

An Attempt at a Multidimensional Structural Classification of American Proverbs

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In 1997, I made an attempt to build up a “multidimensional natural” classification of Estonian proverbs relating their syntactic, logical, modal, and figurative structure as well as parallelism concerning all their structural levels.

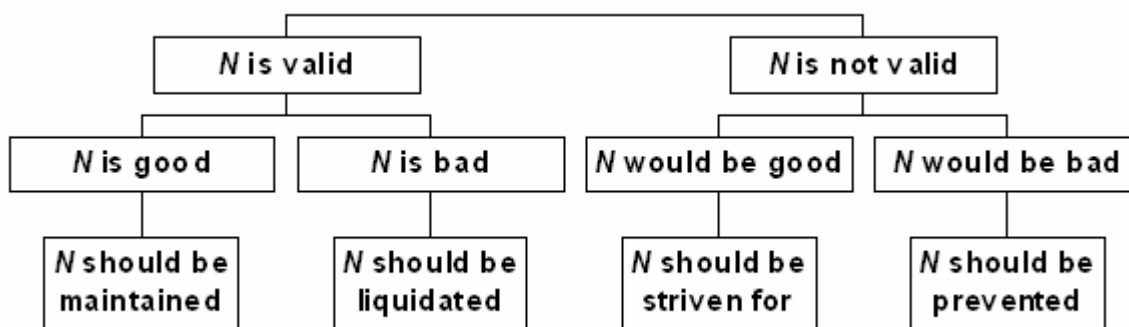
In May this year, at the Tenth Summer School of the Russian State University for the Humanities, I tested the applicability of the classification against the Russian proverbial material (see at http://www.folklore.ee/~kriku/MOSKVA/Moskva2010_Provstruct.ppt).

My today’s presentation here in Tavira aims, as a next step, to check the working capabilities of the classification against another large stock of material – “A Dictionary of American Proverbs” by Wolfgang Mieder.

The source material of my Estonian test came from the Estonian Folklore Archives (to be more precise, ab. 13 000 “heading texts” of proverb types in the academic edition of Estonian proverbs constituted the immediate object of my research). As the Russian source, I used the well-known edition by Vladimir Dal “Пословицы русского народа” (the printing of 1957) containing ab 32 000 texts of proverbs and proverbial phrases, plus a certain number of riddles). In Mieder’s Dictionary the material is organised alphabetically by keywords, with a numbered list of typological entries (proverb types) under each keyword and the list of different wording variants of texts belonging to the given proverb type (mostly a single one, but sometimes up to 20). Some entries are duplicated under two (sometimes even in three) different keywords. According to my calculations, the number on typological entries in Mieder’s book is 14 447, the total number of single texts (including repetitions) – 18 412, and the actual number of single texts without repetitions – 17 608.

My attempt was based on the following theoretical beliefs.

1. Proverbs formulate certain (ethical, social, household- and agriculture-bound, medical etc.) empirical laws, rules and regularities, that is, as to their logical nature, proverbs can be considered as generalised implications.
2. The communicative structure of proverbs as tools for conveying folkloric didactics thus involves three basic levels of linguistic modalities: indicative (stating, assertoric), evaluative (appraisive, axiological), and imperative (prescriptive, deontic). On the cognitive level, the pragmatic, behaviour-directing functioning of proverbs can be explained by the so-called tree of optative strategies:



3. The structural levels of proverbs reveal versatile and complicated mutual relatedness, and just parallelism capable of constituting itself on whatever structural (euphonic, morphological and syntactic, as well as lexico-semantic) level plays a very important role in the structural composition of proverbs, in connecting the various levels of its form and content. The well-known striving towards the syntactic symmetry is perhaps the most salient expression of parallelism in proverbs.

