POSSIBLE STRUCTURAL AMBIGUITIES IN ENGLISH PROVERBS AND THEIR ROMANIAN CORRESPONDING VERSIONS

Anca-Mariana PEGULESCU, PhD, Ministry of National Education

Abstract: Starting from the concept of 'proverbiality' which includes the particular pattern, proverbs (as small texts) display, I oriented my research towards the way(s) a speaker intends to derive the sense and reference from the range of possible senses and reference a sentence can have within a saying format.
Combining the syntactic and the pragmatic perspectives, I have explored a potential sentence-level ambiguity, searching for the differences and the similarities of the proverbs' versions in English, as a source language (SL) and Romanian as a target language (TL). I was interested in the speaker's meaning and at the same time in the contextual/ utterance meaning.
Among the various methods regarding the sampling, I decided on the ethnofields of TRUTH and ADEVĂR, applying the descriptive and contrastive methods to examples of proverbs extracted from V. Lefter's Dicţionar de proverbe, 2007, Teora.

Keywords: context, equivalent, level, position, structure.

I.1. The concept of 'proverbiality' obliges paremiologists, on one hand, and proverbs' users, on the other hand, to give a special attention to the analysis of proverbial markers. These markers are not the only elements that can define the proverbial style. Internal and external devices contribute to an overall understanding of proverbs. Still we can wonder ourselves if in varying degrees poetic devices like parallelism, ellipsis, alliteration or rhyme, combined with semantic devices like metaphor, personification or paradox, do influence the way the speaker wants to convince his/her interlocutor – the hearer, who may have his/her own interpretation of the message.

Whether the proverbs originated more in an oral tradition than in a written one is not unanimously admitted. What is nevertheless agreed on is the fact that the proverb has been a teaching method for those who wanted to convey examples of 'what is good' vs 'what is bad'.

When referring to the difficulties of defining a proverb, everybody (paremiologists as well as people who are not inclined towards the study of proverbs but use them quite often) admits some of the qualities a proverb should have: brevity, symmetry, intelligibility, intuitively, convincing formulations, a clear message. I searched all these characteristics within the corpus I am going to describe in the following pages.

II. Designed approach

II.1. The aim of this research has been the comparison of the proverbs' structure in English and Romanian and it envisaged both the specificity of the source language (SL) pattern and the possible poetic devices that could influence the message. I have to underline the fact that the concept of SL is variable because the starting point within the article is, in turn, represented by English and Romanian versions of the same proverb. The common

BDD-V552 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 02:56:46 UTC)

denominator is the ethnofield TRUTH/ADEVĂR to which I added (as there are no strict boundaries) the ethnofields WORD/CUVÂNT and LIE/MINCIUNĂ.

The sample size went to the option I mentioned above, as I consider ethnofields representative samples. Using ethnofields means to extend a certain theme or topic to a level where we can reach conclusions relating to proverbs' structure in general.

II.2. I extracted 59 proverbs as dictionary entries, in the ethnofields I referred at in II.1., from the corpus structured by Virgil Lefter's *Dicţionar de proverb englez- român, român-englez*, published at Teora in 2007, changing, in turn, the SL and the TL. As Virgil Lefter explained I dealt only with proverbial patterns, not sayings, adages or aphorisms. The author has not given explicit details of the sources he used. We can presuppose that the proverbs Lefter selected were gleaned from oral tradition, having unknown authors who showed, however, having mastered language skills and a comprehensive knowledge of the world.

The relatively small size of the extracted corpus was used in order to produce a comparable image of the similarities and differences that may appear in the two languages at the level of proverb pattern and structures.

III. Syntactical proverb markers' analysis

III.1.The Romanian paremiologist C. Negreanu [1983,p.48] underlined the fact that proverbs (he referred to the Romanian proverb pattern, analyzed in collections coming from Zanne and Hinţescu) have some obvious advantages: their lexical concise form, (most of the time) a precise message, bearing a huge essential capacity of rearranging different parts of the proverbial structure.

