# Mnemonic Structure and Style in Irish Proverbs

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# PROVERBIUM

**Series Title**

Online Supplement Series of Proverbium Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship

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# MNEMONIC STRUCTURE AND STYLE IN IRISH PROVERBS



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JOSIP JURAJ STROSSMAYER UNIVERSITY OF OSIJEK

Osijek, 2025

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# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Prof. Wolfgang Mieder, who answered an unsolicited email from me in early 2000 and, with extraordinary generosity, sent me boxfuls of his books from the US. This was at a time when the internet was in its infancy, my postgraduate finances were low, and the idea of receiving parcels via courier was entirely unfamiliar—let alone such kindness from a stranger across the Atlantic. He has remained a constant source of support, inspiration, and encouragement ever since.

I would also like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Fionnuala Carson Williams, whose contribution to Irish paremiology and paremiography has been immense. Her generosity in support, guidance, and counsel over many years has shaped this work in countless ways, not least through the provision of materials and her careful reading of the manuscript. Her suggestions have added immensely to the final text, and I am sincerely indebted to her.

I would like to acknowledge two other scholars from whom I personally learned so much: Prof. Peter Grzybek and Prof. Arvo Krikmann. Beyond their publications, their conference papers and the robust discussions that followed were highlights of my early academic career. They were giants in the field of paremiology, as well as thoroughly decent, kind, and generous human beings. The world of proverb scholarship is much poorer without them.

I am extremely grateful to Prof. Melita Aleksa Varga and Prof. Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt for the invitation to contribute to the Proverbium Online Supplement Series and for their unfailing support and patience throughout the preparation of this work. They have been more accommodating than I had any right to expect. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to Prof. Draženka Molnar for her comprehensive peer review and for the many thoughtful suggestions she offered, all of which greatly strengthened the manuscript.

*Do Leonora, mo chara is mo shearc-mhaoin, agus dár gclann mhac, Iarla Liam, Éanna Aodh agus Dáibhí Barra.*

# INTRODUCTION

## *1. Introduction:*

Proverbs persist through their patterned linguistic form. Their durability depends not only on the wisdom they encode but on the linguistic structures that render them memorable: syntactic patterns, prosodic features, and figurative devices that mark a statement as 'proverbial' and support its retention across generations. In the Irish-language tradition, the documentary record of proverbial material is substantial. The three major dialectal collections of the twentieth century—Énrí Ó Muirgheasa's *Seanfhocla Uladh* (1907; 1936), Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha's *Seanfhocail na Muimhneach* (1926), and Tomás S. Ó Máille's *Sean-Fhocla Chonnacht* (1948, 1952)—preserve over 18,000 proverbial entries, and the Schools' Manuscripts Collection (1937–1939) contains attestations numbering in the millions. Yet while the corpus is extensive, the formal structures that underpin it have not been subject to sustained linguistic analysis. This monograph is the first systematic account of the mnemonic architecture of Irish proverbs. It examines the structural and stylistic features that make proverbs memorable, distinguish them as traditional utterances, and support their recognition and reuse.

## *2. Proverbial Markers: Theoretical Context*

Scholarship on proverb traditions across languages has identified a range of formal features—termed "proverbial markers"—that distinguish proverbial statements from ordinary speech. Among these, poetic devices such as parallelism, ellipsis, alliteration, and rhyme, and semantic strategies including metaphor, personification, paradox, and hyperbole, are frequently cited as hallmarks of proverb style (Mieder 2004: 7). Foundational studies such as Taylor's *The Proverb* (1931) and Whiting's 'The Nature of the Proverb' (1932), along with later work by Krikmann ('On Denotative Indefiniteness of Proverbs',

1974, [1984]), Dundes ('On the Structure of the Proverb', 1975), Silverman-Weinreich ('Towards a Structural Analysis of Yiddish Proverbs', 1981), Arora ('The Perception of Proverbiality', 1984), and Norrick's *How Proverbs Mean* (1985), demonstrate that these markers operate across lexical, semantic, and syntactic domains. Winick ('Intertextuality and Innovation in a Definition of the Proverb Genre', 2003) argues that these markers serve two functions: they entextualize the statement–setting it apart from surrounding discourse–and they act as intertextual indices of proverbiality, cueing competent speakers to recognize the utterance as belonging to a traditional repertoire.

The specific configuration of these markers varies across languages. Some traditions rely primarily on structural features such as parallelism or parataxis; others foreground prosodic devices such as alliteration or rhyme; still others depend on figurative strategies, particularly metaphor. For example, Arora (1984) shows that rhyme functions as a primary marker of proverbiality in Spanish, while Silverman-Weinreich (1978) demonstrates that Yiddish typically signals proverbial status through clusters of grammatical markers. In each case, the combination of features forms what may be understood as a language-specific mnemonic structure—a set of formal cues that supports retention, recognition, and entextualization without recourse to explicit framing formulae such as "as the proverb says." Knowledge of these markers constitutes what Hirsch terms "cultural literacy" (see Mieder 1992), enabling speakers to recognize and interpret proverbs even when the exact item is unfamiliar. This competence underpins both the transmission of traditional proverbs and the creation of new expressions modelled on established patterns.

