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TOWARDS AN EMIC DEFINITION OF THE PROVERB IN GREEK FOLKLORE: METAPROVERBS, STUDENT DEFINITIONS, AND POPULAR PERSPECTIVES

Abstract: This article uses Greek metaproverbs—proverbs about proverbs—as an emic tool for defining the proverb, and then combines it with six student definitions and twenty-six popular (non-specialist) definitions gathered through fieldwork. Drawing a focused set from the Digital Repository of Proverbs (Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, Academy of Athens), the study close-reads eight metaproverbs to articulate the core properties they ascribe to the genre. It then places this emic picture alongside contemporary voices: those of emerging folklorists and informants with no folkloristic background. The comparison shows strong convergence on condensed communal speech used in situ to frame action, with divergence in the rhetoric of authority and in how form is foregrounded. The paper proposes a concise emic definition of the Greek proverb, consistent across the three corpora and argues that proverbial authority is realized primarily in use.

Keywords: proverbs, metaproverbs, oral literary criticism, emic definition, genre theory

1. Introduction

The present article examines metaproverbs—proverbs that speak about proverbs—from an emic perspective¹ within the context of Greek folklore, focusing particularly on how the proverb genre is defined, since these texts offer concise statements about what a proverb is and its purpose. The definition derives inductively from a small corpus of Greek metaproverbs that explicitly comment on various aspects of the genre, such as origin etc.

Drawn primarily from the concepts of *metafolklore* and *oral literary criticism* introduced by Alan Dundes (1966), the concept of genre is examined under the prism of a “folk theory” derived from the folk. In what follows, the data are presented, in particular the metaproverbs, which are coded according to the features they emphasize, allowing a definition from the metaproverbs to be derived. Subsequently, a comparison of this definition follows with six contemporary definitions elicited from postgraduate students of Folklore, and twenty-six definitions from informants with no folkloristic or philological background, so that the convergences and divergences in how the genre is conceptualized today by modern informants is understood.

The article does not aim to propose a universal definition of the proverb; rather, it seeks to articulate an emic definition of the proverb as it emerges within Greek folk culture from metaproverbs and contemporary informants. Framed in this way, the article addresses the following research questions: Can a coherent emic definition be inductively derived from metaproverbs? How closely does this definition align with contemporary informant definitions? What are the similarities and differences? What would a definition of the genre look like that would consider all the above?

¹ The terms *etic* and *emic* belong to anthropological theory. In this article, they denote analytical perspectives rather than fixed participant categories. Accordingly, specialists are not treated as automatically “etic,” nor non-specialists as automatically “emic”; the comparison concerns differently positioned forms of insider discourse, placed in dialogue with scholarly paremiology.

2. Theoretical background and methodology

2.1. From 'types' to emic views

The classification of folklore genres, and the subsequent sub-classification within each genre, constitutes one of the most fundamental tasks in folkloristics. The folklore genre is now regarded as an “entity with a defined set of relations among language, symbols, and reality” (Ben-Amos, 1976: xxxi). On this premise, for a genre to be established and then analyzed, one must examine its linguistic constitution in direct conjunction with the ways and circumstances in which genres are realized. This fact also constitutes the greatest difficulty for folklorists regarding the classification of genres, since in many cases there is a risk that these two factors will be ignored, chiefly because genres are usually conceived as artificial categories that function as analytical tools (Frog, Koski, Savolainen, 2016: 17). Thus, etic classifications often ignore emic meanings, which, however, are essential to consider in classification and interpretation. This was the case in folklore studies for a long period of time, since folklorists focused on so-called “types” in their efforts to classify various folkloric texts.

Essentially, the term “type” came to mean “genre”, which gradually replaced the former term (Frog, Koski, Savolainen 2016: 18). Yet the shift in terminology was accompanied by a shift in scholarly interest from the meanings of texts to the very bearers of folk culture, as emphasis was placed on the notion of variation, which relates to groups, networks, and the like (Frog 2013, cited by Frog, Koski, Savolainen 2016: 24). This shift in scholarly interest brought the concept of *context* to the fore. Folklorists thus began to be concerned not only with collecting texts but also with collecting contexts. Even so, this too appears insufficient, for “one cannot always guess the meaning from context. For this reason, folklorists must actively seek to elicit the meaning of folklore from the folk” (Dundes 1966: 507). This innovative view, proposed by Alan Dundes as “oral literary criticism”, is of particular significance, for it essentially refuses to separate items of folklore from the tradition-bearers and, in effect, proposes a new way of studying folklore².

² For an approach of this kind in proverbs from the Balkans, see Tserpes (2018) and Tserpes (2024).

