

Aren't Proverbs there for the Taking?

References to Proverbs in Newspaper Texts

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POLITICIANS AS USERS OF PROVERBS

The novel by the Czech author Milan Kundera, *Immortality* contains the following passage: Johann Wolfgang Goethe is invited to an audience with Napoleon Bonaparte. At the beginning of the audience Napoleon, glancing at Goethe, utters a short remark, “*Voilà un homme! Hle, muž!*” [Behold, man]; towards its end he says “*divadlo – škola lidu*” [Theatre – school for the people] (Kundera 1990: 58, 60). As an experienced ruler, Napoleon knows that the greater part of what he is going to say will presently be forgotten. To making a speech memorable requires application of an **attention-grabber**. It takes but a brief impressive phrase – *une petite phrase*, as the French say – for the listeners to notice. If there were journalists present, these phrases would be repeated in the newspapers of the following day and the statesman has achieved his aim – he has made a memorable presence.

Phrases of this kind constitute the sc. “borrowed sayings” columns in today’s Estonian newspapers. These include quotations by politicians or other influential persons, usually one per day. Sometimes these columns draw attention to a politician’s infelicitous remarks, sometimes, however, they include such vividly expressive sayings as the ones described above.¹

The two phrases attributed to Napoleon represent two different methods of catching public attention. In the latter case, it is as if the utterer presents own ideas, which should attract the listeners’ attention with their figurativeness.² In the former case

¹) A 1997 overview of this column is accessible on the web-site <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/12/31/uudis.htm#viieteistkymnes>

the French phrase “*Voilà un homme!*” is comparable to the corresponding Biblical quotation, *Et Pilate leur dit: Voici l’homme*” (John, 19:5). Using a phrase that is familiar to the audience makes the situation in which it is uttered more memorable. When listeners encounter something familiar – flavoured with individual adaptations of the speaker – they are reminded of a text that is familiar to them and, through that, to a familiar situation.³

Thus, the memorability essential for success in politics is guaranteed by using well-known quotations (or paraphrases of these) as well as dropping witty comments of one’s own. One of the most effective categories of such quotations is made up of **proverbs**. These can be regarded as anonymous quotations, but – in contrast to anonymous letters – they nevertheless are perceived as coming from an authoritative source. The responsibility for their contents is projected on to an *anonymous past, anonymous folk* – as Alan Dundes and Erastus Ojo Arewa have formulated it their well-known essay titled “Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore” (Dundes & Arewa 1979: 35) which is among the first to draw attention not to proverbs as **texts**, but rather to the **context** in which they are used in oral speech.

²) Cf. e.g. the article in the Estonian daily newspaper *Postimees* (16 Dec, 1997), saying,

President Jacques Chirac of France has quoted Premier Mart Siimann’s promise, given at a dinner for European heads of states, that although on Saturday champagne was consumed both in Luxembourg and in Tallinn, next week Estonia will plunge into the serious work of preparing for the negotiations.

<http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/12/16/uudis.htm#kaheksas>

³) Cf. the news agency report in the daily paper *Eesti Päevaleht* (28 Oct, 1996):

[The Russian prime minister] Chernomyrdin also stated that the formation of a union of the four leading countries of CIS does not necessarily mean a vagueness of responsibilities or the destruction of the vertical hierarchy of executive power: “Every one of them [the four nations] will continue to carry out their own responsibilities and our meetings will be held along the principles of old folk saying – one head is good, two or four – even better.” <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/12031>

THE AUTHORITY OF PROVERBS

That a proverb implies authority is reflected in many languages by the meaning of the corresponding generic term for it (i.e. the popular one, not the one used by researchers). In his work *Sananlaskut ja puheenparret* [Proverbs and proverbial phrases] (1954), Matti Kuusi has given a concise etymology for the word “proverb” in different languages. In addition to expressions such as “**word uttered**” or “**word said**”, they may also have the meaning of “a statement in support of something” (Welsh or Cymric), a “**wise word**” (Komi or Zyryan) or an “**influential word**” (Japanese) (cf. Kuusi 1954: 5–6).

In Estonian (“*vanasõna*”) and Irish (“*sean fhocal*”) the underlying meaning is “an **old word**”. While, in the case of “a wise word”, reference is made to the significant quantity of wisdom contained in the saying, in the case of old word another obviously positive concept is alluded to. The compound “old+word” assigns value to the saying by attributing it to the category of “old”, i.e. belonging to the past – as has been the case with folklore ever since Herder’s romantic conceptualisation of it.

Just as an aside remark, a line of thought that is based on the author’s impressions only and is not supported by any substantial proof might be mentioned at this point. At least in Estonian the use of the word “*vanasõna*” has an important shade of meaning attached to it, as the general attitude towards proverbs that represent a shorter form of folklore, differs significantly from the attitude of average uninformed person towards folklore as a whole, or “folk poetry” (“*rahvaluule*”), as the Estonians call it. For the man in the street anything that is included under the term “proverb” tends to have considerable truth value, whereas what is labelled as “folk poetry” is frequently viewed as fabrication, idle talk, as I have noticed during my folklore collecting field expeditions.

In addition to mediating old wisdom, the user of proverbs – e.g. a politician – acquires an aura of being one of the people. Although international by their very nature, proverbs seem nevertheless to belong to the domain of **our own people**; thus, the statesman attempts to leave the impression that he is voicing the people’s opinion. Abundant examples of politicians using proverbs can be found on the highest levels of the political hierarchy. Having chosen the Estonian words “*vanasõna*” (‘proverb’) and

“Meri” as my search words on the Internet, and using the Altavista search engine resulted in four proverbs from speeches given by Lennart Meri, President of Estonia, as well as several proverbs from interviews with him. It seems that he did not use proverbs merely for political eloquence, rather it stemmed from his wish to be memorable. Meri included proverbs in his speeches during his visit to Japan⁴ and on the occasion of the first visit of the Turkish head of state to Estonia,⁵ in his speech commemorating the sinking of the MS Estonia,⁶ as well as in his introduction to the Estonian Human Development Report in 1996 presented to the UN.⁷ The President of a country that has become very enthusiastic about the Internet concludes the latter speech with the following words:

[...] There is an Estonian proverb we would like the Internet to propagate over the world: “Kus viga näed laita, seal tule ja aita!” (“Where you find fault with something, come and give a hand.”) Proverbs never grow old, for they harbour the collective wisdom of the people – just the kind that people use as they talk among themselves or to their State.

“AREN’T PROVERBS THERE FOR THE TAKING”?

In the survey article on proverbs included in the new Encyclopaedia of American Folklore the influential proverb researcher Wolfgang Mieder, who has conducted similar research himself (Mieder 1997b) argues that the ways in which world leaders of both democratic and dictatorial persuasion have used proverbs as an effective political tool can be of similar interest to researchers as the use and functions of proverbs among the sc. *primitive peoples* (Mieder 1997a: 665).

