

## USE OF PROVERBS AND NARRATIVE THOUGHT

*Outi Lauhakangas*

**Abstract:** The article is based on a research of the functions of proverbs in social interaction. Academician Matti Kuusi's characterization of proverbs as signs of situations and emotional loadings was a starting point for the writer to collect material of proverbs in their social contexts. The multicultural corpus consists of context examples borrowed from other scholars around the world, from Finnish folklore archives and fiction, from everyday situations and the media. The use of proverbs or proverb-like sayings deals with questions concerning the same themes as in folk narrative research in general: selective memory, reconstruction of experiences, explaining and reasoning about the past, giving instructions and warnings for the future, encouraging or amusing each other, etc. The speech where proverbs are used and its mode of rationality differ from logical and scientific argumentation. The point is in the narrative strength of proverbs in social contexts. Proverbs are multifunctional and flexible instruments of everyday reasoning, although they may maintain solidified attitudes or traditional modes of thought of a certain culture.

**Key words:** functions of proverbs, mundane reasoning, narrative strength of proverbs, persuasive communication, proverbs in contexts, social interaction, social strategies

Professor Wolfgang Mieder's presentation in memory of Alan Dundes in Tartu and the title of his article in this journal *The Proof of the Proverb is in the Probing* points straight to my subject matter: The use of proverbs and narrative thought. Probing processes in real situations has a lot to do with molding and modifying the truthfulness of a proverb through narrative way of thinking. In more or less big questions we try to find the ways to analyze the situation in order to act or at least to react.

If one focuses upon the use of proverbs or proverb-like sayings, namely on the functions of them in social interaction, one will find questions concerning the same themes as in folk narrative research in general: selective memory, reconstruction of experiences, explaining and reasoning about the past, giving instructions and warnings for the future, encouraging or amusing each other, etc.

This type of research proved to be possible through a combination of social psychological approach and deep knowledge of folklore data. Rethinking of ar-

chival or ethno-methodologically collected data and new records from everyday situations made it possible to reanalyze the data and find various functions of proverbs in social interaction. The research, which was approved for a doctoral thesis in the Department of Social Psychology at the University of Helsinki, owes a great deal to folkloristic and anthropological research done among different cultures (Lauhakangas 2004). Further it has connections with the early days of psychology – namely, Wilhelm Wundt’s folk psychology (1912). This branch remained in the margin for a long time (because of the triumph of experimental psychology). But if we take W. Wundt’s thoughts under consideration now, we notice that their spirit was quite close to narrative research.

The theoretical and empirical principle in the research of the functions of proverbs in social interaction was to study the common sense or everyday thinking in its cultural and social contexts. The role of language and cultural conditions was now reconsidered, after W. Wundt’s days, as a challenge to understand social interaction.

In one of his introductions to proverb collections, Matti Kuusi called proverbs signs of situations and emotional loadings (Kuusi 1988). He probably meant their unique linguistic properties as cultural tools of man, but this description could also be understood from the point of view of the social use of proverbs. What was their function in everyday encounters and conversations? It was not enough for a culturally orientated social psychologist to state that proverbs were a nice or tough-lived part of tradition transferred as cultural modes of thought. A general list of the functions of proverbs given even by any leading paremiologist would not be satisfying. This kind of research could be culturally valid only if it covered as many aspects as possible of any speech situations where people use proverbs.

## **1. WHY DOES A PROVERB EMERGE INTO A SPEECH SITUATION?**

Any social or personal context where people use proverbs in different cultures (and throughout history) could be considered equally interesting from the point of view of the above formulated general question. Accordingly, proverbs with contexts were collected for this research from other scholars around the world and not only from Finnish folklore archives and fiction. Besides, the author observed everyday situations and kept a notebook about people’s ways to use proverbs in the media. The following example shows how people even nowadays are keen to use proverbs, although they call them clichés or well-worn expressions.

