Proverbs

William Baddoo, Zachary Benjamin, Hannah Margolis, Madison Minsk, Allie Norris, Vi Nguyen, James Wen, Rachel Zhao
Introduction to Proverbs

“The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking.” - Proverb and Riddle Scholar Archer Taylor
Introduction to Proverbs

- Proverbs:
  - Offer wisdom
  - Are generally short
  - “Socially sanctioned advice”
  - Truths, morals, or views of a culture
Introduction to Proverbs

General Features

- About people & real life
- Use metaphor: the situation in the proverb is related to the situation of the receiver or speaker of the proverb
- Classify situations and propose strategies to resolve them

Purpose

- Alleviate social tension and provide advice
Our Proverbs

- Proverbs about: friends, families, relationships, etc.
- Subgroups:
  - Catholic Proverbs
  - Jewish/Yiddish Proverbs
  - Spanish Proverbs
  - Chinese Proverbs
  - Russian Proverbs
Analysis

1. Formula (Alan Dundes’ *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb*)
   - Better _____ than _______. Ex: “Better late than never.”
   - A _______ is a _________. Ex: “A proverb is a true word.”
   - _______ never _________. Ex: “Barking dogs never bite.”
   - _______ or _________. Ex: “Live free or die.”

2. Image
   - Humorous, serious, sad.

3. Message
   - The interpretation and use of the proverb
Catholic Proverbs

Informants:

- Dartmouth College Catholic students/admins & administrators
- All Americans
- All “Cradle Catholics”

Trends:

- Serious proverbs focused on living out church teachings
- Humorous proverbs poking fun at religious topics
Catholic Proverbs

It’s hardest to be a saint around your family.

- Formula: Two part proverb, with a statement and a condition
- Image: Humorous, but serious implications
- Message: Importance of sainthood to Catholics

- Informant emphasized usage in his own family
- Was inherited from several people separately (ubiquity of proverb)
Catholic Proverbs

It takes a martyr to live with a saint.

- Formula: Two parts, with a statement and a condition
- Image: Humorous
- Message: Uses metaphors of Catholicism to diffuse tension, inject humor, and poke fun at humility

- Informant cited application of this proverb in her own marriage
Catholic Proverbs

Widely known version:

**Blood is thicker than water.**

Catholic expanded version:

**The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.**

- **Formula:** Two part proverb that relies on comparison
- **Image:** Serious reflection on the church’s tenets
- **Message:** Contradicts the meaning as interpreted by secular culture, and instead preferences church family above “blood” relations.
Catholic Proverbs

There is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

- Formula: A “than” comparison proverb
- Image: Serious (but colloquially is softened)
- Message: Uses a callback to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, compares that to the love between friends

- Informant uses this proverb informally, to express affection among family and friends
Spanish Proverbs

Informant Demographics:

Mexican, El Salvadoran, Honduran, Spanish, Argentinian; immigrants and nonimmigrants (first-generation and non-first-generation, students and professors)

- Informants were aware of the other Spanish proverbs collected
Spanish Proverbs: Trends

- Metaphor using animals/characters
- Proverbs were more serious than humorous
- Maternal figures often sharing proverbs with children
  - Reinforces the idea that family comes first/unconditional familial support (theme)
  - Shows that proverbs are used to teach values to children
- Interpretation and context alters meaning of proverb (to informant) from more general meaning
  - General proverbs allow for flexibility in interpretation and to be applied to different situations
- Structure within Spanish culture - emphasizes traditional views and practices
- Themes:
  - Importance of Family - Family Comes First
  - Values in Friendship - Like Attracts Like
  - Expected Behaviors and Practices
Spanish Proverbs: Family Comes First

Orally transmitted proverb: “Una onza de sangre vale más que una libra de amistad”

Translation: “An ounce of blood is worth more than a pound of friendship”

Meaning: The bond between family members is stronger and more significant than the bond between friends.

