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COGNITIVE-DISCURSIVE FUNCTIONS OF ANGLO-AMERICAN PROVERBS

Abstract: This article explores the role Anglo-American paremias (or proverbs), both standard and modified, play in the processes of cognition and communication. I argue that their cognitive nature as precedent utterances accounts for their ubiquity and their significant conceptual power. Indisputably, paremias possess certain rhetorical value but this “artful” dimension of the use of proverbs is not going to be my main concern here. In addition to being efficient rhetorical means, they serve to structure discourse and convey information. I propose a list of cognitive-discursive functions these formulaic phrases fulfil in discourse, and exemplify each with one or more instances of their use. The primary data include the discourse of public speaking – excerpts from Nobel Prize acceptance speeches, commencement addresses, and presidential political rhetoric (Clinton and Obama) – as well as media discourse (excerpts from an American TV series and print interviews).

Keywords: paremia (proverb), cognition, discourse, cognitive-discursive function, cognitive base, precedent utterance

Cognitive characteristics of proverbs

Proverbs are unique formulae which seek to represent reality by capturing a certain situation, while serving as ready-made tools for representing analogical situations. They describe and interpret the surrounding world, and at the same time help convey attitudes and evaluations. Their appearance in discourse indicates the speaker’s goals and intentions. They are consequently endowed with considerable conceptual power.

Cognitive psychologists and discourse scholars stress the importance of background knowledge, or ‘cognitive base’, as it is called in Russian linguistics, in the perception and processing of information (Bartlett 1932; Neisser 1976; van Dijk & Kintsch 1978). Paremias are indispensable elements of this complex of knowledge, ideas, conceptions and beliefs shared

by the members of a given lingua-cultural community. They belong in the realm of precedent phenomena¹, i.e. texts, utterances, proper names, or situations that an average representative of a culture and language will easily recognize. They are also characterized by recurrent use in discourse and considerable cognitive and emotional value for the speakers. The cognitive base dictates the choice of linguistic means that are employed to structure and fill discourse. Thus the use of proverbs is cognitively predetermined. Like any other language unit, the paremia is a sign existing within a given semiotic system (the paremic system of a language). Proverbs represent in the human mind some generalized situation that is of value to the speakers of a language for certain cognitive and psychological reasons. In discourse one and the same paremia can be applied to a myriad of situations by analogy.

My previous research into the use of Anglo-American proverbs and proverbial expressions in various types of discourse within the broader fields of media discourse and public speaking attests to their ubiquity² (Konstantinova 2007; 2012; 2014). They can be called a universal linguistic means as they are applied in different types of English language discourse, albeit with varying frequency. Thus, the hypothesis behind the study is the suggestion that paremias are ready-made means for storing, processing, retrieving, and structuring information in discourse.

Cognitive-discursive functions of proverbs: general remarks

The aforementioned research has allowed me to distinguish the cognitive functions these language units fulfil in written and spoken communication. As I will show, on the one hand, they serve as its constructive elements; on the other, they help its interpretation. I should, however, make the caveat that the suggested division is not absolute, and the functions are not mutually impenetrable. As my analysis reveals, it is often the case that one of these functions is not fulfilled in discourse *per se*, i.e. in isolation from some other functions. But for the purposes of interpretation a certain function is distinguished as the leading one in any particular instance of discursive use. In this regard, of special interest are contexts marked by the convergence of cognitive-discursive functions fulfilled by one and the

same paremia, and such examples will be discussed further below.

Cognitive-discursive functions of Anglo-American proverbs

Discourse interpretation. In order to extract knowledge from a text and interpret its contents one needs to apply cognitive mechanisms of processing the linguistic data. These mechanisms are based on the knowledge of a certain language, the world, and also on the conventions of correlating linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge. As precedent utterances that most members of a lingua-cultural community are familiar with, proverbs serve as cues for discourse explication/ interpretation, and, thus facilitate its processing, understanding, remembering, and recalling. From this arise more specific functions.