*In a Finnish radio broadcast, editor Juha Kulmanen interviews Jari Luoto, an Under Secretary of State, about population policy. The interviewer poses one of his questions in a rhetorical way: "The rich will become richer and the poor will grow poorer. This is an old phrase but it holds good." (cf. 'He who has is given, he who has little is taken from' or 'Money is drawn to money'.) The interviewee addressed shows his agreement. The conversation continues and for a closing statement Luoto says: "It is a stock phrase but holds good: If there were no UN, we would have to invent it." (A radio broadcast in Yle One, 24.10.2005.)*

For the study of contexts, a new term, 'the proverb speech', was formulated. It can be simply defined as a kind of speech where a proverb or a proverb-like saying is used (inner speech included). By building a many-sided classification of the functions of 'proverb speech' based on the material of context examples, it could also be better explained why proverbs had special linguistic structures. At least the emotional tendencies and social strategies of people to recall proverbs could be better understood.

The themes of the social interaction of proverbs, in terms of their imagery, are interesting as such (see Matti Kuusi's thematic classification of proverbs in Lauhakangas 2001). But themes in proverbs seem to have a connection to the function of proverb speech as a narrative mode of thought.

## **2. THE POWER OF DIFFERENT RATIONALITY IN THE USE OF PROVERBS**

In order to succeed in defining narrative modes of thought in the use of proverbs different theoretical approaches ought to be combined. Unlike analytic thinking, this mode of reasoning concentrates on the functioning of things and thoughts and requires an ability to make syntheses. Geoffrey White (1987) calls it 'personal rationality'. Melvin Pollner (1990) speaks about 'mundane reasoning', Golwyn Trevarthen (1993) about 'a dialogic mind' and Mark Turner (1996) about 'a narrative mind'.

All those synonymous modes of reasoning deal with broader and more intuitive structures of thought than analytic and binary thinking. Personal rationality gives an impression of individual experiences, the grandmother's voice, etc. The term 'mundane' refers to ordinariness and regularity and it connects this kind of reasoning to the way inventions become established. Aesthetic crystallization or other structural, etc. properties make the regularity to be called folklore. The everyday mode of thinking proceeds from an observation

or a thought to an emotion or a wish and at the same time to an intention or an act. In the case of the items of folklore the observation includes a delight of recognizing. A proverb might emerge into a conversation, for example, in a situation of decision. This kind of reasoning is needed to strengthen the emotional or ethical aspect of the decision. It enables both the proverb user and the audience to hold to their own exclusive and logically “correct” ways to interpret the situation. If the emphasis were on some other point of reasoning or if somebody else were leading the line of argument, the right way to interpret the situation and, accordingly, a proverb recalled in the situation might be quite different. Any proverb does not irrevocably belong to any situation.

It would be wrong to measure the proverb speech and its mode of rationality through the same criteria as logical and scientific argumentation. We go astray, if we call mundane reasoning or common sense a kind of lack of logical thinking or inability to make arguments. The question is of a different mode of thinking. We are dealing with a texture of nuances of different rationality. Through mental models people apply implicit heuristic processes. One should ask how productive or otherwise functioning those processes prove to be in different situations. Jonathan St B. T. Evans and David E. Over (1996) describe the use of mental models as processes by which we focus on appropriate things and through which we can distinguish relevant elements.

Typical for this mode of rationality is to practice simultaneous ‘both–and’ statements instead of binary ‘either–or’ truth statements. But this does not mean that proverb texts themselves should be conciliatory or that they could always include observations of life and social situations from many-sided or harmonious points of view. The other way around, proverbs and proverb-like utterances are often quite one-sided and full of contrasts, black and white imagery. The wisdom is hidden in the way they are used.

### **3. THE NARRATIVE STRENGTH OF PROVERBS IN SOCIAL CONTEXTS**

Proverbs are multifunctional and flexible instruments of everyday reasoning, although they may maintain solidified attitudes or traditional modes of thought of a certain culture. A proverb can be considered as a piece of advice concerning a recommended direction of action (although it is not literally a piece of advice). Proverbs are propositions loaded with hidden feelings, wishes and intentions of the speaker. They can serve as tools to cover individual opinions in public interactive situations. Like in rhetoric in general the proverbs we use in our speech (and in our inner speech, too) protect our personal attitudes by

referring to the third party. They give us persuasiveness by appealing to an authority.

