

PETER UNSETH

The Function of Proverbs in Discourse: The Case of a Mexican Transnational Social Network. By Elías Domínguez Barajas. (Contributions to the Sociology of language 98). Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2010. Pp. 189.

This review is written primarily for proverb scholars, not primarily for those who study the sociology of language, (critical) discourse analysis, or educational policies for immigrant communities, though these are all topics that the author addresses at some length. A review of this same book for a different audience would be significantly different. The author is properly referred to as “Dominguez Barajas” rather than merely “Barajas”, but will here be abbreviated to his initials, EDB.

The book consists of seven chapters and an Epilogue; proverb scholars will most want to read the first five chapters. The first, Introduction, is important, introducing or reviewing a number of points about proverbs and theory. Two points are particularly important: the book describes the use of Spanish proverbs in a mostly bilingual (Spanish & English) context and the proverbs cited were all used by adults, not children.

The second chapter describes “The López social network and its proverbs,” the subjects of the study. They are an extended family, with a branch in Chicago but still connected to their roots in Mexico. EDB describes the social network and stresses that their use of proverbs can only be comprehended by understanding the settings in which they are used.

“Proverbs mean more than they say”, chapter 3, contains only one example of proverb use, but examines a very wide variety of complementary insights and theoretical perspectives, citing such authors as Bauman, Briggs, Brown & Levinson, Dundes, Honeck, Hymes, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Ohtsuki, Pepicello & Green, Pérez Martínez, Seitel, Silverman-Weinreich, and Whorf. Interestingly, considering that he spends much time discussing how proverbs are understood, he did not include Norrick's book

How Proverbs Mean. His study of “discourse” shows a restricted scope, neglecting conversational analysis and text linguistics, approaches to discourse that are eminently suited for studying “the function of proverbs in discourse.” The fourth chapter, “Proverbs do more than they mean”, contains 12 of the 15 proverbs cited in context, explaining their contexts and how they are to be interpreted. The fifth chapter, “Toward praxis: Linking the saying with the thinking”, discusses further how proverbs are interpreted and begins to develop another theme of the book: orality should not be interpreted as an indication of lesser cognitive skills, since the appropriate use and interpretation of proverbs in context requires sophisticated cognitive functions.

The next two chapters, “The academic stakes of language use” and “Beyond school halls”, launch a separate topic, though in EDB's mind the logical and appropriate next steps. He calls for broader American society to recognize the difficulties faced by people from Spanish-speaking contexts and for a recognition of their cognitive abilities regardless of their English skills. The word “proverb” only appears on 10 in these 34 pages. The Epilogue contains three points: Socialization practices; Identity formation; and Maintenance, loss, or transformation of oral traditions in U.S. contexts. In the Socialization section, there are at least 12 uses of “proverb(s)”, but this section and chapters 6 and 7 would have been much stronger if his corpus of proverb usage had included conversations that included children. The last two sections of the Epilogue are useful in better understanding the social context of *mexicanos* (his term) in America, but have only one reference to “proverbs”.

Research methodology

As he did his research, the author was living in Chicago, part of a social network largely composed of immigrants from Mexico in Chicago and also the extended family that still remained in Mexico. (He defines “social network” on p. 23, but a reader does not need to understand “multiplexity” and “density” to profit from his description of the interactions of the network's members.) As a member of the social network, he was able to hear the use of proverbs in natural conversational contexts. Also, he knew the people and the family dynamics well, so he was able to inter-

pret their use in deeper ways. For example, he knew that a mother had objected to her son courting a certain young lady, yet he understood that a proverb used in a discussion about this was not merely blaming the son, but was a warning specifically aimed at another young man in the room. In another case, EDB explains how a younger man uses a proverb to show his older relatives that he agrees with their opinion. In this situation where an elder criticized younger members of the family who had not taken advantage of an opportunity, another younger member of the family used a proverb to agree with an older member, but at the same time not criticize those who were absent. In yet another case, EDB knew the long history of two ladies, how they had grown up together. When one irritated the other, he is able to understand and explain the proverb that is used in their conversation.

However, being an intimate member of the social network, he admits that sometimes in the midst of conversation he also found himself “genuinely resentful” at being an analyst instead of being a participant (p. 5).

EDB stresses the social context in understanding proverbs, something richer and more revealing than studying only lists of proverbs. Yet he still finds it useful to examine lists of proverbs out of context when discussing proverbs about cultural beliefs regarding predestination (p. 35) and the poetic artistry of Spanish and English proverbs (p. 53). Clearly both approaches are useful, each in their proper sphere.