The function of semantic highlighting. Considerable research has shown that precedent phenomena (Gudkov 2003; Krasnykh 2003; Zakharenko et al. 1997) bear authority in them. Being precedent utterances, proverbs serve as well-remembered and easily reproduced cues for generating information, and can be efficiently used to foreground the most important pieces of information in discourse. We can see this, for example, in the excerpt from the commencement address by the American actor Alan Alda, whose daughter was one of the Connecticut College graduates in 1980. His speech is composed in a peculiar way: the actor addresses the audience under the fiction of an address to his child. As Alda points out, he feels the urge to pass on the most fundamental things to his treasured girl:

I want to tell you things that will see you through. I have this helpless urge to pass on maxims to you. But we live in new times. Strange times. Even the Golden Rule doesn't seem adequate to pass on to a daughter. There should be something added to it. You know how I love amendments. You knew I wanted to amend the Constitution, but you probably didn't know I wanted to amend the Golden Rule as well. Here's my Golden Rule for a tarnished age: Be fair with others but then keep after them until they're fair with you (Alda 1980).

In this excerpt, the speaker creates the anti-proverb 'Be fair with others but then keep after them until they're fair with you' on the basis of the traditional Bible proverb 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' (Matthew 7:12). As W. Mieder and A. Litovkina show, the proverb known as the Golden Rule often undergoes modifications (1999: 66-68). This fact can be accounted for by the changes in moral principles and values dominating in the contemporary society. Alda explains the necessity of the addition he makes to the proverbial wisdom by the dictates of the times: 'But we live in new times. Strange times. Even the Golden Rule doesn't seem adequate to pass on to a daughter. There should be something added to it.' Thus, this important lesson for his daughter, representing the whole audience of young people who are just starting grown-up life in this 'tarnished age', is expressed through the anti-proverb that fulfils in this case the function of semantic highlighting.

The function of emotional highlighting. Some acts of interpretation of incoming information are accompanied by the process of emotional assessment, i.e. its evaluation in terms of 'bad' and 'good'. As precedent utterances, paremias have emotional value for the people who share the same culture and language. They express an attitude towards some (or rather, an infinite number of) analogical situations and, thus they help accentuate emotional spots in discourse. Let us look at the way the proverb 'Blood is thicker than water' performs this function in the Nobel acceptance speech by the South African social rights activist Desmond Tutu for his outstanding role in the struggle against apartheid. Whilst dwelling upon the issue of the discrimination existing in his country at that time, Tutu bitterly condemns the fact that the ruling whites treat the blacks as 'expedient material':

In parenthesis, can somebody please explain to me something that has puzzled me. When a priest goes missing and is subsequently found dead, the media in the West carry his story in very extensive coverage. ... But in the self-same week when this priest is found dead, the South African Police kill 24 blacks who had been participating in the protest, and 6,000 blacks are sacked for being similarly involved, and you are lucky

to get that much coverage. Are we being told something I do not want to believe, that we blacks are expendable and that blood is thicker than water, that when it comes to the crunch, you cannot trust whites, that they will club together against us? I don't want to believe that is the message being conveyed to us (Tutu 1984).

The aforementioned proverb 'Blood is thicker than water' helps Tutu to figuratively depict and at the same time condemn the behavior of the white population in his native South Africa. This behavior, and the evident facts of racism, are deemed by the speaker to be an attempt by the ruling white minority to prove their superiority over the native people for, as the proverb suggests, tight bonds exist between relatives, and in this speech the whole race is presented as a family. Thus, applying the well-known family proverb to the racist context enables the Nobel Prize winner to articulate with strongly felt emotion his negative stand on the dreadful events. Tutu's Nobel lecture is without doubt already emotional due to the theme he discusses and the terrifying examples he gives. He employs several more proverbs further in his speech, and, as my analysis shows, they mark its most emotional moments. They serve as a means of condemnation and express his negative attitude to both the racial segregation policy in South Africa and war and violence in the whole world.

Sometimes paremias are used along with other formulaic expressions or phraseological units that add to their cognitive-discursive value and help create phraseologically saturated contexts³. In such cases paremias and/or other phraseologisms typically serve to enhance emotionality. Here is one such example of clustering several proverbs and metaphorical expressions in a short piece of text – Oprah Winfrey's interview with Bill Clinton, in which, among other things, they discuss the scandal which emerged from his sexual involvement with Monica Lewinsky and which resulted in his undergoing impeachment by the US House of Representatives in 1998. Of special interest is the way proverbs function in the following extract:

Oprah: What was the major lesson you took from the crisis?