The contents of Estonian proverb about proverbs (“*Vanasõna ei ole varrest võtta*”, EV 13584),⁸ could be conveyed into English

⁴) <http://vp1992-2001.vpk.ee/est/k6ned/K6ne.asp?ID=4112>

⁵) <http://vp1992-2001.vpk.ee/est/k6ned/K6ne.asp?ID=4084>

⁶) Meri 1996: 409; <http://vp1992-2001.vpk.ee/est/k6ned/K6ne.asp?ID=4224>

⁷) <http://web.archive.org/web/20010827185058/www.undp.ee/nhdr96/eng/Foreword.html>

⁸) Abbreviation EV stands for the register number of proverbs in the scientific edition of “*Eesti vanasõnad*” [Estonian Proverbs] vol. I–III, published 1980–1985.

approximately as, “proverbs aren’t there for the taking”. The proverb was sent to the Estonian Folklore Archives by the correspondent Marta Mäesalu, whose explanation of the meaning of the text says that a proverb “is not to be changed or distorted as one pleases” (*Eesti vanasõnad* III: 637). Also, the saying may mean that proverbs when used properly come to the user “on their own accord”, not when desperately looked for. According to the academic index of Estonian proverbs, this example has been attested only once. Nevertheless, considering the general reliability of the correspondent who sent it to the archive, it has been identified as an authentic proverb.

The distribution of proverbs contained in the Estonian Folklore Archives is governed by the so-called Zipf’s Law (cf. Krikmann 1997: 188) – a relatively small number of proverbs are represented by numerous attestations, whereas a majority of proverbs have only a small number of attestations. More than a half of the proverbs have been attested only once. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of the metaproverbial proverb may raise the question of whether using proverbs in vain could have been considered too insignificant for the people for proverbs to be coined about it. According to the electronic collection of proverbs “*Eesti vanasõnad*” [Estonian Proverbs], there are 13 metaproverbial Estonian proverbs, the number of attestations in each case is one or two only.⁹ Only two types have a significantly greater number of attestations – “*Vanasõna ei valeta*” [A proverb does not tell lies] (EV 13585, 25 authentic texts), and “*Vanasõna – vana hõbe*” [Proverb is old silver] (EV 13592, 15 authentic texts).

Thus we are faced with the question of whether proverbs are being used in the function of a purposeful embellishment, a rhetorical cliché or spontaneously.

SEARCH

In my research I have attempted to observe proverb usage in contemporary Estonian society. As the Herculean task of identifying all occasions of the use of proverbs by politicians appeared insurmountable, I decided to observe the context of proverb us-

⁹) <http://haldjas.folklore.ee/~kriku/VSR/TH.HTM#NHO>

age not by state authorities but by the so-called “fourth estate” that is the press.

My search for proverbs in today’s newspaper texts was restricted to those original articles, published in *Postimees* and *Eesti Päevaleht*, the two major daily papers in Estonia, that have appeared on the Internet during 1997–1999.¹⁰ In my search I followed my earlier practice and confined myself to a relatively simple method of searching (cf. Järv 1997: 31–34) – **only these proverbs are considered which the user has marked as being in a different level of text.** In Estonian this is done by using traditional phrases, such as: “as the saying goes...” (Est. “*vanasõna ütleb, et*”), “as folk wisdom has it...” (Est. “*rahvatarkuse järgi...*”), etc. It appeared also that in some cases users tended to call proverbs “proverbial phrases”; therefore, I have included those “proverbial phrases” as they were labelled, when they obviously turned out to be proverbs.¹¹ The search was limited to four keywords only – *vanasõna* (‘proverb’), *rahvatarkus* (‘folk wisdom’), *kõnekäänd* (‘proverbial phrase’), *vanarahvas* (‘old folk’). Thus the search has ‘flagged’ only those proverbs for which any one of these terms is applied as an ‘indicator’ of a proverb.

the use of proverbs, indicated by the author as	<i>Eesti Päevaleht</i>	<i>Postimees</i>	Total
‘proverb’	56	98	154
‘old folk’	7	20	27
‘proverbial phrase’	17	9	26
‘folk wisdom’	12	12	24
Total	92	139	231

Table 1. General results: the marking of proverb usage with different terms.

The use of such simplified search system is justified by the fact that in the instances mentioned the authors of the articles draw the readers’ attention to the “proverbiality” of the utter-

¹⁰ The electronic version of *Eesti Päevaleht* has been published since 4 Oct 1995, the electronic version of *Postimees* has been published as of 24 Nov 1995. I included articles published before 13 Nov 1997.

¹¹ I tried to go by the degree of generalisation of the utterance, which in case of proverbial phrases is absent. The interrelationships of the two genres in the Estonian material are dealt with e.g. in Krikmann 1997: 52ff.

ances. Thus, in those instances, not knowing the proverb does not mean the the proverb would not be recognised as one. This aspect has been brought recognised by e.g. Shirley Arora who, having studied the perception of Spanish proverbs, polemizes with Dundes' and Arewa's above-mentioned essay. In the collection *Wise Words*, compiled by Wolfgang Mieder, she stresses that proverb performance is successful when the other party is **clearly aware** that what is used is a proverb, or "collective wisdom" (cf. Arora 1994: 6).

It is obvious that such a search method can not be exhaustive. A comparison of the newspaper material with all of the 15,000 types of proverbs identified in the volume *Eesti vanasõnad* would be more conclusive; however, it would involve too massive an amount of work to be gainfully employed. Moreover, the folkloric variation of proverbs as well as their conscious variations (e.g. paraphrases) would complicate the search in terms of the types' title texts or core terms.

The number of proverbs that remain undiscovered by this method cannot be estimated, as we lack statistics on how often the "proverbiality" of a proverb is emphasised and how often its presence is marked. A brief survey of the articles found by the above-mentioned search method demonstrated that proverbs not modified by the search keywords can also be used even in the same articles. For example, in addition to the concluding sentence of an article by the prolific proverb user Rando Soome, *I am reminded of the proverb about shoemakers who never have decent shoes to put on*,¹² there is an allusion to a proverb in the title of the same article "**Silence is Really Gold**" (recalls the proverb "Talking is silver, silence is gold" EV 9956).¹³

¹²⁾ <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/02/26/sport.htm#1>

¹³⁾ Other articles by this author contain combined proverbs, but not all of them refer to the 'proverbiality' of the text: e. g. <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/11/13/sport.htm#kolmas> and <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/11/21/sport.htm#kolmas>. Certainly other such prolific proverb users can also be found.

¹⁴⁾ <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/06/14/kultuur.htm#esimene>.

“PROVERBS ARE NOT POPULAR THESE DAYS...”