Analysis:

- 2 part structure and comparison
- Family is more valuable than friendship
Spanish Proverbs: Like Attracts Like and Proper Behavior

Orally transmitted proverb: “El burro hablando de orejas.”

Translation: “The donkey is talking about ears.”

Meaning: It is ironic and hypocritical when friends gossip about each other (because, as friends, they are similar people).

General meaning: The accuser is pointing out a fault of someone else in which they also share.

Analysis:
- Tradition/culture: disapproval of gossiping
- Metaphor using animals
- Assumes that friends are similar; like attracts like (based on informant interpretations)
Spanish Proverbs: Proper Behavior

Proverb: “Más sabe el diablo por viejo que por diablo.”
Translation: “The devil knows more through being old than through being a devil.”

Meaning: Elders must be respected and their wisdom must not be taken for granted.
General meaning: Wisdom comes with age.

Analysis:
- Tradition/culture: emphasizes importance of respecting and listening to elders
- Structure: cause and effect
- Metaphor using character
Orally Transmitted Proverb: “Un caballo regalado no se le mira el diente”

Translation: “A horse given as a gift you shouldn’t look at its teeth.”

Meaning: Appreciate a gift you receive rather than being ungrateful and looking for inadequacies in the gift.

Analysis:

- Tradition/Culture: Gifts should be valued on the thought put into them, not superficially.
- Horse teeth used as metaphor for flaws in a gift
- Metaphor using character
Jewish/Yiddish Proverbs

Contextual Information:
- Interviewed rabbis, professors, and other adults and students
- Yiddish is spoken primarily in Israel, Russia and the US
  - Where all of our informants were from
- Not many Dartmouth students knew proverbs
- Often learned from parents/grandparents or religious studies
  - Yiddish tends to be spoken by only older generations in the US

Trends:
1. Biblical Proverbs: very serious, often a commandment or rule
   a. One of the main source of wisdom comes from religious sources
      i. Demonstrates the importance of religious learning and rabbinical wisdom in Jewish culture
2. Casual Proverbs: humorous, very blunt, often Yiddish
Jewish/Yiddish Proverbs

Original Text: (Yiddish)

Translation: “When your cock is standing, your head is in the ground”

Informant: Professor Bernard Avishai

Message: When a man is attracted to a woman, he acts irrationally

Context/Analysis:  
- The image is meant to be absurd and humorous  
- Often used by older men in a joking manner  
- Professor Avishai emphasized how unoriginal the message of this proverb is, which illustrates how proverbs are fundamentally about the typical
Jewish/Yiddish Proverbs

Original Text: לִפְנֵי שָׁוֶר לֹא תִֽקְשֹׁ֑ל

Translation: “Do not place a stumbling block before the blind.”

Informant: Rabbi Meir Cohen Goldstein (Hillel Rabbi)

Analysis:
- Structure is not one of those listed by Dundes- more like a commandment
- Biblical with serious imagery
- Yet often used in a joking or teasing way
Jewish/Yiddish Proverbs

Original Text: (Hebrew)

Translation: “Poverty in one’s home is worse than 50 plagues.”

Informant: Rabbi Moshe Gray (Chabad Rabbi)

Message: financial troubles are the worst thing for relationships

Context/Analysis:
- Structure: comparing two things in terms of negative effect
- Religious origin: from the Talmud and references Job in the Bible (serious imagery)
- Finances are not as commonplace to discuss socially, so easier to act as if it is common wisdom (relieves the blame)
Jewish/Yiddish Proverbs

Original Text: “Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t!”

Translation: “Besser mitn taivel vos m’ken eider mitn taivel vos, ‘ken im nit!”

Informant: myself

Analysis:

- Structure: Better ______ than __________
- Casual proverb, originally in Yiddish
- Humorous imagery and often used to dispel tension.
Chinese Proverbs

Interviewee Demographics

- primarily Chinese-American students
- native speakers from mainland China
- learned proverbs from parents/Chinese school
  - reflects lack of cultural immersion ⇒ need for institutional learning/diffusion

Trends/Analysis

- primarily object comparisons/metaphorical situations
- structure = 2 clauses (A and B structure)
- Common themes: hardship, providing support
Chinese Proverbs

一個籬笆三個樁, 一個好漢三個幫

(yí gè líba sān gè zhuāng, yí gè hǎohàn sān gè bāng.)