Clinton: You know what the Greeks said: ‘Those whom the gods would destroy they first make angry.’ In November 1995, I was mad. Workaholics like me get so involved in their work. But there is a point beyond which – and I don’t care how good you are or how much stamina you have – no one can go without losing his or her fundamental sense of what ought to be done. It was a very difficult period for me. At the time, I was engaged in a great public war with the Republican Congress over the future of the country, and a private war with my old demons. I won the public fight and lost the private one.

You just have to deal with that stuff and go on. It’s not the end of the world. ... I’m no different from anybody else. An old Irish proverb says that even if the best man’s faults were written on his forehead, he would put his cap over his face in shame. Once I got that, it was liberating. Some people think, ‘Gosh, if I got humiliated like that in front of billions, I’d want to stick my head in an oven.’ I didn’t feel that way. I felt, This is great – I have nothing more to hide. ... I don’t have to pretend anymore (Winfrey 2004).

As we see, the former US president employs two ancient proverbs in his reply ‘Those whom the gods would destroy they first make mad’ and ‘If the best man’s faults were written on his forehead, he would put his cap over his face in shame’, both of which fulfil the function of semantic highlighting in discourse. They are used to designate the two crucial phases of the scandalous situation which occurred. The first encapsulates Clinton’s psychological state which, according to what the proverb conveys, had been a signal before the crisis broke out. The second marks its critical point and the break-through moment. It is worth noting, that in both cases the interviewee resorts to introductory formulae ‘you know what the Greeks said,-’ and ‘an old Irish proverb says,-’, which point out to the origin of the paremias and manifest the speaker’s erudition. In their own turn, these introductory phrases contribute to the semantic foregrounding of the proverbially expressed ideas that follow. In Clinton’s answer we also observe a phraseologically saturated

context, for he uses several metaphorical expressions along with the proverbs. The figurativeness of his speech makes explicit his deep psychological involvement during these two phases of the crisis. The phrase ‘war with my old demons’ (cf. ‘to fight one’s demons’) conveys his depression and emotional tension before the scandal. The phrases ‘it’s not the end of the world’ and ‘stick my head in the oven. I didn’t feel that way’ signify psychological freedom, admitting his faux pas, and the realization of the belief that the truth does set you free.

Summarizing function. Research on story comprehension has revealed ‘that processing load is the greatest at the beginning and the end of a story episode’ (Honeck, 1997: 118). Beginnings are typically ambiguous because the reader lacks information, and endings require summarizing. As Honeck points out, ‘proverbs can be beneficial for both’ (ibid). Proverbs express a general observation. They, therefore, can be an excellent means of presenting the epitome of the whole text or its constituent parts. In his study, W. Kintsch shows that ‘summaries can be as valuable and sometimes more valuable than the material they summarize by reducing information load, making important pieces of information salient, allowing easier connections between these pieces ‘...’ (Kintsch 1988, quoted in Honeck 1997: 119). My research reveals that paremias can be effectively used to summarize the whole text as well as its parts.

In his remarks at the commencement ceremony for a local high school in 2010, for instance, President Barack Obama uses the modified popular proverb ‘Hitch your wagon to a star’ as the summary of his thoughts:

Don’t just hang out with people who look like you, or go to the same church you do, or share your political views. Broaden your circle to include people with different backgrounds and life experiences. Because that’s how you’ll end up learning what it’s like to walk in somebody else’s shoes. That’s how you’ll come to understand the challenges other people face.

And this is not just an academic exercise. It’s a way to broaden your ambit of concern and learn to see yourselves in each other.

Which brings me to my final piece of advice for today, and that's to give back, to be part of something bigger than yourselves. Hitch your wagon to something that is bigger than yourselves (Obama 2010).

In the speech, the 44th US president dwells on the problem of tolerance and mutual understanding, which he deems to be the guarantee of the successful co-existence of people. According to Obama, empathy and the ability to see the world through other people's eyes are the character traits necessary to a young person entering grown-up life. Obama modifies the traditional proverb: by changing the lexeme 'star' for the word combination 'something that is bigger than yourselves', he points to the 'height' his young audience should aim for. The use of the proverb in the final position of a part in the commencement address enables the speaker to sum up his thoughts and succinctly express his message.

The function of structural organization. My research suggests that the position of a paremia in discourse is significant. Proverbs build schemes for organizing, remembering, and comprehending information in discourse. Therefore, they are elements of its structural organization. Other studies also stress the significance of proverbs as 'conceptual pegs' that structure existing information and integrate new information (Matlin 1994, quoted in Honeck, 1997: 119).