One of the sources suggested by Dundes for oral literary criticism is *metafolklore*, which is also the subject of the present study. Dundes notes characteristically:

There are a limited number of folkloristic commentaries on folklore. As there is a term 'metalanguage' to refer to linguistic statements about language, so we may suggest 'metafolklore' to refer to folkloristic statements about folklore. Examples of metafolklore of the 'folklore of folklore' would be proverbs about proverbs, jokes about jokes cycles, folksongs about folksongs and the like (Dundes 1966: 509).

This passage brings us to the core of our topic: a genre referring to itself (however this does not mean that metafolklore is only intragenre, since one genre may also refer to another). As we have seen, Dundes himself cites as an example, proverbs that refer to proverbs; therefore, these are metaproverbs.

Numerous studies have addressed this issue, which has pre-occupied research since as early as 1938. Selwyn Gurney Champion, in his work *Racial Proverbs. A Selection of the World's Proverbs Arranged Linguistically*, in which he gathers 12,000 proverbs from 190 countries, includes 124 texts in the chapter "Proverbs and Sayings about the Proverb" (Champion 1938: 3–9), which essentially constitute definitions of the proverb, while Wolfgang Mieder, in his *Encyclopedia of World Proverbs. A Treasury of Wit and Wisdom Through the Ages*, likewise provides proverbs about proverbs. Specifically, he lists 23 texts under the lemma "proverb" (Mieder 1986: 392).

Beyond the paremiographical level, however, the issue of metaproverbs has concerned many scholars who have written studies of a paremiological nature. Péter Barta distinguishes metaproverbs related to the truth of proverbs, their folk character, and the dialectics of the genre (Barta 1985: 170–171), while Ojoade undertakes an intercultural comparison within the African context (Ojoade 1977: 20–23). In the context of individual languages, the studies on Spanish metaproverbs are of interest, where further sub-typologies are proposed: specifically, these concern the nature of proverbs, their origin, dissemination, use/misuse, verisimilitude or fallibility, and the doctrine they express in the form of teaching (Jaime Gómez and Jaime Lorén 1995),

while Rafael Nicolás López refers to *proselytizing metaproverbiality*, a case in which the proverbial texts plead for (i.e., attest to) their own value and *framing metaproverbiality*, where the very word “proverb” appears in order to demarcate a segment of the proverbial text within the whole (López 1996). There is also reference to metaproverbs in the realm of Indian proverbs (Lourdu 1984). Finally, many studies examine metaproverbial discourse within literature (indicatively: Adeeko 1991; Fournié 1999; Joly 1984; Joly 1996; Lindfors 1968; Shelton 1969).

Metaproverbs are directly related to the issue of defining the genre. The question of defining the proverb has strongly engaged researchers.³ Archer Taylor, on this matter, states:

The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone. An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial. (Taylor 1931: 3).

What, then, is this incommunicable quality? To answer this question and address the problem of definition, it was proposed that specialists turn to the “folk” themselves. After all, Taylor’s reference to the famous incommunicable quality acknowledges the folk’s capacity to identify whether something is a proverb or not. Such attempts have indeed been made, the most notable being that of Wolfgang Mieder (Mieder 1985). In a study he conducted, he asked 55 individuals to write a definition of the proverb. Examining these definitions, Mieder finds that, for the respondents, proverbs express human wisdom in a sentence (Mieder 1985: 117), while he formulated the following definition: “A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” (Mieder 2004: 3).

³ Researchers from various fields have been addressed the definition of the proverb. The literature is extensive. However, there is still no generally accepted definition. This issue, dating back to 1931 and Archer Taylor’s view quoted above, remains a vexed question. For a recent view on the matter, see Villers (2024).

Of course, Mieder's research once again highlights the issues of genre and its various approaches. Moreover, his study refers to American folk culture. This is evident in Mieder's empirical research itself, since the respondents do not regard proverbs as universal; only two of the 55 respondents characterized proverbs as such (universals) (Mieder 1985: 118), in the sense that they are not universally valid. Their form may suggest this, but it does not hold everywhere and always.

A similar attempt, though of a different kind, was made by Başgöz (1990; 2006). Başgöz considers metaproverbs themselves to be folk definitions of the proverb. Relying on the texts provided by Champion and adding ten Turkish metaproverbs and five from the Luganda language, he compiles a corpus of 143 folk definitions of the proverb in the form of metaproverbs from 44 cultural areas (Başgöz 1990: 8). In his intercultural and interlingual approach, Başgöz identifies the following typology of definitions: 1) by means of content, 2) in relation to speech and discourse, 3) by means of origin, 4) by means of transmission and diffusion in time and space, 5) by means of prestige and power, 6) by means of form, and 7) by means of function (Başgöz 1990: 8–10).