Due to that, proverbs with productive formulae (*He*) *who... that, Where... there, When... then, If... then* etc. come to look like certain “causal implications” with equipotent, syntactically and morphologically coordinated, similar antecedents and consequents, not complex sentences consisting of independent and subordinate clauses (that is, parts of different levels), as they are considered in the linguistic grammar:

Who give to the poor lends to God (poor (n.) 2)

Where the needle goes, the thread follows (needle 3; thread 5)

When the night is darkest, dawn's nearest (dark (adj.) 2)

If the mountain won't come to Mohammed, Mohammed will go to the mountain (Mohammed)

The basic implicative level of a proverb (be it embodied in symmetrical components of a complex sentence, in an equative sentence connecting two nouns by the copula *is*, or read out indirectly from semantic relationships between the subject and verbal predicate of simple sentences with externally non-symmetric structure) can be superimposed with another component creating analogies, contradictions or other relationships between the two or more basic level components and thus constituting a secondary parallelistic-symmetrical “higher level” of the structure of a proverb:

Money lost, nothing lost; courage lost, much lost; honor lost, more lost; soul lost, all lost (money 48)

A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in a little thing is a big thing (faithfulness 1)

A father's a treasure; a brother's a comfort; a friend is both (father 1)

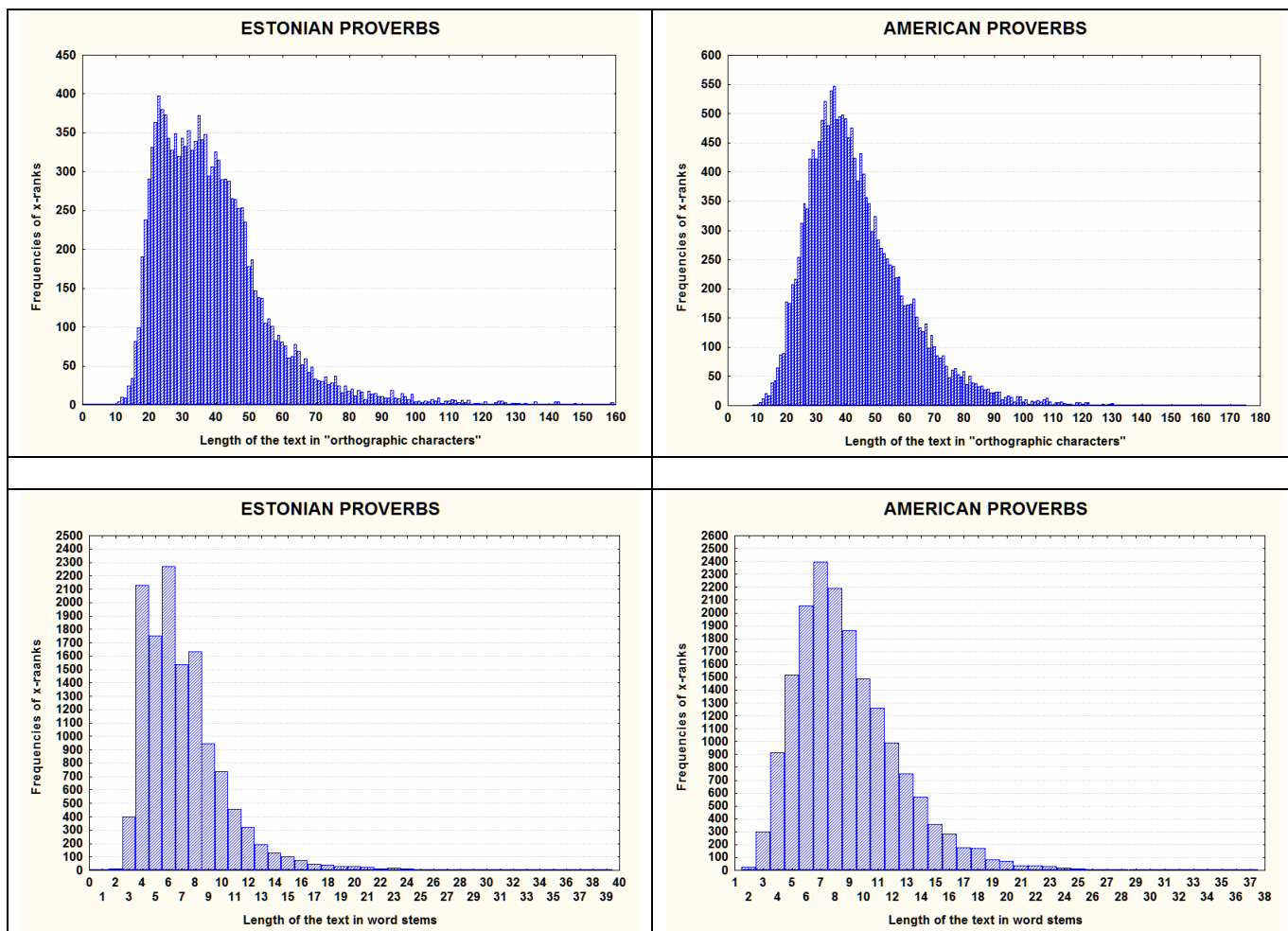
Little children step on your toes; big children step on your heart (children 20)