This cross-linguistic variation raises a question that has not been systematically addressed for Irish: which structural and stylistic features mark a statement as proverbial in the Irish-language tradition, and how do they combine to produce memorability? Certain patterns are well attested. Ó Siadhail (1989: 212), for instance, identifies topic repetition as characteristic of 'maxim'-type sentences, particularly those introduced by *an té* 'he who'. The construction marks a

proverbial frame, as in *An té is mó a fhosclas a bhéal, is é is lú a fhosclas a sparán* 'He who opens his mouth the widest [he] opens his purse the least' (U§1019). My previous studies examined some of these elements individually, combining qualitative analysis with quantitative corpus-based description: syntactic structures in Mac Coinnigh (2012) and explicit metaphor in Mac Coinnigh (2013). Those articles, though focused in scope, laid the groundwork for the comprehensive account offered here of how syntactic, semantic, and prosodic markers interact in Irish proverbs and serve their social functions.

## 3. The Irish Proverbial Tradition: Historical Depth

The formal and stylistic preferences visible in modern Irish proverbs have deep roots in the textual tradition. Early wisdom texts—*teagasca* 'teachings', gnomic verses, and sententious statements embedded in narrative prose—appear in the earliest strata of Old Irish (c.8th–9th centuries) and Middle Irish (c.10th–12th centuries). Terse maxims such as *Tosach áigh aithchomsáin* 'Reproach is the beginning of a quarrel', *Ferr dál debiu* 'Consensus is better than discord', and *Dligid mer múnad* 'A fool should be instructed' (Ireland 1999: 15) demonstrate an early preference for brevity and parallelism. Similar preferences appear in the early Irish triads, attributed by Meyer (1906) on linguistic grounds to the ninth century. These three-part statements rely on parallel phrasing and semantic grouping, as in *Tréde conattig fírinne: mess, tomus, cubus* 'Three things which justice demands: judgment, measure, conscience' and *Trí óible adannat seirc: gnúis, alaig, erlabra* 'Three sparks that kindle love: a face, demeanour, speech' (Meyer 1906: 10–11). The compositional habits formed in these early texts proved remarkably durable, remaining visible, as we will see, in proverbs recorded in the twentieth century.

Bilingual lexicography both extended and transformed this inheritance. From the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, works such as Ó Beaglaoich and Mac Cuirtin's *Foclóir Béarla Gaoidheilge* (1732) preserved long-standing items while also generating new proverb-like expressions through translation and analogy (Mac Coinnigh 2013b).

Lexicographers rendered English (and indeed French) proverbial material into Irish through literal translation, equivalents, and adaptation—introducing new forms into the written record, though whether these ever gained currency in speech is another matter. As Honeck and Welge (1997: 627) observe, the act of committing proverbs to writing exerts its own influence on the tradition, creating a "feedback-loop system" in which recorded examples become available as models for further proverb generation.

The major documentary effort, however, came in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of marked linguistic contraction. As Irish receded from public life and the last monoglot speakers in many Gaeltacht communities disappeared, scholars worked to record what remained of vernacular culture. This effort produced the three regional collections that remain central to the study of Irish proverbs: Énrí Ó Muirgheasa's *Seanfhocla Uladh* (1907; 2nd ed. 1936; 3rd ed., ed. Ó hUrmoltaigh 1976), Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha's *Seanfhocail na Muimhneach* (1926; revised as *Seanfhocail na Mumhan*, ed. Ua Maoileoin 1984), and Tomás S. Ó Máille's *Sean-Fhocla Chonnacht* (1948, 1952; 2nd ed., ed. Donla uí Bhraonáin 2010). Collectively, these works contain over 18,000 entries encoding "wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views" (Mieder 1996a: 4) and constitute the principal evidential base for the present study.

Alongside these regional collections, state-funded initiatives documented proverbial material on an even larger scale. The work of *Institiúid Bhéaloideas Éireann* (Irish Folklore Institute, 1930–1935) and its successor, *Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann* (Irish Folklore Commission, 1935–1971), was central to preserving oral tradition, including proverbs. One undertaking worthy of particular note is the Schools' Manuscripts Collection (1937–1939), which mobilised schoolchildren, their families, and local teachers across twenty-six counties to record vernacular knowledge. The scale of the material is considerable: 1,128 bound volumes comprising over 451,000 handwritten pages, with proverb attestations alone numbering, by one estimate, in the millions (Carson Williams 2018: 362). The digitisation of this

material through the National Folklore Collection (www.duchas.ie) and the Meitheal transcription project has opened it to systematic analysis.