The above approaches relate to the broader issue of classifying folklore genres and to the well-known distinction between etic and emic perspectives. In general terms, etic perspectives involve analytical classifications formulated from outside a tradition (typically in scholarly contexts), whereas emic perspectives foreground local categories and classifications articulated within the tradition itself. The debate over how these two perspectives should be combined was once extensive, the most well-known divergence being between Lauri Honko and Dan Ben-Amos. Honko disagrees with earlier views on archetypal genres and attempts to construct a system of narrative genres based on a complex series of criteria. Hence the issue of distinguishing between real and ideal genres arises. Honko places genres along the axes of synchrony and diachrony, with the synchronic perspective giving a sense of permanence and the diachronic a sense of continual evolution. Honko thus attempts to combine etic and emic approaches (Honko 2005: 4–25). Dan Ben-Amos, on the other hand, is a strong supporter of the emic approach to genres, essentially accusing Honko

of attempting to create a kind of normative–legislative scientific paradigm governed by universal laws. For Ben-Amos, folklore genres are socially recognizable and culturally determined, while any attempt to create universal genres constitutes a conceptual arbitrariness. All universal laws can only be hypothetical, since one can always find a group (ethnos) whose folk culture does not fall within any of the known categorizations (Ben-Amos 1992: 14–21 and 20–26, cited by Hakamies 2016: 300).

In essence, Dan Ben-Amos argues that taxonomic schemes of universal validity cannot exist precisely because they do not take into account the classificatory schemes of the tradition-bearers themselves; or, even when they do, they attempt to combine them with those of other groups and societies, effectively ignoring that “... the genres of folk culture and literature are social cognitive categories, emerging within local social practices” (Kaplanoglou 2022: 124). Consequently, they bear specific and unique features which, in turn, align with the usefulness of the genre (Datsi 2024: 200).

In any case, the issue is vast and cannot be fully analyzed at present. It is certain, however, that there must be a common understanding among scholars as to what each genre is and represents, so that intercultural comparisons are possible without disregarding emic conceptualizations. After all, genres today are not understood as universal; rather, they provide a frame of reference for approaching and comparing traditions (Frog 2016: 76). For this reason, each genre as an analytical category primarily describes “a pattern of equivalence rather than identity” (Frog 2016: 78). However, it is extremely useful always to bear in mind the conceptualizations of the folk.

2.2. *Data and methods*

Taking all the above into consideration, we will attempt to identify Greek metaproverbs and distinguish the basic features attributed to the genre by these texts. To locate the material, we used the Digital Repository of Proverbs of the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens. Specifically, we searched the repository using as keyword the term “παροιμία”⁴

⁴ A brief terminological clarification is necessary. The repository search was conduct-

(“proverb”). This search yielded eight texts, seven of which are classified under the lemma “*παροιμία*” and one under the lemma “*λαός*” (“people”), which appeared in the search because it includes the word “*παροιμία*”. Thus, the corpus includes only texts in which the word *παροιμία* (proverb) is mentioned. However, texts were excluded which, although they include the word “*παροιμία*”, do not refer to the genre as such, nor do they serve as folk definitions of the proverb, since the term is used more as a framing device. The archival material is used as evidence of attested metaproverbial formulations, not as a measure of present-day frequency or circulation. Their relevance here lies in the fact that they are documented reflexive statements about proverbs within the Greek folkloric archive.

Subsequently, we undertake an analysis of these texts to clarify which features are deemed significant for proverbial discourse. In parallel, following Başgöz—who treats metaproverbs as folk definitions of the genre, a stance also attributable to the fact that we lack information about the circumstances of use of these particular proverbs (Başgöz 1990: 8)—we will treat these texts as such, seeking to extract from them a definition of the proverb that encompasses all the characteristic traits ascribed to proverbs by the individual texts.

Finally, drawing on definitions of the proverb that we have collected from the tradition-bearers themselves, in particular postgraduate students of Folkloristics and informants with no folkloristic or philological background, we will compare the definition that emerges from the metaproverbs with these texts, to determine whether the same properties are attributed to the proverb as a genre and to what extent. The definitions from the students were provided by them during a lecture about proverb. To complement the “disciplinary folk” definitions provided by postgraduate folklore students, we conducted a small pilot survey of 26 non-specialist informants. Each informant was asked a single open question in Greek - “*Τι είναι για σένα/εσάς παροιμία;*

ed using the Greek term *παροιμία*, and the present study is concerned with that Greek folk category. For readability, *παροιμία* is translated as “proverb”; however, we acknowledge that in some English-language paremiological usage, the term “*paremia*” may function as a broader umbrella category. The claims made here therefore concern the Greek category *παροιμία* and its emic construal.

Πώς θα την όριζες/ορίζατε με δικά σου/σας λόγια;” (“What is a proverb for you? How would you define it in your own words?”), in informal settings (family, friends, gym, neighborhood). Responses were recorded verbatim, anonymized, and accompanied by minimal demographics (age group, gender, occupation, level of education).