It is a good horse that never stumbles, and a good wife that never grumbles (horse 45)

It's easy to die right, but it's hard to live right (die (v.) 9; right (adv.) 6)

In proverbs of different languages, the tendencies of symmetry and parallelism have different strength and regularity. They are detectable in American proverbs, notably stronger in Russian proverbs, and very salient in Estonian proverbs (as in proverbs of most Finnic peoples in general where parallelism is one of the main constitutive features of the so-called Kalevala-form which originates from runic songs whence it has generalised to other formulaic genres as well).

Let us look at distributions of Estonian and American proverb text lengths measured in “orthographic characters” (the pair of graphs above) and in word stems (the graph below).



By and large, all the four graphs reveal a distribution, close to log-normal. However, when both American distributions are almost ideally smooth, Estonian proverbs with an even number of word stems (4, 6 and 8) notably exceed and those with an odd number (3, 5, 7) of stems notably fall behind the expected frequencies for the given x-ranks, and the strange concave top of the Estonian character distribution probably reflects somehow that unevenness.

According to Matti Kuusi (e.g. *Proverbium* 5 (1966)), all lexical constituents of the proverb text can be divided into four types: kernel elements (*Kernelemente*), formula elements (*Formelelemente*), extending or repetition elements (*Parallelelemente*) and filling elements (*Füllelemente*). Kernel elements are the words bearing the basic (literal and/or figurative) content of the proverb. Formula elements are stereotypical words or word units that refer to the logical and syntactic structure of the text (in addition to those listed above, e.g., ‘Better... than...’, ‘X is the Y of Z’, ‘Everybody / Nobody can...’, ‘Never ~ Don’t [+ imperative verb]’, etc.). Repetition elements are one kind of parallelistic tools mentioned above that are used for building up “supra-implicative” analogies, oppositions or other types of juxtaposition (sometimes via the linking of two different proverbs together).

A list or classification of stereotypical form patterns in proverbs can, of course, proceed from different views and assumptions on the topic. Anyway, any attempt of this kind should probably rely on some lexically manifested “props”, otherwise it could turn out to be too “content-bound” and arbitrary. Therefore the mere number of simple sentences practically consisting of mere “kernel elements” without any lexically explicit formal “stepstones” appeared the most difficult part of the material to process – to conceptualise their verbless subjects as antecedents of causal premise-conclusion structures, to find relevant implicit features to group sentences together, etc. In all three materials I found in fact only one productive pattern of (sometimes synonymous) proverbs with explicit and clearcut formulae – ‘Every X has his ~ its (own) Y’; ‘There is no X without Y’, e.g.:

There is an exception to every rule ~ There is no rule without an exception ~ The exception proves the rule (exception)

Every rose has its thorn ~ There are no roses without thorns (rose 7)

A good garden always has weeds ~ No garden without its weeds (garden 1)

Each Jack shall have his Jill (Jack 2) ~ There’s never a Jack without a Jill (Jack 6)

and ‘X is ~ may be known ~ You can(not) tell... ~ ... X by Y’, sometimes varying with symmetric implicative formulae ‘(Such) as X, such ~ so Y’:

A tree is known by its fruit ~ Such as the tree is, so is the fruit (tree 9)

In my preliminary Estonian version and in the Russian test the rest of simple sentences were almost totally left out of classification, In my present attempt with American material I made certain desperate efforts to group together sentences with nominal predicatives of the object and verbs expressing, for example, causing, conducting, enabling (*makes, breeds, begets, brings, gives, leads to, is followed by*); assuming, needing (*needs, wants, takes... to...*), getting, reaching (*gets, gathers, catches, finds*), knowing, identifying, believing (*can(not) know ~ tell by..., thinks*), fearing, avoiding (*fears, dreads, keeps away from...*), and also some other constructions, e.g. identifiable in proverbs of many languages with formulae *is worth of...*, etc.