“[---] and too often they just do not apply any more”, stated one of the articles considered.¹⁴ And yet, both daily newspapers make use of proverbs almost every other day; all in all, nearly 300 texts with proverbs warranting further discussion were found. In addition to these, about 50 of those articles that dealt with proverbs on one or another level, contained references to researchers, collections of proverbs etc.¹⁵ These were excluded from my survey; several texts were also ignored that were referred to as ‘proverbs’ by the users, but which did not in fact belong to our corpus of proverbs, representing e. g. so-called short proverbial phrases.¹⁶ As an exception, a popular saying remaining on the borderline between the proverb and the proverbial phrase “*Hundid söönud, lambad terved*” [Wolves fed, sheep whole] was included. It is not recorded as a proverb in EV but still was as a rule regarded as one by most of its users.

I have also included familiar quotations, which to a certain extent meet the criteria set for proverbs. In such cases the author’s name has usually been forgotten in the course of time or it might never have been known. The concluding sentence of an article on politics is an example of this:

[---] And, as the proverb goes: He who does not know his past may have to relive it. This is a tragedy I would not wish to befall even Russians.¹⁷

seems to be a free rendition of the aphorism by the Estonian author Juhan Liiv. “He who doesn’t know his past lives with no future”.

Of course, we can never be certain whether such subjective consideration of what to include or exclude has any effect on the statistics below. The following merely exemplifies some caveats here. One article begins with the sentence:

¹⁵) References to hypertexts of all included articles with proverb are at the web-site <http://haldjas.folklore.ee/tagused/nr10/vsviited.html>

¹⁶) In reviewing and extending the typology of proverbs, as well as searching for background information I received invaluable help from Arvo Krikmann to whom I am most grateful.

¹⁷) *Eesti Päevaleht*, 1. 08. 1997, p 2.

¹⁸) <http://epl.ee/artikkel/8354>

[---] According to folk wisdom a warm summer is usually followed by a warm winter, a hot summer, on the other hand, is usually followed by an extremely cold winter [---]¹⁸

This is indeed reminiscent of an attested text noted as a proverb “*Sui käib talve järele*” [Like summer, so winter], (EV 10983, 5 authentic recordings). Still, because the text was not used as an aphorism presented as a proverb, but rather it was an example of so-called *common wisdom*, it was discarded.

From the point of view of folklore research, the next extract also contains neither a proverb nor actual beliefs of people; rather, it could be classified as an everyday credo:

[---] A German proverb about catching a cold says that it takes three days to come, three days to stay, three days to disappear. There is another proverb about running noses as well. This states that if you treat it, it will be cured in a week, and if you don't, it will be gone in seven days [---]¹⁹

With some reservation I have included an extract from a literary review which attempted to characterise the book's protagonist with the help of the proverb “*Kudas küla mulle, nõnda mina külale*” [As the village treats me, I shall treat the village] (EV 5030, 115 authentic texts). To lend support her point, the author made a reference to the 2nd volume of “*Eesti vanasõnad*”, including the page number as well as the large number of variants found for the proverb obviously with the aim of proving the its reliability.²⁰

A fairly interesting letter from a reader was left out, that was titled “**Let's Remember Folk Wisdom**”. In the letter an annoyed parent uses nine proverbs from M. J. Eisen's book “*Estonian Proverbs*”, to defend her child's school (e.g. *Mis sa teed, teed enesele* [Whatever you do, you do unto yourself], *Seda, mis tahad teisele öelda, ütle enne enesele* [Whatever you wish to say to another, first say to yourself], *Mida vihaga tehakse, läheb viltu* [What is done in anger will fail], *On sul häda, kaeba enesele* [If you have a trouble, complain to yourself]).²¹

¹⁹⁾ <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/4829>

²⁰⁾ <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/2096>

²¹⁾ <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/05/14/tartu/kirjad.htm#esimene>

OWN AND FOREIGN, OLD AND NEW

The occasional interpretation of the Estonian term “vanasõna” whereby proverbs are regarded only as **old** wise sayings, might exclude more recent sayings reminiscent of proverbs, that have become firmly established in popular usage, from being classified under this name. Nonetheless, sayings such as “*Enne, kui lähed Pariisi, käi ära Nuustaku!*” [Before going to Paris, go and visit Nuustaku], “*Üks pilt räägib enam kui tuhat sõna*” [One picture says more than a thousand words], “*Kes maksab arved, tellib hiljem muusika*” [He who pays the bill can order the music] have become firmly established in modern usage and are perceived as proverbs by the people.

It is hardly surprising that such new sayings have an international distribution. A number of such “new” proverbs were discovered by Finnish researchers as the result of the 1985 proverb collecting composition. The bulky volume of this material contains the proverbs and proverbial phrases that had not been included in the archival records up to 1950 nor had they appeared in publications about proverbs before 1965 (Kuusi 1988: 14). The material includes equivalents to such sayings labelled as proverbs in our newspaper texts as “*Üks pilt räägib rohkem kui tuhat sõna*”²² [One picture says more than a thousand words] (Cf. *ibid.*: 253), “*Poolel teel hobuseid ei vahetata*”²³ [You don’t change horses half-way] (Cf. *ibid.*: 215; Archer Taylor (1931: 37) attributes it to Abraham Lincoln).

Proverbs of other nations have often been consciously used. As stated by the authors of articles included in my search, there were in all 29 instances of proverbs from 15 different countries (in fact, foreign proverbs were even more numerous than native ones). Russian (8), English and Chinese (both 3) were the ones used most frequently. Only a small portion of them was connected directly to the contents of the text, i.e. the article was concerned with the relevant country. For example, an article about the Russian Orthodox religion began with the words:

²² <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/10/11/valis.htm#neljas> and <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/05/07/tana.htm#teine> (the author of both articles is Kaido Floren).

²³ *Eesti Päevaleht*, 23. 05. 1997, lk 2

[---] “A priest’s beard is always soaked in butter” goes a Russian proverb [---]²⁴

An article that was inspired by the building of an oil terminal in Lithuania described the passionate debates around it:

Social democrats call the terminal a strategic issue, but president Brazauskas and prime minister Gediminas Vagnorius regard it as a commercial matter. There is a Lithuanian proverb: a name does not ruin the thing itself.²⁵

Generally, however, there was no obvious reference to the contents of the article and the proverbs were well-known maxims from ancient “classical” cultures (Latin, Arab, Hindu), or else they expressed the wisdom of indigenous peoples (Rundi, Mari). In a single case a proverb was attributed to another culture in order to achieve a comic effect.

Texts regarded as foreign proverbs were in some cases also known in the Estonian tradition, – for example the proverb, “*Peale kaklust rusikatega ei vehelda!*” [Do not fling your fists after the fight] occurred three times (and was twice identified as a Russian proverb). It is included in EV with one authentic version, “*Pärast riidu ei ole tarvis rusikad näidata*” [There is no need to show your fists after the quarrel], (EV 9622, a record from Vaivara parish where Russian influence has been strong).