To illustrate this point let us consider the role proverbs play in an episode of the medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*, 'If Tomorrow Never Comes' (season 1, episode 6), wherein proverbs feature in all important elements of the discourse structure: the title, the opening and closing voice-over narration. The given episode sets a record in the number of proverbs used (six in total). The popular dictum 'Tomorrow never comes' introduces its theme. Without knowing the plot, one may guess it is devoted to the problem of the habit of procrastinating or indecisiveness standing in the way of making decisions and well-timed actions. Moreover, the proverb being used in the conditional clause makes the viewers consider whether it is right to postpone things, for tomorrow may never come.

In the opening voice-over narration the main female character Dr. Meredith Grey shares with the audience a somewhat different view of the problem already stated in the episode title:

A couple hundred years ago Benjamin Franklin shared with the world the secret of his success. Never leave that 'til tomorrow, which you can do today. This is the man who discovered electricity; you'd think we'd pay more attention to what he had to say. I don't know why we put things off, but if I had to guess it has a lot to do with fear. Fear of failure, fear of pain, fear of rejection. Sometimes the fear of just making a decision ...

By applying a synonymous proverb 'Never leave that 'til tomorrow, which you can do today' in the voice-over narration, Meredith Grey links human indecisiveness to the fear of taking a wrong step and making mistakes. The plot of the episode centers on a unique medical case. A female patient, who was afraid to consult doctors for a long time, is admitted to Seattle Grace hospital. As a result, she has a giant growth on her body, and her chances of survival are slim to none.

Another relevant plot line is the continuing love relationship between the two main characters Meredith Grey and Derek Shepherd. Their careers seem to be in jeopardy when Seattle Grace resident Miranda Bailey learns about their romance. Grey is Dr. Bailey's surgical intern, and the mentor watches the couple closely as she looks down on romantic links between a high-ranking doctor and an intern who has just started her medical career. Meredith, in her turn, is doubtful about the new relationship and the special treatment she gets from Dr. Shepherd.

In the same episode Meredith's co-interns face situations requiring prompt decisions and quick actions. The lessons to be deduced from the events are formulated in the closing voice-over narration with the help of a chain of popular proverbs:

'The early bird catches the worm.' 'A stitch in time saves nine.' 'He who hesitates is lost.' We can't pretend we haven't been told. We've all heard the proverbs, heard the philosophers, heard our grandparents warning us about wasted time; heard the damn poets

urging us to seize the day. Still, sometimes we have to see for ourselves. We have to make our own mistakes. We have to learn our own lessons. We have to sweep today's possibility under tomorrow's rug until we can't anymore. Until we finally understand for ourselves what Benjamin Franklin meant. That knowing is better than wondering. That waking is better than sleeping. And that even the biggest failure, even the worst most intractable mistake, beats the hell out of not trying ('If Tomorrow Never Comes,' *Grey's Anatomy*, 2005).

The proverb 'The early bird catches the worm' refers to intern Alex Karev, who is doing his best to deliver blood for the female patient with the tumor, but eventually fails. For her tomorrow will not come, as she dies in the operating room. The proverbs 'A stitch in time saves nine' and 'He who hesitates is lost' sum up the events that happen to Izzie Stevens. The inexperienced intern remains alone with a post-op patient who suddenly collapses, and she has to perform a series of complex manipulations on the open heart. Izzie's boldness and timely actions help her save the patient's life. The phrase 'wasted time' singled out from the proverb 'Time wasted is time lost' and the Latin proverb 'Seize the day' complete this proverb chain. The modified idiomatic expression 'to sweep today's possibility under tomorrow's rug' (cf. 'to sweep something under rug'), that in its turn deals with the habit of putting things off till tomorrow, adds to the phraseologically saturated context effect.

It appears logical that the writers used multiple synonymous proverbs in the context cited. They are introduced as widely known authoritative sources of prudent behavior. All the expressions stress the importance of time by warning that if you don't hasten, you can fail as you will inevitably run out of time. In the closing voice-over narration, Meredith Grey offers a different interpretation of the folk wisdom that focuses on the significance of personal experience. The realization that she shouldn't be afraid to act, because one learns through action, compels Meredith to continue her romance with Derek against all odds. Thus, when used in strong positions, like the title, the beginning, and the end of the narration, these numerous prov-

erbs organize the structure of the episode, and also contribute to interpreting the plot and deducing its moral.