Admittedly, however, the results of those efforts should be regarded quite questionable: most of the groups I got in this way remained considerably small and structurally blurred.

However, as some of such sentences appeared structurally very close to the proverbs with *is*-copula and nominal predicatives of the subject which I grouped together as “Generalising equalities”, I included some more productive groups of them into my classification.

Besides “totally kernel” simple sentences, there is another productive group – elliptic proverbs that are also lacking any explicit (adverbial, conjunctive or other) formula elements, which are easy to recognise by their ideally symmetric structure and shortness (most usually, 2+2 words), but whose actual communicative structure is often hard to specify, or it remains arbitrary, or altogether unreachable for a contextless approach. Most likely, such ellipses are naturally interpretable as implicative causal expressions:

Ale in, wit out (ale 2)

Always late, never succeed (late 1)

Bad bird, bad eggs (bird 10)

Big talker, little doer (talker 2)

Calf eyes, calf love (eye 8)

Cold nose, healthy dog (nose 2)

Cookie today, crumb tomorrow (cookie)

Earlier wed, sooner dead (wed)

Early ripe, early rotten (ripe 1)

Easy come, easy go (easy (adv.) 1)
Evil gotten, evil spent (evil (adv.); get 3)
First come, first served (first (n.) 2)
Friday begun, never done (Friday 3)
Hot summer, cold winter (summer)
Late children, early orphans (children 17)
Like father, like son (father 10)
Long hair, little brains (hair 12)
Much profit, much risk (profit (n.) 3)
Once burnt, twice shy (burned 1)

but sometimes also as supraindicative parallelistic compounds of two simple sentences:

Beauty vanishes; virtue endures (beauty 32)
Man proposes, God disposes (man 146)
Men meet, mountains never (man 167)

or as various kinds of imperatives:

Aim high, time flies (aim (v.) 3)
Be brave, not ferocious (brave (adj.) 1)
Deliberate slowly; execute promptly (deliberate 2)
First creep, then go (creep 2)
Haste not, rest not (haste 6)
Hit first; talk afterwards (hit (v.) 2)
Love all, trust few (love (v.) 8)
Praise publicly; blame privately (praise (v.) 2)
Read carefully; sign cautiously (read 2)
Speak little; do much (speak 14)
Talk less; listen more (talk (v.) 12)
Trust not, tempt not (trust (v.) 9)

or as not-generalising proverbial phrases (i.e. figurative descriptions of contradictory, paradoxical or otherwise impressive objects, situations and events):

After death, the doctor (death 1)
Big head, little sense (head 10)
Closely gathered, widely scattered (gather)
Fair face, foul heart (face (n.) 3)
Great boast, small roast (boast (n.))
Here today, gone tomorrow (today 3)
Nothing ventured, nothing won (venture 4)

A minimally short proverb must consist of at least two words. A proverb of such minimal length hardly has any space for formal elements and the two words should be, most likely, the subject and verbal predicate of a simple indicative sentence. In Mieder's book, I found 21 two-word proverbs which, to my big surprise, exhibited quite a big variety of different forms.

Only 11 of them indeed turned out to be simple indicative sentences:

Courtesy pays (courtesy 14)
Extremes meet (extreme 1)
Figures lie (figure 3)
Honesty pays (honesty 8)
Money speaks (money 60)
Money talks (money 60)
Opposites attract (opposite)
Patience conquers (patience 9)
Quality shows (quality 5)
Tastes differ (taste (n.) 5)
Time flies (time 63)

But among them there were also 5 representatives of the above-mentioned elliptic structures:

Forewarned, forearmed (forewarned)
Unknown, unkissed (unknown 3)
Unknown, unmissed (unknown 4)
Unminded, unmoaned (unminded)

Unseen, unrued (unseen)

The selection also included 4 imperative sentences:

Be yourself (be 2; yourself 1)

Conquer yourself (yourself 2)

Know thyself (know 19)

Shun wickedness (wickedness 1)

and one verbless slogan-like expression with imperative content:

Safety first (safety 1)

