# SEMANTICS OF A FEW SIMPLE AND OFTEN USED WORDS IN BRITISH POPULAR WISDOM

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**Abstract**

The purpose (and the nourished ambition) of this brief paper could have been the ones of spotting the essential core of British popular wisdom, through the study we have attempted of the evolution of the senses taken by a few words which are very simple and very often made use of as well; our aim is also to illustrate this wisdom at its highest level of generality, because the words we have chosen bear no reference towards whatever precise profession, towards whatever determined period in time or towards whatever precisely constituted group of persons. A discreet and diffuse comparison with the Romanian popular wisdom is attempted, but only seen as a side-effect of its random reflection within the British experience. The eventually occurring differences between the two perspectives are pointed out.

**Key words**: *semantics, proverb, world, life, death*

**Résumé**

Le but (et l'ambition) de ce petit article auront été de surprendre l'essentiel de la sagesse populaire britannique, de par l'étude entreprise au sujet de l'évolution du sens de certains mots très simples et fort fréquemment usités; il s'agit aussi de saisir cette sagesse dans son niveau le plus haut de généralité, parce que lesdits mots ne renvoient point à un quelconque métier précis, ni à une période précise dans le temps ou à un quelconque groupe déterminé de personnes. Nous tentons une comparaison, discrète et diffuse, d'avec la sagesse populaire roumaine, mais cela seulement dans la mesure où cela est possible en tant qu'effet secondaire de sa réflexion aléatoire au-dedans de la sagesse britannique. Les différences pouvant apparaître entre les deux perspectives y sont soulignées.

**Mots-clé**: *sémantique, proverbe, monde, vie, mort*

British wit is universally acknowledged as being a *sui generis* creation, appreciated (or not) by various other cultures. Yet this kind of wit does express a special sensitivity (about which every British person does nourish the ambition of hiding it from his/her fellows and, perhaps, even from himself/herself but which is, in a silent way, reflected by the "serious" proverbs generated through popular wisdom. In this framework, usual and often made use of words acquire new significations, much more complex than the ones they might has throughout everyday life. The (ambitious) aim of this brief paper was an attempt to pinpoint the intrinsic nature of British popular wisdom *before whatever path of specialization*: a chosen domain, an elected period in time or a targeted group of persons. **I.** *world* (understood as: "hey sister world", that is to say as an object suitable for empirical perception): 1. *unique field* (but yet structured into successive levels) of the human individual's existence and action: *The world is a*

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*ladder for some to go up and some to go down* (p. 163)[1]. 2. *territory*, the main feature of which is to continuously represent a danger towards the human being; in order to survive, this latter has to be endowed with a large bunch of qualities, either by nature or acquired skills; it is pleasant for us to remark the similarity to a well-known quote from Ion Creangă, though the British context is different: *To travel through the world, it is necessary to have the mouth of a hog, the legs of a stag, the eyes of a falcon, the ears of an ass, the shoulders of a camel and the face of an ape and, moreover, a satchel full of money and patience* (p. 123). Yet, the British perspective is a lot more darkened. 3. *unstable conjecture*, the evolution of which might in no way be anticipated by the human being: *This world is unstable, so saith sage*; *therefore gather in time, ere thou fall into age* (p. 86); the nature of the danger is a social one, the expected evil does come, mostly, from one's fellows, while the solution which is foreseen is a continuous prudence, since even the acquired wealth might fade away like an illusion; the best thing to do is, ultimately, to gather coins into one's purse. 4. *realm of mediocrity*, the triumph of which becomes inevitable: *If you had all the wit in the world fools would fell you* (p. 12). Therefore, let us remark that fatality or predestination do act indeed, but pushing into one and only sense, namely towards trouble, and never towards the other sense, that would be the human being's content! 5. *realm of the social establishment*, which does prove itself to be much more ruthless than whatever among the ephemeral tyrants: *As good be out of the world as out of the fashion* (p. 133). This phenomenon has reached to such an overwhelming extent that, should he be endowed with an active intellect, any among the human beings should resent it as a suffocating burden. 6. *perpetuum mobile*: *Thus fareth the world, that one goeth up and another goeth down* (p. 88). The world as a whole is going through an internal Brownian movement, which depends upon each among its components, but is not at all obeying to some unique will that would be able (and might pretend) to rule over it. 7. *coherence*, for the functioning of which the respect vowed to a (minimal) bunch of norms proves to be absolutely necessary; they constitute the famous *common sense*: *In the world, who knows not to swim goes to the bottom* (p. 108); yet, this coherence owns an intrinsic abstract nature, that fundamentally differs from the phenomenon criticized above, that is to say from the pernicious almightiness of the day-by-day social establishment. 8. *physical realm* (consequently accessible through the simple empirical approach) where, yet, the intellectual assets of the human being exist and function at their best level; optimism does exist, but it acts a lot more silently than pessimism, which is favoured by being proclaimed loudly: *The gown is his that wears it and the world his that enjoys it* (p. 91); The possession of earthly welfare does preserve its importance, but the adequate response towards the whole amount of encountered adversities comes to be, for the individual, the *freely consented* adaptation to the circumstances of the moment he is going through. 9. *Love makes the world go round* (p. 116): with no direct pointing out towards the Christian principle, the idea is, yet, admitted that, for the world's going further, the human individual's *experienced feelings* are an essential and unavoidable power. 10. *It takes all sorts to make a world* (p. 12): the world's *equilibrium* is reached then maintained due, precisely, to the

