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ARE PROVERBS ENFORCING DESIRABLE HUMAN  
BEHAVIOUR? COMPARING AND CONTRASTING ROMA-  
NIAN PROVERBS WITH THEIR ENGLISH VERSIONS

**Abstract:** When stating that “Proverbs mean more than they say” – which can be in itself a proverb and a definition – we might need to rethink some of the fundamental terms in the study of these particular linguistic patterns. If, on the other hand, we believe that “Proverbs do more than they mean”, then, we have to take into account possible different approaches and explore the latest terminology in paremiological research.

Beginning with the literal meaning of words, phrases or sentences, proverbs can offer a perfect image of a literary translation. Proverbs are real challenges, when referring to the transfer of meaning from one language to another and it is interesting to see how two languages, the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) can complete each other if a certain version is preferred. Exploring translation as an act of communication, we can understand how the negotiation of meaning between interactants is related to coherence and cohesion, as “a covert potential meaning relationship among parts of a text” or as “an overt relationship holding parts of a text, expressed by language specific markers” [Blum-Kulka, S: 2002, pp. 298-299]. From a pragmatic point of view, proverbs can be seen as speech acts, conveying reflections of humans themselves.

My analysis will target human thoughts, feelings, beliefs, realities and attitudes that might link *homo religious* to *homo modernus*, passing from ethnological fields like *baptism, confession, faith to man, work, social hierarchy* of Romanian proverbs and their English versions adopting a cognitive and a systematic approach. The paremias samples have been selected from Virgil Lefter’s *Dicționar de Proverbe Englez-Român și Român-Englez* and from Pr. Alexandru Stănciulescu-Bârda’s *Sfintele Taine și proverbele românești*.

**Keywords:** communicative strategy, English, interaction, modification, Romanian, variability, version

### ***Introduction***

When acquiring languages, people learn words and expressions meant to label the world around them, the concepts and values that make sense of what they see and understand, of the society they live in.

Proverbs belonged more to the oral code than to the written one and were conceived and transmitted by adult members of a completely or predominately oral society. The importance of orality has been proved while acknowledging the expanding function of writing. If we admit with Walter Ong that only about 78 of the 3000 languages in existence have a literature, we can ask ourselves about the relevance between the oral techniques used in the space of the written word and narratives recorded after many generations and changed from what was told yesterday and what might be told tomorrow.

It was in action and interaction that the most profound interrelations between language and society were to be found and proverbs should not be overlooked.

It is only within the past five or six centuries that Romanian as a written language was recorded. It went the same for English (perhaps three centuries earlier) but tales and proverbs appeared much later in collections that have been published in the 19th - 20th centuries. What is obviously a common feature for both languages is that proverbs became an antecedent to literary history and a mirror of social changes.

Speakers are well aware of the fact that successful management of interpersonal relationships is a difficult task. Anticipation of the action of others, calculation of short and long term costs and gains, people's behaviour are illustrated by proverbs. Predictability is very important. Proverbs function at different degrees of ritualisation of the interaction.

That is why I have selected proverbs that can be grouped in three ethnofields: *man*, *social hierarchy* and *work* (ethnofields that I have explored in another article too) referring at the same time to what can be considered with Mircea Eliade's words – the sacred – people's myths, beliefs and rites - and the profane [Eliade, M, 1995].

### ***I. Comparing and Contrasting***

1.0. Romanian is a language that has its roots in the Latin and the Dacian languages. When comparing and contrasting Romanian proverbs and their English versions, I am interested in revealing certain characteristics that encompass both the expression and the content. More than that, my approach will search the actants' attitude from a pragmatic point of view.

Proverbs do not always display the **sender** of the message. Even if from a pragmatic angle the sender takes into account social factors like:

- the social distance between the speaker and the hearer,
- the relative power of the speaker over the hearer,
- the ranking of imposition in a certain culture.

The paremic units of the corpus I selected are, in their great majority, lacking personal pronouns. Still such an example like:

R(omanian): **Eu** dorm, **tu** dormi, cine să ducă *sacul*?

E(nglish): **I** proud/stout and **thou** proud/stout who shall bear *the ashes* out?

implies the two poles of the dialogue and the personal pronouns are very clearly displaying them.

In its very early beginnings mankind wanted to feel and find God's presence, to live in a perfect world. And soon mankind realized that the sacred and the profane are two ways of being in the world, two existential situations were assumed by man throughout his history [Eliade, M, 1995, p.13]:

R: Numai **la Dumnezeu e dreptate.**

E: Only **in God is justice.**

1.1. The dichotomy between *superior* and *inferior* is seen in very many paremic units and there is even a variety of ranks:

R1:... **în satul tău fruntaș** decât *codaș* la oras.

E1:... **be first in a village** than *second* at home.

R2: ..**fruntea cozii** decât *coada frunții*.