It is important to clarify that, in this article, the term “definition” is used in an emic and metadiscursive sense, not in the strict logical sense of necessary and sufficient conditions. The aim is to reconstruct a culturally articulated, prototypical understanding of the proverb—how speakers describe, recognize, and authorize it in discourse and use. The present study therefore does not attempt to resolve the full boundary problem between proverbs and all other sayings. Instead, it identifies recurrent features and functions foregrounded when the proverb is reflexively conceptualized in Greek metaproverbs and in contemporary folk definitions. Thus, the features discussed here are treated as recurrent and variably foregrounded, not as obligatory criteria that must be present in every case. This is more of an attempt to understand how the genre is perceived (Arora 1984). This approach is consistent with genre research in Folkloristics more broadly, where emic genre concepts often operate through family resemblances, situational recognition, and use-oriented expectations rather than through rigid taxonomic boundaries.

3. The folkloric material: Greek metaproverbs

Given that even today there is no universally accepted definition of the proverb at a global level—that is, an etic definition—we will attempt to derive a definition of the proverb within the context of Greek folk culture. Of course, we do acknowledge that although proverb scholarship has not produced a universally accepted definition, several criteria recur with broad consensus (e.g. brevity, traditionality, contextual use). The contribution of the present study is not to replace such criteria, but to examine how they are emically articulated and differently weighted across Greek metaproverbs, student definitions, and popular definitions.

In Greek, the term used for proverb is *παροιμία* (paroimía). It is an Ancient Greek compound derived from the preposition

pará and the noun *oîmos* (“road”), and thus initially denotes something said in a collateral or oblique manner (Christides 2023: 11). Of course, etic-type definitions of the proverb have been proposed since antiquity.⁵ However, since our aim is an emic approach to the issue, we will attempt, as noted above, to derive a definition of the proverb both from proverbs that refer to proverbs and by comparing these texts with definitions of the proverb given by the tradition-bearers themselves.

As noted above, the search for proverbial texts (metaproverbs) was conducted in the Digital Repository of Proverbs of the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens, using the keyword *παροιμία* (“proverb”) as the principal search term. The texts we identified are as follows:⁶

- (1) *Παροιμία λαού, σοφία Θεού*⁷ (A people’s proverb is God’s wisdom). The proverb indicates that folk wisdom is almost equated with divine wisdom. Consequently, folk wisdom is sacralized and enveloped in absolute trust.
- (2) *Η κάθε παροιμία είναι λόγος ανεκτίμητος*⁸ (Each proverb is an invaluable saying). The value of the proverb cannot be quantified. This metaproverb underscores the rhetorical dimension of proverbial discourse.
- (3) *Είναι κάθε παροιμία εθνική φιλοσοφία*⁹ (Every proverb is a national philosophy). Proverbs are the philosophy/wisdom of the folk—their collective thought. Thus, proverbs appear as a form of folk epistemology.

⁵ For an analytical presentation of the concept of the proverb at the level of definition, both within Greek paremiology and in international literature, see Doulaveras (2010: 17–29).

⁶ The texts are presented in the order in which they appear in the digital repository. After the Greek text, its literal translation into English is provided in parentheses, followed by the commentary. For each proverb are provided in a footnote the number of the manuscript, the page on which the proverb is found, the place of registration, the collector and the year in which the collection was compiled. Sometimes not all this information is available. The initials F.A. stand for Folklore Archive, the previous name of the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, which was founded in 1918. The new name of the Research Centre was established in 1966.

⁷ F.A. Manuscript 340, p. 74, Kyzikos (Asia Minor), Ph. Philippides.

⁸ F.A. Manuscript 798, Ionian islands, G. Kavvadias, 1876.

⁹ F.A. Manuscript 2285, p. 98, Epirus – Ionian islands, G. Kavvadias, 1880.

- (4) *Κάθε παροιμία έχει τον τόπο της*¹⁰ (Every proverb has its place). This text refers to the fact that proverbs may be locally determined. Metaphorically viewed, it may also mean that each proverb has an appropriate occasion in which it may be used.
- (5) *Ούλες οι παροιμίες αληθινές είναι*¹¹ (All proverbs are true). Proverbs are accepted as axiomatic truths, a fact that highlights traditional thought's trust in the wisdom of the community.
- (6) *Α δεν ήταν (έτσι), δεν τα λέγανε οι παροιμίες*¹² (If it weren't so, the proverbs wouldn't say it). Proverbs describe how the world is, not how we would like it to be. They function as proof of authority. If something is "proverbial," it means it holds true. So, if it weren't true, it wouldn't be a proverb.
- (7) *Α δεν εσυνεβαίνανε, δεν τσ'έβγαναν τση παροιμίες*¹³ (If it didn't happen, it wouldn't have become a proverb). Proverbs arise from real events; they are the distillation of experience. Their causal origin is emphasized, since a proverb is considered the product of collective experience.
- (8) *Οι παροιμίες είναι ούλαις λόγια φρόνιμα*¹⁴ (Proverbs are all sensible words). The proverb is presented as a vehicle of prudence, temperance, and morality; thus, its pedagogical character is also brought to the fore.

