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PROVERBS IN SMS MESSAGES: ARCHAIC AND
MODERN COMMUNICATION

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The proverb *Sitä kuusta kuuleminen, jonka juurella asunto* [lit. You must listen to the advice given by the spruce you live next to] is assumed to be the oldest known Finnish proverb (Haavio 1949). Nearly all native Finnish speakers know it, but the interpretation of it has simply been established in a new environment (Granbom-Herranen 2013a, 382–383). In the first half of the 20th century, this proverb was understood as encouraging obedience towards one's parents and the authorities. Here's how one woman, born in the early 1920s, saw its usage:

[...] monia vanhoja ihmisiä -30 luvulla jotka, kun yhteen sattuivat, muistelivat omaa lapsuuttaan ja nuoruuttaan ja ennenkaikkea sitä, kuinka kasvatus oli kovaa enimmäkseen. Vanhempien sana oli laki eikä sitä pyritty kumoamaan ja kuka siihen rohkeni ruveta, sai kuulla, sitä kuusta kuuleminen, jonka juurella asunto. (PE85, nainen, s. 1922).

[In the 1930s, older people remembered their childhood and, in particular, how children were brought up. At that time, parents' words were law and a child brave enough to try to disprove them heard *Sitä kuusta kuuleminen, jonka juurella asunto.*]¹ (PE85, woman, b. 1922).

In the early 21st century, the interpretation has shifted to indicate solidarity with one's employer and consciousness of one's own

roots. Two women born in the first half of the 1950s interpreted the proverb as follows:

Jos aikoo säilyttää työnsä ja tulonsa, on parasta olla ääneen puhuessaan samaa mieltä: Kenen leipää syöt, sen lauluja laulat. (Q-2000, nainen, s. 1955).

[If you want to keep a job and income, it's better when speaking to have the same opinion as one's employer: *Kenen leipää syöt, sen lauluja laulat* (lit. Whose bread you eat, his or her songs you sing).] (Q-2000, woman, b. 1955).

Tämä on muistutus siitä, että meillä kaikilla on juuremme jossakin, eikä niitä tulisi unohtaa. (Q-2000, nainen, s. 1952).

[It's a reminder. We all have roots somewhere and they shouldn't be forgotten.] (Q-2000, woman, b. 1952).

The proverb also occurs contemporarily, as seen in an SMS message [electronic message of 160 characters] sent as short letter to a newspaper editorial page in 2009, here still referring to the demand for obedience:

Puolueiden tukeminen on väärin. Ehkä ei juridisesti, mutta moraalisesti, samalla tavalla kuin muukin lahjonta. – Sitä kuusta kuuleminen ... (SSS, sent 16.6.2009).

[It is wrong to support political parties, perhaps not in a juridical sense but in a moral sense, as similarly, all bribery is wrong – *Sitä kuusta kuuleminen ...*].

Finnish-language proverbs as an everyday phenomenon

The field of paremiology currently uses various definitions for a proverb, but the concept of *proverb* has never been perfectly defined. Nowadays, the concept of proverb in the Finnish context is most often used to refer to proverbs and proverbial expressions both in the language used in everyday occasions and in the language of researchers. There are no generally applicable characteristics which could identify a sentence as a traditional or modern proverb (Dundes 1994, 44; Mieder 2004, 2–3; Taylor 1981). However, to define the key concepts exhaustively has not been considered always to be necessary or possible, for there

must always be room for new connections (Honko 1989, 14). In everyday use, a proverb is alive as long as it is referred to. This means that when we look for proverbs in speech and speech-like texts, we have to look at the proverbs, shortened proverbs, or references and allusions to them (Granbom-Herranen 2014b, 378). As I see it, a proverb is a short, independent statement, which is or has been relatively familiar to the general public in a particular time and place and, in this case, most often in Finnish.² If a proverb does not fulfil the demand of *familiarity*, it can hardly become generally used (*frequency*) (Mieder 1994, 298; Grzybek 1987, 73).