The disciplinary orientation of these collection efforts shaped the type of research engagement that followed. Proverbs were gathered primarily as *folkloric* items—paradigmatic expressions of traditionality, in Toelken's (1979: 32) terms, "tradition-based communicative units informally exchanged in dynamic variation through time and space." Collectors often prioritised compilation over contextual documentation, and the institutional consolidation of folklore studies reinforced this emphasis. While the preservation of the record is among the field's major achievements, it also constrained the kinds of analysis that were undertaken. Most significantly, the linguistic study of the corpus has been limited, a situation intensified by the small cohort of scholars equipped to undertake such work on Irish-language material. Even so, scholars such as Fionnuala Carson Williams and Bo Almqvist have played a central role in documenting and interpreting aspects of the tradition, both in Irish and in Hiberno-English, and in sustaining its international visibility.

The Irish-language material has nonetheless remained only loosely integrated into international paremiology. Foundational studies in the English-language tradition—Taylor (1931), Whiting (1932), Mieder (2004), and Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Aleksa Varga (2015)—provide comprehensive overviews of proverb form and function, and subsequent language-specific studies have extended this work across traditions including Ancient Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish, Russian, and Yiddish. Wolfgang Mieder's *International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology* (2010) attests to the global scope of research in the field, yet scholarship on Irish appears only marginally within it. To date, only two monographs have examined Irish proverbial material in any depth: Moran and O'Connell's *Timeless Wisdom: What Irish Proverbs Tell Us about Ourselves* (2006), a largely psychological treatment aimed at a general readership, and Carson Williams's *Wellerisms*

*in Ireland: Towards a Corpus from Oral and Literary Sources* (2002), a substantial academic contribution focused on a single proverb type.

## 4. The Present Study: Scope and Method

This monograph addresses five related questions. How have the major twentieth-century dialectal collections shaped the documentary record of Modern Irish proverbs? What criteria allow the main proverb-related subforms to be distinguished and classified? Which syntactic frames and structural devices form the core of Irish proverbial expression? In what ways do figurative and prosodic features enhance the mnemonic force of Irish proverbs? And how do *blasons populaires* draw on proverbial forms and structures to articulate regional and social evaluations?

The analysis combines close qualitative reading with corpus-based description. It identifies recurring syntactic, semantic, and prosodic patterns across Irish proverbs and accounts for their functional role. These features are treated not as ornamental but as elements of a mnemonic architecture that supports recognition, retention, and performance. The approach rests on a straightforward premise: proverb structure and style are shaped by mnemonic pressure, and a limited set of language-specific frames enables recognition and reuse even on first encounter. The core evidence is drawn from the three dialectal collections: *Seanfhocla Uladh*, *Seanfhocail na Mumhan*, and *Seanfhocla Chonnacht*. Material from the National Folklore Collection (NFC) and from earlier lexicographical sources supplements the analysis where relevant.

## 5. Chapter Overview

The first chapter examines the Modern Irish proverb tradition through the lens of the three major dialectal collections, highlighting their differing editorial methods and the challenges they present for documentation, definition, and classification. It situates these collections within a longer history, tracing the lexicographical trans-

mission of proverbial material and the influence of MacAdam's innovations in thematic organisation and comparative method.

The second chapter turns to the main subforms that appear alongside core proverbs in the dialectal collections: proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, proverbial questions, Wellerisms, and enumerative forms such as triads and tetrads. By identifying the defining features of each subform, it clarifies previously conflated categories and proposes a revised framework for classification.

The third chapter examines the syntactic and structural features that underpin the mnemonic design of Irish proverbs, giving particular attention to emphatic constructions—clefting, left dislocation, marked word order—and to core copular templates. It demonstrates that Irish proverbs operate within a systematic yet flexible syntactic framework.

The fourth chapter addresses the semantic and prosodic dimensions of proverbial style. It analyses how figurative language, particularly metaphor and personification, works in tandem with syntactic frames to generate meaning, and considers the role of alliteration and rhyme as integral proverbial markers.

The final chapter focuses on the *blason populaire*, examining how these expressions draw on familiar formal strategies to articulate regional and social characterisations. It considers what these stereotyping proverbs reveal about the relationship between proverbial form and cultural attitudes, noting that Irish *blasons populaires* are predominantly regional in focus and largely benign in tone.[1]

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## *6. Contribution*

By documenting the structural and stylistic features that give Irish proverbs their recognisable form, this study establishes a descriptive model not previously articulated for Irish-language material. It also provides a framework for classifying proverbial subforms—proverbial expressions, Wellerisms, enumerative proverbs, proverbial comparisons, proverbial questions—that supports clearer identification and annotation in archival and digital settings. Beyond its descriptive aims, the study clarifies how established structural patterns continue to support cultural literacy and provide learners and New Speakers of Irish with stable models of idiomatic usage, even as intergenerational oral transmission weakens.