It seems that a proverb from a foreign “high” culture may at times seem more effective to the user than a native one, e.g. the proverb quoted in the extract:

A popular Chinese proverb says that if everyone swept the pavement in front of his house, the whole street would be clean.²⁶

has an Estonian variant as well (EV 9372, “*Igaüks pühkigu oma ukseesist*” [Everyone should sweep their own threshold]).

²⁴) <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/17817>

²⁵) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/03/06/valis.htm#kolmas>

²⁶) <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/2738>

All in all, a total of 182 proverbs were found to have reference numbers in EV,²⁷ while the remaining twenty percent consisted of foreign loans, familiar quotations, etc. with no Estonian counterparts. Thus, we notice the fact that proverbs' absence from the EV index did not discourage the authors from classifying them as "proverbs" ["folk wisdom" etc] – "new" proverbs and those from other cultures were used without their origin or novelty posing any problem.

PARAPHRASES AND PARODIES

Naturally, the proverb texts exhibited variation; memory will play its tricks even when the texts have reached the user via a secondary tradition. The variations were also more complicated – for example, the merging of two proverb texts:

[---] Generally, the saying "kaua tehtud, hästi tehtud" [Slowly done, well done] does not apply to the production of Russian car industry. [---]²⁸

Apparently, this is a combination of the proverbs "*Kaua tehtud, kaunikene...*" [That which is slowly done, is nice] and "*Ise tehtud, hästi tehtud*" [Done by oneself, well done], (EV 8487+EV 7982).

In a few dozen cases the proverbs were intentionally paraphrased for the purpose of parody. While Arvo Krikmann noticed a "growth in intensity of the production of proverbial parodies" (Krikmann 1985: 474), the proportion of such parodies in our study seems to indicate that this is not the case at least with respect to the press.

In some cases, however, the paraphrasing of a proverb was probably not intended to have a humorous effect. The following text is an example of this

[---] I can't help recalling the old folk wisdom that an ox is to be feared from the front, a horse from the back and a career-climber from all four sides simultaneously [---]²⁹

²⁷) The more recent additions to the "Eesti vanasõnad" are available in Internet search: <http://haldjas.folklore.ee/ri/date/robotid/leht1.html>.

²⁸) <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/6037>

²⁹) <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/7936>

the actual proverb ends with the words, “and an evil person from all sides” (EV 3270); it is not certain whether the newspaper version is the author’s creation or a paraphrase heard from elsewhere. The evaluative force of a proverb (even if used humorously) may be retained in newspaper articles as has been observed, among others by Neal N. Norrick (1985: 24).

In an interview the sports physician Peeter Mardna argues that it is not only sports medicine that can guarantee Estonian skiers

“[--] high results at title competitions. Or, to paraphrase a proverb: Trust in medicine, but do some work yourself as well!” Mardna adds.³⁰

Apparently, this is a paraphrase of the internationally known proverb “Trust in God, but don’t be reckless yourself” (There are no authentic attestations of the proverb among the Estonian archival texts).

In the case of some paraphrases the comical effect was secondary, e.g., in the sentence “...*vanarahvas teadis öelda, ega tuumaõnnetus ei hüüa tulles...*” [... a nuclear accident brings no warning, as folk wisdom has it...], which refers to the proverb “*Õnnetus ei hüüa tulles*” [Misfortune brings no warning], (EV 14714).

The most numerous category of paraphrases discovered seems to consist of those created with the aim of producing a comical effect; the paraphrase acquired an additional element of parody. For example, introducing the picture “The First Wives’ Club”, a film critic wrote,

“Fool a woman once, and she will fool you nine times,” may be a topical interpretation of a well-known proverb [--].³¹

A special mention should be made of the journalist Tambet Kaugema, who has used modified paraphrasing on several occa-

³⁰) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/10/28/olympia.htm#kolmas>

³¹) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/05/24e/film.htm#teine>; refers to the proverb “*Narri põldu üks kord, põld narrib sind üheksa korda*” [Cheat the field once and the field will cheat you nine times’], EV 7398)

sions; he is the author of modifications such as “*Aga kus suitsu, seal välgumihklit, on vanarahvas ikka öelnud.*” [The old folk has always said that where there’s smoke, there’s a lighter]³² and “*Parem papagoi peos, kui kondor katusel*” [A parrot in the hand is better than a condor on the rooftop],³³ as well as the perhaps apocryphal “*Samojeedi rahvatarkus ütleb, et kahte asja ei tohi pilgata: mehe naist ja mehe palka*” [A Samoyed saying goes that you must not make fun of two things: a man’s wife and a man’s salary].³⁴

DISTRIBUTION OF PROVERBS IN DIFFERENT COLUMNS

As far as the differences between the divisions into sections of the two daily newspapers were concerned, the columns had to be categorised. Thus, token ‘conventional columns’ were formed, mainly on the basis of the more general columns found in *Eesti Päevaleht*. The more detailed division of *Postimees* had to be reorganised. A new separate section titled **Readers’ Letters** was also introduced. Originally, it did not exist in either of the papers. The **Opinion** column (“*Arvamus*”) of *Postimees* was divided in two, separating **readers’ letters** (even if these were concerned with politics) on the one hand, and **political** articles on the other. I also considered the **People** section of the weekend supplement *Extra* of *Postimees* and the column **Life** as equivalents of the **People** column of *Eesti Päevaleht*; these were classified as the section **Life, people**. As expected, some columns in one newspaper had no equivalent in the other, miscellaneous articles were classified as **Other**.

Measuring the “proneness to proverbs” in different columns of different newspapers did not necessarily provide the most reliable of results. Due to the paucity of the material observed, the conclusions reached might be arbitrary. The number of proverb occurrences in different token columns (see Table 2) is nearly equal as far as **Politics** and **Readers’ Letters** were concerned,

³²) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/10/21/kultuur.htm#neljas>; refers to the proverb “Kus suitsu, seal tuld” [Where there’s smoke there’s fire]; (EV 10650)

³³) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/07/27/kultuur.htm#neljas>; reference to the proverb “*Parem varblane peos, kui tuvi katusel*” [Better a sparrow in the hand than two on the branch], (EV 13795)

³⁴) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/02/12/kultuur.htm#teine>

column\ newspaper	Eesti Päevaleht		Postimees		Total	
		%		%		%
Politics	21	22.8%	23	16.5%	44	19.0%
Readers' letters	10	10.8%	33	23.7%	43	18.6%
Culture	16	17.4%	23	16.6%	39	16.9%
Sports	10	10.9%	21	15.1%	31	13.4%
Life, people	12	13.0%	14	10.1%	26	11.3%
Foreign News	4	4.4%	8	5.8%	12	5.2%
Environment	11	12.0%	1	0.7%	12	5.2%
Economy	7	7.6%	2	1.4%	9	3.9%
News	0	0%	5	3.6%	5	2.2%
Media Review	–	–	4	3.6%	4	1.7%
Other	1	1.1%	5	2.9%	6	2.6%
Total	92	100.0%	139	100.0%	231	100.0%

Table 2. The total of proverbs and percentage of articles containing proverbs.

followed by **Culture**, **Sports** and **Life, people**. However, the separate 'top lists' of the two papers somewhat differed from each other – e. g. in *Postimees* **Readers' Letters** are definitely in first place.

