbs in political discourse.

2. Classical rhetoricians on proverbs

Ancient rhetoricians were dealing with proverbs along with similar and related terms, such as maxims and aphorisms.¹ Anaximenes of Lampsacus in his *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (11) classifies maxims (γνῶμαι) into two kinds, ones that are generally accepted (ἐνδοξος) and those 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).

¹ The terminological difference between proverbs, maxims, gnomes and other similar terms, which are often used as synonyms (cf. Lanham 1991, 124), cannot be discussed thoroughly within this paper but in contemporary scholarship maxims are seen as a special type of proverbial genres.



Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 2.21 is devoted to the maxim (γνῶμη). He defines it as a declaration concerning a general matter related to human action, a universal statement about which actions should be chosen and which avoided (*Rhet.* 1394a22–29), or as the major premise or conclusion of a rhetorical syllogism (ἐνθύμημα) standing alone (i.e. a single proposition).² Aristotle notes two general uses of maxims: firstly, the effect of a speech is greatly increased when the audience can (at least partially) sympathize with the sentiment expressed in the maxim (this should therefore be aimed for); secondly, maxims give speeches an ethical character because they make the moral choice or purpose clear. He considers that riddles or enigmatic expressions may also be used as maxims though the explanation should be short (Anderson 2000, 31).

Aristotle assigns maxims a crucial role in the practice of the rhetorical art (DiLeo 2020, 371) and recommends that maxims should be used for older audiences and concerning subjects they are familiar with. When complaining or exaggerating one may use generalizing statements (γνῶμαι) which are only partially true. Aristotle also notes that some proverbs (παροιμιαί) are also maxims (Anderson 2000, 31). The proverbs, with introductory formula “as has been said”, can also be used as 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.’” (*Rhet.* 1376a). One may also deliberately contradict well-known maxims with effect, but a reason must be added (cf. Aristotle *Rhet.* 2.21.13 where two ways of doing this are suggested) (Anderson 2000, 31).

Quintilian deals with maxims and proverbs in a similar manner³ in his *Institutio Oratoria* (8.5.1–8), preferring a division into simple maxims 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 maxims 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 maxim and χρεῖα⁴ (Anderson 2000, 31).

In *Rhetorica d Herennium* 4.24 the topic is discussed under the term *sententia*. The author 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). Cicero's *De Oratore* 2.286 gives an information on maxims/proverbs used in jesting. Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* 1.9.3 briefly mentions the *sententia* (defined as *universalis vox*) in the context of progymnastic exercises. The term is found frequently in the works of Dionysius of Halicarnassus (Anderson 2000, 32).

Revising the rhetorical scholarship on proverbs (and attitudes towards their usage), Lanham (1991, 125) remarks that the most difficult thing for the modern reader to remember may be that the proverb, like the exemplum, has been for most of formal rhetoric's history “a means of *proof* rather than a substantiating ornament”. He also notes that “the precise *kind* of proverb (or the precise term for it) matters less than the way it is used in a specific text” (Lanham 1991, 125). We can conclude this section by referring to the explanation of the effective use of metaphorical proverbs by Kenneth Burke (1941, 256): “Proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations. In so far as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them. Another name for strategies might be attitudes.”

² Kennedy (2007, 102) notes that in Athens orators sometimes quoted poets, oracles, or proverbs as “witnesses”.

³ “When the ancients used the word *sententia*, they meant a feeling, or opinion.” (*Institutio Oratoria* 8.5.1)

⁴ A shortened anecdote where the maxim is connected to a famous speaker and the context of uttering it.



3. Proverbs in rhetorical and argumentative practice

Although mostly attached to the discipline of paremiology, which can be seen primarily as an intersection of folkloristic and linguistic approaches to the subject, the study of proverbs was always interested not just in their structure but also their actual usage in human interactions. From the rhetorical and argumentative point of view it is therefore interesting to observe specific functions of proverbs in spoken and written discourse. Proverbs can thus be seen as representing generalizing statements “about factual and normative regularities (in the broad sense), which can act as argumentative warrants” (Kindt 2002, 280). Because of their power to focus on abstract and general, rather than on particular, they function “as generalized advice, instructions how to act, justifications of actions, or explanations of actions” (Jesenšek 2014, 145).⁵

Jesenšek (2014, 145–149), following Wirrer (2007), argues that the argumentative function of proverbs is based on their syntactic-logical structure, on their occurrence in syllogistic structures and on the fact that they verbalize *topoi*. By employing a proverb, the speaker attempts to immunize their assertion against potential counterarguments. As Kindt (2002) points out, proverbs carry a specific pragmatic weight because they successfully transform an individual stance into a collective social norm; this significantly increases the difficulty for the interlocutor to refute the argument without challenging widely accepted values.

