

# DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN PROVERBS AND SAYINGS ACCORDING TO JOSEF MLACEK'S CLASSIFICATION IN DICTIONARIES AND PAREMIOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS: THE CASE OF EXPLANATIONS OF MEANING IN TWO SLOVENIAN DICTIONARIES

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**Abstract:** Among the genre characteristics of proverbs and sayings in Slavic paremiology, this article focuses mainly on the question of the generality or concretisation of the meanings of the expressions denoted by these two terms, which is one of the key criteria of the terminological distinctions between proverbs and sayings in Jozef Mlacek's theory. These criteria are used when explanations of meaning are prepared for paremiological expressions in eSSKJ (Dictionary of the Slovenian Standard Language) and SPP (Dictionary of Proverbs and Similar Paremiological Expressions). Both Slovenian dictionaries rely on the analysis of the paremiological expressions in language corpora. In the beginning of the article, three theoretical classifications of sayings (by Grigory Permyakov, Jan Mukařovský and Jozef Mlacek) according to the relationship between phrasemes with texteme status and phrasemes with the status of a sentence element are compared. In the article, examples of prototypical sayings and prototypical proverbs are presented, as well as borderline cases where the very formulation of a dictionary explanation of meaning reveals key differences that allow for a more certain determination whether the expression in question is a saying or proverb. The article presents three groups of prototypical sayings that differ in how they achieve semantic concretisation: through a time-limit on the developments, through a highlighted relationship between the developments and the utterance and through criticising a certain *modus operandi*.

**Keywords:** dictionary, paremiology, paremiography, proverb, saying, semantics, semantic concretisation

## 1. DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN PROVERBS AND SAYINGS IN THE SLAVIC RESEARCH CONTEXT

Proverbs present an important type of expressions studied by linguistics and are also considered as a part of folklore. Folklore research includes proverbs as a collecting material and also as an analysed material:

*Proverbs fulfil the human need to summarize experiences and observations into nuggets of wisdom that provide ready-made comments on personal relationships and social affairs. [...] (Mieder 2008: 9)*

Proverbs are not mere statements, but also traces of a society's thinking, normative systems, and historical facts (Babič, Voolaid 2023).

The term *saying* in English has a different meaning from its Slavic equivalents (Slovenian *rek*, Slovak *porekadlo*, Russian *pogovorka* etc.); in English texts, both non-professional and linguistic (Norrick 2015: 7), it acts as a hypernym for a wide range of different (both paremiological and non-paremiological) expressions with the value of a sentence, covering proverbs as well. The use of the term in Slavic languages is characterised by its pairing with the term *proverb* (Slovenian *pregovor*, Slovak *príslovie*, Russian *poslovica*), which is strongly perceived as the central paremiological genre in these languages. Permyakov (1970: 8) highlights that the phrase *proverbs and sayings* (in Russian) often appears as a single multi-word term, which comes as no surprise considering the proximity of the two genres. The same applies to Slovenian and a multitude of other Slavic languages, for example, Slovenian *pregovori in reki* or Slovak *príslovia a porekadlá*. Many phraseological and paremiological theories include a definition of proverbs but offer no definition of sayings, and the term *proverb* (in Slavic languages) is often understood very broadly (Mlacek 1983: 130) – almost as a synonym of the term *paremia*.

An analysis of the term *saying* in the role of paremiological text introducer in modern and earlier Slovenian texts (Meterc 2016: 186) has shown that it often even introduces prototypical proverbs in texts, but very frequently it acts as a concept covering everything that is not sufficiently proverbial. The reverse applies as well; the text introducer *proverb* can introduce expressions that could, according to the criteria presented in this article, be termed sayings, as well as various other paremiological and even non-paremiological expressions.