It must not be forgotten that the proportions of columns vary according to the newspaper as well. That the number of proverbs in readers' letters of *Eesti Päevaleht* is smaller than in *Postimees* comes as no surprise, since it was obviously caused by the smaller number of readers' letters printed. Furthermore, there was no such column as **Media Review** in *Eesti Päevaleht*. The column **Environment**, however, appears almost every day in *Eesti Päevaleht*, but quite rarely in *Postimees* (under the name of Nature), which is why this column was high in the 'top list' of the former newspaper.

As mentioned already, the frequent use of proverbs in the **Politics** column is hardly surprising, as politicians want to be remembered and seen as relying on the people. The high position of **Readers' Letters** in the list is fairly predictable – letters sent to editors are often intended as a protest or to teach others. The authors have probably assumed that the most efficient way of educating the public is by using arguments ostensibly created by the same public. While we can presume that politicians share the same psychological motivation to a certain extent, as far as

the writers of letters are concerned, there might be a latent concern that the man on the street might not get a hearing and so consequently “generally accepted truths” should be used.

The frequent use of proverbs in the **Culture** column can be explained by the fact that proverbs in fact belong to the cultural sphere more so than to the topics covered in other columns. Still, I would once again like to remain mindful of the possible “flaws” in the mechanism of choice. About a quarter of the proverbs (4) from the Culture column in *Eesti Päevaleht* derive from Mati Unt’s essayistic articles in the series “Everyday Mythology” where he often gives examples of wisdom of different nations. Often, however, it can be assumed that these are artificial and do not express a spontaneous reaction, but are rather the deliberate intention on the part of the author to demonstrate erudition (this is further correlated with the wide range of proverbs and familiar quotations of different origin that he uses). E.g. in the article “**Red Light**” Unt writes: “There is an English proverb that the red evening sky is the shepherd’s joy, and the red morning sky is a warning of bad weather”.³⁵ In his article “**Field**” he recalls the well-known proverb “*Narrid põldu üks kord, narrib põld sind üheksa korda vastu*” [Cheat the field once and the field will cheat you nine times], (EV 7398) arguing that this is a case of personifying the field.³⁶

What appears as a surprise is the sum total of the proverbs in the **Sports** column of *Postimees*. Almost all of these (18 out of 21) occur in Rando Soome’s articles, either in their original form (“*Kus häda kõige suurem, seal abi kõige lähem*” [Where the need is the greatest, help is nearest], (EV 1787),³⁷ or “*Töö kiidab tegijat*” [Work praises the one who has done it], (EV 12515)),³⁸ or as a paraphrase:

³⁵ *Eesti Päevaleht*, 11. 05. 1996, p 6, the thought has parallels in Estonia as well: “*Eha punab, hea ilm; koit punab, kuri ilm*” [Sunset is red – nice weather, sunrise is red – bad weather] (EV 514)

³⁶ *Eesti Päevaleht*, 31. 08. 1996, p 7.

³⁷ <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/09/03/sport.htm#kaheksas>

³⁸ <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/09/17/sport.htm#viies>

[---] I cannot help being reminded of the proverb about shoemakers who never have decent shoes to put on.³⁹

[---] Knight's words implied that at least in his opinion, business is thicker than blood, to paraphrase a popular saying.⁴⁰

This is an example of one author's uncommonly prolific use of proverbs that is not equalled by anyone else.⁴¹

Quite a number of proverbs could be found in the **Life, people** column. In some of the interviews included here the proverbs have been uttered by the person interviewed and the reporter has merely recorded them. But still, proverbs have also been used in asking questions: a reporter, for instance, asked the director general of the State Revenue Office whether the proverb "*Suured vargad sõidavad tõllas, väiksed ripuvad võllas*" [Big thieves drive in coaches, smaller ones are hanging from the gallows] still applies. The answer was the following

All thieves should be hanged, the bigger ones higher and smaller ones lower. (Laughs.) Actually, there should be no difference in how they are treated.⁴²

Of the major columns it is predictably the **Economy** column that contains relatively few proverbs. This is illustrated by *Postimees*, where the classification of two articles containing proverbs under "Economy" is ambiguous – although classified as such by the newspaper, both are connected with family planning rather and are not genuine articles on economic issues.⁴³ Prov-

³⁹) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/02/26/sport.htm#1>, cf. EV 3188 "*Rätsepal pole riidet ega kingsepal kinga*" [The tailor has no clothes, the shoemaker no shoes].

⁴⁰) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/08/21/sport.htm#kuues>, cf. EV 13944, "*Veri on paksem kui vesi*" [Blood is thicker than water].

⁴¹) When, in order to reduce the possible influence of such prolific user of proverbs as Rando Soome, I excluded him from the calculations. As a result, the percentage of proverbs published in the Sports column dropped to 6,9%, placing it in the same group with the columns Environment, Foreign News and Economy.

⁴²) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/03/22e/index.htm>

⁴³) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/11/14/majandus.htm#kolmeteistkymnes> and <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/05/11/majandus.htm#kuues>

erbs occurring in the **Economy** column of *Eesti Päevaleht* were comparatively more numerous, including a striking example of manipulation with a proverb that was included in an insurance agent's advertisement for buying insurance: "As the saying goes, "Being stingy is not efficient", and neither is not being insured."⁴⁴

It seems interesting that while *Postimees* has peppered its **News** column with five different proverbs (although admittedly two of them appear in interviews on topical matters), there is not a single occurrence of proverbs in the corresponding column of *Eesti Päevaleht*.

All these differences have had an effect on the general statistics, over the period of two years (see table 1) the numerous references to proverbs in *Eesti Päevaleht* are two thirds the number in *Postimees*. The uneven distribution for proverbs could be the result of the different size, or else by the different target groups of the two papers. *Eesti Päevaleht* has characterised its reader as an "ambitious Estonian",⁴⁵ while *Postimees*, which has wider circulation, has aspired to be a paper for "readers of all age groups".⁴⁶

DISTRIBUTION OF PROVERBS ACCORDING TO AUTHORS

As mentioned earlier, the articles containing the largest number of proverbs were written by Rando Soome – all in all he used proverbs in 17 different articles. References to proverbs in more than three articles occurred in the texts of authors such as Vahur Kalmre, Tambet Kaugema, Andrus Laansalu, Mati Unt, (4), Vahur Kalmre (4), . eslovas Iškauskas, Ülo Tonts, Devil Tserp, and Andres Varik (3). Among consistent proverb users there were not as many politicians as might have been expected. Nevertheless, more than one proverb was used by Andres Varik, minister of agriculture (3), Robert Lepikson, in his roles as the minister of internal affairs and the mayor of Tallinn (1 + 1), and the young politician Meelis Kitsing (2).