Contemporarily used proverbs can be ancient or relatively young. In my research, I focus on the given meanings and interpretations of proverbs. From one person's point of view, both meanings and interpretations are situational. However, the use of them is a communal occasion. (See more in Granbom-Herranen 2013a, 374). After defending my doctoral dissertation in education in 2008, which focused on the use of proverbs in pedagogical speech, I was repeatedly asked, in academic circles as well as in my everyday life, why I'm studying proverbs that nobody uses anymore. Once you get asked a question repeatedly, it makes you think. I became curious and, as is well known, curiosity combined with wondering is a good start for a research. Specifically, I wondered if the problem was not disappearing proverbs but the fact they had found a new environment, because I had encountered proverbs or references to them every morning when reading my local newspaper, *Salon Seudun Sanomat*. I saw them especially in the SMS messages sent to the editorial page (Granbom-Herranen 2010b, 218). So, this dissertation began with this question and my wondering, and I therefore chose to focus on contemporarily used proverbs. I decided to examine these SMS messages more closely, in which the language is nearer to the vernacular than it is to the literal expression and which function as opinion letters in this special context. Ultimately, there are very few people who can, when asked, remember any proverbs or the context in which they are used.

The articles and research material

This dissertation consists of an extended introduction as well as six more articles. The first article, "The genre of proverb – a

relic or very much alive?” (2016a), analyses changes both in the concept of proverb and in defining the genre of proverb, especially from the perspective of Finnish folkloristic paremiology. The next article, “How do proverbs get their meanings? The model of interpretation based on a metaphor theory” (2010a), concerns understanding and interpreting proverbs: what does the listener hear and understand? I have applied the model based on possible world semantics in order to model how proverbs are interpreted and how they function. The model makes it possible to account for both the communal and individual lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*³) when interpreting proverbs. As times change, the life of the community also changes. Language is a culture-bound message. The third article, “Some theoretical aspects of processes behind the meanings of proverbs and phrases” (2013a), is a more comprehensive look at the subject, offering a wider overview and supplementing the previous article. The fourth article, “SMS-messages – context for traditional and modern proverbs” (2014b), focuses on proverbs used in SMS messages. The fifth article, “Beyond understanding: How proverbs violate Grice’s cooperative principle” (2014a), is based on Grice’s cooperative principle, which describes the basic requirements for understandable and meaningful dialogue. The last article, “Proverbial expressions and cultural context in archive materials” (2015a), focuses on the use of archives in paremiological research. The article discusses the questions that should be asked when using already existing materials.

The research material for these articles consists of proverbs and references to them. They have appeared in SMS messages which have been sent to be published as short letters to the editor and aimed at the readers of the daily regional newspaper. Originally, one message could be up to 160 characters long. If the message was longer, the phone divided the text and sent it in several parts. Later, it became possible to use more than 160 characters. The research material consists of about 70,000 original SMS messages sent over a five-year period. These messages included about 7,000 proverbs or references to proverbs.

Interpreting proverbs

In everyday life, it is most often the context of use that creates the meaning, and this way the proverb is interpreted as a

cooperation between many elements. A proverb in everyday use, however, cannot really be used incorrectly. It can be used in a peculiar way or in an unexpected connection, but not in an incorrect way. This is true in folkloristic paremiology. In literature and translations in linguistics the role of interpretation is different, but in those contexts it is no longer a question of everyday life and of keeping up tradition (see Granbom-Herranen 2010b, 2011). In everyday life, the interpretation of a proverb is a matter of situational and individual experience (Granbom-Herranen 2008, 2009, 2013c).

To use a proverb or a reference to a proverb in a newspaper includes the presupposition that readers recognize it. Recognizing a proverb does not mean that a reader understands it in the same way as a writer has intended (see Granbom-Herranen 2010a). A proverb is suitable to be used in a short-form communication, no matter if the tool to be used is speech, a mobile phone or a computer. A proverb can be used to argue one's own point cleverly, and it is always possible to find a suitable one (Lauhakangas 2004, Widbäck 2015 also Granbom-Herranen 2004). The usage of proverbs in these opinion messages indicates that, in the vernacular (written or spoken), a proverb typically arises spontaneously from some experience of the speaker. In everyday use, a proverb is not a planned performance (Briggs 1988; Bauman 1992). One can always put an end to a conversation by using a proverb and, actually, a proverb can only be repudiated with another proverb.