E2:.. **the head of an ass** than *the tail of a horse*.

The country area is seen through “the peasant”, “the yeomen” and “the noblemen” while the town is targeted led. For everybody there is a Government because:

R: *Schimbarea domnilor, bucuria nebunilor.*

E: **Only fools exult** when *Governments change.*

1.2. Culturally re-constructed identity is very important when discussing how people see themselves in social settings.

R: **Mai bine țăran în picioare** decât *boier în genunchi.*

[Better standing as a peasant than kneeling as a boyar]\*

E: **Better be the head of the Yeomanry** than *the tail of gentry.*

The strong hierarchical sense of values is felt in the paremic units where ability and cleverness in everyday situations appear when setting one’s place in society:

R : **Răzeș c-un sac de hârtie și-un petic de moșie.**

[A Yeoman has a piece of paper and a shred of land]\*

E : **He that hath lands, hath quarrels.**

[ \* In the following examples, the square brackets contain my English word-by-word translation of the selected Romanian proverbs.]

Religious proverbs contain true folk sayings that circulated among people and have been retained in various ancient texts included later in the Bible [Petrova, R & Stefanova,D: 2017 p. 8]:

R: Răbdarea-i din rai.

E: Patience from heaven.

According to Al. Stănciulescu-Barda’s opinion “religious Romanian proverbs form a solid documentary basis for the composition of a Romanian ethnotheology”:

- proverbs and expressions of dogmatic character, those regarding God as a creator, leader, savior and judge:

R: **Numai Dumnezeu crează, omul doar educă.**

E: Only God creates, *man educates.*

- proverbs targeting the creation of the world, man (body, soul, salvation), Mother of God, church, cross, saints, icons, the Holy Sacraments:

R: **Cine-ntr-altă lege sare/Nici un Dumnezeu nu are.**

E: **Who in another law jumps/No God has.**

- proverbs and expressions of a moral character, concerning virtues (faith, hope, love, courage, justice, compassion, wisdom, etc.):

R: **Sufletul când pătimește, tot trupul se topește.**

E: **When the soul is suffering, the whole body melts.**

There are in this particular category, more than in other domains, significant *contextualizers* or *markers* that favour possible associations with the image of the translator's interpretation:

R: **A fi botezat cu zeamă de varză (este un om rău din fire).**

E: **To be baptized with cabbage juice (he is a bad man by nature).**

1.3. It seems that the Latin tradition makes *man* an authoritative figure in his home:

R: Tot omul **e împărat** în casa lui.

[Any man is an emperor in his house].\*

E: A man's **house is his castle.**

Within the ethnofield *man* there are several subthemes like:

- appearance/behaviour:

R: **Chipul omului** e oglinda sufletului.

[The man's face is the mirror of his soul].\*

E1: Good **face**/fair face.

E2: A good face is a letter of recommendation; A fair face cannot have a crabbed heart.

- honesty/ business:

R: De la **omul cinstit** e destul un cuvânt.

[From an honest man a word is enough].\*

E: **An honest man's word is as good as his bond.**

- wisdom:

R: **Omul cuminte** își cumpără vara sanie și iarna car.  
[The wise/good man buys the sledge in summer and the cart in winter]\*

E1: In fair weather prepare for foul.

E2: He is **wise** that *is ware in time*.

- fate:

R: Când **te apuci de vreo treabă**, *n-o lăsa fără ispravă*.

[When you begin a task, get the result, too].\*

E: Better never **to begin** than never *to make an end*.

*Man's* characterisation is nevertheless multi-featured even if not multi-dimensional. There is, no doubt, a stereotypic valuing role when such a sentence is transmitted.

R: **Omu-i om** și numai om.

[Man is only man].\*

E: Remember *thou art but a man*.

1.4. The relative power of the speaker/sender over the hearer can be seen through:

- material control (economic distribution and physical force):

R: Cum vei **sămăna**, așa vei **secera**.

[As you sow, you will harvest].\*

E: As *they sow*, so *let them reap*.

- meta-physical control:

R: **Dă din mâini** și Dumnezeu îți va ajuta.

[Use your hands and God will help you].\*

E: *God helps* those who **help themselves**.

The absolute ranking of impositions leads to the situation when the speaker minimizes costs to certain interlocutors and maximizes benefits to others:

R: Ce nu poate face un singur om, **fac mai mulți împreună**.

[What one man cannot do, many men can do together].\*

E: **Many hands make light work**.

If the power of the speaker and the hearer are more or less equal like in:

R: **Cine nu lucrează să nu mănânce.**

E1: **He that will not work shall not eat.**

E2: **A horse that will not carry a saddle must have no oats.**

The imposition is a warning.

The independence of the ranking can also be shown if the speaker's power is small and the "diference" (social distance) is great:

R: Când te **apuci de vreo treabă** *n-o lăsa fără ispravă.*

[When you begin a task, get the result, too].\*

E: If you buy **the cow**, take the tail into the bargain.