Vis-à-vis proverbs, to which are traditionally ascribed the conveyance of a rule of life or ethical judgement (Mukarovský 1971: 278; Mieder 2004: 3; Kržišnik 2008: 38; Norrick 2015: 11) and can because of their heterosituativity, polyfunctionality, and polysemanticity (Krikmann 1974) adjust their meaning to

different situations (Granbom-Herranen 2010: 57–63), Mlacek's definition (1981: 131) of saying denotes an expression with a texteme status conveying a typification of a specific situation that is not valid as absolutely as a proverbial situation; a saying's message thus does not carry the status of a general law of life that the participants in the communication convey as a lesson, guidance or ethical judgement. Expressions that differ from proverbs in their semantic concretisation and a lack of didactic value are denoted with different terms in English:

*Requiring didactic tendency would eliminate some items often included in the category of proverbs, in particular those bound to specific situations like Long time no see as a greeting formula or A little bird told me as a way to avoid divulging the source of information. Sayings like these lacking any didactic potential are perhaps better separated from proverbs proper and labeled clichés or conversational gambits. (Norrick 2015: 11–12)*

Sentential phrasemes that have a purely pragmatic function instead of a denotative meaning (such as the greeting formula in the quote above) are considered pragmatic phrasemes (Jakop 2005); in addition, however, there are many phrasemes that do have a denotative meaning, but the latter is not didactic and is less general than in proverbs (e.g. *A little bird told me*). Some of them belong to a group of multiword units whose authorship is known (Diadechko 2010).

In the author's opinion, the following expressions, which are discussed in the following sections in terms of their dictionary explanations of meanings, can hardly be considered proverbs, but they are phrasemes with a sentence or texteme status, so they can be considered sayings according to Mlacek's definition (only those examples from the article that have English paremiological equivalents are listed):

*The comedy is over;  
Mountains will go into labour, and a silly little mouse will be born;  
Much fuss about nothing;  
The night is young;  
Said and done;  
The rest is history;  
And then there was silence;  
The emperor has no clothes;  
An eye for an eye;  
Bread and circuses;  
Who is not with us is against us;  
Money doesn't stink.*

In addition to such obvious cases, this paper is interested in borderline cases, where the very formulation of a dictionary explanation of meaning reveals key differences that allow for a more certain determination whether the expression in question is a saying or proverb. Concrete examples demonstrate how two dictionaries employ the formulation *izraža, da* (*expresses that*), which is better suited to proverbs, and the formulation *opisuje situacijo* (*describes a situation*) which is better suited to sayings.

### 1.1 Proverbs and Sayings and the Question of Texteme Status in Three Different Concepts

Before focusing on the semantic distinctions between proverbs and sayings, it is worth taking a look at three different theoretical classifications of sayings according to the relationship between phrasemes with texteme status and phrasemes with the status of a sentence element (a building block of a texteme) in Slavic phraseology. There follows a comparison of how this relationship was reflected on by Grigory Permyakov, Jan Mukařovský and Jozef Mlacek.

In Permyakov's paremiological theory (1970: 7), both paremias and phrasemes in the narrow sense of the word are clichés that are used as signs; among them, proverbs and sayings are used as the signs of situations or particular relationships between things (1970: 19). According to Permyakov (1970: 8–9; 1988: 83–84), proverbs are fixed sentential units that need no contextual complement, while sayings are established sentential units that do need such a complement. In this context, Permyakov (1970: 19) lists concrete realisations of verbal phrasemes (e.g. *delaet iz muhi slona*, lit. *makes an elephant out of a fly*) as sayings, contrary to his distinction of paremias from other phrasemes based on their being a complete text (texteme) and not merely part of a text (a string of lexemes) (1970: 9–10).

Similar cases are labelled sayings by Mukařovský (1971: 285), who stresses that a saying (Czech: *pořekadlo*) is incomplete without context and rarely has the value of a sentence, more often that of a sentence element. Mlacek (1983: 131, 138) stresses that a proverb (Slovak: *príslovie*) is a complete thought with a generally valid logical judgement, whereas a saying (Slovak: *porekadlo*) is a semantically complete thought whose meaning depends on a very concrete situation or context. In addition, Mlacek claims the two can also be distinguished based on how proverbs carry a didactic message due to their general validity (Mlacek 1983: 131), while sayings do not convey such a message because their meaning is, to a large extent, concretised. Typical sayings are not hard to recognise, but transitional occurrences complicate the matter (Mlacek 1983: 138).