The ability to use proverbs leans on common rules and recipes and it is a part of facilities for outlining and organizing quickly and effectively things which we experience in everyday situations. Reasoning, classifying, comparing and explaining are mechanisms by which people aim at while creating hierarchy and consistency to the contents of commonplace thinking. Using proverbs means that people can deal with their relations to each other and/or to things. People can explain to themselves what happens or what has happened and they can give explanations to any behavior they have observed. Ready-made models make it easy to orientate in these types of situations and demands of social life, but the drawback of this is that those models, for example proverbs, guide us to see situations named by them. Thus we are not able to see or notice the (possible) distinguishing features of them.

The mundane philosophy of proverbs or proverb use deals with ethical and pragmatic questions. They are about questions how things are or how they should be; about issues how things can be recognized and what we can know about them. They are brought out in situations where people feel emotional tension and need smooth actions. They mean authorized wisdom called for when people should decide how to explain things. Proverbs are brought to conversations to make calculations of profitability: How do we influence on things or on our life? and How and when it is wise to act or let things go?

Kwesi Yankah (1989) wrote about a broad or wider consciousness of language and how the user of proverbs has a creative ability to utter them in a convincing way (and also an ability to convince her/himself). The proverb users have ready-made opinions about urgent questions which they seem to strengthen with suitable proverbs. But in any case the attention of listeners focuses on creditability of the proverb mentioned. The narrative strength concentrates just on the proverb, if we examine the use of it, namely the proverb in its social context. Jokes or anecdotes are not the most critical contents of any conversation or presentation, neither is a proverb or a proverb-like expression. But anyway they may be the best remembered parts in argumentation.

#### **4. THE FUNCTIONS OF PROVERBS SEEN THROUGH SEVEN PARADOXES**

Seven pairs of opposites concerning the aims of 'proverb speech' were found during the research of the functions of proverbs in social interaction. They were formulated as a result of theoretical reasoning and after analyzing of

several contextual examples. Every pair of contrary tendencies draw the interpretation of functions to two different directions but both aspects seemed to be true at the same time. A closer analysis showed that opposing observations were not exclusive and they were often only seemingly opposites.

But what causes a paradoxical impression as one goes into details of the use of proverbs? One cause might be that the speech where proverbs are used has several functions acting on different levels at the same time. The act of using proverbs gets varying explanations on different levels of interpretation. Thus, the following pairs of opposites should be considered from a demonstrating point of view.

#### **4.1. Predictability – unexpectedness**

Although proverbs belong to the familiar and predictable voice of tradition, the multiple ways to interpret them in different new situations bring a lot of unexpected aspects to their use. They represent by no means neutral everyday talk. Proverbs convince, persuade and they give an implicit impression of truth. Still they are not arguments to be verified. Their effects are grounded on unexpected analogies.

#### **4.2. Safety – taking risks**

It is safe to use proverbs and to lean on authorities and traditional policy, but using proverbs can also be a speech that takes risks. Proverbs can interfere the normal ways of thought or decision. They can be useful tools to strengthen the opinion of a risk taker in the decision-making process when there is no single “right” solution.

#### **4.3. Detachment – familiarity**

The effect of a proverb grounds on generality and the voice of “the third party”. Thus, with a proverb one brings detachment and neutrality into the situations of social interaction. But the effect on the listener is the stronger the more familiar the proverb is to her or him. The effect depends on how personally the proverb is learned. For example, through proverbs that one hears or uses oneself it is possible to bring to one’s mind the familiar locution of some important person – mother, grandparent, etc.

#### **4.4. Maintenance of hierarchy and control – face saving in violation of social hierarchy**

The use of proverbs usually supports the maintenance of social hierarchy and control, but in other contexts the same expressions can help to solve problems caused by the questions of authority and power. The use of proverbs can be means to save face in violation of social hierarchy. Explanations are needed especially in situations of retreat or admitting one's error.