The proverb creator, belonging to the rural areas or towns middle class, managed to reshape the specificity of the human nature. The stylistic devices, used in proverbs, are:

- metaphor:

E: *Craft* must have clothes but truth likes to go naked.

R: *Vicleşugul* şi minciuna au nevoie de veşmânt bogat, dar adevărul umblă gol-goluţ.

- comparison:

R: Şi minciuna e vorbă, dar vremea descoperă adevărul.

E: Though a lie be well dressed, it is ever overcome.

The devices are very diverse: repetition, metonymy and irony are among the most frequently met:

R: Când adevărul lipseşte, 'aşa mi se pare' se apropie de adevăr.

E: Almost and very (well) nigh saves many a lie.

All these literary devices make possible the interrelation between different ethofields. TRUTH and WORD can appear together, even if the source language (SL) – this time Romanian – does not display the same idea – the Romanian term ' vorbărie' implies ' many words' but it may also imply 'lack of substance' or 'waste of time', 'poor quality of a discourse':

BDD-V552 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 02:56:46 UTC)

E: In many words, the truth goes by.
R: Când e prea multă *vorbărie*, adevărul se pierde.

Following the same path, we can extend the ethnofields relationship: the boundary between TRUTH, WORD and LIE is almost invisible. LIE as the antonym of TRUTH seems to be more explored in English than in Romanian (8 English proverbial units vs 4 Romanian ones in Lefter's *Dicţionar*).

III. 1.2. In the English proverb:
E: "They may so' is half a lie.

(otherwise a sentence in a sentence construction, where the Subject is in fact another small sentence formed of S+V+ dir.Obj)
the construction, similar to a Russian doll pattern, ensures the symmetrical balance.
The Romanian version to the above English proverb:

R: Zvonurile sunt pe jumătate minciună. (translation)

renders the idea of confusion and vagueness that can become LIES. Romanian makes use of a noun in the plural – *zvonurile*- which stands for a whole sentence in English, 'They say so".

The fact that proverbs are, in general, short sentences [Mieder, 1985] cannot be denied. The sentence status has been questioned and analysed for long periods of time: it has been defined through 'a minimum sense of unity and completeness (Greenbaum and Quirk, 1990:12).Still, it is not easy to decide what qualifies a 'short' proverb and when a 'short' proverb becomes a 'long' proverb.

The English proverb:
E: The devil sometimes speaks the truth.
is rendered by the Romanian translation:
R: Uneori şi dracul spune adevărul.
(which is almost a word by word translation, the only change being the word order)

and in such a case the transfer from the SL(English) to the TL(Romanian) is complete.
The same situation can be viewed in:
E: All truths are not to be told.
R: Orice adevăr nu e bun de spus.

Such a structure which contains one single independent clause is very much met in the whole corpus and it usually contains a declarative, non-oppositional pattern.

III.1.3. The opposition, however, can appear within the pattern itself, like in the following units:

- truth vs lie:
  E: Better *speak truth* rudely than *lie*.

BDD-V552 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 02:56:46 UTC)

R: Mai bine *să spui adevărul* pe faţă decât *să minţi* cu meşteşug.

(a word by word translation where the Romanian version introduces the nuance 'cu meşteşug' , which does not exist in the English version)

- truth vs the ones who speak it:

E: *Fools* and *madmen* speak the *truth.*

R: *Copiii* şi *nebunii* spun adevărul.

(the Romanian version introduces this time the noun 'copiii' instead of the equivalent 'prost/idiot//tâmpit', conveying, in fact, the innocence value and attitude as a matter of cultural choice)

- the singular vs the plural of the same term:

E: *Lies* have short legs.

R: *Minciuna* are picioarele scurte.