# CHAPTER 1
# DIALECTAL PROVERB COLLECTIONS

## 1. Introduction

This chapter examines the tradition of Modern Irish (*c.*1650–present) proverbs through the lens of three major dialectal collections published in the twentieth century: *Seanfhocla Uladh* (Ó Muirgheasa 1907; 2nd ed. 1936; 3rd ed., ed. Ó hUrmoltaigh 1976), *Seanfhocail na Muimhneach* (Ó Siochfhradha 1926; revised as *Seanfhocail na Mumhan*, ed. Ua Maoileoin 1984), and *Sean-Fhocla Chonnacht* (Ó Máille 1948, 1952; 2nd ed., *Seanfhocla Chonnacht*, ed. Donla uí Bhraonáin 2010).[1] While these collections form the backbone of the modern Irish-language proverbial corpus, they are not uniform in approach. The analysis that follows considers both their methodological strengths and their limitations, particularly in the areas of documentation, editorial annotation, source attribution, and, most crucially, the challenges surrounding proverb definition, terminological consistency, and classification.

To contextualize this twentieth-century material, the chapter begins with a brief overview of proverbial usage in Old Irish literature (c.8th–9th centuries), with emphasis on the didactic and ceremonial functions these expressions fulfilled in texts such as *Audacht Morainn* 'The Testament of Morand' (Kelly 1976), and *Tecosca Cormaic* 'The Instructions of Cormac Mac Airt' (Meyer 1909). It then turns to the lexicographic tradition of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries,

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[1]     The following abbreviations will be used to refer to the sources: *Seanfhocla Uladh* (U); *Seanfhocail na Mumhan* (M); *Seanfhocla Chonnacht* (C). I will provide my own English translation for each proverbial entry directly after the Irish version. Although *Seanfhocla Uladh* includes English translations in its first edition (1907), these will be used only where available and suitable, and may be revised where they contain inaccuracies or archaisms. For all other entries, I will provide my own English translation directly after the Irish version.

focusing on landmark works such as Edward Lhuyd's *Irish–English Dictionary* (1707) and the *Foclóir Béarla Gaoidheilge* (1732) compiled by Ó Beaglaoich and Mac Cuirtin. The final section addresses the pivotal role of the Belfast industrialist, scholar, and antiquarian, Robert Shipboy MacAdam (1808–1895), whose innovations in thematic categorization and multilingual comparison established much of the framework through which later editors approached Irish proverbial material. His influence, while often underacknowledged, remains central to understanding the evolution of modern proverbial forms in Irish.

## 2. Historical Background to Twentieth-Century Dialectal Proverb Collections

Proverbs and proverbial language occupy a distinctive and enduring place in the Irish linguistic tradition, with documented roots reaching back to Old Irish literature. The early periods of the Irish language are generally considered to be Old Irish (*c.*8th–9th centuries) and Middle Irish (*c.*10th–12th centuries) (Griffith et al. 2018: 1) (see also Greene 1966; Koch 1995; Russell 2005). Among the most significant forms in Old Irish are the *teagasca* 'teachings', gnomic, sentential sayings traditionally attributed to mythological kings and warriors. These concise expressions of counsel served not merely as moral instruction but as a means of passing wisdom from one generation to the next, offering guidance to heirs, kin, and the wider community alike. Some of the most significant early collections of *teagasca* include: *Audacht Morainn* 'The Testament of Morand' (Kelly 1976), *Tecosca Cormaic* 'The Instructions of Cormac Mac Airt' (Meyer 1909), *Briathra Flainn Fhína Maic Ossu* 'Old Irish Wisdom Attributed to Aldfrith of Northumbria' (Ireland 1999), and *Senbhríathra Fithail* 'The Proverbs of Fithal' (Thurneysen 1912). Scholars such as Robinson (1981) have argued that these sayings qualify as proverbs in their own right, citing their fixed structure and the presence of traditional proverbial markers such as alliteration, rhyme, and syntactic parallelism. At the same time, it is important to recognize the essentially

literary nature of these texts. As O'Rahilly (1920: 147) notes, while their form is undoubtedly proverbial, there is no evidence to suggest that they ever circulated widely in everyday speech. Their primary function appears to have been didactic and ceremonial rather than conversational. Still, these early *teagasca* 'teachings' form a vital part of the genealogy of Irish proverbial expression.

The first collections of what we understand in Modern Irish (*c*.1650–present) as 'proverbs' are found in the dictionaries that were compiled throughout the seventeenth–nineteenth centuries focusing "on the contemporary, literary language" (Griffith et al. 2018: 2). Examples include *Focloir Gaoidheilge-Shagsonach no Bearladoir Scot-Sagsamhuil. An Irish–English Dictionary* by Edward Lhuyd (1707); *An Foclóir Béarla Gaoidheilge* (Ó Beaglaoich and Mac Cuirtin 1732); *Foclóir Gaedhilbhéarlach* (Tadhg Ua Neachtain 1739); *Focalóir Gaoidhilge-Sax-Bhéarla or An Irish–English Dictionary* by John O'Brien (1768), *A Galic and English Dictionary*, William Shaw (1780) and Edward O'Reilly's *An Irish–English Dictionary* (O'Reilly 1817, 1864), *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (P. Ó Conaill 1826). Not all of these works were published, of course. For example, Peadar Ó Conaill's *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (1826) remains in manuscript form in the British Library, with copies in Trinity College Dublin and National Library of Ireland (Doyle 2009). And Robert MacAdam's *English–Irish Dictionary* (*c*.1850) manuscript (MS. 1/153) is housed in Queen's University Belfast.