In delineating between proverbs and sayings, Mlacek (1983: 133), just like Mukařovský and Permyakov, also wonders about the boundary between sentential and phrasal phrasemes. While agreeing with Permyakov (1970: 8–9; 1988: 83–84) that proverbs are established sentential units that need no contextual complement and that sayings are established sentential units that do need such a complement, he nonetheless advocates a stricter adherence to Permyakov's (1988: 83) criterion that both paremia genres are textemes and not textual elements. Unlike Permyakov, Mlacek thus cites no examples of expressions that are completely inflectable (e.g. verbal phrasemes), as is evident from his cited examples. Because he is more strict in adhering to the classic linguistic opposition between the system and use, or *langue* and *parole*, a contextual complement in Mlacek's theory does not entail that expressions can have completely free and arbitrary realisations of forms in their paradigm; it is merely a matter of mandatorily filling in certain blanks (Mlacek 1983: 132–133) – of pragmatic variation (e.g. *The night was young* in addition to *The night is young*) – and in addition, of contextually complementing the meaning, which is necessary exactly due to the semantic concretisation.

Mukařovský (1971: 285) stresses the fluidity of the genres: as the scholar includes expressions that do not necessarily have the value of a sentence among sayings, he highlights cases where a minor change turns the saying into a proverb, e.g. by singling out the imperative mood from a diverse set of the verb forms of a particular verbal phraseme. Mlacek (1983:139) criticises such a view of the almost mechanical transitioning of phrasal phrasemes to proverbs in Permyakov's and Mukařovský's theories, pointing out that it is necessary to distinguish between the potential transitioning of any expression between genres and the concrete realisation of such a transition, which occurs only in some expressions.

## **1.2 Types of Paremiological Expressions in the eSSKJ General Dictionary, the SPP Paremiological Dictionary and a Paremiological Collection *Pregovori***

Both dictionaries – *Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika, tretja izdaja* eSSKJ (Dictionary of the Slovenian Standard Language, third edition) and *Slovar pregovorov in sorodnih paremioloških izrazov* SPP (Dictionary of Proverbs and Similar Paremiological Expressions) (Meterc 2020) – are published on the Fran.si webpage of the Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language which is a part of Znanstvenoraziskovalni center Slovenske akademije znanosti in umetnosti ZRC SAZU (Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts)

with new dictionary entries being added every year: to eSSKJ from 2015 and to SPP from 2020. Both dictionaries rely on the analysis of the paremiological expressions in language corpora. With language corpora, paremiology has gained the ability to thoroughly examine the variants of a proverb, which was previously impossible (Čermák 2003: 15–16).

For eSSKJ, the Gigafida 2.0 corpus is used in particular, plus other corpora in an auxiliary role. In addition, to analyse the formal properties of paremiological expressions, the work on both eSSKJ and SPP relies on the findings of a survey on the Slovenian paremiological minimum and optimum (Meterc 2017: 49), in which more than 550 respondents assessed the familiarity of 918 paremiological expressions, also providing a multitude of their variants. eSSKJ presents those variants of paremiological expressions that are the most frequent in standard language and thus the most relevant to users; the threshold for an individual form (both the basic dictionary form and a variant) to be included in the dictionary is approximately five prototypical instances sharing the same form (Meterc 2019: 35). Many well-known paremiological expressions appear in the corpus materials in the same form in the hundreds, while less familiar ones include expressions that barely, if at all, reach the threshold. This threshold minimises the possibility for including other types of paremiological expressions than proverbs, such as established antiproverbs, wellerisms etc.

SPP is a specialised paremiological dictionary that is more inclusive in terms of the breadth of paremiological genres presented: it includes proverbs, sayings, fixed antiproverbs, wellerisms, weather proverbs, slogans, folk beliefs and unconventional replies, and it is also open to peripheral, less frequent paremiological genres (Meterc 2021: 47). In order to include more paremiology, the threshold for the inclusion of an individual expression and its variant in SPP is lower than for a general dictionary. Because the threshold is lower, a wider range of linguistic corpora for modern Slovenian and additional resources are employed to confirm that an expression is established (Meterc 2019: 36; 2021: 47). SPP presents all the variants of a particular expression that can be confirmed as established through at least a few prototypical examples of usage.