⁴⁴) <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/15671> , cf. EV 15209, "Koonerdamine pole kokkuhoid" [Stinging is no economy].

⁴⁵) *Eesti Päevaleht*, 18. 12. 1995, p. 2.

⁴⁶) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/95/12/30/arvamus.htm#esimene>

The principal users of proverbs in newspaper texts are men – they contributed 72% of the proverbs under observation, whereas women were responsible for 17% (the rest of the articles were written by persons whose gender remained unspecified, the articles were anonymous or signed with initials only). Yet I believe that men contribute to 4/5 of the contents of a newspaper, while women are responsible for only 1/5. So, a cautious formulation might be that **men seem to use more proverbs in newspapers than women.**

It is interesting to observe how the use of a proverb by one author can bring along the repetition of the same proverb (at times even in a similar context) by another. This might lend evidence to the fact that a proverb sharpens the audience's attention. For example, one author made a critical comment, relying on the proverb "*Kelle leiba sööd, selle laulu ka laulad*" [You sing the song of the person whose bread you eat], (Cf. EV 5657).⁴⁷ In an answer published three days later the proverb was "returned", i.e. was directed against the original writer.⁴⁸ Thus, criticism through the use of a proverb must have been effective and conditioned its re-use.

Several examples of this kind could be noted. On April 16, 1996 the Sports column of *Eesti Päevaleht* included the following sentence:

[...] The winners are not judged – this saying would also justify [basketball coach Allan] Dorbek's behaviour [...].⁴⁹

Two days later the same phrase was repeated by another author, an editor of the sports column:

[...] After the match this situation was not mentioned, he was simply glorified. Even the saying goes: the winners are not judged [...].⁵⁰

⁴⁷) *Eesti Päevaleht*, 23. 11. 1996, p 2.

⁴⁸) *Eesti Päevaleht*, 26. 11. 1996, p 2.

⁴⁹) <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/5301>

⁵⁰) *Eesti Päevaleht*, 18. 04. 1996, p 9.

We can also observe how the same proverb is repeatedly inspired by the same situation. Presuming that the following two texts have not influenced by each other, we have another – in this case Island-related – piece of evidence of how witty expressions are retained in people’s minds and are quoted in their travel-ogues with nearly a year between them.

[...] But yesterday’s weather refuted the Icelandic saying that if you don’t like the weather, wait for half an hour [...]⁵¹

[...] Icelanders have a proverb of the Murphy kind: if you do not happen to like the Icelandic weather, just wait for five minutes and it gets worse [...]⁵²

THE POWER OF PROVERBS

Due to its intertextuality a proverb exercises a distinct influence when it is merged in a text. The proverb is a complete text in its own right, constituting **a text within the text**. A proverb is even more powerful when it occurs in a stressed position, at the beginning or end of the text. In his survey of the use of proverbs in some newspapers Max Lüthi has mentioned the not infrequent use of proverbs “*an ausgezeichneter Stelle*,” as titles or concluding sentences (Lüthi 1970: 495).

It is a well-known fact that what is said at the beginning or end of a story is remembered best, psychologists, conducting experiments with sequences of unrelated words, have termed these phenomena as *recency effect* and *primacy effect* (see e.g. Gleitman 1991: 249). Thus, the positioning of proverbs will underline the author’s (perhaps even unconscious) wish to be remembered by the reader, reveal the general tonality of the story or provide it with an imposing final chord. Traditionally, proverbs have been used at the end of folk tales to make a rhetorical conclusion of what has preceded; however, unlike folk tales, newspaper texts are fairly utilitarian. It seems that the use of a proverb positioned at the beginning of a text, especially as the title, can be regarded as relatively “non-folkloric”; such an application

⁵¹⁾ <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/07/24/uudis.htm#seitsmes>

⁵²⁾ <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/09/21e/reis.htm>

of proverbs is a calculated action rather than the spontaneous reaction to a situation.⁵³

In the following I shall note proverbs in titles, at the beginning and end of texts. Also proverbs situated not at the absolute beginning or end of the article, but near the “border” of the text, are included. These additional proverbs were all situated in the first or the last paragraphs, and the “topic” of the proverb did not deviate from the topic of the text itself – the whole of the text between the proverb and the text border constituted a preparatory statement for the proverb or its conclusion. Examples from the beginnings of sentences:

Chairman of the Coalition Party Mr Tiit Vähi and Chairman of the Centre Party Mr Edgar Savisaar have been busily digging pits for each other for two weeks running. Supposing the well-known proverb be true, the digger should fall into the pit himself” [---]⁵⁴

In today’s technological world talking is an old-fashioned form of communication. Even a proverb states that talking is silver, silence is gold [---]⁵⁵

On one occasion a set of two proverbs was used to summarise the article:

[---] There are two good proverbs applicable in such a situation: “The pot derides the kettle” and “It is wiser to give in”. The choice you make will depend on hoe kind you are.⁵⁶

We should make a note here that some of the examples involving two proverbs in a row in one and the same article have been ‘devaluated’ for our statistics, e.g. the following concluding sentences

⁵³) The Estonian weekly *Maaleht* deserves special attention as a conscious user of proverbs. On the front page of every issue we can find a topical picture with a matching proverb (most likely selected by the editors).

⁵⁴) *Eesti Päevaleht*, 22. 08. 1997, p 2. The article, in fact, is entitled “Tiit Vähi in His Own Pit”.

⁵⁵) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/01/04e/jess.htm#esimene>

⁵⁶) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/07/19e/elu.htm#esimene>

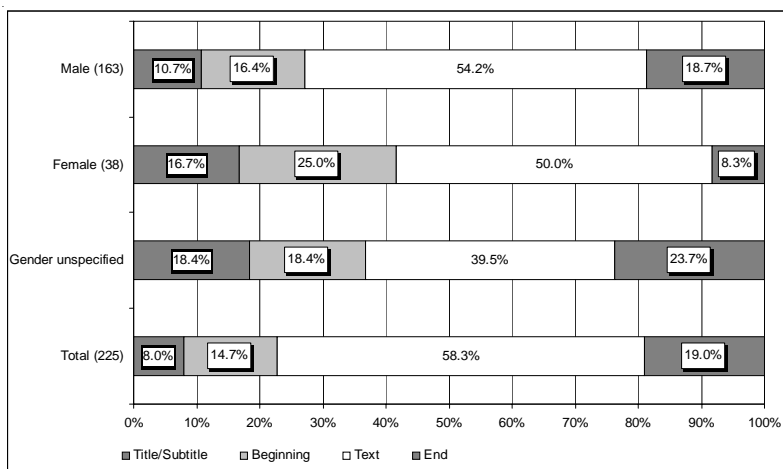


Chart 1. The use of proverbs at the beginning/end of the article according to the user's gender. Percentage among the particular distributions.