Of special interest is the following example of functional convergence in which a proverb fulfils the function of structural organization along with two other functions. Russell Baker, an American author and newspaper columnist, opens the commencement address he gave at Connecticut College in 1995 with an element of the popular modern proverb 'There is no /such thing as a/ free lunch' which helps him to immediately establish contact with the young audience and create an informal atmosphere for communication:

The authorities of Connecticut College have suggested that for me to speak longer than 20 minutes would be regarded as cruel and inhuman punishment and that if I go as long as 30 minutes several strong men will mount this platform and forcibly remove me. But if I can finish in 15 minutes – 15 minutes! – they will let me stay for lunch. They know their man, ladies and gentleman. When I smell a free lunch, I go for it.

The length of the commencement address is a crucial problem on this remarkable day, so most speakers routinely promise to be short. Best known for his satirical and humorous works, Baker chooses to deal jokingly with the speech-length issue by applying the paremic image 'a free lunch' ('When I smell a free lunch, I go for it'). According to the guest speaker, only such an extremely rare stroke of luck as a free meal can make him squeeze all the wisdom he plans to pass on to the young generation into a quarter of an hour. Thus the element 'There is no such thing as' is withheld from the listeners at the beginning of the address. Baker, however, resorts to the paremia under discussion at the very end of his address. The writer manages to keep his speech brief mainly due to its special structuring. He offers a list of ten succinctly formulated recommendations, adding in his humorous manner lesson № 9.5. Another important lesson he leaves unnumbered:

Now it seems I have run past the 15-minute limit and will have to buy my own lunch. That's life Class of 1995. No free lunch.

My sermon is done (Baker 1995).

When closing his speech, Baker returns to the topic of the ‘free lunch’ he raised at the very beginning. Regardless of the fact that the truncated proverb ‘No free lunch’ is again humorously presented in the context, it still embodies one of the main social laws: you have to pay for everything, *c’est la vie*. Thus, being applied both at the beginning and the end of the commencement address, the proverb fulfils the function of structural organization of discourse, as it frames the speech making its composition complete. It also fulfils the phatic function⁶ as it helps to establish contact with the young listeners, and the function of semantic highlighting as it encapsulates significant information.

Euphemistic function. The approach employed in my study calls for the analysis of the role language phenomena play both in **cognition and discourse**. These phenomena are tightly connected with knowledge, opinions, attitudes, assessment, and stereotypes. Therefore, to fully understand cognitive and discursive processes one has to take into account socio-cultural and psychological (and, consequently, emotional) factors. The figurativeness of proverbs (semantic ambiguity) helps the speaker to avoid improper, offensive, or indecent words and phrases. I have called this function the ‘euphemistic function’. The term is somewhat restricted, since proverbs are not neutral language, which euphemisms normally require. What, then, I mean by ‘euphemistic’ in this context is the capacity of these linguistic units, as demonstrated by my analysis, to help prevent communicative conflicts, and dissimulate or encode true meaning. Let us look at one such example.

During his 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama used proverbs—both traditional and modified—on numerous occasions to characterize the philosophy of the White House. It was his strong belief that years of selfishness, greed, and irresponsibility by the current administration had led the country to the economic crisis:

If the financial markets collapse, and loans are not available, businesses, large and small, will follow. It’s your jobs, your savings, your ability to pursue your

dreams for your children that are at risk. That's why we have to act. That's why we have to set aside the politics of the moment and exercise something we haven't seen in Washington lately – responsibility.

Now, let me be perfectly clear. The fact that we are in this mess is an outrage. It's an outrage because we did not get here by accident. This was not a normal part of the business cycle. This did not happen because of a few bad apples.

This financial crisis is a direct result of the greed and irresponsibility that has dominated Washington and Wall Street for years (Obama 2008).

In the speech cited, Barack Obama employs the now popular idiom 'a few bad apples' originating from the traditional proverb 'One bad apple spoils the lot.' Along with the phrase there exists a pseudo-proverb⁶ 'There are always going to be a few bad apples' offering a certain excuse for the corruption, failure, or misconduct one can encounter in an organization or institution. The use of the metaphorical expression, pertaining to the well-known proverbial image, enables the politician aspiring to the presidency to sound maximally correct while adding expressivity to his speech. In the given context the phrase fulfils the euphemistic function.