Let me also say a couple of words about quantifying words and formulae in proverbs. I am continually convinced that the proverbial logic is not the usual bivalent logic operating with two absolute opposite points ‘always’ and ‘never’, and with an immense indefinite “field of existence” between them. Rather, it is a peculiar “center-fixed” logic that qualifies events and causal relationships as belonging to the higher or lower than 50:50 degree of probability. Therefore I have desisted from basing my form groups on “natural quantifiers” often occurring in proverbs, like absolutising *always, every, everything, everybody / never, no, nothing, nobody*, or those denoting various in-between degrees of probability either stressing “upward” or “downward” shift of probability (*many, often, easily / few, seldom, rarely, hardly*), or marking some indefinitely neutral degree of probability (*some*). Depending on the concrete context and illocutive intent of the sayer, those “somewhat shifted” quantifiers can gravitate towards the opposite direction as well: ‘often, but not necessarily’, ‘seldom, but not never’, etc.

There is a special type of quantification worthy of closer examination and often met in proverbs – I mean sentences about “borderline cases” where something or somebody is excluded from or included into the “normal group” of objects via formulae *all... except ~ but* or quantifiers *even* and *only*, e.g. *Nothing can sit still and make a profit except a hen* (hen 18; profit (n.) 5); *Even a flea can bite* (flea 3); *Only in the grave is there rest* (grave 2), and the like. Such proverbs seem to imply more real quantification than the rest of “fuzzy” quantifiers listed above, and for a moment I cherished the hope to base some of my groups on these formulae and words, but as they often appeared to compete with other, more relevant criteria of classifying, I dropped the intent.

Grammatically, proverbs are, as a rule, indicative or imperative sentences. But the final pragmatic (communicative) end of them (as of any other utterances of verbal communication) is to canalize and direct somehow the internal mental stance and/or external behaviour of dialogue partners.

The traffic from indicative prognostic assertions to their implicit directive connotation or from explicit directives to their possible rational arguments and explanations is mediated by axiologic judgements (remember the above graph of optative strategies).

The mediating evaluative move is usually implicit, it finds its clearcut external manifestation primarily in a very productive comparative formula *Better... than...*, also in non-productive formula *The best way to* [do something]..., in the tendency to have evaluative antecedents in reverse-ordered symmetric implications beginning with the consequential component, for example, in those with *Who ~ What... that...* etc. formulae:

He is a good preacher who follows his own preaching (preacher 3)

It is a good horse who never stumbles (horse 45)

It's a good story that fills the belly (story 2)

He is not a good soldier who fights with his tongue (soldier 8)

He's an ill cook that can't lick his own fingers (cook (n.) 5)

It is a bad cloth indeed that will take no color (cloth 2)

It's a bad wind that never changes (wind 10)

However, synonymy between the proverbs with (evaluative-)indicative and directive consequents (be they expressed via grammatical imperatives or indicatives with *has to, must, should (not)* etc.) is very customary. For example, *if*-implications (and other kinds of implicative structures) may have indicative-prognostic as well as imperative consequents.

An indicative consequent is, as a rule, axiologically “loaded”, i.e. understood either as “bonuses”, that is, to imply positive appraisals and suggestions regarding the action or situation in the antecedent, e.g.:

If luck is with you, even your ox will give birth to a calf (luck 14)

If one gets over the dog, one gets over the tail (dog 69)

If the owner keeps his eye on the horse, it will fatten (horse 39)

or (much more often) as a “penalty”, and thus imply negative appraisals and warnings or interdicts concerning the actions in the antecedent:

If a man once falls, all will tread on him (fall (v.) 3)

If we go with the wind, we shall soon be gone with the wind (wind 7)
If we tell untruths, no one will believe us even when we do speak the truth (truth 12)
If you buy everything, the result will be that you sell everything (buy (v.) 5)
If you dig a pit for someone else, you fall into it yourself(pit)
If you curse others, you will be cursed (curse (v.) 1)

If-imperatives can result in direct ordering ~ suggesting / warning ~ forbidding consequents as well:

If you feather your own nest, sleep in it (nest 3)
If the cap fits, put it on (cap)
If you can't be the sun, be a star (sun 5)
If you want the truth, ask a child (truth 13)
If you want knowledge, you must toil for it (knowledge 9)
If they ask you for cabbages, don't give them peas (cabbage (n.))
If it is a secret, don't tell it to a woman (secret (n.) 7)
If you talk with a hog, don't expect anything but a grunt (hog (n.) 3)
If you want to keep a friend, never borrow, never lend (friend 110)
If you can't help, don't hinder (help (v.) 3)

Or both, in parallelistic forms:

If you drive, don't drink; if you drink, don't drive (drive 2)
If you drive, don't drink; if you drink, don't drive (drive 2)
If rich, be not elated; if poor, be not dejected (rich (adj.) 20)

It is a well-known fact that one and the same proverbial idea can be expressed in a number of different ways. It concerns not only varying of figurative and other "kernel" elements, but also the logical and syntactic structure of texts. That is, many formula patterns of proverbs are deeply synonymous.