#### **4.5. Relieving situations – exacerbating situations**

The use of proverbs has an obvious connection to the function of humor as the reliever of tension in different situations. This does not exclude the possibility that proverbs would be used to maintain narrow points of view or to authorize violence. Stereotypes can be kept alive as humoristic proverbial imagery even better than in the serious use of proverbs.

#### **4.6. A uniform way of thinking – difference of opinions**

By using proverbs one can emphasize (even quite loudly) feelings of togetherness, but at the same time they may serve as tools of segregation. With a common language people can exclude those who do not belong to the community or those who are not able or willing to share the consensus. In other words, proverbs can strengthen the unity or even narrowness of interpretation. But a proverb can also be a tool for giving a more exact analysis of situations than traditionally expected. They may serve as a way to avoid conventional interpretations of situations. In that case it is not inevitable to conform to the uniform viewpoint of one's community. With proverbs one can express difference of opinions within the community. They can be used as aphorisms to think differently. As a part of literal culture there are no limits set in advance for their interpretation.

#### **4.7. Identity of a community – internationality**

Using proverbs of your own language or dialect has a central function to be a kind of speech that strengthens the identity of the community. This is also true when we consider the ways how a subculture or minority uses proverbs. Their specialty is emphasized and compared to the generalizing truths, which

are favored by the dominant culture. On the other hand, the ideas of proverbs are mostly international. Accordingly, the speech using proverbs enables interactivity to bring different people closer to each other and it fades away cultural boundaries. Already the observation that different people can have the same kind of practice to use proverbs in their social interaction will help to decrease the experience of strangeness. The general impression of understanding constructs internationality, even if it would be considered impossible for “outsiders” to understand any single proverb of your own nation or subculture.

## REFERENCES

Evans, Jonathan St B. T. & Over, David E. 1996. *Rationality and Reasoning*. Essays in Cognitive Psychology. Hove (East Sussex, UK): Psychology Press.

Kuusi, Matti (ed.) 1988. *Rapatessa roiskuu: Nykysuomen sananparsikirja*. [Plaster will always spatter: A dictionary of proverbs and proverbial phrases in current Finnish.]. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.

Lauhakangas, Outi 2001. *The Matti Kuusi International Type System of Proverbs*. Folklore Fellows' Communications, 275. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica. (Note: Finnish and English versions of the database of the Matti Kuusi international type system of proverbs is to be found in Internet through [www.finlit.fi](http://www.finlit.fi) pages following the path: Tietopalvelu – Aineistot.)

Lauhakangas, Outi 2004. *Puheesta ihminen tunnetaan: Sananlaskujen funktiot sosiaalisessa vuorovaikutuksessa*. [A man is known by his words: The functions of proverbs in social interaction. Summary in English.] Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran toimituksia, 1001. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.

Pollner, Melvin 1990. Mundane Reasoning. Coulter, Jeff (ed.). *Ethnomethodological Sociology*. An Elgar reference collection. Schools of thought in sociology, 2. Hants (Vermont): Edward Elgar Pub. Company, pp. 138–157.

Trevarthen, Colwyn 1993. Predispositions to Cultural Learning in Young Infants. *Behavioral and Brain sciences*, 16, pp. 534–535.

Turner, Mark 1996. *The Literary Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press.

White, Geoffrey M. 1987. Proverbs and Cultural Models: An American Psychology of Problem Solving. Holland, Dorothy & Quinn, Naomi (eds.). *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*. Cambridge (Cambridgeshire) & New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 151–172.

Wundt, Wilhelm Max 1912. *Elemente der Völkerpsychologie: Grundlinien einer psychologischen Entwicklungsgeschichte der Menschheit*. Leipzig: Alfred Kröner.

Yankah, Kwesi 1989. *The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric: A Theory of Proverb Praxis*. Sprichwörterforschung, 12. Bern & New York: P. Lang.