The English–Irish Dictionary, *An Foclóir Béarla Gaoidheilge*, of Ó Beaglaoich and Mac Cuirtin, published in Paris in 1732 is, as far as I can ascertain, the first significant source of Modern Irish proverbs. In contrast with Lhuyd (1707), the authors show a particular penchant for proverbial material. There are 407 entries in the dictionary containing the abbreviation *P.* (Proverb). Although labelled 'proverbs', many of these entries function more accurately as proverbial expressions or idiomatic translations from English and French entries. Abel Boyer's *Le Dictionnaire Royal, François–Anglois et Anglois–François* (1729) served as a template for the nomenclature of the proverbial material

in the dictionary (Mac Coinnigh 2013b). The authors used over 90 per cent of Boyer's proverbial entries, rendering Irish entries through an ad hoc mixture of methods such as literal translation, Irish equivalents, explanations of the English proverbs, and translations of Boyer's original French. Some examples are shown below:

Literal translation

(1) *Dog, P. love me and love my Dog.* (1732: 170)

*Gráidhigh mise agas gráidhigh mo ghadhar.* 'love me and love my dog'.

Irish equivalents

(2) *Absent, P. Long absent soon forgotten.* (1732: 6)

*An tí bhíos abhfad a muigh dearmudthar a chuid.* 'The person who is out for long, his dinner is forgotten'.

Explanations of the English

(3) *Trouble, P. to fish in troubled water.* (1732: 641)

*Do dhéana éadáladh anáimsear cogadh.* 'to make profit in a time of war'.

Translation of the French

(4) *Rebuke, P. The Devil rebukes sin.* (1732: 568)

*Do ghnídh an Sionnach searmóin dona geadheachaibh* 'the fox preaches to the geese'.

P. Le Renard prêche aux Poules. 'the fox preaches to the hens'.

Almost a century later, in 1831, the publication of *Hardiman's Irish Minstrelsy* marked a significant milestone in the printed tradition of Irish proverb collections. The volume includes 228 Irish-language proverbs, presented without English translation or explanatory annotation. Despite its brevity, the collection holds enduring value for paremiologists, as it represents the first printed collection of Irish prov-

erbs. O'Rahilly (1922: 151) suggests that some of these proverbs may have been drawn from earlier manuscript sources, a view supported by Robin Flower (1926: 103–104, 110), who attributes their provenance to a collection compiled by the eighteenth-century scholar Tadhg Ó Neachtain (1671–*c.*1752). According to Flower, this material was later taken by Edward O'Reilly and incorporated into the manuscript now catalogued as Egerton 146 in the British Library. Hardiman's collection clearly shaped the work of later figures such as John O'Donovan, whose collection appeared in *The Dublin Penny Journal* (1832–1833), Canon Ulick J. Bourke, author of *The College Irish Grammar* (1856), and Lady Wilde's *Ancient Cures, Charms and Usages of Ireland* (1890), which offered a broader ethnographic view of Irish tradition. Yet, despite their historical importance, these collections are not without their flaws. One recurring issue is the uncritical reproduction of material from *Irish Minstrelsy*, often without verification or reference to alternative sources. As O'Rahilly (1922: 151) observed, the same textual errors crop up across different publications, revealing a pattern of borrowing or copying rather than independent collection. What might at first glance appear to be corroboration or repetition from oral tradition is, in many cases, simply the echo of an earlier printed text.

Between 1858 and 1862, the Belfast industrialist, antiquarian, and scholar Robert Shipboy MacAdam made a significant contribution to Irish paremiology through the publication of over 600 proverbs and proverbial expressions in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*.[2] Sourced primarily from Irish-speaking areas of Ulster, the collection stood out not only for its size but also for the originality of its content: "with a very few exceptions, the proverbs…differ entirely from all

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[2]    The collection was published in four instalments in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* (First Series). They first appeared in Volume VI (1858), which includes an introductory essay on pages 172–177, followed immediately by the first set of proverbs (nos. 1–96) on pages 177–183. The same volume also includes a second section, comprising proverbs 97–332, on pages 250–267. Volume VII (1859) continues the series with proverbs 333–457 on pages 278–287. The final instalment appears in Volume IX (1861–62), which presents proverbs 458–600 on pages 223–236.

those already printed" (MacAdam 1858: 173). Although many of these proverbs were likely attested in the other other dialects of Munster and Connaught, MacAdam's regional focus lent the work a distinct Ulster character and allowed him to assert a measure of linguistic authenticity. That said, as Almqvist (2000: 166) has noted, MacAdam tends to overstate both the uniqueness of the Ulster tradition and the distinctiveness of Irish proverbs more broadly.