In 2022, the Institute of Slovenian Ethnology at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts published an open-access paremiological collection entitled *Pregovori* (lit. Proverbs) (Babič et al. 2022; Babič & Erjavec 2022), which has been organised as a linguistic corpus through lemmatisation. It has taken shape over more than 50 years and contains around 37000 forms of Slovenian paremiological expressions, which includes different recorded variants of some recorded expressions. In addition to proverbs, this paremiological collection encompasses sayings, while wellerisms (e.g. “*Bolje je le bolje!*” *je rekel tisti, ki je špeh na maslu cvrl*, lit. “The more, the better”, said

someone frying bacon in butter) and antiproverbs (e.g. *Kdor ne dela, naj vsaj je*, lit. He who does not work shall at least eat, which originates in the proverb *Kdor ne dela, naj ne je*, lit. He who does not work, neither shall he eat) are rarer, but still present. The number of sayings is definitely lower than the number of proverbs in this collection. The collection is also used when analysing the paremiology for the dictionaries mentioned above; even though the sources are mostly older, sometimes much older, than the materials used for both dictionaries, it is useful, allowing us, for example, to check whether previously recorded variants of paremiological expressions are also used in modern texts (roughly from 1990 onwards).

The expressions in the article are written in the form that appears the most representative in terms of frequency in the linguistic corpora for modern Slovenian, namely Gigafida (approximately 1.3 billion tokens) and Metafida (approximately 4.4 billion tokens). In the collection, they are often found in variants that are rarer or do not appear at all in contemporary usage. The search for the saying *Mi o volku, volk iz gozda* (by searching for the phrase *o volku*) yields a multitude of variants: instead of the *gozd* (forest) component, there are also the synonyms *hosta* (colloquially *gozd*) and *les* (woods) in the same meaning. In addition, the collection includes a few pragmatic variants, e.g. *Ti o volku, volk iz gozda* (lit. You [speak] of the wolf, the wolf [comes] from the forest, with the *ti* (you) pronoun instead of *mi* (we)), which indicate a (partial) openness of the saying, in line with its semantic concretisation in every use. There are also several variants including verbs (e.g. *Če o volku govoriš, volk pride*, lit. If you speak of the wolf, the wolf comes) and *Če govoriš o hudiču, hudič pride*, lit. If you speak of the devil, the devil comes. Due to their explicitly expressed causality, these two forms are closer to proverbs, while the form with the reference to the devil is akin to a Slovenian folk belief that is formulated the most frequently as *Ne kliči hudiča* (lit. Don't call the devil). Variants containing the verb *govoriti* 'to speak', which demonstrate a transition between these two expressions, are infrequent in or even completely absent from today's usage.

The *Pregovori* collection also reveals forms that are not necessarily fixed variants but merely adaptations to the text, as discussed by Mukařovský, Permyakov and Mlacek, e.g. *Iz tiste moke ne bo kruha*. (*tiste* (that) = adaptation to context).

## **2. DICTIONARY EXPLANATIONS OF MEANING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE GENERALITY OF MEANING AND DIDACTIC VALUE**

The following chapters present examples of prototypical sayings and prototypical proverbs, as well as borderline expressions in the case of which we are able to rely on certain clues that contribute to categorising a particular expression as belonging to one genre or the other. Explanations of meaning were drafted by examining multiple instances of the usage of a particular expression in a linguistic corpus which cannot be cited in the article due to space constraints.

### **2.1 Examples of Prototypical Sayings That Do Not Fit an Explanation of Meaning for Proverbs**

The following subchapters present three groups of prototypical sayings that differ in how they achieve semantic concretisation: through a time-limit on the developments (2.1.1), through a highlighted relationship between the developments and the utterance (2.1.2) and through criticising a certain modus operandi (2.1.3). In the future, it will probably be possible to identify groups of prototypical sayings with different semantic concretisations, so these groups are presented merely as some of the most recognisable ones in our paremiographic work so far.

#### ***2.1.1 Semantic Concretisation through a Time-Limit on the Event***

The semantic concretisation of the prototypical sayings presented in this subchapter stems from a time-limit on the event. In most of the examples below, the most frequent, basic form is about already completed developments (e.g. *The operation was a success, but the patient died*), which is characteristic of sayings from a formal viewpoint according to Mlacek (1981: 292, 298) as well, but it can also refer to developments that are ongoing at the time the saying is being uttered (e.g. *The night is young*). While some synonymous expressions are presented as well, the examples mostly do not quite overlap in meaning, are not interchangeable and differ substantially in certain semantic features.