The choice of strategy will determine the choice of an adequate linguistic form:

R: *Treaptă cu treaptă*, **te urci pe scară.**

E: *Step after step*, **the ladder is ascended.**

The symmetry and correspondence of the terms are almost perfect in the above Romanian and their English versions: noun+noun vs verb and noun+noun vs noun+verb. This symmetry is not the common rule because the asymmetry between the speaker and the hearer appears in the *criticism* vs the *complete approval*:

R: *In lipsa cărmaciului*, **corabia se scufundă.**

[Helmsman absent, the boat is sinking]\*

E: *Master absent* and **house dead.**

Vs

R: În **casa lăutarului** *fiecare joacă.*

E: In a **fiddler's house** *everyone sluggards.*

## ***II. Cultural translation between the transfer of meaning and the translator's interpretation.***

2.0. A modification of the communicative strategies in the proverbs of the corpus I have mentioned, may include:

## a. positive politeness:

R: **Lucru** laudă pe *meșter*.

[Work praises the master]\*

E: A *carpenter* is known by **his chips**.

## b. offers:

R: *După lucru* e bun **repausul**.

[After work the rest is good]\*.

E: *All work* and no **play** makes Jack a dull boy.

## c. assumptions:

R: **Cum vei sămăna**, așa vei *secera*.

[As you sow, so you reap].\*

E: **As they sow**, so let them reap.

## d. questioning:

R: Văzut-ai vreun ciubotar cu ciubote bune?

[Have you seen a shoemaker (wearing) good boots?]

E: None more bare than the shoemaker's wife and the smith's *more*.

## e. being pessimistic:

R: **Cine spune multe** face puțin.

[Who speaks much does little].\*

E: **They bray most** that *can do least*.*Good words without deeds are rushes and reeds.*

## f. impersonalizing the speaker and the hearer:

R: **Multă lucrare** face pe *meșter bun*.

[Much work makes a good master].\*

E: Use maketh **mastery**.

Use/Practice makes perfect.

## g. being ironic (an apparently friendly way of being offensive):

R: **Găina care cântă** nu ouă.

[The hen that cackles does not lay eggs].\*

E1: **You cackle** often, but *never lay an egg*.

E2: Much bruit, little fruit.

2.1. According to Vinay and Darbelnet [in Venuti, L: 2000, pp.84-93], there are different methods of translating, each one representing a degree of complexity:

- direct translation based on parallel categories:

R: **Pune mîna** și o să pună și Dumnezeu milă.

[Use your hand and God will give you his blessing].

E: **Use the means** and God will give the blessing.

- direct translation based on parallel concepts:

R: Cel mai bun **vînător**, cel ce vine cu **vînat**.

[The best hunter is the one who brings the venison].\*

E: He **plays** best that **wins**.

Proverbs may offer sometimes the image of *transposition*. The above example is displaying not only an interchange (referring to the concept of “hunting” in the source text (ST) as opposed to the idea of “winning” in the target text (TT)) but it also allows a particular nuance of style, transforming a statement into a metaphor – the hunter is a player and [eventually] a winner.

Along with *transposition*, *modulation* is considered a variation of the form of the message, obtained by a change in the point of view: what is a statement and a negation in the ST:

R: Omul cu rușine piere/ Nimeni nu-i dă pân' nu cere.

[An ashamed man loses. Nobody gives him anything until he asks for it].\*

becomes a warning in the TT:

E: He that cannot ask, cannot live.

2.2. The diversity of the *equivalence* types can be felt in the relationship between the ST and the TT. Within the proverbs' translation, the *linguistic equivalence* is to be searched in the structures' level, the syntagms' level and even the words' level. The correspondence that is established through different categories and classes leads to a *semantic equivalence*. It is stated that proverbs are the image of *equivalences* in most of the cases:

R: In lipsa **cârmaciului**, corabia se scufundă.

[Helmsman absent, the boat is sinking].\*

E: **Master** absent and house dead.

The Romanian proverb uses the nouns 'helmsman' and 'boat' while the English version uses the nouns 'master' and 'house' with the meaning of 'coordinating and taking responsibilities'. The equivalence of the above example is felt through the Romanian word 'corabia'/'boat' that conveys the idea of 'house' and 'master'. If there is no master, the house is dead.

*Adaptation* is a special kind of *equivalence*. The cultural gap between the SL and the TL imposes sometimes a new situation that can be considered as being equivalent. For most of the examples, it is a *situational equivalence*:

R: **Harnic ca o albină, strîngător ca o furnică.**

[**As busy as a bee**, as *industrious as an ant*]\*

E: Industry is fortune's right hand, and frugality her left.