[---] Just be consistent and keep on looking. He who seeks shall find – as the proverb goes. And a mouse will not run into the mouth of a sleeping cat!⁵⁷

In distributions all of this kind (7) were considered to be a single reference to a proverb.

Chart 1 shows the tendencies in positioning the proverbs. As the chart indicates, men placed proverbs into beginning or end of the article in more than 40 percent of the cases. Women have proved to be even more conscious users of proverbs – three out of every five proverbs used by women (nearly 60%) were placed at the very end or beginning of the article. In other words, as such sentences constitute but a minor part of the bulk of the article, the function of the proverb as a rhetorical weapon is quite apparent.⁵⁸

The authors' awareness of the power of proverbs is convincingly demonstrated by including them in editorials. Half of the

⁵⁷⁾ <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/01/10/tartu/kirjad.htm#kolmas>

⁵⁸⁾ Another calculation also considered proverbs placed at the end or beginning of paragraphs – it appeared that most of the proverbs were positioned as the title (11%), at the beginning (32%) or the end (34%). Only less than a quarter of the proverbs were placed in the middle of a paragraph...

eight proverbs used in the editorials of *Postimees* were placed at the end of the text.

[---] If he [the current prime minister of Estonia Mart Siimann] really has no skeletons in his closet as he himself claims, there is no need to be worried. Nobody can lay hold of the skirt of a righteous man, as the proverb goes.⁵⁹

[---] And so the personnel policy of Siimann as far as the proverb reminds us: row slow and you shall reach far. And if there are no extraordinary elections, he may indeed get far.⁶⁰

[---] Better half an egg than an empty shell – “Postimees” would like to hope that the proverb does not apply here. All compensations that high state officials receive should be honest and made public. Only then can we decide whether Tiit Vähi’s [the then prime minister of Estonia] future salary of 16.560 kroons a month is appropriate for a politician.⁶¹

[---] Thus, at the visa negotiations with Finland Estonia does not have to play the role of the humble brother any more. “He, who has thirst, has legs,” says an Estonian proverb.⁶²

We cannot overlook the fact that in three cases proverbs are meant to reproach the Prime Minister in office. Obviously, proverbs are used as *vox populi* not only by the statesmen, but also against them.

In both newspapers proverbs (or paraphrases of them) were used as headlines:

Before Going to Paris, Go and Visit Nuustaku!
First Negligence, then Disaster.
Taking One’s Time Brings Good Results
Never Look a Gift Horse in the Mouth

⁵⁹⁾ <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/04/30/index.htm#esimene>

⁶⁰⁾ <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/97/03/17/index.htm#esimene>

⁶¹⁾ <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/05/18/index.htm#esimene>

⁶²⁾ <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/01/20/index.htm#esimene>

Repetition is the Mother of Wisdom
 He Who Asks is not Slapped on the Mouth
 You Shall Reap What You Sow
 A Name Does not Ruin the Man
 If a Cow Had a Grandmother It Would Keep an Eye on the Calf! (Estonian proverb)
 The Mote that is in Thy Brother's Eye... [+ in the article the text was continued as: "...and the beam in your own"]

The first example is not an 'authentic' proverb, but it is often used as one these days. In this regard, nearly all proverbs used as headlines belong to the ones used frequently, which demonstrates again that popularity in traditional usage has indeed served as a precondition for them to be included in headlines. An exception here is "If the cow..." – a proverb with a single authentic variant obviously derived from the collection *Vanasõnaraamat*.⁶³

Headline proverbs are often extended: "**Being Stingy on Insurance is not Efficient**",⁶⁴ and modified: "**The Big Cheats are Still Driving in Coaches**",⁶⁵ "**Half an Egg Does Not Replace a Whole**",⁶⁶ "**The Cranes Have Left, but Nasty Weather Has Not Come**".⁶⁷ An interesting example of proverb usage was an article where the headline "**Negligence Causes Increasingly More Fire Accidents**" was extended by the first sentence of the article "*First negligence, then disaster*".⁶⁸ Sometimes headlines question the validity of proverbs: "**Is Silence Consent?**",⁶⁹ or reverse folk wisdom, "**Wolves not Fed, Sheep Gone**".⁷⁰

⁶³ Presumably it is the first text under the sub-topic "*Oleks*" [If there were...] (*Vanasõnaraamat*: 557), containing a single record.

⁶⁴ See note 44.

⁶⁵ Cf. the proverb "*Väiksed vargad ripuvad võllas, suured sõidavad tõllas*" [Small thieves are hanging from the gallows, big thieves are driving in coaches], (EV 14474).

⁶⁶ Cf. the proverb "*Parem pool muna kui tühi koor*" [Better half an egg than an empty shell], (EV 8970).

⁶⁷ A polemization with the proverb "*Kured lähvad – kurjad ilmad [---]*" [When the cranes leave there'll be nasty weather], (EV 4574)

⁶⁸ EV 1496

⁶⁹ Cf. "*Vaikimine on nõusolek*" [Silence is consent], (EV 3225)

⁷⁰ Cf. "*Hundid sõnud, lambad terved*" [Wolves fed, sheep whole].

Mihkel Mutt's lengthy essay titled "Tying up the Ox's Mouth", an extensive speculation on the meaning of proverbs as its starting point, starts from a proverb derived from the Biblical quotation about not tying up the ox's mouth while he is threshing grain. The article was placed in the context of the then topical "housing scandal" (municipal government illegally selling apartments to statesmen and businessmen).⁷¹

There is little that is new under the Sun. The present article was already nearing completion when I discovered similar research conducted by Wolfgang Mieder in 1971 that was based on the weekly *Die Zeit* (Mieder 1983). The frequency of proverb occurrence in Mieder's survey provided a 'top list' nearly similar to the one listed above. (The division of Mieder's survey was to be sure more specific, and the columns with no equivalents in my survey might change the results to a certain extent): Modern Life – Politics – *Feuilleton* – Readers' Letters – Mirror of Country – Economy – Literature – Science – Sports – Topical (Mieder 1983: 12).

Wolfgang Mieder also studied the position of proverbs in articles. 36 (11.7%) out of the total of 306 proverbs were used as headlines, 64 (20.9%) at the beginning of paragraphs, 56 (18.3%) at the end of paragraphs. (Mieder 1983: 12). It deserves attention that only 65 (21.2%) of the proverbs detected by Mieder are marked, whereas the terms used as keywords in the present paper form only a minor part of Mieder's survey (Mieder 1983: 12). This demonstrates that the actual number of proverbs in newspaper texts might be considerably higher than the one presented in our survey.

