ARCHETYPES AND SYMBOLS IN ROMANIAN PROVERBS

MARIA ACIOBĂNIŢEI
Universitatea „Dunărea de Jos”
Galaţi

1. Proverbs: re-contextualising archetypes

Archetypes are a part of myths as universal symbols, usually in a corporeal, solid form that people can perceive. Most of them are elements of nature, such as the sun and the moon, water, earth, fire and air. The term cannot be given a one-dimensional definition. Derived from the Greek compound of *arche* and *tupos*, it refers to the creative source (*arche* – the „first principle”) and all of its different expressions (*Tupos*). In time, the notion of archetype broadened to signify stock characters, personality types, and other behavior patterns.

Seen as micro texts, literally speaking, proverbs pose several problems, in spite of some of the scientific studies that have been produced recently. Their conciseness, the fixed structure, the metaphorical aspects, their reinterpretation given the renewal of contextualisation, all these aspects require a new approach to the presumptive genetic context, on the one hand, and observing them in their usage in different social situations on the other. Symbols and archetypes appear in proverbs as discourse units or idiomatic expressions, since a proverb encapsulates a completely unique way of expression.

There is a close connection between proverb usage and different stages in people’s lives. Stages such as childhood, youth, maturity and old age, death, ethics, family, the church, the school – they all find a clear expression of their essence in proverbs, since the piece of wisdom they express ranges according to every person and his / her relationships. General truths, experiences and spiritual considerations are not, however, simple meanings of proverbs, but entities situated outside of them. The contextual relationship was pointed out by Andre Jolles (Jolles 1972: 127-137), who stated that people use proverbs every time they classify and label one of their experiences.

2. Truth – lie

An interesting dichotomy present in Romanian proverbs is that of **good** and **evil**. Sometimes, proverbs emerge as encoded means of communication and interpretation, therefore correlating with archetypal structures, which requires us to have knowledge about the implications of the symbols enclosed. The presence of the **good - evil** couple in proverbs is suggestive of the duality that is characteristic of man. Good and evil appear as antonymous, but, at the same time, they are paired, any evil doing having the quality of highlighting the attributes of good or vice versa: *Bine faci şi rău găseşti // A good deed is often met with an ungrateful response; Rău cu rău, da-i mai rău fără rău // Nothing so bad but it might have*

BDD-V932 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:01:47 UTC)

been worse – a comment on adaptability as a feature of human nature). Good ultimately has the utmost moral value which benefits the one who chooses it:

> *Aruncă binele tău în dreapta şi în stânga şi la nevoie ai să-l găseşti // The charitable give out at the door, and God puts in at the window; Nu da binelui cu piciorul, că pe urmă o sa-i duci dorul // When fortune knocks, open the door.* Most of the time, evil is not even mentioned, but suggested: *Ochi pentru ochi şi dinte pentru dinte* // *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, Orb pe orb când se conduc, cad amândoi în groapã* // *If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch* sau *Cine sapă groapa altuia, cade el în ea // He who digs a pit for others falls in himself.*

Two very important symbols are shown here, the eye and the grave. The eye stands for light and knowledge; using it to execute revenge, losing the sense of sight, represents decay, chaos and unbalance. The grave indicates a doorway to the unknown, to another world, but ultimately epitomizes the inclination to wrong-doing, trying to create dangerous situations for someone else. The idea of evil is quite frequent in Romanian proverbs:

> *Un rău/ o nenorocire nu vine niciodată singur/ă // Misfortunes never come singly; Vorba de rău mai lesne se crede // Ill news is too often true; Rău de vei semăna, mai rău vei secera// Sow thin, mow thin*; *Mic cu acul si rău ca dracul // Short folk are soon angry; Lucrul rău nu piere cu una cu două // Ill weeds wax well.*

Different types of behaviour manifest themselves in our sense of morality, therefore many proverbs exhibit teachings of a religious nature. A proverb such as *Numai la Dumnezeu e dreptate* // *Only God can bring justice*, has, first of all, a theological meaning: God is the embodiment of truth, good, righteousness, beauty; He creates and epitomizes these qualities. Once there are breaches in this respect, it is considered that the place or the person in question has fallen from grace, is „without God": *Nu are nici un Dumnezeu* // *He is godless*. The two proverbs illustrate traits which benefit from respect and prestige within the general belief system, as they are in complete conformity with theological thinking. Just like there is only one truth, opposed to deceit, the good - evil duality requires the defence of principles related to justice. Another interesting proverb, *Până la Dumnezeu te mănâncă sfinţii* // *There is no going to Heaven in a sedan*, referring to people serving the law, calls on the image of the justice system as implemented by man. Other similar proverbs reinforce the idea that justice is an instrument sometimes used by the wrong hands: *Dreptatea e cum o fac domnii // Laws go as kings like; Când legile îşi pierd puterea lor, dreptatea se îngroapă // When laws lose power, justice goes under.*