The following expressions have similar meanings, because they describe a specific manner of completing certain developments:

*Operacija uspela, pacient umrl* (The operation was a success, but the patient died) – describes a situation in which the positive evaluation of an act does not reflect its actual effects or consequences;

*Kocka je padla* (The die is cast) – describes a situation in which someone takes a decision that strongly influences further developments; depicts a situation in which something key, decisive, fateful happens;

*Komedija je končana* (The comedy is over) – describes a situation in which something exciting, dramatic or problematic comes to a close;

*Vrag je odnesel šalo* (lit. The devil has taken the joke away) – describes a situation in which it becomes clear or obvious that something key, decisive, fateful has happened, especially when it hurts or burdens someone;

*Tresla se je gora, rodila se je miš* (Mountains will go into labour, and a silly little mouse will be born) – describes a situation in which the developments promise a lot, but the results are meagre; refers to a situation in which something is met with overreaction, overexcitement.

The explanation of meaning of the saying *Tresla se je gora, rodila se je miš* also applies to its synonyms, which are similar in structure but different in their imagery: *Veliko hrupa za nič* (*Much fuss about nothing*), *Veliko grmenja, malo dežja* (lit. Much thunder, little rain) and *Veliko kokodakanja, malo jajc* (lit. Much clucking, few eggs).

The next saying describes a situation that deviates from what is expected, so interpreting the expression as a proverb (in the sense of a general law) is impossible:

*Jajce več od kure ve* (lit. The egg knows more than the hen) – describes a situation in which it surprisingly turns out that a younger person has superior knowledge to someone older.

The example given below does not refer to already completed developments, but rather to an ongoing state (night):

*Noč je še mlada* (The night is young) – describes a situation in which there is still enough time for something, especially something fun, in the evening or night.

As has already been mentioned, sayings, whose basic form contains a past-tense verb, express already completed developments and predominate in the analysed Slovenian materials. It is worth adding that some of these expressions are found in (much less frequent) pragmatic variants with other tense forms, e.g. *Kocka bo padla* (*The die will be cast*) in addition to *Kocka je padla*. There is a different situation in the case of the following saying, where the basic form with a future-tense verb is much more frequent than pragmatic variants with the verb in other tenses (e.g. the past tense) according to linguistic corpus data:

*Iz te moke ne bo kruha* (lit. There will be no bread from this flour) – describes a situation in which it is clear that a wish or prediction will not come true or that an effort will not be successful.

### **2.1.2 Concretisation through a Highlighted Relationship between the Developments and the Utterance**

This group consists of sayings characterised by the fact that their meaning is concretised through expressing a relationship between a concrete statement and a performed act:

*Beseda je meso postala* (lit. The word became flesh) – describes a situation in which something said, a promise or agreement, is realised;

*Beseda je dala besedo* (lit. The word has given a word; *One thing leads to another*) – describes a situation in which talking leads to an action, the realisation of something or a decision about something;

*Rečeno, storjeno* (Said and done) – describes a situation in which an expressed intention is soon followed by the performance of the deed;

*Vse drugo je zgodovina* (The rest is history) – describes a situation in which something that follows the utterance is well known, famous;

*Mi o volku, volk iz gozda* (lit. We [speak] of the wolf, the wolf [comes] from the forest; Speak of the devil) – describes a situation in which someone who has been mentioned suddenly and unexpectedly appears.

It is observed that some sayings have variants with other tenses. Nonetheless, these expressions are not without grammatical limitations: for example, the

expression *Vse drugo je zgodovina* (The rest is history) is not attested in the hypothetical future tense form *Vse drugo bo zgodovina* (The rest will be history)\*.

There is often a statement in the text where the saying is used, either preceding or following it, as in the two following examples of usage (in the quote, the statement is underlined, and the saying is shown in italics):

*Said and done.* Police officers lived up to their promise that they would reinforce checks of drivers on weekends during grape harvest season.

The following saying comments on an unspoken statement that is expected in the given situation:

*In potem vse tiho je bilo* (And then there was silence) – describes a situation in which silence falls suddenly and very noticeably, especially when there is something delicate or problematic going on or there is no interest in or response to something.