Different forms of imperative formulae may vary in one and the same directive proverb, and directives may interchange with assertions:

Let every tub stand on its own bottom
Every tub has to stand on its own bottom
Every tub must stand ~ set ~ sit on its own bottom
Every tub ought to stand on its own bottom
Every tub should stand ~ rest on its own bottom
Every tub stands ~ sits on its own bottom
(tub 2)

Variation of a proverb can involve different kinds of symmetric implications :

When cobwebs grow, no love goes
Where cobwebs grow, beaux never go
(cobweb)
He who chases two hares catches neither
If you choose two hares, both will escape you
(hare 4)

It can involve different kinds of symmetric implications:

If you lie down with dogs, you'll get up with fleas
He who goes to bed with dogs wakes up with fleas

plus syntactically indefinite ellipses:

Lay down with dogs, get up with fleas

plus substitution of indicative forms with *must*-imperatives or ironical jussive imperatives:

If you lie down with dogs, you must expect to get up with fleas
Lie down with dogs, you're liable to get up with fleas
(dog 71)

Simple and complex sentences and/or indicative and imperative sentences can interchange in many ways, e.g.:

One can't play with fire without being burned
He who plays with fire could get burned
People who play with fire always get burned
If you play with fire, you are bound to get burned

Don't play with fire
Play with fire and you'll get burned
(fire 16)

And so on, and so on, in a huge lot of various combinations

My present attempt at classification as a classification of single texts, unfortunately, does not allow to follow such kind of formal synonymy of proverbs, although it is perhaps the most intriguing and auspicious aspect of such kind of research.

I would like to draw your special attention to one particularly interesting cluster of proverbs that I have called Generalising equalities and comparisons, very productive in all the three materials I have hitherto studied. From the rhetorical point of view, they are equality-formed nominal metaphors or comparisons. Such structures, being grammatically a kind of simple sentences, can occur in various modifications and are in close relationships with more complex sentence structures.

1. For example, they can take the form of 'X is ~ are X' form quasi-tautologies:

Business is business (business 5)
Enough is enough (enough 3)
Facts are facts (fact 4)
Orders are orders (order (command) 2)
Pigs are pigs (pig 10)
Boys will be boys (boy 14)

2. They can be just 'X is Y' form sentences without any additional components:

Art is power (art 10)
Character is destiny (character 5)
Content is happiness (happiness 3)
Finding is keeping (finding)
Health is wealth (health 13)
Knowing is power (knowing 2)
Money is power (money 40)

3. They can be equalities or comparisons with various additional components (attributes, adverbials etc.) in the subject and/or predicative part of the sentence:

A dollar saved is a dollar earned (dollar 4)
A friend married is a friend lost (friend 18)
A good friend is a great treasure (friend 24)
A knave discovered is the greatest fool (knave 1)
A hungry man is an angry man (hungry (adj.) 2)

4. They can assume parallelistic forms like '[A man ~] without X is (like) Y without Z':

A man without a country is like a man without a soul (man 44)
A man without a religion is a horse without a bridle (man 45)
A man without a woman is like a ship without a sail (man 46)
A man without ambition is like a woman without beauty (man 47)
A man without books is like a king without money (book 8; man 48)
A man without money is like a ship without a sail (man 49)

5. They can have a form of exaggerating equations 'X is half ~ double ~ ... Y' or the like:

A good beginning is half the task (beginning 2; task 3)
Good arms are half the battle (arms 3)
A gift with a kind word is a double gift (gift 4)
A little is a big percent on nothing (little (n.) 3)
Three moves are as bad as a fire (move)

6. Very productive are forms "with the absent fourth", i.e. 'X is Y of Z'

(for the fuller list of XYZ- and other personifications involving kinship terms see Actas ICP Proceedings, pp. 54 ff.):