The function of cognitive economy. In his study of the language-mind-proverbs triad Honeck referred to the last as 'miniature theories,' while stressing their ability to 'summarize, integrate, and economically code a large number of superficially distinct events' (1997: 103). Being succinct linguistic forms, paremias serve as compact markers of a situation that possess considerable cognitive power, and thus facilitate the processing of the transmitted information. For instance, in the feature interview with the well-known American TV host Phil Donahue made by Oprah Winfrey for *O, The Oprah Magazine* one finds an anti-proverb derived from the traditional dictum 'A man's home is his castle':

Oprah: The bottom line is that we need you, Phil, because we need to be challenged by the voice of dissent. What do your children think of your return?

Phil: They're surprised. But they've also said, 'Go get 'em, Pop'. I'm not 29 anymore, my wife isn't pregnant, I'm not trying to raise kids, I don't have a mortgage – so it takes less courage for me to speak up. Maybe I'll get to talk about things like why this administration is so secretive. Whatever the framers meant, this wasn't it. I'm an American, just like you, and I am impressed with the Bill of Rights. I believe a woman's home should be her castle ... People can yell at me, they can criticize me, they can call me names. But there's one thing they can't do: They can't take away my flag (Winfrey 2002).

When discussing his upcoming return to TV with a new talk show, Phil Donahue mentions the topics he is planning to devote his program to. He formulates each in a separate sentence, but for the topic of women's rights he chooses to use a proverb, which makes it stand out from the rest. The standard proverb 'A(n) (English)man's home is his castle'⁴ has been for a long time a legal maxim of the Common Law established by the English lawyer Sir Edward Coke in the 17th century. The substitution of the lexeme 'man' by the lexeme 'woman' and the addition of the modal verb 'should' enables the interviewee to speak out his belief in the necessity of equal rights for women and men. This folklore 'miniature theory' fulfils the function of cognitive economy, helping Donahue to succinctly formulate his vision of the complex problem.

Another relevant example of this function is the group of proverbs encapsulating universal truths and the principles shared by the major religions (All people are created equal; Do unto others as you would have them do unto you; Love thy neighbor as thyself). While studying the performance of proverbs in Nobel Acceptance Speeches (specifically by the Peace Prize Laureates), I distinguished a number of speeches featuring these maxims, in which they fulfil the function of cognitive economy. In their heartfelt speeches, the orators dwell on the common topic of tolerance for other lifestyles, cultures, and

beliefs that is supported by the three dictums cited above. Being popular and widely used phrases as they are, these proverbs still preserve their meaningfulness and relevance. So when used in discourse, these ‘miniature theories’ do not require additional linguistic means for their substantiation, as they already have a broad socio-cultural background behind them:

And most dangerously, we see it in the way that religion is used to justify the murder of innocents by those who have distorted and defiled the great religion of Islam, and who attacked my country from Afghanistan. ... Such a warped view of religion is not just incompatible with the concept of peace, but I believe it’s incompatible with the very purpose of faith – for the one rule that lies at the heart of every major religion is that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us (Obama 2009).

Phatic function. My analysis shows that proverbs can be an effective marker of the speaker’s attention being fully directed to his interlocutor/listener in order to establish or maintain contact. Using proverbs can also indicate a certain reaction to the information obtained from discourse. At the same time, these elements of the cognitive base serve as markers of sociality or belonging to a particular culture. This specific function is typical of discourses where communicators are engaged in direct interaction. With this in mind, I shall offer the following illustrative example.

In 1998, the First Minister of Northern Ireland David Trimble received the Nobel Peace Prize. At the beginning of his Lecture, in which Nobel Laureates typically extend gratitude for the high honor, David Trimble created a joke with the help of a proverb:

Having said that, I am at the same time, anxious to allay any fears on your part that I might fail to pick up the medal or the cheque. The people of Northern Ireland are not a people to look a gift horse in the mouth. It is imperative that I take the medal home to Northern Ireland – if only to prove that I have been to Oslo (Trimble 1998).

