PROVERBS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Laura IONICĂ*

Abstract*: Proverbs stand for relevant tools of communication in the contemporary society and their interpretation and usage usually provide valuable material for cross-cultural studies. Any culture can be partly known by means of proverbs. They highlight both culture diversity and patterns of values that a nation inherits from one generation to another. The present paper aims at interpreting proverbs as a set of mental windows through which infinite sources of wisdom flow continuously. Their role in shaping society and their contribution to the cultural heritage are also important points in the study to follow.*

Keywords*: communication, culture diversity, mental windows.*

The first writings of mankind were marked by the spontaneous penetration of proverbs into the mass of the vocabulary. Proverbs have a long existence, being according to Herodotus *wise teachings* or *the voice of gods and wise men.* As profound forms of thinking, having a millenary presence, proverbs have entered the folk language of fundamental works such as the Odyssey, the Iliad or the Bible. Chronicles, religious books and old translations abound in proverbs, considered perpetual communicating vessels, with a special stylistics. The present study aims at a contrastive approach of proverbs in Romanian and English, two cultures strongly influenced by the presence of proverbs. As echoes of socio-cultural experience, proverbs conserve ideally living practices in a true source of wisdom. Beyond their role of teaching, the proverbs in Romanian and English are solid rules of conduct, legal and religious norms, marking the unwritten code of these societies.

Defining proverbs

There have been some debates in terms of the word definition, since it is difficult to provide a universal explanation of proverbs due to its syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects. According to Mieder, a proverb is *a short generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation* (2004:3). *Dexonline.ro* provides the following definition: *A short phrase, sometimes rhymed, through which the people express metaphorically and suggestively the result of a long life experience, points to a conclusion and some advice with an emphasizing moral nuance.* In addition to different dictionary based definitions, proverbs are said to include three important elements: shortness, conciseness and salt. They are short sentences which provide a sense and a moral lesson.

* University of Pitesti, lauraionica1976@yahoo.com

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However, Mieder and Lewandowska state that *proverbs can stand for themselves and can be regarded as independent micro texts* (2008:41). They make their way relying on their own merits, because they have become active part of our lives and remain unchanged, even if collective memory seems to have forgotten their meaning. Most of the definitions highlight the idea that the content of proverbs is generally metaphorical and perfectly adaptable to different human experiences throughout the history. With a strong moralizing force, proverbs offer a constant and sometimes contradictory diversity of the world we live in: *Corb la corb nu-și scoate ochii, Cine sapă groapa altuia, cade singur în ea, Cine pe altul cinstește pe sine se omenește* etc.

The works of the great Romanian and English writers and poets: Anton Pan, Ion Creangă, Costache Negruzzi, Mihai Eminescu, Coleridge, Shakespeare abound in proverbs that capture the world in its totality, both in the context of consciousness and morality. Shakespeare's plays *Measure for measure, All is well that ends well* are scattered with witty proverbs meant to give a new artistic dimension to his writing. Beyond the metaphorical, abstract meaning, there is a concrete meaning, with unexpected effects that awaken emotions among readers: *Linge mierea de pe degete, dar să nu le rozi.* Despite writers' zeal for proverbs, there were times in the English culture when folk wisdom was not ranked as deserved, due to the emphasis on rational thinking and empirical evidence. The Elizabethan period was marked by representation of proverbs as ornamental elements on different objects. Avoidance of the word *proverb* occurred during John Locke's publication of *Essay concerning human understanding*. Proverbs were eliminated from language and replaced by new values specific to those times. However, they remained basic elements in the politicians' speeches, advertisements or films.

In Romanian, proverbs highlight both a positive and a negative side, creating a subtle play on words by using irony or satire. The Romanian proverbs are emotional, stir up the critical spirit and provide a special expressiveness through the contextual valences they create. Both Romanian and English cultures represent an inexhaustible source of multiple meanings rendered by proverbs. The whole range of tropes: comparison, repetition, personification, epithet, metaphor are found in the arsenal of artistic expression: *Vremea râde, vremea plânge, Gardul are ochi și zidul urechi, Ban la ban trage, Din omul bun, bun lucru iese, A fool and his money are soon parted* etc.

These figures of speech give plasticity to the spoken language. The nuances of words or the syntactic inversion highlight the multitude of expressive potentials of the language.