[1] The proverb texts in English are cited from: Virgil Lefter, *Dictionar de proverbe englez-român*, Editura Ştiintifică, Bucuresti, 1974. Their above mentioned location through page numbers corresponds to the respective tome.

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diversity of the elements which come to aggregate it; yet, and this is a fundamental axiom, in order to acquire the wanted (and hardly sought for) knowledge, the only accurate modality is the direct and, consequently, empirical study through observation; should the British people not admit that, because it would too much hurt their pride, this method is highly Cartesian. **II.** *life*: 1. *good reputation*: (in a sense and with an intensity that are a lot more... vital than the simple and fluctuating trend of public opinion): *Take away my good name and take away my life* (p. 155); 2. *state of uniqueness* (there is no "other" life than the one carried on in the present days): *There is aye life for a living man* (p. 112); 3. *state of finitude*: *No man hath a lease of his own life*. (p. 129); 4. *supreme purpose* to be accomplished by a human individual: *He is unworthy of life that causes not life in another* (p. 112); 5. the most complicated of all *puzzles*: *Life is half spent before we know what it is* (p. 112); 6. *difficulty* to go through: *Life is not all beer and skittles* (p. 112); 7. (strictly) *terrestrial aggregate* (there is absolutely nothing within it that could pertain to another kind of spheres, whatever they might be): *Life is made up of little things* (p. 112); 8. *hope* (perhaps here we have the word's most important sense, because, under it, what carefully hides is optimism): *While there is life, there is hope* (p. 112); 9. *labyrinth*: *There is but one way to enter this life, but gates of death without number* (p. 53). Let us point out the fact that, once more, the consequence implied by this statement is that, after the physical death, there is nothing left. 10. *self-awareness*: *None so old that he hopes not for a year of life* (p. 132); 11. *luck* (unmerited, in most of cases; here rises, under a faked simplicity, the tough theological problem of the existing and concretely acting evil): *A handful of good life is better than a bushel of learning*; 12. *dialectical equilibrium* (situated beyond the current empirical facts, yet functioning as a natural intrinsic principle; here is the empirical visible form of the *universal constant* which acts in physics.): *The life of the wolf is the death of the lamb* (p. 109) or its counterpart (p. 53): *The death of wolves is the safety of the sheep*. 13. *continuity*: *Such a life, such a death* (p. 112) or either: *An ill life, an ill end* (p. 103); 14. *day-by-day living*: *Who more than he is worth doth spend, he makes a rope his life to end***,** as well as *Bread is the staff of life* (p.37); 15. *affective necessity*: *Life without a friend is death without a witness* (p. 81). 16. *Two things doth prolong thy life*: *a quiet heart and a loving wife* (p. 142). Straightly moralizing exhortations are, indeed, very rare, yet they continue to exist should we see them as errors in persuasion? **III.** *death* (acknowledged only as a physical and chronological end of the state of life, consequently lacking whatever metaphysical or supernatural insight): 1. (eternal) *social establishment*: *In life you loved me not, in death you bewail me* (p. 112) and also: *Speak well of the dead* (p. 152); 2. *status of physical immobility*: *Hares may pull dead lions by the beard* (p. 95); 3. *lack of efficiency*: *Dead men do not harm* (p. 53) or: *Dead dogs bark* (*bite*) *not* (idem), and, on the "positive" side: *A dead bee makes no honey* (p. 23); 4. *absence of discomforts*: *A dead mouse feels no cold* (p. 53); 5. *status of incapacity* (from action): *Sleep is the image of death* (p. 151); 6. *assumed attitude*: *We must live by the quick, not by the dead* (p. 113); 7. *absence of will* (that would enable action): *A living dog is better than a dead lion* (p. 114). British people view death as a simple fact, which is, simultaneously: natural, simple and easy to cope with. 8. *Men fear death as children to go in the dark* (p. 70), as well as: *Death is the grand leveller* (p. 53); 9. (ultimate) *certitude*: *Nothing so sure as death* (p. 130); 10. *means of random equilibrium*: *Old men go to death, death comes to young men* (p. 54), but yet: *Deaths foreseen come not* (*idem*); 11.