Not only was MacAdam's approach to the collection of proverbs innovative for its time, but he also provided a substantial introduction to his work, in which he addressed some of the most complex and enduring questions in the field of paremiology. These included the definition of the proverb, its historical background, sources, and classification, as well as editorial principles for arranging such material. He also reflects thoughtfully on matters of origin, thematic content, and stylistic features. In this way, MacAdam's contributions laid the early groundwork for the kinds of methodological and comparative frameworks that continue to inform paremiological research.

Another particularly distinguishing feature of MacAdam's collection is his methodological foresight. Proverbs were arranged thematically in his collection under subject headings such as: *Procrastination*; *Experience, Knowledge, Hope, Reliance on Providence*; and *Humility*. Each Irish proverb is accompanied by an English translation, and in many cases, he goes further, offering comparative equivalents from a wide range of European traditions, including Latin, French, and Spanish. Hughes (1998) describes him as an early example of a 'good European' in this regard:

> In addition to the accolades he merits for his work as a pioneer of the Irish-language revival, MacAdam also has the honour of being an early example of a 'good European', for, in addition to his Irish and Scottish material, he also includes French, Italian and Spanish proverbs – not forgetting examples in Latin and Greek. (Hughes 1998: 65)

This multilingual framing reveals a scholarly breadth unusual for the time and perhaps reflects a desire to situate Irish proverbial wisdom

within a broader international framework, given MacAdam had mastery of thirteen languages (*In Memoriam*, 1895: 152; Carson Williams 1995: 343). For example in the case of the proverbial expression *Sin tòin na muice meithe do ghrèisiughadh* 'That is like greasing the rump of a fat hog', MacAdam (1859: 285) includes: Spanish– *Al puerco gordo untarle el rabo* 'To grease the fat hog on the breech', English– To take coals to Newcastle, Latin– *In sylvam ligna referre* 'To bring wood back into the forest' and *Juxta fluvium puteum fodit* 'One digs a well beside a river', French– *Porter de l'eau à la mer* 'To carry water to the sea', Italian– *Veder lucciole per lanterne* 'To mistake glow-worms for lanterns', and, for good measure, a final one from Spanish– *Llevar hierro a Viscaya* 'To bring iron into Biscay'

MacAdam's comments on the metaphorical use of proverbs in spoken interaction, particularly their "endless variety of applications, both directly and ironically" (MacAdam 1858: 177), also demonstrate a sensitivity to the performative and contextual dimensions of proverbial usage that extends beyond the textual record. His compilation, notable both for its scale as the most extensive Irish-language collection to date and for its comparative engagement with European paremiological traditions, reflects a scholarly approach that was in many respects ahead of its time. The full corpus has since been standardized orthographically and republished, accompanied by a detailed biographical study, in *Robert Shipboy MacAdam: His Life and Gaelic Proverb Collection* (Hughes 1998).

While a corpus of 600 proverbs may appear substantial at first glance, Almqvist has noted that many individual Irish speakers possessed a markedly larger repertoire within their personal idiolects:

> Six hundred items may sound impressive, but considering that we now know of several individual Irish speakers whose proverb repertoire was much bigger than that, it is likely to represent only a minor part of the proverbs actually current in the nineteenth century in the province of Ulster, let alone in the whole of Ireland. (Almqvist 2000: 162)

Moreover, the number of true proverbs is considerably smaller. This is possibly because MacAdam termed 'proverbs' as *seanráite* 'old sayings', which is a broader category that includes a wide range of related forms. "Proverbs (at least Irish proverbs) treat of the most miscellaneous subjects, in fact, *de omnibus rebus*; and perhaps, on the whole, the best name we can apply to them is the one given to them by the Irish themselves, namely, *Sean-Ràite*, 'Old Sayings'" (MacAdam 1958: 175). The collection therefore includes comparisons, weather and calendar sayings, idioms, and enumerative forms, alongside what may be termed 'true' proverbs.

Proverbs also featured frequently in the numerous periodicals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly those in the magazine of the Gaelic League, *Irisleabhar na Gaeilge* 'The Irish Language Journal'. Others included *An tUltach* 'The Ulsterman', *An Connachtach* 'The Connaughtman' *Fáinne an Lae* 'The Dawn of Day', *Dublin Penny Journal, Irisleabhar Muighe Nuadhad* 'Maynooth Journal', and *An Claidheamh Solais* 'Sword of Light'. Once again, the collections included much miscellaneous material, not just proverbs, a tendency that contributed to ongoing confusion regarding the boundaries of proverbial form as to what exactly a 'proverb' was. Smaller collections featured in books of this period also, particularly in lexicographic sources and in dialectal studies, e.g. *Sean-Chaint na nDéise: The Idiom of Living Irish* (Sheehan 1906) and *Cnuasacht Trágha* (Sheehan 1908), *An Ghaoth Aniar* (Ó Máille 1920)—this collection was based on the material published in the periodical *An Stoc—Leabhar Cainte* (Ua Dubhghaill 1901), and in *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla: An Irish–English Dictionary* (Dinneen 1904, 1927). While proverbs are notoriously difficult to extract from dictionaries like Dinneen's, Fionnuala Carson Williams's painstaking work has done much to address this challenge. The Irish Folklore Collection now holds a complete card index of all proverbs in Dinneen's *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla: An Irish–English Dictionary* (over 1,000 proverbs) as well as all those in the two other main dictionaries of Modern Irish published in the

twentieth century: Tomás de Bhaldraithe's *English–Irish Dictionary* (1959) and Niall Ó Dónaill's *Foclóir Gaeilge–Béarla* (1977).