Mieder (2004, 133) follows the insight by Jason (1971) that semantic ambiguity of proverbs results to a large degree from their being used in various contexts with different functions. The important insight is that proverbs also act as analogies, “which adds to the complexity of understanding their precise meaning in a particular speech act” (Mieder 2004, 133). When it comes to answering the question of proverbial validity, Mieder (2004, 134) opines that proverbs are not universal truths “but rather limited pieces of folk wisdom that are valid only in certain situations” and that in contextual usage proverbs function effectively as social strategies (cf. Yankah 1984). Although they are not always didactic, authoritative, or proscriptive⁶ (Mieder 2025, 90), due to their reliance on folk or “common” wisdom, proverbs undoubtedly have the rhetorical potential of becoming vehicle of populism.

4. Proverbs as a potential vehicle of populism

Appeal to “common wisdom” or even more specifically “folk wisdom” in many cases undoubtedly represents an example of *ad populum* fallacy because of the false assumption that “thousands of people can’t be wrong” (Tindale 2007, 105). However it can be argued that, beside this reliance on “wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views” (Mieder 1996, 597), the very surface structure of proverbs (rhyme, parallelism, contrast) offers the material for such (mis)use because many political slogans tend to imitate these typical features.

Proverbs, as the corpus linguistic research has shown, are both comparatively rare and variable in everyday discourse, but they nevertheless remain recognizable to members of the language community due to their high salience (Norricks 2014, 13). Besides metaphoricity, as one of the

⁵ Although she places the focus of proverbs on abstract and general, Jesenšek (2014, 145) argues that they possess “particular persuasive power due to which they serve as convincing arguments in relevant contexts” (cf. Wirrer 2007, 175).

⁶ Norrick (2014, 12) summarizes that 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*).”



typical required attribute of proverbs (often labelled as attribute of their inner structure), proverbs are also recognizable due to their surface features such as 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). It is not strange therefore that scholars consider that the communicative potential of proverbs is founded in the first place in their rhetorical form (Jesenšek 2014, 138).

All these features prove to be potentially both very useful and very dangerous means of persuasion of large masses because appeal to common wisdom does not necessarily imply that the speaker had obvious populist intentions (cf. Tindale 2007, 105). As Mieder (2004, 139) notes, all American presidents 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”, and that is the reason why inaugural addresses are abundant with proverbial material (cf. Mieder 2005, 147–186). On the other hand, this influential paremiologist also recognized the misuse of proverbs (for example anti-Semitic proverbs in Nazi Germany), warning how they can become dangerous verbal weapons because people followed (in the past but unfortunately in the contemporary society as well) “such proverbial invectives blindly, forgetting that proverbs are not absolute truths” (Mieder 2004, 139).

Many paremiologists have recognized that proverbs, used as stereotypical invectives, often become part or even the very kernel of nationalist, racial and/or colonial slurs. Their use in populist speeches, slogans and campaigns can, in certain cases, be labelled as a form of (soft) hate speech, and this is the topic that should be researched further. One method of research could follow established paremiological approaches by targeting proverbs with specific components (words which bear ideological potential) and then investigating their occurrence in different spheres of public discourse. The other similar method would be to follow semantics of proverbs, their intended meaning which can metaphorically be distanced from the actual components. In both cases the findings should be interpreted according to the context, according to the promoters of the proverbial wisdom and according to the targeted audience. Such investigations could not just recognize the actual populist use of proverbs, but also establish the procedures for successfully battle such deviated use of traditional forms of wisdom and knowledge. Hopefully, more findings will belong to rhetorical situations where proverbs are used with purpose of relaxing tensions as metaphors of indirection (Mieder 2004, 139), remaining “the wisdom of many and the wit of one”.

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