### ***2.1.3 Semantic Concretisation through Criticising a Certain Modus Operandi by Seeming Affirmation***

This group of prototypical sayings consists of expressions seemingly voicing a particular belief, guidance or call; however, this is not a message the speaker using the saying identifies with (unlike in proverbs), but rather a description of the modus operandi of someone else whom the first speaker distances themselves from, derides or even condemns. It is worth noting the relationship of many expressions in this group to the slogan genre as they seemingly call for a certain modus operandi, which is a defining characteristic of slogans (Norrick 2015: 8), but actually they criticise the modus operandi. They could even be termed *quasi-slogans*. Unambiguous derision of a certain modus operandi appears in the following Slovenian sayings:

*Naj sosedu krava crkne* (lit. May the neighbour's cow drop dead) – describes a situation in which someone wishes another person would fare worse than them or acts gleefully about someone's misfortune;

*Če sam ne znam, bom pa druge učil* (lit. If I can't do it myself, I'll teach it to others) – describes a situation in which someone attempts to set an example to others even though their abilities are lacking.

The last example is special, because verbs in the first person (*znam, bom učil*) give a particular indication that this could be a thought that the speaker of the saying identifies with; however, on the contrary, the expression criticises the way of thinking or *modus operandi* it describes.

Some sayings from this group even originate in former slogans to which the speakers have developed a new attitude due to societal developments and changes in value systems that have occurred since their primary, original historical use:

*Okno za okno, zob za zob* (An eye for an eye)

- contemporary prototypical usage: describes a situation in which someone acts uncompromisingly, vengefully or answers violence with violence;
- historical usage: expresses a call for a punishment to be equal to or equally harsh as a given crime.

*Kruha in iger* (Bread and circuses)

- contemporary prototypical usage: describes a situation in which someone, especially a large group of people, prioritises the need for something superficial, particularly physical pleasure or entertainment, over a need for something complex or difficult;
- historical usage: expresses a call for providing physical pleasure and entertainment.

If such sayings are used in their original, historical meaning in contemporary usage, this is not their typical, prototypical use but rather the use that tends to be accompanied by historical commentary:

*While, in the olden days, people were able to use the words bread and circuses to concisely explain what they wanted in life, much else needs to be added nowadays.*

*He doesn't care about basic civilisational and legal norms, instead reviving primitive behavioural patterns of the "eye for an eye" or "who is not with us is against us" type.*

The following expression is rather ambivalent in contemporary usage, making it hard to say whether it should be classified as a saying or slogan:

*Kdor ni z nami, je proti nam* (Who is not with us is against us)

- describes a situation in which someone behaves uncompromisingly regarding another person agreeing or disagreeing with them

- expresses a call for someone choosing either to cooperate and agree with or disagree with and work against someone, especially a group of people.

We assess that it would be advisable to provide both explanations of meaning in a dictionary for the last examples cited: the one better suited to slogans and the one better suited to sayings.

## **2.2 Borderline Cases: Sayings with the Possibility of an Alternative Explanation of Meaning Following the Model for Proverbs**

This chapter presents examples of sayings that border on proverbs, as their explanation of meaning could be formulated as a kind of general law from which a specific moral could derive; however, as shown below, such explanations of meaning appear inaccurate and strained. The eSSKJ and SPP paremiographic practice so far has revealed that situations when an explanation of meaning appears imperfect without (in this context, rather weak) expressions such as *včasih* ('sometimes'), *ponavadi* ('usually'), *pogosto* ('often') etc. are strong signs that this is not a proverb but rather a saying. In an explanation, such expressions relativise the general validity without any substantial contribution to describing the meaning: there is no clear criterion on how frequent or rare a phenomenon must be to be described with *včasih* ('sometimes') or *pogosto* ('often'). The following examples cite sayings with an appropriate explanation of meaning and an alternative explanation including superfluous features (which are underlined):

*Na jeziku med, v srcu led* (lit. Honey on the tongue, ice in the heart)

- describes a situation in which bad, hostile, injurious intentions lie behind kindness, flattery;
- alternative explanation: – expresses that bad, hostile, injurious intentions can lie behind kindness, flattery;

*Denar ne smrdi* (Money doesn't stink)

- describes a situation in which someone does not spurn profit even if it can be questionable;
- alternative explanation: – expresses that someone might not spurn profit even if it is questionable;

*Sova sinici pravi, da ima veliko glavo* (lit. The owl says to the tit that it has a big head)

- describes a situation in which someone criticises another person for flaws or features that they themselves have to an even greater degree;
- alternative explanation: – expresses that sometimes someone criticises another person for flaws or features that they themselves have to an even greater degree;

*Vsako prase riže zase* (lit. Every pig roots for itself)

- describes a situation in which someone acts selfishly;
- alternative explanation: – expresses that people often act selfishly.