Range of topics in proverbs

As a diversified cultural material, a clear classification of proverbs is difficult to accomplish, due to the multitude of themes they encompass. I.A. Zanne proposed a system of eight categories which proved insufficient to comprise all classes. The constitutive elements of a proverb may be dispersed and attached to several common themes. Therefore, Negreanu 1983:39 recalls the need of a conceptual field in order to cover major areas of concepts that proverbs encompass. Major themes such as *truth, honesty, courage, emotion,*

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education, friendship, imagination or *intelligence* underlie a classification as relevant as possible for the study of the language.

For the present study I propose the analysis of two themes commonly found in the Romanian and English proverbs: *education and truth*. Both Romanian and English cultures have grounded their perception of life and world on complex concepts such as *truth, honour, education,* etc. Each of the proverbs about *education* and *truth* are springs of wisdom, each of which contains a key word that man applies to everyday life.

Here are eloquent examples of such proverbs: *Învățătura este o comoară care-și urmează posesorul oriunde, Cu învățătura omul nu moare de foame, Omului cu învățătură îi curge miere din gură, Învață plângând și vei câștiga râzând, Unde școala se ivește, pământul se îmbogățește, Omul cât trăiește învață și tot moare neînvățat, Ce înveți la tinerețe știi și la bătrânețe* etc.

A profound analysis of these proverbs reveals not only their didactic spirit, but also their continuity and universality. The comparison with *o comoară*, the presence of the rhyme, the antinomic structures *plangând – râzând*, *tinerețe – bătrânețe* highlight an expressive language, and the richness of learning as a tool for human development, and evolution.

The concrete language *Învățătura este cea mai bună avuție* or metaphorical, abstract language *Cine nu știe potecile, nu știe nici drumul mare* equally emphasizes the importance and role of education in life. Enlightenment opens the mind, protects from dangers and reveals to man the sinuous ways of life. Those lacking education fall prey to failure and are incapable of finding practical solutions to existential problems. The following proverb bears witness to the above-mentioned idea: *Învățătura mintea îmbogățește, iar neștiința o sărăcește.*

Learning and wisdom with their multiple facets polarize dozens of proverbs that underline the strength and transformational ability of our peers, according to *Ochii înțeleptului văd mai departe*. Proverbs about learning sometimes reveal a negative aspect in a satirical structure such as *Știe carte până la genunchii broaștei*. This proverb found in Creangă's *Memories of Childhood* reflects the lack of knowledge or its scarcity.

The theme of *truth* is equally rich in the paremiological units, representing a permanently valid, universal and fundamental concept for any culture of the world. *Truth* in contrast to *lying* has always been a living concept from the ancient world to the present days. The customs of the community have always taken into account the principles of life based on truth and honesty, all human facts being analyzed according to these principles. Proverbs based on the concept of *truth* have become indispensable moral guidelines for family, school, and society. Such proverbs as: *Minciuna are picioare scurte, Nu toate adevărurile se pot spune, Adevărul este realitatea simțurilor, Esența pură a adevărului nu moare niciodată, Adevărul e recomandat pentru că servește vieții, Adevărul este începutul marii virtuți, A constata un adevăr nu înseamnă să urăști pe cineva* reveal an inner world of human reactions to major life topics. *Truth* is a vital bridge between body and spirit. By acting on the *truth*, man can create a strong connection not only with himself but also with the universe he is part of. *Truth* itself has a strong symbolic charge and is a key element to our social behaviour.

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The lack of *truth* creates confusion and disbelief, and the one who turns *the lie* into an instrument of misinformation and manipulation will lose the meaning for which he was created. Irrespective of the theme a proverb addresses, the Romanian language is a huge source of wisdom, good advice and moral conduct, and validity of proverbs has remained unchanged until today. If other cultures such as the English, Irish, or Muslims have rediscovered new ancient proverbs, and adapted them to modern times, the Romanian people retained the simplicity of proverbial words, their emotional charge remaining the same from one generation to another.

Romanian proverbs are understandable both at the level of the structure and in terms of stylistics of the separate elements, compared to the English culture that provides a wide range of complex paremiological structures, whose general meaning is difficult to decipher. Most English proverbs involve a metaphorical sense. Metaphorical proverbs say more than the sum of the words they contain and are generally misunderstood and misinterpreted by non-native speakers: *A false tongue will hardly speak the truth*, *Favour will as surely perish as life, Pride feels no pain*, *A rolling stone gathers no moss* etc. Their interpretation triggers some knowledge deeply rooted into the culture they belong to. Figurative proverbs contain vivid and complicated images which can be applied to a wider range of situations demanding various degrees or stages of comprehension (Rapp and Schmierer 2010: 422).