Thus while accepting the Nobel Prize, the politician uses the proverbial phrase ‘to look a gift horse in the mouth’ existing alongside with the proverb ‘Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth’, that advises one not to act fastidiously when given a present. The comic effect is achieved through the comparison of the greatness of the real Prize and the gift mentioned in the proverb. It is noteworthy that the joke created by playing with the well-known proverbial image indicates that the speaker feels at ease with the audience and helps endear him to the public. I should also stress, that by referring to the people of Northern Ireland as unpretentious (‘The people of Northern Ireland are not a people to look a gift horse in the mouth’), Trimble makes it clear that he is speaking on behalf of the whole province, and that he doesn’t consider the Prize to be his personal achievement.

An interesting case of functional convergence is observed in the commencement address by the African-American screenwriter and playwright Suzan-Lori Parks:

It is commencement and you all are commencing – you are beginning. Today is your birthday. ... It is the beginning of things, it’s also the end of things and I’ve brought along 16 SUGGESTIONS which may be of use – as you walk through the rest of your lives. ...

SUGGESTION № 5: DEVELOP THE ART OF MAKING A SILK PURSE FROM A SOW’S EAR. Cause, you know, it ain’t whatcha got, it’s how you work it (Parks 2001).

The fifth suggestion put forward by the speaker comprises only two sentences – a recommendation and a comment. To formulate her advice Parks applies a part of the proverb ‘You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear’. To support her idea she resorts to the transformed paremia ‘It’s not what you have but how you use it’. In contrast to what is stated in the popular proverb, the commencement speaker insists that her young audience should learn to create something worthy out of seemingly worthless things. The orator strengthens her idea with the modified paremia in which she changes the standard grammatical forms for vernacular ones (‘is not → ain’t’, ‘what you have

(got) → ‘whatcha got’), and also substitutes the verb ‘use’ by the better suited verb ‘work.’ On the one hand, using nonstandard forms in the address makes the speaker sound less formal, and this brings her and the young people closer together. On the other hand, it enables Parks to attract, and then focus the attention of the intended audience on the ideas being communicated. Thus these two proverbs fulfil two functions – the phatic function and the function of semantic highlighting. It should be pointed out that along with the ironic suggestion № 14 ‘Say “Thank you” at least once a week’, the recommendation under consideration is the shortest one. The author masterfully and effectively exploits the expressive and cognitive features of these two popular proverbs that, in this case, also fulfil the function of cognitive economy.

Conclusion

The research undertaken on the discursive performance of Anglo-American proverbs testifies to the fact that these linguistic units should be defined as precedent utterances, belonging to the cognitive base shared by the members of a given lingua-cultural community. Their cognitive nature predetermines their universality and frequent application in discourse. Proverbs are able to play the role of cultural touchstones, and act as ‘miniature theories’, or be used as symbols of certain situations. The study revealed that they function as contextual cues in discourse, and are capable of affecting the perception and meaning of incoming information. Thus, the reported findings support the hypothesis that the study set out to test.

It should be stressed that employing proverbs in one of the functions singled out in the essay (emotional highlighting, semantic highlighting, summary, structural organization of discourse, cognitive economy, euphemistic and phatic function) serves to substantiate their main purpose in discourse – its *interpretation/explication* – and is predetermined by their salient features as precedent utterances.

Sources of the examples

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Notes

¹ The terms 'cognitive base' and 'precedent phenomena' were introduced by Russian linguists V. Gudkov, V. Krasnykh et al. in the 1990ies.

² Feature recurrently stressed by Mieder (see e.g. Mieder 2004:1).

³ Phraseological saturation of context is distinguished and analyzed as one of modification devices of phraseologisms in Russian linguistics, and consists in the simultaneous use of two or more phraseological units (including proverbs and proverbial sayings which belong in the field of phraseology).

⁴ The variation of the proverb 'A man's home is his castle' is common in American English.

⁵ The phatic function is discussed further on.

⁶ I came across the term 'pseudo-proverb' when I attended Prof. W. Mieder's "The Nature and Politics of Proverbs" course during my Fulbright stay at the University of Vermont in the fall of 2009. What I mean by it is a new utterance/formation built according to traditional paremic semantic and structural models, possessing typical stylistic markers/features, and express-

ing some generalized view occasionally echoing some well-known proverbial ideas. The statement 'There are always going to be a few apples' is not listed in the "Dictionary of Modern Proverbs" published in 2012 (Doyle et al. 2012).

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