Thomas F. O'Rahilly occupies another significant position in the development of Irish paremiology, publishing two major texts in the field: *Dánfhocail* (1921) and *A Miscellany of Irish Proverbs* (1922). *Dánfhocail* is a collection of 290 epigrams in syllabic metre that were gleaned from amongst the marginalia of manuscript texts. The epigrams were organized in the collection according to themes, such as *An Bhochtaineacht agus an Saibhreas* 'Poverty and Wealth', *Caint agus Tost* 'Talk and Silence', *Na Mná* 'Women', *An Grá* 'Love', *An tÓl* 'Drink' amongst others. Similar to the *teagasca*, or 'teachings', it appears that these epigrams were literary in origin, and were either taken from poems or deliberately composed by a poet. Many appear to be similar in syntax and meaning to proverbs, but they cannot be classified as such due to the lack of evidence on currency or use. There is ample evidence of proverbs appearing in the epigrams, however. For example, the proverb *Ná toigh bean ar a scéimh* 'Do not choose a woman for her beauty' which is found in *Seanfhocail na Mumhan* (M§253) occurs in the following epigram:

> *Ná togh bean ar a sgéimh,*
> *go bhfionnair cad é an locht;*
> *tar éis iad do bheith dearg,*
> *is searbh blas na gcaor gcon* (O'Rahilly 1921: 15).

> Do not choose a woman for her beauty,
> until you find out what her fault is;
> though they may be red,
> the berries of the dog rose taste bitter.

It could also be the case, of course, that these literary forms entered speech and then circulated as proverbs thereafter.

O'Rahilly published his second work, *A Miscellany of Irish Proverbs*, in 1922, a volume that constitutes the first sustained academic study of Irish-language proverbs undertaken from a comparative–historical perspective. The work represents a significant scholarly achievement, offering a broad and carefully structured account of proverbial material across 174 pages. It includes lists of modern Irish proverbs and triads accompanied by English translations and explanatory notes, as well as an examination of proverbs and proverbial phrases in Irish literary texts, and concludes with a full bibliography of sources. Many of the proverbs were transcribed from a manuscript by Mícheál Ó Longáin housed in the Royal Irish Academy (MS 23 G 20, pp. 85–89), titled *Seanfhocail mhatha a bprós sonn, as an leabhar dárb ainm an Seanduine* 'Good proverbs in clear prose, from the book called *The Old Person*'.

## 3. Twentieth-Century Dialectal Collections

The founding of *Conradh na Gaeilge* 'The Gaelic League' in 1893 marked a pivotal moment in the revival of Irish as a spoken language and in the promotion of Irish-language literature. Members of the League were also actively involved in collecting folklore, viewing it as an essential element of the broader cultural revival movement. As Briody (2008: 73) notes, these early efforts were often embedded in competitions and prizes organized during *An tOireachtas*, the League's annual Irish-language cultural festival (est. 1897). The motivations for collecting folklore were varied: for some, it offered accessible reading material in Irish; for others, it provided a model of vernacular authenticity to be emulated by learners; and for others of a more scholarly inclination, it served as a valuable source for linguistic analysis. Nonetheless, a unifying belief underpinned many of these projects: that folklore constituted a vital expression of Irish identity, and that a national literature in Irish should be rooted in the linguistic heritage of the people. Proverbs and proverbial speech were, of course, at the heart of this heritage, as de hÍde notes:

> Wherever Irish is the vernacular of the people there lives … a vast and varied store of apothegms, sententious proverbs, and weighty sentences, which contain the very best and truest thoughts, not of the rude forefathers of the hamlet, but of the kings, sages, bards and shanachies of bygone ages. (de hÍde 1889: 216)

> The native Irish deal in sententious proverbs perhaps more than any other nation in Europe; their repertoire of apothegms is enormous. It is a characteristic which is lost with their change of language, and, consequently, has not been observed or noticed. Let their language die, and not one of their proverbs will remain. Of the hundreds of stereotyped sayings and acute aphorisms which I have heard aptly introduced upon occasions where Irish was spoken, I cannot say that I have heard five survive in an English dress where the language has been lost. (de hÍde 1889: 216–217)

The early decades of the twentieth century were a period of profound political and cultural transformation in Ireland, culminating in 1922 with the establishment of an independent state for twenty-six of Ireland's thirty-two counties. The newly formed government of *Saorstát Éireann* (Irish Free State) was, at least nominally, tasked with continuing the cultural revival efforts initiated under colonial rule. Although the founding of *Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann* (Irish Folklore Commission) in 1935 is often regarded as the formal beginning of state-sponsored folklore collection, its institutional roots extend to the earlier activities of *An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann* (Folklore of Ireland Society), established in 1927. This Society set out, with some urgency, to preserve what it described as "the riches of Irish folklore" before they were "irretrievably lost" (Briody 2008: 19).