Contemporarily used Finnish proverbs

A contemporarily used proverb can be a traditional or modern one, a Bible quotation or a reference to these (see Granbom-Herranen 2018, 42; 2015b, 2016b, Granbom-Herranen *et al.* 2015). Next, I provide a few examples of such usage:

By traditional Finnish proverbs I mean proverbs found in publications based on collections made before the 1950s in Finland.⁴ For example, the proverb *Se koira älähtää, johon kalikka kalahtaa* [lit. That dog yelps, which is hit by a stick⁵] was used many times in the SMS messages:

Äiti! Se koira älähtää jne. Missä olit itse dokaamassa kun poliisi joutui P:n talolla paimentamaan lastasi. Hoi-

da jälkikasvusi, älä hoidata valtion varoin. -X- (SSS, sent 16.2. 2007).

[Mum! *Se koira älähtää* etc. Where were you yourself drinking when the police had to be in P's house to collect your child. Take care of your offspring, don't do it with the means of the state. - X-]

This SMS message is a response to an earlier one:

Jos urheilutalo vuokrataan alaikäisille, syyttäkööt itseään! Ja poliisi ajaa nuoret vähissä vaatteissa -25, huh huh. Kannattaisi antaa puh.vuoro nuorille! -äiti (SSS, sent 14.2. 2007).

[If the building of the sports association is rented to minors, they are simply to blame themselves! And police chase the youth off dressed only in light clothes -25 (Celsius), huh huh. It would be worth it to give the floor to the youth! - mum].

The opinion is part of a discussion about a party some minors organized in the building of a sport association in the wintertime. There was a full building of minors, drinking and dancing. In Finland, the police are supposed to be informed if large parties are organized. Because minors cannot be responsible, they are not allowed to organize such parties without adults being present and signing the rental agreement. The combination of minors, drinking and cold weather has proved to be a lethal combination in Finland (Granbom-Herranen 2018, 44).

In this dissertation, modern Finnish proverbs are considered those proverbs collected after the 1950s or those which are so new that they could be called potential proverbs, that is, expressions that might become settled in the Finnish language in the future and achieve the status of proverb.⁶ They are a part of modern tradition. Some modern proverbs have first been literary, such as *Kell' onni on, se onnen kätkeköön* [lit. He/she who has much happiness does well to hide it] is the beginning of a poem by the Finnish author Eino Leino.⁷ Nowadays, this line is a proverb and people often do not know its origin. Maybe the most exciting (and theoretically the most uncertain) part of these modern proverbs are the aforementioned potential proverbs (Grzybek

1987, 40; 2011; see also Krikmann 2017, 101–102; Lambertini 2017). These include expressions that are used but nobody knows if they will survive, such as the ski-jumper Matti Nykänen’s *Elämä on laiffii* [lit. Life is life] (see Granbom-Herranen 2013b, 323–324; 2016a, 322). In Finnish, many of the proverbs transmitted from other cultural areas and languages are modern proverbs even if in their original language they represent traditional proverbs.

In addition, some Bible quotations and proverbs included in the Bible have become traditional Finnish proverbs, such as *Mitä ihminen kylvää, sitä hän niittää* [lit. What a person sows, he or she will reap; in English the other way around: You reap what you sow.] Originally “*Älkää pettäkö itseänne! Jumala ei sallii itseään pilkattavan. Mitä ihminen kylvää, sitä hän myös niittää.*” (*Raamattu, Gal. 6:7*) [“Be not tricked; God is not made sport of: **for whatever seed a man puts in, that will he get back as grain.**” (Bible, Galatians 6:7)]. For centuries in Finland the Bible has been one part of oral tradition. Even though there was a long period when most people were not capable of reading the Bible, they came to know it through the quotations and proverbs they heard during church services (Tuomaala 2004; Stark 2005; Granbom-Herranen 2008). Another SMS message stated the following:

Salossa 200 äänellä ei tullut lautakuntapaikkaa. - sitä niittää, mitä kylvää. (SSS, sent 16.12. 2008).

[The place in a municipal board in Salo was not achieved with 200 votes – *sitä niittää, mitä kylvää*].