What the cited sayings have in common is that they convey a negative evaluation of the situation, which is hard to generalise to all people in the sense of a proverbial moral; instead, they can only be attributed to a particular person in a concrete situation through a saying.

### **2.3 Borderline Cases: Proverbs with the Possibility of an Alternative Explanation of Meaning Following the Model for Sayings**

This subchapter takes a look at non-prototypical, borderline cases that could be described as sayings, but we judge that an explanation of meaning for proverbs would suit them better because they express general laws that can apply to anyone at any time. They do not feature the modes of distinct semantic concretisation described in subchapter 2.1. In the eSSKJ and SPP dictionaries, when both an explanation closer to sayings and an explanation closer to proverbs are possible, we have decided to use the latter and label the expression as a proverb.

Non-prototypical proverbs often express a general law on the possibility of something happening in a particular way; to express this possibility in the explanation of meaning, we prefer not to use the expressions *pogosto* ‘often’ or *včasih* ‘sometimes’ but rather only *lahko* (‘can’) or *praviloma* (‘as a rule’) (underlined in the examples below):

*Strup je v majhnih stekleničkah* (lit. Poison comes in small bottles)

- expresses that someone of short stature can show great strength or energy, especially if provoked; expresses that something small can turn out to have surprising strength, intensity;

– alternative explanation: – describes a situation in which someone of short stature shows great strength or energy, especially if provoked; describes a situation in which something small turns out to have surprising strength, intensity;

*Dobrota je sirota* (lit. Benevolence is an orphan, *No good deed goes unpunished*)

– expresses that benevolence can be a burden to someone, that they can face disapproval or be ridiculed for it;

– alternative explanation: – describes a situation when someone's well-intentioned deed does not pay off or is not met with the proper and expected recognition or gratitude.

The two alternative explanations above are not wrong, as they explain situations in which a certain general law applies. Yet, the descriptions do not suffice exactly, because they do not express this general law or common applicability. The proverb comparing a short person or sometimes objects to a small bottle provides a characterisation of short people or objects in general; in the same vein, the second proverb describes a general law about a problem faced by those who act benevolently towards someone – this is not just a random, isolated situation in which a benevolent deed does not pay off to a given person.

In the following proverb, the generality of the law conveyed by the proverb is expressed explicitly through the adverb of time *nikoli* ('never') (underlined):

*Nesreča nikoli ne pride sama* (Misfortunes never come singly)

– expresses that, as a rule, a negative event is followed by another or more negative events;

– alternative explanation: – describes a situation in which a negative event is followed by another or more negative events.

The next proverb on treachery, dishonesty can be compared to the sayings about the same property presented in subchapter 2.2 (*Na jeziku med, v srcu med* and *Kadar prosi, zlata usta nosi, kadar vrača, hrbet obrača*). It can be observed that in this proverb, possibility is expressed explicitly with the word *rada* ('tends') (underlined), which reinforces the status of an expression conveying a general law:

*Laskava beseda je rada zaseda* (lit. A flattering word tends to be an ambush) – expresses that bad, hostile or injurious intentions can lie behind kindness and flattery.

## 2.4 Examples of Prototypical Proverbs That Do Not Fit an Explanation of Meaning for Sayings

In prototypical proverbs, there is no semantic concretisation arising from a temporal delimitation, highlighting the relationship between the developments and what is being said or criticising a certain *modus operandi* through seeming affirmation. Besides, such proverbs do not express a general law about the possibility of something happening a particular way; they express an always and unconditionally functioning principle of developments. In explanations of meaning, the feature *can / might* would be completely superfluous, for example:

*Ena lastovka še ne prinese pomladi* (lit. A single swallow is not enough to bring about spring) – expresses that a single event is not (might not be) enough to bring about change, especially change for the better;

*Kar lahko storiš danes, ne odlašaj na jutri* (Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today) – expresses that any work should be done as soon as possible.

## 2.5 Formal Properties through Which Distinctions Can Be Made between Proverbs and Sayings

Mlacek (1981: 292, 298) enumerates the formal properties through which distinctions can be made between proverbs and sayings: e.g. the imperative mood, the 2nd and 3rd persons in verbs as well as the future tense for proverbs and the past tense for sayings. In addition, certain syntactic patterns (e.g. He who X, Y) are characteristic of proverbs in particular. However, Mlacek (1981) stresses that when an expression has a formal property of proverbs but is, at the same time, semantically closer to sayings, the semantic criterion is the deciding factor.