III. 1.4. The normal sentence pattern in English proverbs is S (nouns in the nominative)+V+ accusative. The Romanian versions can have the same pattern:

E: Tell a lie and find a (the) *truth.*

R: Spune o minciună şi vei afla *adevărul*.

or can display a different pattern to S+V*Adv Modifier/(relative clause)

E: A blister will rise upon one's tongue that tell a *lie.*

R: *Mincinosului* îi creşte păr pe limbă.

(Dative +V+ Dir. Object+ Adv. Modifer)

Complex sentences, containing one main clause and at least one sub-clause are found in very many examples:

E: He [that trusts in a lie] shall perish in truth.

R*:* Cine crede într-o minciună, va pieri din cauza *adevărului*.

.III.3.2 Parallelism

Syntactic parallelism has the highest frequency value of all the formal devices. It is present in the structural symmetricitye between the .parts of the proverbial unit and the sentences that form the unit (either by s*yntactic coordination – the conjunction 'and', 'or', 'but'):*

R: Puţine cuvinte şi ispravă multă.

E: Few words and many deeds.

or asyndetic coordination – conjunctic absent:

E: More matter, less art

as the corresponding version to the above Romanian proverb to the above Romanian proverb:

R: Puţine cuvinte şi ispravă mai multă.

III. 3.3.1 Different other proverbs sequential linkage are achieved through logical, temporal, causal or manner means. The sender of the message can challenge the addressee to connect and interpret the semantic relationshios between different constituents in order to infer and an overall unified meaning:

BDD-V552 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 02:56:46 UTC)

E: Face to face, the *truth* comes out.
R: Priveste-l pe om în ochi şi vei afla *adevărul*.

Between the two above paremic units the term TRUTH/ADEVĂR is definitely the common denominator. While the English proverb uses a simple sentence, displaying a fronting adverbial modifier, the Romanian version uses the verb *to look/a privy* that can be only presupposed in the English proverb.

Distinct semantic relationships can be identified in the 59 proverb entries I retained:

- equality between the two parts of the proverbial unit:

E: *A bird is known by note*, the man by his *words.*
R:*Omul după grai*, ca clopotul după *sunet* îndată se cunoaşte.

The equality is seen within the same paremic unit, otherwise the comparison between the '*bird'* (in the English proverb) and the *man*(in the Romanian version) is enriched through the term '*clopot/bell'* (which appears only in the Romanian version) sending back to the term '*note'*(of the English version), including it in the same lexical family with the term 'sunet'/'sound.

- cause and effect:

E: He who gives *fair words*, feeds you with an empty spoon.
R: Cine te îmbie cu *vorbe frumoase*, te hrăneşte cu lingura goală.

The above pair of proverbs – a translation version – shows a causal linkage containing the 'cause-consequence' relationship between the first and the second sentence. In both cases, if the actions of the first sentences are achieved, people being addressed only 'fine words', then they are not properly fed, their spoons being empty, having no food but words.

- contrast and antonymy:

E: *Fine words* dress *ill deeds*.
R: *Vorbele frumoase* acoperă *faptele urâte*.(translation)

The proverbial pattern focuses in the above paremic pair on the two parts of the same idea, the contrast between good and bad, between 'fine' and 'bad' words. The 'pillar' is the verb conveying the same idea and displaying nuances. The verb 'to dress' in English implies not only covering, it adds sometimes the idea of 'adorning', 'embellishing'. The Romanian verb 'a acoperi' is conveying a more negative context.

In most of the cases the verb makes possible the ballance between the subject and the direst object. For the same English proverb ' *Fine words* dress *ill deeds'*, another Romanian version is eluding the verb and displays only the contrast between 'miere'/'honey' and 'otravă'/'poison':

R: Din gură *miere*, iar din inimă *otravă*.

The antonymy may appear between two words of the same sentenceŞ
R: *Mincinosul* cu de-a sila face *musca* cât *cămila*.

BDD-V552 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 02:56:46 UTC)

E: He changes a *fly* into an *elephant*. Making *mountains* of *molehills*.