The *adaptation* in the case of the previous example went a bit farther than expected: the 'bee' and the 'ant' from the Romanian proverb have as equivalents the nouns 'industry' and 'frugality'. In such a way the *adaptation* covers very many terms, passing from the living world to the world of concepts.

The three levels of expression, i.e., lexis, syntactic structure and message seem to work together within the same proverbial unit as in the following one:

R: **Vizitiul prost bate calul bun.**

[**The bad coachman beats the good horse**]\*.

E: **A bad workman** quarrels with his tools.

The paradox of the above example is that the cultural gap between the SL – Romanian – and the TL – English – allowed the figurative use of the Romanian word 'vizitiu'/'coachman' with the meaning of the English term 'workman'. The possible *adaptation* and the *equivalence* between the two terms was permitted by the fact that a 'workman' is a person employed to do manual work while the 'coachman' uses the whip to make the horse work. The common denominator is the verb 'to work' which is not expressed either in the Romanian or the English proverb. The particular feature of the *equivalence* procedure in such a context is the message in its totality.

If we are to question the notion of *equivalence* as an 'identity' between ST and TL, we can admit that there is information only in possible differences and a translation is a code in its own right:

R: Fapta bună laudă pe om.  
 [A good deed praises the man].\*  
 E: An ill deed cannot bring honour.

### **III. Variability vs modification in proverbs**

3.0. The study of *proverb variability* goes back to A. Taylor's work [1931] and opened the path towards proverb *variants* studies. The difference between the two concepts is very important because a proverb *variation* does not change the proverb's basic meaning, while a proverb *variant* modifies it.

A proverb *variation* can be seen in:

R1: Cine lucrează, acela, se cade să mănânce.  
 E1: A horse that will not carry a saddle must have no oats.

R2: Cine nu lucrează să nu mănânce.  
 E2: He that will not work shall not eat; A horse that will not carry a saddle must have no oats.

A possible example of a proverb *variant* is:

R1: Meșterul se cunoaște la lucru.  
 [Master is known through his work].\*  
 E1: The workman is known by his work.

R2: Lucru laudă pe meșter.  
 [Work praises the master].\*  
 E2: A carpenter is known by his chips.

Romanian variants have one noun – 'meșter' – while English variants use 'workman' and 'carpenter' for rendering the idea of working.

3.1. Proverb *variability* is a mechanism that shows how a proverb system can renovate itself. Proverb *modification* is also a mechanism but it refers to proverb transition to another linguistic unit [Vager, M, 2015 in *Proverbium* no 32. p. 359]:

R: Nu-i nimeni sfânt pe pământ.  
 [There is no saint on Earth].\*  
 E1: Men are not angels.  
 E2: Every man has his faults.

*Men and saints* are compared and contrasted and the conclusion is a very direct one: there is no saint on Earth and men are not saints or angels. The verdict is even sadder: every man has his own faults (making mistakes or sinning).

When analyzing a *modified* proverb, one has to know the original form. Between the *modified* proverb and the *proverb-synonym* [Vager, M, 2015 in *Proverbium* no 32. p. 362]. figurativeness disappears and the statement becomes a potential maxim. The proverb *modification* can be researched through contrastive analysis implying semantics, syntactic structures, morphological and stylistic devices. Belonging to an open system, proverbs can be modified, these modifications giving birth to different patterns. What remains in the end is the message.

- R: Omul ca lumânarea, când luminează atunci se sfârșește.  
 [The man is like the candle, when he lights he consumes himself].\*
- E: A candle lights others and consumes itself.

### **Conclusions**

Paremiology has proved itself an interdisciplinary field of study, borrowing methods from very many other sciences and domains. Proverbs can be a very useful teaching instrument when we refer to communication, management or simply human interrelationships.

Summarizing the observations I have already included in this article, I can affirm that:

- proverbs do influence people's behaviour containing instructions for life; they can be studied through linguistic, semantic, literary and translation approaches;
- proverbs still remain an open system that interacts with socioeconomic and cultural influences and undergo qualitative and quantitative alterations;
- translating proverbs or using equivalence when having a TT from a ST means accepting the idea of a process of signification that might be either formal or primarily dynamic; while the former focuses on the message, the latter produces a dynamic change based on the relationship between the TT and ST.

Proverbs have a cognitive nature that reveals their universality [Konstantinova, A, 2017, p.175]. In terms of communicative strategies proverbs' expression and interpretation cannot be reduced to general principles governing human interaction or other cognitive/pragmatic abilities that are independent of language. Their structure is constrained and partly determined by linguistic forms across languages. They lead to clear pragmatic effects and that is why we can refer to the appropriateness or inappropriateness of sentences. Differences in form correlate with profound differences in meaning, with corresponding truth-conditional effects. Their pragmatic effects influence the speaker's/hearer's ability to select a relevant context for interpretation and adequate human behaviour.

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