From the above texts, we observe that a continuum is formed, beginning with the origin of the genre and ending with its limits of use, with intermediate milestones, those of authority and function.

The origin of the proverb is attributed to the folk, the people. This fact highlights the collective nature of the genre and especially the collective experience, something that is acknowledged as the "philosophy of the folk" (*Every proverb is national philosophy*). This gives proverbial speech an epistemological and phil-

¹⁰ F.A. Manuscript 701, p. 19, Epirus, Ch. Christovasilis.

¹¹ F.A. Manuscript 482, p. 92, Gortynia, T. Kandiloros, 1909.

¹² F.A. Manuscript 798, p. 9, Ionian islands, G. Kavvadias, 1876.

¹³ F.A. Manuscript 798, p. 9, Ionian islands, G. Kavvadias, 1876.

¹⁴ F.A. Manuscript 798, Ionian islands, G. Kavvadias, 1876.

osophical dimension since proverbs are not considered only as practical rules of everyday life, but also as means of understanding the world. This understanding of the world arises from the empirical basis from which proverbs derive (*If it didn't happen it wouldn't have become a proverb* and *If it weren't so, the proverbs wouldn't say it*). Recurring events have led to the coinage of proverbs, so their truth is guaranteed by collective experience. At the same time, collective experience is so much appreciated, even sacralized as in *A people's proverb is God's wisdom*. Proverbial speech, and folk discourse in general, is equated with God's wisdom.

Sacralization enhances the rhetorical power of proverbs as arguments. Perhaps that is why *Each proverb is an invaluable saying*, which also has a didactic purpose, since *Proverbs are all sensible words* and thus regulate social relations. This regulation of social relations highlights the function of the proverb as performance, since proverbs are not only texts, but also speech acts that are used on various occasions and for multiple purposes. This fact explains Roger D. Abrahams' choice to classify proverbs as a conversational genre, since in these genres of discourse, different forms of knowledge are communicated. In particular, regarding proverbs, Abrahams argues that "proverbs contain social wisdom and comment upon man's relation to other men" (Abrahams 1976: 201), thereby serving as a stabilizing form in social relations.

Finally, appropriateness is presented as one of the basic features of proverbs, since *Every proverb has its place*. The term "place" may have a local - cultural meaning or a pragmalinguistic meaning. In both cases it reveals two characteristics that from a folkloristic point of view are of pivotal importance: variation and the circumstance of communication (context). So, are *all proverbs true*? Yes, but only in a specific place and time, according to the metaproverb (4).

In sum, metaproverbs offer a self-reflection of the genre regarding what generates them (experience), their rhetorical power since they are used mainly as means of persuasion (truth/prudence/value) and how they should be used (where and when). What, then, could be a definition of the proverb within the frame-

work of Greek folk culture—one that could encompass all the above elements? Our proposal is as follows:

A proverb is condensed discourse stemming from a community's experiential knowledge of recurrent situations, employed on the appropriate occasion, as it is regarded as a bearer of truth, prudence, and wisdom, and at times is invested with sacred authority.

4. Emerging folklorists' definitions

With a view to bringing the issue of definition into the modern era, we next present six definitions of proverb offered by students, in order to determine whether emerging folklorists share the same views of the genre as those expressed in the metaproverbial texts analyzed above.

These definitions were provided by postgraduate students in the elective course “Myth, Fairy Tale, Proverb, Legend, Folk Poetry (Song), Autobiographical Narrative, Oral History, New Forms of Artistic Folk Discourse: Theoretical and Applied Approaches” of the master's program “Folklore and Literature – Georgios A. Megas” at the Department of Philology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.¹⁵

The definitions are as follows (in the order received):

1. Phrases with particularly imagistic language that compress within them the themes and issues of life. They often appear internally contradictory yet relate to the occasion in which they are uttered.
2. A proverb is a small “philosophy of life” that begins with the “we” and ends with the “I”.
3. A proverb is a short sentence with which an attempt is made to convey, concisely and compactly, a meaning or message. The meaning is usually expressed metaphorically, while a proverb often has meter/metrical segments or even rhyme.

¹⁵ I collected the definitions myself, as the course instructors (Mrs. Kaplanoglou and Mr. Kouzas) had invited me to give a lecture on the proverb. The lecture was delivered during the 2022–2023 academic year.

4. A proverb is folk wisdom used in specific instances to teach, advise, admonish—even to defuse—since it also has humor.
5. A proverb is the metaphorical rationalization of everyday events, human beings, and behaviors using images and rhythm.
6. A proverb is the shortest (often metrical) text that contains a dense meaning, a judgment regarding social life. It is aphoristic in character; it passes judgement and philosophizes.