TOP LIST OF THE MOST POPULAR PROVERBS

According to the result of the survey, the most popular marked proverbs were the following:

Üheksa korda mõõda, üks kord lõika [Measure nine times, cut once], (EV 14841, authentic archival texts 40) – 7 occurrences

⁷¹⁾ *Eesti Päevaleht*, 27. 01. 1997, p 2.

Väiksed vargad ripuvad võllas, suured sõidavad tõllas [Smaller thieves are hanging from the gallows, bigger ones are driving in coaches], (EV 14474, authentic texts 35) – 5

Parem hilja kui mitte kunagi [Better late than never], (EV 1262, auth. 40) – 4

Pada sõimab katelt, ühed mustad mõlemad [The pot derides the kettle, both are equally black], (EV 8196, auth. 220) – 3

Parem pool muna kui tühi koor [Better half an egg than an empty shell], (EV 8970, auth. 270) – 3

Ära enne vana kaevu täis aja, kui uus valmis ei ole [Don't fill up the old well before you have dug a new one], (EV 13525, auth. 195) – 3, occurred only as 'Don't spit into...'

Pea tehtud pilla-palla, kaua tehtud kaunikene [What is done quickly is a muddle, what is done slowly is nice], (EV 8487, auth. 165) – 3

Teise silmas näed pindu, enda silmas ei näe palki [The mote that is in thy brother's eye and the beam in thine own eye], (EV 11889, auth. 50) – 3

Tasa sõidad, kaugemale jõuad [The slower you drive, the further you get], (EV 11698, auth. 35) – 3

Pärast riidu ei ole tarvis rusikad näidata [There is no need to show your fists after the quarrel], (EV 9622, auth. 1) – 3

It is possible that 'proverbiality' is stressed first of all in the case of less known proverbs. We might, therefore, assume that more popular proverbs were consequently more poorly represented in our search. As a second phase of the study a renewed search for proverb texts that were already detected by the present search might have been conducted.

Nearly half (103) of those proverbs detected that were recorded as types in EV were attested only once. Part of them had obviously been used with certainty just because of their occurrence in the well-known "*Vanasõnaraamat*" or some other source. The position of the proverb was also important; cases in which the first proverb listed in a certain topical category or printed at the top of a page in "*Vanasõnaraamat*" are by no means rare.⁷²

⁷²) Here, I present a list of five references to the articles where this was the case: <http://www.zzz.ee/epl/961123/art61.html>, <http://www.zzz.ee/epl/961203/art48.html>, <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/13443>, <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/04/13/arvamus.htm#teine>, <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/05/11/index.htm#esimene>

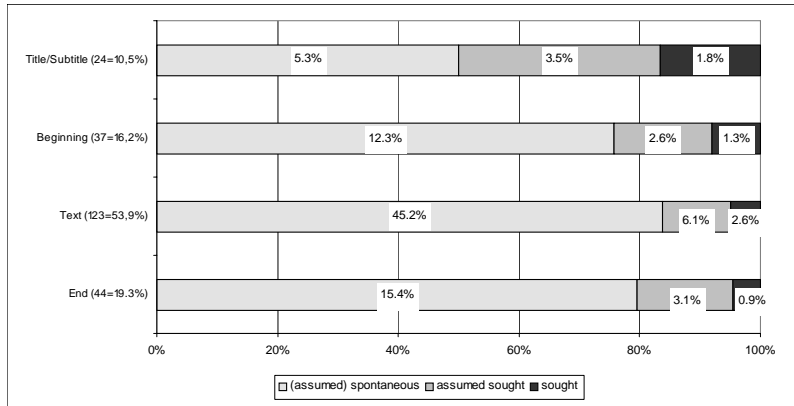


Chart 2. Use of 'sought' proverbs in the text titles & subtitles/ beginnings/ closures. Percentage among the total number of occurrences.

For instance, the proverb “Üks põle ühtigi” [One is nothing]⁷³ that is supposed to come from Paldiski is most likely taken from the introduction to the respective subsection in “*Vanasõnaraamat*”, that mentions Paldiski as the site of recording.

An interesting proverb found at the end of an article is “*Koduvärvat ei panda kinni, ütleb Võrumaa vanarahvas*” [One’s home gate will never be closed, says folk wisdom from Võrumaa].⁷⁴ “*Eesti vanasõnad*” contains three authentic records of the saying (EV 4003), all of them dialectal and originating from the Setu region. We might assume that the author of the article has borrowed it from the earlier, 1955 edition of the proverb collection, which indeed names Võrumaa as the place of recording (*Valimik eesti vanasõnu*: 196).

This kind of proverb use cannot be labelled as spontaneous, but may rather be described as a purposeful search in a “catalogue of goods”. An attempt to differentiate between the two situations resulted in the distribution of proverb use as presented in Chart 2. (In some cases identification of loans proved difficult and remained necessarily subjective.)

Although the role of purposely sought and presumably purposely sought proverbs is by no means overwhelming, it becomes clear that these appear to be more numerous in the titles and at

⁷³) <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/4888>

⁷⁴) <http://www.postimees.ee/leht/96/08/14/kultuur.htm#esimene>

the beginnings of the texts (The ‘planned’ proverbs’ distribution was also similar within smaller text units – **paragraphs**). It seems that in the case of natural and oral use of proverbs the proverbs are mostly situated so as to conclude the text unit, to characterise what has been said earlier. The tendency, apparent in newspaper articles, to use proverbs at the beginnings of text units is a result of the (presumably) more calculated composition.⁷⁵ It is not surprising that publications facilitating proverb search have been used for this purpose. Nevertheless, most of the proverbs we observed in newspapers have been referred to because of an “inner compulsion”, thus in the spontaneous way.

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Comment

This article has appeared earlier in the journal *Folklore* (Järv 1999). Unfortunately, a considerable number of the internet links have been moved or are no longer valid. The links referred to in the earlier version of the article were double-checked, and have been, when necessary, substituted with the new web-addresses. Those sources that could not be traced have been replaced with references to paper sources (including the entire political column in *Päevaleht*). In addition to this, the language of the present version was improved by Harry Mürk’s corrections, which has also been reflected in the alteration of the title. What has remained unchanged, however, is the use of proverbs in newspapers, by politicians, and by the society at large. This is evidenced by the continued practice of featuring proverbs in newspapers, for example on the front page of *Maaleht*, or by politicians, as shown in Wolfgang Mieder’s recent brilliant analysis of Barack Obama’s rhetoric (Mieder 2009). *Vanasõna om alati tark* – ‘There is wisdom in proverbs’.

⁷⁵ Also Charles L. Briggs (1994: 336) who has studied the proverb use by the inhabitants of the state of New Mexico has observed that proverbs used for didactic purposes nearly always constitute the final word on the subject.

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