English: Like a fence with three stakes, a person needs people to support them

Analysis:
- typical 2 part comparison/character symmetry
- comparison to an ordinary object

Context
- only child w/ parents
- do not be stubborn, learn to rely on others for help
Chinese Proverbs

觀其友, 知其人

(guān qí yǒu, zhī qí rén.)

English: You know someone by looking at their friends

Analysis:

- typical 2 part structure
- character symmetry (sounds and number)
  - 其 is the second character in both parts + 3 characters on each side

Context

- thinking about how friends affect your life/behavior
- learned in Chinese school
Chinese Proverbs

和朋友在黑暗裡同行, 好過一人在光明中獨步
(hé péngyou zài hēiàn lǐ tóngxíng,

hǎo guò yī rén zài guāngmíng zhōng dú bù)

English: Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light.

Analysis

- 2 part structure
- situational based (walking w/ a friend)

Context

- mother discussion how her friends supported her when she was growing up
Chinese Proverbs

背后說好話，才是真朋友

(Bèihòu shuō hǎohuà, cái shì zhēn péngyǒu)
English: He is a good friend that speaks well of us behind our backs

Analysis:

● Simple language and structure (cause and effect)
● Little imagery but simple message to the point
● Defines what a true friend is and does

Context

● learned from parents
● hard time during elementary school
Russian Proverbs

Interviewee demographics

- One American majoring in Russian/Russian camp
- One professor, native to Eastern Europe

Trends:

- Collectivist; things owed to group
- Value of people, known things
Russian Proverbs

кто не работает, тот не ест.

English: “Whoever doesn’t work, doesn’t eat.”

Meaning: Everyone should do their part, and in exchange they will be rewarded.

Analysis:

- Conditional structure: “If not x, then not y”
- Collectivist
Russian Proverbs

Не имей сто рублей, а имей сто друзей.

English: “It’s better to have 100 friends than 100 rubles.”

Meaning: Friends are more important than material things.

Analysis:

- Comparison: parallel phrasing of two contrasting things
- People over possessions; importance of groups
Russian Proverbs

Се́меро одного́ не ждут.

English: “Seven will not wait for one.”

Meaning: The group as a whole should not suffer for an individual.

Analysis:

- Statement of fact; “will” vs “should”
- More collectivism; well-being of group
Russian Proverbs

Одна голова -- хорошо, а две -- лучше.

English: “One head is good, but two heads are better.”

Meaning: You can do more by collaborating than by working alone

Analysis:

- Comparative statement, parallel structure
- Importance of other people; cannot succeed alone
Conclusions

- Students tended not to know as many proverbs as adults and professionals.

- Religious proverbs: Biblical to humorous
  - The Hebrew Proverb, “Do not rejoice at your enemy’s downfall.” vs the Yiddish Proverb “Do not rejoice at your enemy’s downfall, but also do not help them get up.”
  - The Catholic Proverb, “There is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friend.” vs. its usage in a less literal context

- In diasporic communities, proverbs also serve to teach children about family’s heritage culture.
  - learned in more formal contexts such as language schools or from religious instructors as seen with Spanish, Chinese, and Jewish proverbs
  - Seen in Russian culture to push national ideals
Conclusions

- **Friends vs Family**
  - Jewish proverbs: equal influence in proverbs
  - Spanish proverbs: family over friends
  - Chinese and Christian proverbs: friends over family
  - Russian proverbs: the group over the individual

- Chinese proverbs follow a formulaic structure and put more emphasis on sounds in certain instances than other proverbs.

- All of the cultures examined had a fair mixture of light, humorous proverbs and serious proverbs, except for those in Chinese.

- Structure of proverbs were more broad than suggested by Dundes