The title may suggest that this is a study of a large corpus of proverbs used in context. In actual fact, it contains a discussion of only 15 proverbs in their conversational contexts, and three of those 15 occur together in a single short stretch of conversation (p. 68). One of the proverbs was described not from EDB's observation, but from the memory of a person who had heard it. In contrast to this small corpus, in only two pages he discusses seven proverbs and their contexts from the 1952 film *Viva Zapata!* (p. 66,67.)

Analysis of proverbs in conversations

EDB points out that in this social network, it is not just the use of a particular proverb in a conversation that helps affirm relationships, but the fact that a person used a proverb at all is

seen as affirming one of the network's values. Additionally, using a proverb well is overtly appreciated (p. 103).

EDB's discussion of the emic/etic distinction, especially for those not already acquainted with it, is too linguistic to be helpful to some readers (I speak as a linguist). It is adequate to think of the distinction as the viewpoint of the insider vs. the outsider. The emic view is the insider's, knowing what is a significant difference, a different category by the community's view, not just different surface variants. But the outsider's etic view, noticing surface variants, is also important. EDB has been able to see using both viewpoints, giving a richer and deeper analysis. Knowing that he has both lenses, I do not quickly dismiss his analysis of a proverb's use as "an appeal to the reconfiguration of existing [gender related] social behavior and roles" (p. 77). To this outsider, the surface form seems to deal only with one situation, but I must take seriously his insider's understanding that the woman who used the proverb was aiming at larger issues. Similarly, when the family is accused of eating before a latecomer arrived, he gives an excellent explanation of the use of a proverb in reply, both defending the family's actions and also defusing hard feelings (p. 39-41).

In one of his more delightful conversational analyses, EDB tells how an older man, on first meeting a young lady, twisted a proverb to joke about her injured foot (p. 33-35). As an insider, EDB explains how what could be interpreted as an insult was affirmed as positive by the young lady, who later related the conversation. The explanation includes the fact that she had a conspicuously bandaged foot, the age differences between the two, the usual form of the proverb, the significance of the vocabulary substitutions, and the worldview assumptions behind the original.

It is often said that proverbs are used to invoke the tradition and wisdom of the community, deflecting responsibility away from the speaker. Instead of merely repeating this claim, EDB documents an actual example of this (p. 76). A woman sought to defend herself against an accusation of impropriety by using a traditional proverb. EDB shows how her proverb use makes "an allusion to a collective and traditional sense of proper behavior... deflect[ing] personal fault in her handling of the situation by dis-

avowing authorship and judgment and imputing them to the social collective.”

Repeatedly, EDB reminds readers that proverbs are culturally interpreted, not just the usage of proverbs in a context, but also their forms. As an example, he cites a proverb about a rooster from one of his examples. The speaker, by referring to himself as the rooster in a proverb “relies on the Mexican culture's common association of the rooster, or cock, with bravery, pride, and confidence” (p. 100, 101).

Having analyzed proverbs in conversations, EDB divided their functions in three categories: (1) support a claim concerning behavior, (2) give advice, (3) establish rapport. He notes an additional function which can be used in addition to any of the above: using proverbs to add variety to conversation (p. 70). Building on Jakobson, EDB points out that though proverbs are usually artistic in form, their use in conversations is rarely about the poetry of the form; “They always carry out another social function in addition to foregrounding their poetic features” (p. 72).

EDB demonstrates his skill at understanding the nuances of proverb use in conversation by analyzing the use of those seven proverbs in the film *Viva Zapata!* His analysis deals not only with the interaction of the film's characters, but also with the way the film translates some Spanish proverbs into English, such as “A monkey in silk is still a monkey.” One is even a combination of two Spanish proverbs spliced together. His two page discussion of the use of proverbs in this film (p. 66, 67) is a welcome addition to the small number of publications examining the use of proverbs in film.

Analysis of cognitive processes related to proverbs

A distinct contribution of this book is his discussion of sociolinguistics and cognitive science (note that it is published in the series *Contributions to the Sociology of Language*). The “two disciplines have been considered diametrically opposed by virtue of their philosophical positioning in regard to their object of study. The first is concerned with the examination of human behavior as it is grounded in particular language use and its context; whereas the latter looks to examine human thought processes and behavior by basing itself on the premise of universal brain functions” (p. 42). He argues repeatedly that

proverbs can only be understood in their social context (both conversational and cultural contexts), but they must also be processed cognitively. He believes that such “examination of proverbs allows the articulation of a synthesis between these two positions” (p. 43). “Much of the complexity surrounding proverbs is based not only on the reasoning skills that are involved in their processing but also on the complex chains of socio-historical knowledge trailing the referents in culturally-specific associations” (p. 109).