What is really interesting in the above pair of proverbs (conveying the same message – the fact that a *liar* can transform and change almost everything through the words he uttered – the contrast between a *fly* and an *elephant* is very well placed, being similar and accepted in the two languages, even if Romanian favours the *camel* and English uses the *elephant*. The English pattern has even another solution – the structure using an *–ing* form: Making *mountains* and *molehills*.

III.3.3.2 Word order can b eone of the most salient grammatical differentiation when discussing the proverb pattern and comparing it with other lingustic utterances.

When referring to word order in proverbs, there are at least two situations that are illustrated by the selected corpus:

- emphatic word order:

NP as Adv. Modifier+ V+ Adv.+ Dir. Obj

R: De la un copil şi un nebun afli întotdeauna *adevărul.*

- inverted word order:

VSO

E: Follow not *truth* too near the heels, lest it dash out thy teeth.

(the Romanian version to this English proverb has a regular word order S+V+ Adv. Modifier but replaces the term 'truth' with 'justice', using in fact a metaphor)

R: *Dreptatea* umblă cu capul spart.

A particular kind of construction is the structure 'he who'. It appears both in English proverbs and in the Romanian corresponding versions:

E: He that trusts in a *lie*, shall perish in *truth*.

R: Cine crede intr-o *minciună*, va pieri din cauza *adevărului.*

(the difference in meaning between the two verbs 'to trust' and 'a crede' is balanced by the way they combine with the noun that explains each of them, the noun 'lie'/minciună' as opposed to 'truth/minciună'.

In very many proverbial units there is an element of the NP of the SL that can suggest a synonymous term of the TL:

E: The sting of reproach is the *truth* of it.

R: În orice reproş adevărul ustură.

Conclusions

The above analysis - situated at the level of sentence structure – allows some general ideas that are specific both to English and Romanian proverbs.

The simple sentence altenates with the compound structures. We cannot consider, on the other hand, the analysed structures 'short' or 'long', counting the number of terms included in a sentence/ structure. The structures' length (either English or Romanian proverbs) can vary from one sentence pattern to a 'developed' pattern.

BDD-V552 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 02:56:46 UTC)

E: All **truths** are not to be told.
R: Orice adevăr nu e bun de spus.
vs
E : When an ass climbs a ladder, we may find wisdom in women.
R: Când mărăcinii vor scoate rodii, atunci şi muierile **cuvinte** de ispravă.

Structural parallelism is usually accompanied by semantic parallelism in which both synonymous and antonymous relationships are underlined.

Many of the English proverbs belonging to the analyzed ethnofield of **TRUTH**, **LIE** and **WORD** displayed repetitions, relational classifications (cause-effect, contrast and antonymy, word order).

In very many situations the message from the SL is only suggested as the 'key' word is not present:

R: *Mincinosul* cu de-a sila face musca cât cămila.
E: He changes a *fly* into an *elephant*. Making *mountains* of *molehills*.

(the pronoun 'he' suggests the 'liar' while the version 'Making *mountains* of *molehills*' does not have a subject).

Even if the analyzed corpus represents a small fragment of the huge thesaurus that gives the image of the conceptualized proverbial pattern, through which the world displays its originality, it shows, in general, a paradoxical manner of thinking, favouring declarative sentences, sometimes imperative structures (positive or negative), parallel paremic units.

The direct message is not always the solution. Comparisons and metaphors are also present.

Still, the proverbial pattern imposes itself through simplicity, powerful synthetic suggestions and a very rich linguistic diversity, specific to both English and Romanian.

Bibliography

Greenbaum, S and Quirk, G, 1990, *A Student's Grammar of the English Language*, Essex: Longman Group
Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B, 1973, "*Toward a Theory of Proverb Meaning*" in Proverbium 22/1987 821 -827 in Frank A. De Caro "Talk is Ceap "Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship 4/1987
Mieder, W, 1985, 'Popular Views of the Proverbs' in : Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship
Negreanu, C 1983, 1983, *Structura Proverbelor Româneşti*,

BDD-V552 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 02:56:46 UTC)