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*challenge*: *When age is jocund, it makes sport for death* (p. 10); 12. *pledge of honour*: *A fair death honours the whole life* (p. 67); 13. (*similarly*) *sui generis social rehabilitation*: *Death pays all debts* (p. 53); 14. *principle of relativity*: *One man's breath, another's death* (p. 37); 15. *juridical limit* of life: *He that gives his goods before he be dead, take up a mallet and knock him on the head* (p. 87) – even if the style procedure employed should be an antiphrase; 16. get-rich-quick procedure (yet an occasion for ruthlessly corrosive satire): *He goes long barefoot that wears dead men's shoes* (p. 20). **IV.** *happiness* (yet bearing unexpected and profound nuances): 1. *untouchable ideal*: *Call no man happy till he dies* (p. 95); 2. *unpredictable* (and also unretainable) *climax*: *Better be happy than wise* (p. 27); 3. (simple) *satisfaction*: *Content is happiness* (p. 46). Happiness is, indeed, possible in our earthly and mortal condition, should we only give up the claims about its degree of intensity. 4. *caution*: *He is happy whom other men's perils make wary* (p. 95). So there are, yet, means through which happiness might be constructed on purpose. But they are not at all kindred to the American "positive thinking. 5. *family*: *Happy is he that is happy in his children* (*idem*); 6. *status of grace*: *Happiness takes no account of time* (p. 94). But bearing no "upper" grounds, a fact which renders it very difficult to explain. Let us notice that the famous thought: *time is money* itself comes to be contradicted on this occasion. 7. *psychological attitude*: *An Englishman is never happy but when he is miserable, a Scotchman never at home but when he is abroad and an Irishman never at peace but when he is fighting* (p. 63); 8. (paradoxical) *ground for anger*: *It is misery enough to have been once happy* (p. 155). The predominance of pessimism in the British folks' wisdom is, thereby, "officially" proclaimed. **V.** *grief* (as the unpleasant side of life is predominant, it thereby gains to be more thought of, and managed, as it is its due right to be): 1. an interesting equivalence of sense with our own "prostie omenească": *If folly were grief, every house would weep* (p. 75); 2. *a permanent status*: *No day passeth without some grief* (p. 52); 3. *an acceptable level of normality itself*: *Go not for every grief to the physician, nor for every quarrel to the lawyer, nor for every thirst to the pot* (p. 87); 4. *a human individual's weakness* (of course, as it is reflected by the trend of public opinion): *Everyone can master a grief but he that has it* (p. 120); 5. status of pauperity (yet we were able to notice that welfare itself comes with its own worrying grounds!): *To have money is a fear, not to have it a grief* (p. 123); 6. *stat of which the cure is still achievable* (in spite of all things): *Time tames the strongest grief* (p. 193); of course, some healthy pragmatism might help a little: *All griefs with bread are less* (idem). **VI.** *sorrow* (as the "mourning" is considered to be the highest level of anger) 1. *unexpected event* (otherwise, certain): *Sorrow* (*and ill weather*) *come unsent for* (p. 151). This is one of the magnificently rare cases when British pragmatism finds no other resource but to invoke divinity for a bit of hand-lending: *God send you joy, for sorrow will come fast enough* (p. 88); 2. *antonym of joy* with which it still has to accomplish a *sui generis* equilibrium: *Of thy sorrow be not too sad, of thy joy be not too glad* (p. 151). Between black and white, the most suitable solution becomes a situation bearing a shade of grey.; 3. *improvised strategy* (yet again designated through an antiphrase): *He that goes a borrowing, goes a sorrowing* 4. *permanent potentiality* (while joy agrees to make its appearance only here and there): *When sorrow is asleep, wake it not* 5. *human state of mind* (the rough and redneck ancestor of our own almighty stress): *Better a little loss than a long sorrow* (p. 26). Here as well we are able to remark that, willingly or not, the human individual's

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supreme purpose is not always constituted by material goods accumulation. 6. *negotiable misdemeanour*: *Better two skaiths than one sorrow* (p. 30); and of course, last but not least, *Never lay sorrow to your heart when others lay it to their heels* (p. 97).

From this beneficent exhortation, we are entitled to draw the comforting conclusion that, in spite of the fact that, much later, the "cousins" from the United States have turned it into a real, functioning and, most of all, profitable (in all senses) "industry", what has become commonly known as "positive thinking" is, in reality, both in fact and in due right, an offspring issued from astoundingly deep British roots.

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