Most of the themes applied to the Romanian culture can be found in the English culture, although equivalence is sometimes difficult to establish. The English proverb *Art is long, life is short*, whose Romanian equivalent is *Omul învață cât trăiește și tot moare neînvățat*, seems to be concise and uses much fewer words than in the Romanian culture. *Art* is associated with learning and gets a metaphorical meaning, while *life* stands for the time span during which a man acquires knowledge and develops himself.

A belly full of gluttony will never study willingly (Rom. equivalent *Burta plină nu învață bine*) introduces a rhyme and an antonymic structure *gluttony-willingly*) in order to provide language with a specific style. The well-known proverb *Better unborn than untaught* (Rom. equivalent *Ai carte ai parte, n-ai carte n-ai parte*), is better emphasized in English. The adjective *unborn* receives a stronger negative connotation than in Romanian and reveals the major role of learning in life evolution.

The special word order or the use of repetition creates an expressive language, with a strong emphasis on the key words. Such is the case of *He that nothing questions nothing learns* (Rom. equivalent *Întrebarea moarte n-are*), *From hearing comes wisdom from speaking repentance* (Rom. equivalent *Cine nu ascultă nu învață*). The presence of the biblical terms *wisdom, repentance* generates a deep meaning to learning. Those lacking education will finally stand the consequences of their actions, translated into repentance.

Truth stands for another life principle whose role in everyday actions is unquestionable and compulsory. Similar to Romanian culture which abounds in truth-based sayings, the English arsenal of proverbs about truth are full of morality and insights into human psychology. Such proverbs as *All truths are not to be told* (Rom. Nu toate adevărurile se pot spune), *If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything* (Rom. Dacă spui adevărul nu trebuie să-ți amintești nimic), *Truth will come to light* (Rom.

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Adevărul iese întotdeauna la iveală), etc. shape a true psychology of the human being who generally build its life on strong principles of moral conduct.

There seems to be no major difference between Romanian and English proverbs in terms of connotations and nuances included. They all render the same ideas and triggers similar consequences. *Truth* is universally accepted as a dominant value of any culture and even if there is no absolute truth in the history of any society, at least it should become a starting point into our development.

Morality of proverbs

Most proverbs praise balance and mirror life in all its complexity. Not only do they illustrate history, customs, geography of different communities, but they also bring to light high levels of intelligence, ways of judgment, beliefs and profound senses of morality. Along with their moral usage, proverbs also have a social function, since they are regarded as "socially accepted formulations of convictions, values, and norms particular to a specific culture and era" (Burger, 2010: 107). Irrespective of their theme or purpose, words making up proverbs express insights into human psychology, peculiarities of a specific society and promote a better understanding of language.

Despite their brevity and preciseness, old sayings provide long-lasting life experiences and continue to shape and refine generation after generation. Any proverb has a lesson to teach and abound in folk wisdom, literature, poetry and all other levels of society. Regarded as the core of education, proverbs in their multitude of meanings prevail over family principles, school values or church canons.

On the other hand, they help to enhance the effectiveness of acquiring vocabulary and to improve language area expertise. Expressiveness of language arises from such proverbs as *Look before you leap* (Rom. Nu zice hop până n-ai sărit /Întâi gândește, apoi pornește), *Proseprity makes friends, adversity tries them* (Rom. Când îmi merge bine toți sunt cu mine, când îmi merge rău rămân numai eu), *Hope for the best, expect the worst* (Rom. Speră ce-i mai bine, dar așteaptă-te la ce e mai rău).

They concentrate profound truths about daily life and reflect some unique originality of the culture they belong to. The vigour, conciseness and deep morality of proverbs are key elements deeply rooted into the history of cultures. They have been implemented into the collective consciousness and remained intact throughout historical areas. Simplicity and beauty of proverbs expressing courage, strength, wisdom, mockery or wittiness are essential features of proverbs, these living mechanisms of nations that transcend time and space.

Conclusions

Proverbs and old sayings are inherent to any culture and stand for strong tools of communication. They do not only facilitate communication, but also helps to overcome language barriers. Besides illustrating ideas, they also reinforce arguments and deliver messages of advice, comfort, persuasion, consolation, inspiration etc. Their importance and prevailing role in any society are rendered by their large coverage, intensive use and

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richness of nuances they embed. All strata of society have always justified their existence based on the legacy of proverbs whose universality and uniqueness provide future generations with value and substantiality.

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