Actually, the form used in this SMS message – *Sitä niittää, mitä kylvää* – is literally “One reaps what one sows”. Today, the same meaning is communicated in the proverb *Sitä saa, mitä tilaa* [lit. One gets what one orders],⁸ which is a modern proverb:

Salossa paljon mukavia ihmisiä. Jyväskylässä paljon mukavia ihmisiä. Vaasassa paljon mukavia ihmisiä jne.- sitä saa mitä tilaa (SSS, sent 20.9. 2006).

[In Salo there are a lot of nice people. In Jyväskylä a lot of nice people. In Vaasa a lot of nice people etc. – *sitä saa mitä tilaa*].

Proverbs in contemporary use

In some cases, proverbs might occur in extraordinary connections if we look at their assumed basic meanings. Traditional proverbs often combine with other proverbs or types of expressions, sometimes creating a new fixed form from two utterances. They are used as jokes (e.g. as in parodies of proverbs or anti-proverbs). Modern proverbs are created using traditional proverbs, and older proverbs receive new interpretations or are connected to new phenomena. Proverbs can also become shorter. Yet they still survive.

The meaning of a proverb can often be understood without understanding every single word in it. Take, for example, the SMS messages that addressed the quality of modern automobiles using the Finnish proverb *Moni kakku päältä kaunis* [lit. Many cakes look good]. Not all native Finnish speakers, and even fewer non-native Finnish speakers, necessarily realize or understand what should follow: *vaan on silkkoa sisältä* [lit. but inside is pure bark bread].

“Moni kakku päältä kaunis. Autot ruostuvat muovikuorien alla. Mistä nykyisten muoviautojen korin kunnan voi tietää? -Sepi.” (SSS sent 23.12.2006).

[*Moni kakku päältä kaunis. Cars rust away under the plastic cover. How is it possible to know the condition of the body of modern plastic cars? – Sepi.*]

The whole proverb is *Moni kakku päältä kaunis, vaan on silkkoa sisältä*⁹ [lit. Many a cake looks good but the inside is pure bark bread], but the writer is using only the first half to ask the question of what is a car that has only “bark bread” on the inside. Even though many people might recognize this proverb and know it is as a whole, they may not know what *silkko* is.¹⁰ Yet for many the essential meaning will still be clear.

However, the life cycle of proverbs is the normal life cycle of tradition (Honko 2013, Rooijackers 1998). Every proverb has been invented by someone who first has the idea of putting it in a statement (Taylor 1931). In order to live, a proverb has to be used in normal everyday life. Finnish proverbs also began a new life phase after they were noticed outside their normal living context, as happened in the 19th century. Their existence was

considered to be endangered, so they were collected and documented, and received status as part of Finland's cultural heritage. Proverb collections were published, which gave the impression that they were part of a living tradition. This was not, however, an everyday use of proverbs; it was conserving them for the future. There are two types of users who look up proverbs in books and archives: those who, for one reason or another, want to use proverbs, and those who want to study them. In other words, proverbs are looked up when needed. This usage might initiate a new life cycle in which proverbs are seen, heard and used. If nothing else has changed, the context has – and it's the context of use that provides a proverb with meaning. Thus, even if the form of a proverb is unchanged, its meaning and interpretation have changed.

In my research, I have addressed some of the most frequently used proverbs in the SMS messages according to their ground forms: The most frequent (about 400 occurrences) was *Kokemusta on* [lit. "Experience exists" meaning: I have this experience so you should listen to me]. The same kind of idea and shape is to be found in the former traditional Finnish proverb *Oma kokemus on paras opetus* [lit. Own experience is the best lesson] (KOTUS). For the next most frequent proverb, *Järjen käyttö sallittu* [lit. It is allowed to use sense/ mind/brains/intelligence] (about 200 occurrences), earlier notations are not to be found. Another frequent one but in its contemporary form was *Katso peiliin* [lit. Look in the mirror]. It can be found in the older tradition as *Katso omaan povees, siel on peili etees* [lit. Look at your own heart/bosom, there is the mirror for you] (Laukkanen & Hakamies 1997).

However, my dissertation presents only one viewpoint on contemporarily used Finnish proverbs. First, the research material does not answer the question of which proverbs are the most common in 21st-century Finland. Second, the material does not cover all of Finland, nor even all of the Salo region. The material is a sample that addresses only those proverbs used in the SMS messages sent to the regional newspaper *Salon Seudun Sanomat* as letters to the editor between 2006 and 2010.