The above definitions create a profile of the genre in terms of both form and function. Initially, the proverb is condensed speech: “phrases that compress” (def. 1), “short sentence” (def. 3), “the shortest text” (def. 6). At the same time certain linguistic devices are used such as metaphor (“metaphorical rationalization”, def. 5), imagery (“imagistic language”, def. 1) and rhythm (“metrical segments” / “rhyme”, def. 3, 6). Thus, proverbs are presented to carry metaphors, imagery and rhythm in a brief form. These characteristics contribute to memorability, mainly due to the brevity of the genre, while the “aphoristic character” (def. 6) gives authority to the proverb, since no validation of what it is said is required.

In terms of function, most of the definitions put emphasis on what proverbs can do as speech acts in daily discourse: “to convey a message concisely” (def. 3), “to teach, advise, admonish” (def. 4), “it passes judgement and philosophizes” (def. 6). At the same time the interpersonal dimension is highlighted in combination with pragmatic aspects, since the proverb is “for specific instances” (def. 4) and “relates to occasion” (def. 1). Thus, these context-oriented views do not recognize proverbs the authority of absolute truth since they often appear to be contradictory¹⁶ (def. 1), while according to Peter Seitel “Although relatively simple in their application of metaphor, proverbs are one of the most complex genres in that they are most sensitive to social context” (Seitel 1976: 141).

¹⁶ About contradiction as a feature of proverbs, see Meraklis (2007: 24).

Moreover, collectivity is another feature of the genre that emerges from definition No 2 (“A small philosophy of life that begins with ‘we’ and ends with ‘I’”), showing that the proverb functions as a mediator between collectivity and individuality, being activated in particular situations and bridging collective norms and individual strategies. Combining the definitions given by the students, we could argue that a definition from these emerging folklorists for the genre would be as follows:

A proverb is a brief, often rhythmic and imagistic, metaphorical utterance that compresses shared life experience into a dense message or judgment about social life; used to teach, advise, admonish, or defuse —sometimes with humor — moving from the communal “we” to the personal “I”, and capable of seeming contradictory while fitting the occasion.

5. *Definitions of the folk*

It is obvious that the six definitions provided by the students cannot be considered a representative sample – both because of the limited number and because of the students’ background, since most of them are graduates of Departments of Philology. Even if they had never previously reflected on what a proverb is, their academic background certainly explains why they placed particular emphasis on the genre’s morphological features.

Considering all the above, we thought that a third set of definitions gathered from people without a similar background would be essential, so that the results would be more reliable and, at the same time, bridging this way the gap between *folk* and *lore*. Following Wolfgang Mieder’s example in his paper *Popular Views of the Proverb* (1985), we collected 26 definitions for the proverb genre through fieldwork. The definitions were gathered in November 2025 by approaching friends, family and acquaintances. The survey included 15 women and 11 men, aged between 17 and 77 years. The definitions collected are as follows (in chronological order, according to the date they were received):

1. A proverb is a sentence that likens one thing to another.

2. A proverb is folk wisdom.
3. A proverb is a phrase passed from generation to generation, not necessarily free of prejudices. In general, it is a distillation of wisdom.
4. A proverb is a saying uttered by the people to remind folks of their roots and to act as an awakening.
5. A proverb shows reality through a story that evokes it without stating it. It is speech that awakens and makes one aware.
6. A proverb is something tied to a real habit from long ago; we have kept what it meant and still use it today.
7. A proverb is the past.
8. A proverb is something the old folks used to say.
9. A proverb is something we say because it has happened many times.
10. A proverb is folk wisdom.
11. A proverb is accumulated wisdom passed down from generation to generation, and it represents a deeply rooted ethos. It is something tacit that makes you think and encounter it within yourself.
12. A proverb is a folk expression with some metaphor.
13. It is a symbolization of a common assumption about the world—like a shared observation, but in a popular, vernacular way.
14. A proverb is the condensed wisdom of the old, so that the young may learn.
15. A proverb is a folk phrase with which we try to get a message across and communicate in a more idiomatic, commonly accepted way—like a code.
16. A proverb is something used socially when ordinary people cannot resort to scientific terminology; they try to explain things through proverbs. It is part of a people's tradition—something embedded in tradition.
17. A proverb is a more symbolic way to capture a collective/social/personal event.
18. A proverb is a phrase that comes from the affective memory of earlier generations and aims to point out a behavior.

19. A proverb is a way for information or a habit to pass from generation to generation, or to censure—criticize—or to reward certain behaviors.
20. A proverb is a saying used by the people to say something metaphorically.
21. A proverb is an expression that usually has a metaphorical/allegorical style and seeks to convey a deeper message.
22. A proverb is a playful maxim that seeks to convey a moral lesson figuratively.
23. A proverb is condensed folk wisdom.
24. A proverb is an expression with well-known conventional meanings that conveys a lesson— a truth—metaphorically.
25. A proverb is a saying that seeks to describe a situation in figurative language.
26. A proverb is an expression shaped by the people, with no known original author, that carries a lesson.