3. Fire - Water

According to the *Dictionary of cultural symbols and archetypes – Dicţionar de simboluri* (Chevalier, Gheerbrant Alain: 1994-1995), **water** is one of the four essential elements out of which the universe was created, as shown in cosmogonic myths in almost every culture in the world. It is a symbol of raw material, of renewal and of life itself. It is characterised by duality: the primordial matter all forms life are sprung out of and regressively returned to. Romanian folk tales mention the „water of life" or „living water" and „water of death". As indicated by C.G. Jung, water is most common symbol for the unconscious. Associated with femininity, motherhood or the depths of human psyche, it is the archetype of every connection in the universe, a collective binder, but also of that which separates and

BDD-V932 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:01:47 UTC)

dissolves. A proverb such as *Apa trece pietrele rămân // Streams are transient, rocks are steadfast* maintains the image of fluidity while suggesting that disappointments and grievances will succumb with the people who experienced them, whereas victories, culture and faith are the ones left standing. On a different note, flowing water is the symbol of regeneration, of constant change. Like time, it cannot be stopped in its course, thus resembling the course of human existence. Romanian proverbs referring to water use the symbol with both positive and negative connotations. Water is seen as inferior to blood, representing family connections (*Sângele apă nu se face* // *Blood is thicker than water*); other times, it acts as both a secret cover (*Mărgăritarul stă în fundul mării şi mortăciunea pluteşte pe d-asupra apei* // *The pearl lies at the bottom of the sea, while the corpse floats on the surface*) and as revealing power (*Tigva nu merge de multe ori la apă, că ori se sparge, ori crapă // The pitcher goes so often to the water, that it is broken at last*). Water takes many different meanings with every new proverb it can be found in: seize the moment (*Scoate apa cât este găleata la puţ* // *Hoist your sail when the wind is fair – Strike while the iron is hot*); futility of action (*Toţi sapă, da' el duce câinii la apă* // *While others work, he takes the dog to the stream*); danger requiring caution (*Să nu te faci viteaz la apa mare* // *Do not be bold in deep water*); ineffective solution (*O vorbă bună stinge focul mai curând decât o bute de ap*ă // *Good words cool more than cold water*); and the variety of meanings continues:

> *Râul lin are apa afund*ă *// Still waters run deep; Precum apa inima ţi-o răcoreşte, aşa şi învăţătura mintea ţi-o limpezeste // Water cools the heart, knowledge clears the mind; Printr-o crăpătură mică răzbate apa în corabia mare // A small leak will sink a great ship; Nu arunca apa cea turbure înainte de a avea pe cea limpede // Don't sell the lion's skin before you killed the lion – Don't throw away the foul water before having the fresh one; Nu da apă la vadul duşmanului // Don't take your enemy to the stream; Nădejdea fără muncă îi ca fântâna fără ap*ă *// Hope without effort is like the fountain without water; Nebunii tulbură apa şi înţelepţii pescuiesc // Fools stir the water and wise men fish in it; Mai mult să te temi de apa lină decât de cea turbure // Fear still waters more than troubled ones.*

In some examples, water symbolism mixes with fire:

> *Apa şi focul nu cunosc îndurarea // Fire and water know no mercy; Apa şi focul sunt servitori buni, dar stăpâni de temut* // *Fire and water are good servants, but frightening masters.*

In fact, the two symbols are complementary. If water represents the primal substance of life, it is fire that sets this substance in motion. Fire is considered the most dichotomous element of them all. The spreader of annihilation, it stands for war and pandemonium. Fire obliterates everything, installing chaos and confusion. In ancient legends, it was considered the saving solution for mankind, when Prometheus risked his life and the vengeance of the Titans by stealing and bringing it to man. The presence of fire, however, is also beneficial, being associated with purification. As such, it was used during the Middle Ages, and not only, as a method of extinguishing the evil in the community brought on by witches and sorcerers. Anthropologist Morris Opler recorded that the Chiricahua Apache, in the 1940s, used fire and ashes against witches and ghosts: „Objects of sorcery extracted from the body of the patient by the shaman are always consigned to the flames, where they explode noisily, giving assurance of the destruction of the witchcraft principle." (Opler 1941: 253) The image of fire is well represented in Romanian proverbs. It is considered, in turns, a destructible and unstoppable force:

BDD-V932 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:01:47 UTC)

Foc pe foc nu stinge // Fire won't extinguish fire; Nu aprinde focul pe care nu-l poţi stinge // Don't start a fire you can't put out; Focul e bun la gura sobei // Fire is good in the stove; a purifying mediator: *Aurul in foc se lamureste // Gold is tried in the fire*; an initiator of danger: *O scânteie cât de mică cel mai mare foc aprinde // Of a small spark, a great fire;* and the truth behind many occurrences: *Nu iese fum fără foc // No smoke without fire*. And the list could continue with proverbs such as: *Omul fără noroc e ca tămâia fără foc // A man with no luck is like incense with no fire; Dacă focul ţi-a aprins sprâncenele, gândeşte-te cum să-ţi salvezi ochii // When fire burns your eyebrows, save your eyes; Focul o dată stins, nu se aprinde din nou // Fire doesn't burn once extinguished*.

4. Earth – Air/ Sky

The presence of the four essential elements is completed with the **earth-air/ sky** duality. Earth is associated with femininity, receptiveness, stability. In mythology, the personified earth becomes the correspondent of the sky, creating an eternal opposition of the elements, on the same antagonistic relationship existent between light and darkness, feminine and masculine. Earth is seen as an integral part of creation, as it appears in biblical legends and also in classical stories. In ancient mythology, Prometheus, like God, creates man from the earth, emphasizing the union between man and nature, from birth to death: *Pământul te naşte, pământul te creşte, pământul te mistuieşte // A piece of churchyard fits everybody*; moreover, earth symbolizes growth and rejuvenation: *În pământul negru se face păinea albă // White bread made in black soil; Pământul bun roade bune aduce // Good soil makes for good crops; Pământului bun puţină apă îi trebuie // Good soil needs little water*. Sometimes referred to as „Mother", the Earth's vital strength inspires people to hold on to it and use it as a point of reference in most of their experiences: an incentive to educate oneself (*Omul fără învăţătură e ca pământul fără udătură // Man without knowledge is like the earth without water*; an advice toward patience (*Fii inimă răbdătoare ca pământul sub picioare // Enduring heart, steady ground*); a warning against falsehood (*Cine-şi calcă jurământul, nu-l primeşte nici pământul // Even the earth won't receive him who breaks his vow*); and an encouragement (*Cel voinic şi pe sub pământ răzbate // The sturdy will prevail beneath ground*). At times, not only the pair fire-water or earth-sky can be found within the same proverb, but all four of them: *Cerul, pământul, focul şi apa n-au judecată // The sky, the earth, fire and water won't judge.* The opposite of the Earth which belongs to man, the air (sometimes replaced with sky) symbolizes the realm of divinity, of the gods, standing for creativity, breath, light, freedom and movement. In Romanian proverbs, the image of the sky is reminiscent of the holy connotations it has: *Cum e faţa liniştită a izvorului curat, aşa-i viaţa celui care e cu Cerul împăcat // The life of the man at peace with the heavens is like the still waters of the river*; in other examples, it rounds off the idea that everyone and everything has its place in the world, as established by divine authority: *Pasărea-n aer, cârtiţa-n pământ şi leneşul în rugină trăieşte // Birds in the sky, the mole underground and the idle man in rust.*

5. Truth- Lie

Considering the relationship between proverbs and the **truth-lie** dichotomy, one may observe that the lie is not the antonym of truth, but is seen as a false, ethnologically speaking, since lying is a mediator between truth and falseness. Romanians often say: *Şi minciuna e vorbă // When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own,* as sometimes lying is seen as a solution to difficult situations. In ritualistic contexts, for instance, one lies to the bride or to the deceased, in order to get them through certain obstacles in order to complete the ceremony.

BDD-V932 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:01:47 UTC)

However, their contradictory nature appears quite often; see, for example, proverbs such as: *Minciuna are picioare scurte // Lies have short legs,* or *Ulciorul nu merge de multe ori la apă // The pitcher goes so often to the water, that it is broken at last* and *O minciună nu se sprijină decât pe o altă minciună // Lies rest on lies*. The reference to the leg has to do with its standing as a symbol of stability, of spiritual strength, whereas a liar no longer has these qualities, as the short leg signifies weakness, vulnerability. There are cases when the symbol moves to the other extremity of the human body, considering the head as a limit: *Cine nu vede pragul de jos, dă cu capul de pragul de sus // He knows the water the best who has waded through it*. People must first be aware of their limitations („pragul de sus"), so as to try and overcome them. Very often, truth is associated with being physically hurt, because a person who speaks the truth is usually confronted with the violent reaction of others:

> *Adevărul umblă cu capul spart // Truth has a scratched face; Cine cutează să spună adevărul, poate lesne umbla bătut ca mărul // Confess and be hanged; Cine spune adevărul nu poate să mulţumească pe toată lumea // You can't please everyone by telling the truth*.