Proverb interpretation is culturally determined (p. 116, 117), so people may cognitively process a proverb correctly but may misinterpret its contextual meaning for cultural reasons, lacking important assumptions. It is interesting to apply this to his analysis of the English proverb “Fair in the cradle, foul in the saddle,” which he interprets as from American cowboy imagery. However, the proverb is documented from as far back as 1639, so its origin lies far earlier, in Britain. It may be that some modern Americans now interpret it in light of cowboy imagery, but in this my first exposure to the proverb, this modern American (living in Texas) never thought of cowboys in interpreting it. But proverbs are interpreted according to the hearer's context, not the proverb's origin, so different hearers may have different, though legitimate, interpretations.

He also argues that the skillful use of proverbs requires significant cognitive skills, so that formally uneducated people do not merely engage in rote memorization, but can be seen to use some kinds of abstract and analogical reasoning that are too often thought to be only the product of formal education. He rejects the notion that in the absence of literacy, the oral medium of communication limits people's capacity for complex abstract thought and metalinguistic expression (p. 109).

It is interesting to compare this conclusion, based on studies of actual proverb use, with one analysis of the use of proverbs in literature. In describing the use of proverbs in Schiller's play *Wilhelm Tell*, Lamport (1981:857) concludes that Tell often uses set phrases, conveying the impression that he does not think independently, that he is guided by traditional thinking. His uses of proverbs “have the appearance of being tips of vast icebergs of accumulated rustic wisdom. But in their insistence that to

every problem there is a ready-made and simple answer, they mark him as a man of limited insight." I prefer to follow EDB's conclusion about the actual use of proverbs among those who are not formally educated, rather than have my opinion limited by the analysis of proverb use by a fiction writer.

There is one painfully politically correct passage in the book, when EDB explains that by using an animal-based proverb in regard to a woman he was not trying "to associate women with animalistic traits" (p. 92). Among proverb scholars, it is understood that the specific images mentioned in proverbs are not taken as imputing "animalistic traits" onto people, as in "The early bird gets the word" or "When the cat is away, the mice will play."

Having taught composition, EDB has thought creatively about how to use proverbs in teaching students analytical thinking. He points out that it is not enough to get students to know the meaning of a proverb, but important that they be able to think about how they got there, a process more challenging and engaging (for both students and teachers), than drills and memorization.

Mexicano presence in USA

Much of the book is about the differences, many of them difficult, between the López social network and English-speaking American culture. He calls for the broader society to accommodate the large Spanish-speaking population. It is not clear, then, how to understand what he means by the network's use of proverbs "reaffirm[s] cultural and interpersonal bonds... that underscores their foreignness" (p. 27, see also p. 129ff.). Does he mean that this social network is trying *not* to fit into the host culture? His emphasis appears to be that their use of proverbs affirms their unity, both with those in Chicago and those back in Mexico. As immigrants, they are striving to maintain their identity of origin, and asking that their host society accommodate them (he even mentions bilingual education in college composition classes); such large scale accommodations to immigrants are not likely to happen. In this linguistic and cultural contact zone, the López network uses proverbs as a tool to maintain their balance, their identity, their bonds.

He complains that “one must speak English ... in order to be empowered in the U.S.” I do not find that so surprising: to be empowered in France one must speak French; to be empowered in Japan one must speak Japanese; to be empowered in Mexico one must speak Spanish (ask the minorities who speak Zapotec, Otomi, Mixtec, Nahuatl, etc.).

Overall evaluation

I was very pleased with EDB's analysis of proverbs in conversational contexts, but disappointed at his small corpus of analyzed proverbs. His study of the cognitive and social interpretation of proverbs is stimulating. These parts of this book deserve to be read, studied, and quoted. However, his calls for educational policy changes based on his work will not change people's minds since he has made no study of proverb use and comprehension among children and youth. He offers some intriguing proposals related to education, but his study of proverbs does not provide the specific evidence to convince readers of the value of his ideas.

References:

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Peter Unseth
Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics
7500 W. Camp Wisdom Rd.
Dallas, Texas 75236
USA
Email: pete_unseth@gial.edu