Summary

Proverbs are, for the most part, unchanging expressions and most traditional Finnish proverbs and Bible quotations still use agrarian language, although nowadays they are often used in a new non-agrarian context and with a new meaning. Proverbs receive new interpretations over time and, in fact, they ought to receive new ones. It is a fact that our whole environment has changed. Despite many changes in recent decades to Finnish society and lifestyle as well as many changes in life and everyday practices, proverbs still belong to everyday use and communication. In Finnish, written colloquial language has become increasingly similar to spoken language, while the urban lifestyle has created changes in the Finnish proverb tradition as well. In this changed context, proverbs are not always similar to their predecessors, because modern proverbs use modern colloquial language. Even though proverbs may not always appear with the same form and meaning as they did in the past, they continue to be used in a range of contexts.

Notes

¹Author's italics. The literal translations of the proverbs have also been done by the author.

²Finnish proverbs are not and have not been used only in the Finnish language. Finnish proverbs also exist in Swedish (nowadays Finland Swedish), Sámi (nowadays Northern Sámi, Skólt Sámi and Inar Sámi) and Romany. (Proverbs might also exist in Finnish sign language.) In contemporary use, English and mixed-English proverbs exist that are original Finnish proverbs (e.g. *Elämä on laiffii* [lit. Life is life]; for more on this proverb, see Granbom-Herranen 2013b and 2016a). In the future, there will be more mixed-language Finnish proverbs partly originating from the various languages spoken by the second- or third-generation members of the Finnish population with an international background. (In 2015, more than 135 languages were spoken in Finland.)

³Edmund Husserl's (1970) *Lebenswelt* is translated *elämismaailma* in Finnish [lifeworld] (Satulehto 1992, 23).

⁴Due to the historic-geographic method (also known as the Finnish method), Finnish proverbs were collected up to World War II and they are well mapped. Most of the ground forms of traditional Finnish proverbs before the 1950s are included in three published collections and in an online database. The published collections are edited by Matti Kuusi (1990/1953; the oldest collections made before the great fire of Turku in 1828), Ruben Erik Nirvi and Lauri Hakulinen (1953/1948; collected in the 1930s) and Kari Laukkanen and Pekka Hakamies (1997/1978; collected prior to the end of 1950s). There is also an online corpus including proverbs collected in the 1930s owned by the Institute for the Languages of Finland (KOTUS

/ *Kotimaisten kielten keskus*). The proverb types, including examples, can be found via the Finnish Literature Society. The concept of the proverb in Finland has primarily been advanced in concordance with the types and structures presented in these publications (Granbom-Herranen 2018, 42).

⁵ In this connection the noun *stick* actually refers to a piece of firewood which has not been split.

⁶ The ground forms of some modern proverbs can be found in books by Pasi Heikura (2004) and Kuusi (1988). These publications do not contain proverbs from the 21st century.

⁷ *Kell' onni on, se onnen kätkeköön* [lit. He or she who has much happiness does well to hide it] is the beginning of a poem by the Finnish author Eino Leino, *Laulu onnesta* [lit. Song of happiness], which was published for the first time in 1900, in a collection entitled *Hiihtäjän virsiä* [lit. Hymns of a skier] (Leino 1978).

⁸ As a proverb in English “You get what you order”. Finnish-language proverbs do not often use personalization such as “I”, “you”, “he or she”.

⁹ *SKVR XIII*, 3399 (Lönnrot, Elias. 1837; R 356.37.).

¹⁰ *Silkko* refers to pure bark bread, a version of bark bread without any meal (*Kielitoimiston sanakirja*). During the most difficult times in Finnish history people had to resort to this kind of food.

Dissertation

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Q-2000 = Questionnaire in 2000. Research material, in the possession of the author.

SKVR = Suomen kansan vanha runot [The ancient poems of the Finnish people] [on line] < <https://skvr.fi/> > [5.10.2018.].

SSS = *Salon Seudun Sanomat* [Salo District Newspaper], a regional Finnish daily newspaper.

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