Most proverbs just synthesise the idea that truth is the best solution (*Cugetul bun e cea mai moale pernă // A good conscience is a soft pillow*), portraying the liar as a thief (*Cine spune minciuni e ca omul care fură // Telling lies is like thieving; Cine a minţit o dată nu se mai crede când spune şi adevărul // A liar is not believed when he speaks the truth; Cine a minţit o dată şi-a mâncat credinţa toată // he that once deceives is ever suspected*); some suggest that truth and lie never go together (*Cu minciuna ori prânzeşti, ori cinezi, pe amândouă nu le închelbezi // You can either lunch or dine with the lie, you can't do both*), others that there is only a short distance from one to the other (*De la adevăr până la minciună e un lat de palmă // It is a short line between lies and truth*). In some cases, truth can be found in the most surprising of cases, such as a liar or a sinner: *Gura mincinosului adevăr grăieşte* // *Liars sometimes speak the truth.* The universal implication is that truth cannot be hidden, at least not for a long period of time:

> *Adevărul pluteşte ca untul de lemn // Truth and oil are ever above; Copiii şi nebunii spun adevărul // Children and fools tell the truth; Nu poţi să ascunzi nici focul, nici adevărul // You can't hide from the truth or fire.*

6. Final remarks

To conclude, proverbs take an active part in the life of the community, having a moulding effect on society. These linguistic elements generate plenty of stylistic effects within the same semantic structures and facilitate the interpretation of proverbs so as to uncover the true meanings of that which pertains to symbolic images. Proverbs, as cultural symbols, constitute a summing up of a series of experiences through which the community expresses itself. The incidence of archetypes and symbols nominate these microtexts as carriers of ancestral wisdom, fully established in the collective mind-set of the Romanians.

CORPUS

Flonţa, Teodor, 1992, *Dicţionar englez-român de proverbe echivalente. English-Romanian Dictionary of Equivalent Proverbs,* Bucureşti, Teora.
Lefter, Virgil, 2007, *Dicţionar de proverbe englez-român şi român-englez*, Bucureşti, Teora.

BDD-V932 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:01:47 UTC)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chevalier, Jean, Gheerbrant Alain, 1994-1995, *Dicţionar de simboluri*, vol I-III, Bucureşti, Editura Artemis.

Jolles, Andre, 1972, *Formes simples*, Paris, Seuil.

Opler, Morris Edward, 1941, *An Apache Life-Way: The Economic, Social, and Religious Institutions of the Chiricahua Indians*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism and Moon, Beverly (ed.), 1992, *An Encyclopedia of Archetypal Symbolism*, vol 1., Boston, Shambhala.

ARCHETYPES AND SYMBOLS IN ROMANIAN PROVERBS

(*Abstract*)

Archetypes are a part of myths as universal symbols, usually in a corporeal, solid form that people can perceive. Most of them are elements of nature, such as the sun and the moon, water, earth, fire and air. The term cannot be given a one-dimensional definition. Derived from the Greek compound of *arche* and *tupos*, it refers to the creative source (*arche* – the 'first principle') and all of its different expressions (*Tupos*). In time, the notion of archetype broadened to signify stock characters, personality types, and other behavior patterns.

Seen as micro texts, literally speaking, proverbs pose several problems, in spite of some of the scientific studies that have been produced recently. Their conciseness, the fixed structure, the metaphorical aspects, their reinterpretation given the renewal of contextualization, all these aspects require a new approach to the presumptive genetic context, on the one hand, and observing them in their usage in different social situations on the other. Since proverbs and archetypes appear entwined as discoursal units, the aim of the paper is analyzing and identifying the archetypal patterns in proverbs.

Proverbs take an active part in the life of the community, having a moulding effect on society. These linguistic elements generate plenty of stylistic effects within the same semantic structures and facilitate the interpretation of proverbs so as to uncover the true meanings of that which pertains to symbolic images. Proverbs, as cultural symbols, constitute a summing up of a series of experiences through which the community expresses itself. The incidence of archetypes and symbols nominate these microtexts as carriers of ancestral wisdom, fully established in the collective mind-set of the Romanians.

BDD-V932 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:01:47 UTC)