In our materials, the third person in verbs is also attested in the already presented prototypical sayings in subchapter 2.1, while the second person is not. The second person of verbs is found in expressions that are prototypical proverbs in terms of meaning:

*Česar ne veš, ne boli* (What you don't know can't hurt you) – expresses that someone cannot be bothered by, worried about or hurt by something problematic if they are not aware of it;

*Star si toliko, kolikor se počutiš* (You're only as old as you feel) – expresses that the effect of age on someone's life is decisively influenced by how they think about this.

In our materials, present-tense verbs appear both in prototypical and borderline sayings, as well as in proverbs. As already pointed out (subchapter 2.1), the past tense is frequent in sayings, and it also appears in prototypical proverbs – even paired with the present tense, as in *Kogar je kača pičila, se boji zvite vrvi* (lit. Someone who was bitten by a snake is afraid of coiled rope; *Once bitten, twice shy*). Nonetheless, a present-tense verb is more suitable for expressing always and unconditionally valid principles of functioning, e.g. *Več jezikov znaš, več veljaš* (lit. The more languages you know, the more you're worth) and *Dejanja so glasnejša od besed* (*Actions speak louder than words*). Many typical proverbs have a didactic message expressed particularly clearly by means of the imperative mood (Mlacek 1981: 292, 298):

*Ne hvali dneva pred večerom* (lit. Don't praise the day before nightfall) – expresses that you should be careful about giving a positive assessment of something that has not yet come to a close;

*Kar lahko storiš danes, ne odlašaj na jutri* (Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today) – expresses that any work should be done as soon as possible.

Proverbs are characterised by typical syntactic patterns (1981: 292, 298), proverbial formulae (Mieder 2004: 85-86) or structural patterns (Meterc 2017: 77):

Like X, like Y: *Kakršen oče, takšen sin* (Like father, like son);

He who X, Y: *Kdor ne uboga, ga tepe nadloga* (lit. He who doesn't obey is plagued by trouble);

No X without Y: *Brez dela ni jela* (lit. No food without work; *No pain without gain*);

Better X than Y: *Bolje je biti prvi na vasi kot zadnji v mestu* (lit. Better to be the first one in the village than the last one in the city).

These patterns are so productive that they enable systematic searching for different proverbs in linguistic corpora (Đurčo & Steyer & Hein 2015: 43–45; Meterc

2017: 77–83; 2019: 9). The examples listed above are principles of functioning that are so general, resulting from collective experience, that there is a clearly expressed moral or didactic instruction derived from them (Mlacek 1981: 294).

### 3 CONCLUSION

The article has focused primarily on the semantic attributes of sayings and proverbs, which have been ascertained by using corpus materials in order to compare many situations of their use. Moreover, several formal properties of the two paremiological genres are also mentioned. We agree with Jozef Mlacek (1983: 138) that many expressions are easy to classify as proverbs or sayings, but there is also a grey area between the genres. As regards expressions belonging to this grey area, it has been shown how certain clues about semantic concretisation and generality can be helpful. Two steps, in particular, are important in this regard: 1. a careful comparison of a large number of examples of usage (in the conducted research, the written ones) and 2. an experiment-oriented and critical approach to creating explanations of meaning or, in other words, the principle that it is useful to create a few competing explanations of meaning and to compare them critically in relation to a multitude of concrete examples of usage provided by linguistic corpora, in particular, as well as digitisation in general.

We judge that distinguishing between proverbs and sayings has a twofold usefulness: 1. Theoretically, due to differences in the function of a paremiological expression and semantic sign; 2. Practically, from the perspective of researchers' attentiveness in collecting and studying paremiological materials and of paremiographic presentation in dictionaries and collections. Both phraseology and paremiology devote too little attention to expressions that, according to Mlacek's criteria, are called *sayings*; even in the past, when there was the dominant romantic view of proverbs as carriers of a nation's wisdom and identity (Mukarovský 1971: 278), collectors were less inclined to include them in their collections in comparison with proverbs; later, the resulting domination in the materials coupled with the (too) general, too broad usage of the term *proverb* further reduced the interest in exploring this part of paremiology.

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