By examining these definitions, we observe that the informants emphasize on themes that organize meaning. Proverbs are anchored in tradition and transmission (“passed from generation to generation,” “the old,” “the past”), and are framed as practical wisdom that advises, awakens, criticizes, or commends behavior. Their warrant is experience—what “has happened many times,” “real habits from long ago”—and their force is contextual, used “at the right moment” to make a point. Form is envisaged as figurative compactness (metaphor, symbolism, condensation), while authorship is collective and anonymous (“shaped by the people”).

At the same time proverbs are considered as discursive strategies. Speakers mobilize metaphors of compression (“distillation,” “condensed”) and coding (“a code,” “symbolization”) to present proverbs as compressed social knowledge. Verbs of practice —“we say/use,” “to pass a message”— cast proverbs as speech acts rather than artifacts. Evaluative terms (“wisdom,” “lesson,” “ethos,” “awakening”) signals a moral-didactic stance. Also, an experiential modality dominates (“because it happens”), with “truth” appearing, when it does, through metaphor.

However, within the corpus of the definitions one can observe certain tensions and binaries, since several productive oppositions organize the discourse: past vs. present (heritage conserved vs. present reactivation), depiction vs. intervention (showing reality vs. delivering a moral), and universals vs. situatedness (rare universal “truth” vs. pervasive in-situ fit). These binaries frame the proverb as both memory and method—a resource that draws on the past yet operates pragmatically in the here-and-now.

Finally, collectivity and normativity appear to be core concepts of the definitions. Frequent use of “we/people” positions the community as both author and addressee; the proverb speaks for the group and to the group. The gnomic present (“is,” “we say”) lends generality and normative force, while the emphasis on use situates authority in performance. Overall, the footing is collective and pragmatic: proverbs are a vernacular code for guiding understanding and negotiating conduct within shared situations.

Considering all the above, and by combining the 26 definitions, one definition from the folk that arises is the following:¹⁷

A proverb is a short, conventional, often metaphorical saying of anonymous popular authorship that condenses inherited experience and ethos into memorable speech, passed across generations and activated in the proper context to frame and guide talk and action, conveying a lesson or “truth” whose authority rests chiefly in use rather than in universal warrant.

6. Discussion: Comparing metaproverbs, emerging folklorists’ and the folk’s definitions

In this article, an attempt was made to examine Greek metaproverbs as folk definitions of the genre. Each metaproverb focuses on different features (recurrent experience, authority, value, and appropriateness), which is why we sought to condense all the texts into a concise and coherent definition that would convey the overall essence of these texts.

¹⁷ At this point we must clarify that all definitions given in this paper are based on this material only. Different metaproverbs or different informants may have led to other definitions.

By comparing this definition with six definitions provided by postgraduate students, we aimed to determine the points of convergence and divergence. In both cases there is a broad agreement as far as it concerns the collective and empirical basis of the genre as well as the prudence and appropriateness of its use (context). On the other hand, the main divergences concern axiomatic universality, truth and divine legitimization that metaproverbs support, something which indicates that the students have a more pragmatistic understanding of the genre. Moreover, the students' definitions refer to formal and stylistic features of the proverb, such as metaphor, meter,¹⁸ image, and rhyme, thereby highlighting their poetic quality (Doulaveras 2010: 37-41), which are entirely absent from metaproverbs. Nevertheless, we should point out here that the more pragmatic dimension highlighted in the students' definitions does not necessarily signify a break with tradition but rather a shift in where the authority of proverbs is grounded; in these definitions it appears to relate more to how proverbs are used, without being perceived as dogmatic truths or axioms.

As far as the 26 folk definitions of the proverb are concerned and their comparison with metaproverbs, we could argue that they converge in viewing the proverb as arising from lived, recurrent experience; as practical prudence that guides action (teaching, advising, admonishing/defusing); and as effective only in context. They also agree on condensation and figurative language, and on collective, intergenerational transmission (anonymity, "of the people"). They diverge, however, in their rhetoric of authority: metaproverbs advance strong truth claims and, at times, sacralization ("all true," "God's wisdom," "invaluable speech"), whereas the folk definitions rarely invoke universal truth and ground authority in practical use and shared sense-making. In addition, metaproverbs explicitly name the principle of "place/appropriateness" ("Every proverb has its place"), while informants imply it functionally without terminology. Regarding form, folk definitions foreground metaphor/symbolism/condensation (and only rarely meter or rhyme), whereas metaproverbs

¹⁸ Especially for the metrical character of modern Greek proverbs, see Doulaveras (1989).

focus chiefly on value and normativity. Finally, metaproverbs articulate a causal genesis (“if it didn’t happen...”), while our informants emphasize transmission and reactivation in the present.