7. They can get the form of "definitions, i.e. 'X is Y who...' (followed by various subordinate clauses):

A diplomat is a person who can tell you to go to the devil so pleasantly that you are raring to go
(diplomat 2)
A friend is a present you give yourself (friend 10)
A hypocrite is one who feeds a starving man words (hypocrite 3)
A lady is a woman who makes it easy for a man to be a gentleman (lady 1)

A broker is a man who runs your fortune into a shoestring (broker)

8. They can have the form of ‘*X* is (like) *Y*’-initiated sentences with their common feature (and difference) made explicit in the following part of the sentence:

A lie is like a snowball: the farther you roll it, the bigger it becomes (lie (n.) 6)

A boy is like a fountain--useful as long as there's something in him (boy 4)

A broken heart is like broken china: we can mend it, but we can never erase the scars (heart 3)

Love is a deep well: a man may drink from it often, but he falls into it only once (love (n.) 41)

or the form of a simple sentence where two or three comparable nouns are presented as recurrent subjects of the sentence, followed again by three predicates explaining their similarity or common feature:

A dog's nose and a maid's knee are always cold (dog 24)

A drunk man and a sleepwalker never get hurt when they fall (drunk 1)

Good health and good sense are two of life's greatest blessings (health 6)

A dog, a woman, and a walnut tree: the more they're beat, the better they be (dog 8)

9. The common denominator of a longer list of objects can be expressed in the beginning of the sentence explicitly through numerals, for example, “three things ~ needs ~ virtues ~ ...”, followed by the list of the objects themselves (this structural pattern is extremely productive in German proverbs on “zwei Dinge”, “drei Dinge”, “vier Dinge” etc.):

A field has three needs: good weather, good seed, and a good husbandman (field 2)

A great war leaves the country with three armies: an army of cripples, an army of mourners, and an army of thieves (war 1)

Early to rise has virtues three: 'tis healthy, wealthy, and Godly (early (adv.) 2)

Providence requires three things of us before it will help us: a stout heart, a strong arm, and a stiff upper lip (providence 7)

Three things drive a man out of his home: smoke, rain, and a scolding wife (thing 41)

Three types of people in the world: those who have wishbones, those who have funny bones, and those who have backbones (people 39)

And finally, there are some exceptional formal groups in all three materials I have hitherto dealt with:

1. Texts in a non-generalised form logically exceptional for proverbs ‘Not all *X* are *Y*’ etc. perceivable as partial negation:

All that glitters is not gold (all 12; gold 2)

All are not braggarts that blow the horn (braggart 1)

All are not thieves that dogs bark at (thief 4)

2. Jussive “ironical imperatives” that are sometimes difficult to distinguish from normal “serious” imperatives, or proverbs on irresultative attempts and efforts that turned out to be surprisingly productive in Russian proverbs (i.e. in those beginning with formulae *Где ни...*, *Куда ни...*, *Как ни...*, *Каков ни...*, *Кто ни...*, *Что ни...*, *За что ни...*, *Сколько ни...*, etc.). We met with American jussives in some previous series of examples.

3. So-called counterfactuals, or “conditional *if*-implications”, not very productive in Estonian, more productive in American and very productive, again, in the Russian tradition:

If a pig had wings he might fly (pig 8)

If idiocy were pain, there would be groaning in every house (idiocy)

If the beard were all, the goat might preach (beard 2)

If the dog hadn't stopped to shit, he would have caught the rabbit (dog 70)

If wishes were horses, beggars might ride (wish (n.) 2)

4. Rhetorical questions, quite rare in Mieder’s collection, e.g.:

All are good girls, but where do the bad wives come from? (girl 5)

Cleanliness is godliness, so why go to church? (cleanliness 1)

How could we measure the ups in life if it weren't for the downs? (up 3)

Of what good are tools if allowed to rust? (tool 3)

The early bird catches the worm--but who wants worms? (bird 28)

What greater crime than loss of time? (crime 16)

What weapon has the lion but himself? (weapon)

What's the good of a fair apple if it has a worm in its heart? (apple 22)

I even found in Mieder a unit of the counterfactual and the rhetorical question:

Is a woman ever satisfied? No, if she were she wouldn't be a woman (woman 43)