Taking all the above into account, it may ultimately be methodologically important to consider the emic conceptualizations of the folk itself regarding folklore genres. At the same time, the comparison between metafolkloristic commentaries and the views of contemporary informants helps bridge the gap between continuity and change, as it becomes clear which elements of tradition endure and which are now regarded as outdated. After all, especially in the case of proverbial discourse, we must always bear in mind that it is one thing for someone to know a proverb, another to believe that it holds true in the present —or that it holds true in a different way — and yet another to consider that it does not hold today.

In attempting to provide an emic definition of the proverb genre within the context of Greek folklore, we consider useful to combine the three definitions given above (from the metaproverbs, the students’ definition and the informants’ definition). We believe that such a definition would be as follows:

A proverb, in Greek folk culture, is the community’s condensed, conventional saying—of anonymous popular authorship rich in metaphor (often rhythmic) and memorably phrased, which distills inherited experience and ethos and is passed down through generations; it is activated in the appropriate context to frame and guide speech and action, claiming prudence (and at times truth or sacred warrant), with its authority resting chiefly on its aptness in use while reflecting traditional perspectives.

The composite definition proposed here is indeed close to several established folkloristic and paremiological definitions in emphasizing brevity, figurative expression, wisdom and contextual use. The present study does not argue that an emic approach is superior to scholarly paremiological approaches, nor that it can replace them. Its contribution lies elsewhere: in reconstructing how, the proverb is reflexively conceptualized within Greek folk discourse, in comparing that reflexive traditional evidence with disciplinary informed and non-specialist contemporary definitions, and in showing how the relative weight of defining fea-

tures shifts across these corpora. The emic and etic perspectives are thus treated here as complementary rather than comparative.

Metaproverbs permit us to “hear” what the genre has to say about itself, while compared to emerging folklorists’ and informants’ definitions, it is perceived more as a communicative strategy employed in various circumstances, being extremely useful in dealing with the complexity of life, since what seems important for people is what they can do with a genre. Such an approach rejects the broader effort of folk culture’s “museumization” and the contemporary era’s constant anxiety about innovation—even in everyday discourse.¹⁹ Innovation can also emerge from new uses, and this is something that proverbs continually demonstrate.

7. *Conclusion*

This article utilized metaproverbs—proverbs about proverbs—as an indicator of an inherent approach within Greek folklore to how the proverb genre essentially defines itself. By analyzing eight such proverbial texts which focus on origin, authority, function and appropriateness, it is highlighted that proverbs arise from recurrent experience, claim authority (sometimes even sacred warrant), and are regarded as sensible and invaluable speech, being effective in the proper context.

Comparing the above characteristics, through the definition proposed for the genre based on the metaproverbs, with contemporary definitions, both continuity and change were highlighted. The three data corpora seem to converge on condensation, practical wisdom and context, but diverge on the sacralization

¹⁹ This phenomenon is particularly pronounced, since many regard proverbs as stereotypes and clichés that ought not to be used, as they offer no originality. It is striking, moreover, that such a tendency toward negative terminology related to proverbial discourse is articulated even by scholars (Naciscione 2015). Within the framework of folk literature, however—which also includes proverbs—change and transformation are the rule. This does not, of course, exclude a tendency toward stability in folk literature, due chiefly to collective authorship and the memorized oral tradition (Meraklis 1988: 10). Proverbs in particular are easily memorizable texts that may not undergo major changes in form because of their brevity, yet they can be used each time in new contexts, which makes them valuable tools for everyday human communication—a process that effectively combines stability with change.

of proverbs and universal truth-claims. All of the above demonstrates that proverbs are no longer treated as axioms but as communication tools, shifting the locus of authority from above use to within use.

The contribution of this study lies less in proposing entirely new defining features than in grounding them emically and comparatively: it shows how these features are articulated within Greek metaproverbs and how they are reweighted in contemporary student and popular understandings, especially in relation to authority. Thus, the validity of this composite definition proposed here is necessarily culture -and language- bound. It concerns the Greek folk category “παροιμία” and its emic construal in archival and contemporary discourse and should not be read as a universally applicable definition of the proverb across languages and traditions. What may travel beyond the Greek case is less the resulting definition itself than the methodological procedure: combining metaproverbial discourse with contemporary elicited definitions to reconstruct and compare emic genre concepts.

We thus hope to have brought to light *the Greek concept of the proverb*, recalling Jan Fredrik Kindstrand’s emblematic study (1978), which focused on how the genre was understood by ancient authors. For our part, we have relied primarily on oral sources and contemporary informants, aiming to show how the concept of the proverb is perceived synchronically, while, at the same time, indicating both the constants that govern it and the shifts as perceived by its users.

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