It was within this charged cultural and political context that the systematic collection of proverbial material took shape. Between 1907 and 1952, three major collections were published, each representing one of the principal dialects of Modern Irish: *Connacht* 'Connaught', *An Mhumhain* 'Munster', and *Ulaidh* 'Ulster'. The geographic location of the dialects, taken from Ó Siadhail (1989: 3), is shown in Map 1.

Figure 0.2   Geographic location of dialects

Map 1. Geographic locations of dialects

We can now turn our attention to these dialectal collections in more detail.

### 3.1. *Seanfhocla Uladh 'The Proverbs of Ulster' (1907, 1936, 1974)*

*Seanfhocla Uladh* 'The Proverbs of Ulster' by Énrí Ó Muirgheasa (Henry Morris) first published in 1907 was the first significant collection of proverbial material in the Irish language in the twentieth century. The work itself is a bilingual one. The introduction is in English and the 1,637 entries (although originally having 2,280 before variants were reclassified), are all glossed in English. It is clear from the introduction that the English translations were penned rather reluctantly:

> Hence I was reluctantly obliged to adopt the plan of page for page translation all through, though it is a style of publication I do not love. The danger is that while it explains them, the English translation may at the same time belittle our proverbs. I should warn readers not to judge the Irish proverbs by their English translations. No English translation could do justice to them. It gives you the idea in a circumlocutory way, but all the artistic form and classical mould of the expression is lost. It is as if a man brought you a beautiful gold trinket or ornament, and you melted it into a lump in a crucible, and then gave it back to him, saying 'Here is your gold: there is not a grain or particle of it lost.' Somewhat in the same way does a beautiful proverb suffer in the process of translation. (Ó Muirgheasa 1907: ix)

In spite of his initial reluctance, he ultimately concluded that the translations would ultimately benefit the work more than they would harm it.

> Irish proverbs are, as a rule, so condensed, express so much in a few words, and are often so idiomatic and peculiar in their meaning that a vocabulary would be almost useless, while to leave them unexplained would be worse than useless. Hence I was reluctantly obliged to adopt a plan of page for page translation all through, though it is a style of publication I do not love. (Ó Muirgheasa 1907: ix)

Ó Muirgheasa (1907: xiv) collected the proverbs from Irish speakers in the province of Ulster, often using intermediaries in the various counties to liaise with the informants: "These have all been written down from the lips of the people by myself or others." His collection

includes MacAdam's proverbs from the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* (MacAdam 1858–1862)—these are marked with the letter (U) throughout the collection—although he omits the proverbs MacAdam had collected from other languages (Hughes 1998: 67). Ó Muirgheasa also includes some other proverbs from small, published collections as well. These mainly covered the counties of Donegal, Derry, Armagh, and Monaghan (cf. Ó Muirgheasa 1907: xiv–xv).

Ó Muirgheasa's aim was to compile a comprehensive collection of proverbs that would enable younger generations to learn and retain the long-established sayings of the Irish-speaking communities, thereby helping to preserve them within the language itself. He openly acknowledges that Ireland had fallen behind its European counterparts in the systematic collection and publication of proverbs—a shortcoming made even more regrettable, he suggests, given that Irish possesses a literary tradition "reaching back as old, perhaps, as the oldest of these [old-world nations]" (Ó Muirgheasa 1907: vi). Underpinning his work is a distinctly nationalistic impulse, in which the aims of linguistic preservation and cultural revival were deeply intertwined:

> … if we are to become Irish again, this Irish characteristic must not be lost. Our young people must be made familiar with the proverbs which have been the heritage and the helpmates of unnumbered generations of our ancestors; they must be encouraged to use them and keep them alive, and hand them down to future generations. (Ó Muirgheasa 1907: viii)

A certain degree of Bowdlerization is evident in Ó Muirgheasa's approach, as he admits some of the material wasn't suitable in his view and was omitted: "I have treasured everything I could get in the way of proverbial sayings, except what was gross or indecent" (Ó Muirgheasa 1907: viii). The tail end of the work contains an introductory description of the Ulster manuscript tradition, followed by a selection of Irish manuscripts that contain other literary poetic expressions which never took hold in the oral tradition (pp. 257–319).

Almost thirty years later, Ó Muirgheasa published a second edition of *Seanfhocla Uladh* (1936), significantly expanding and refining the original collection. Over 300 new proverbs were added, while approximately 150 were removed on the grounds that they lacked "much sense or wisdom, although they were undoubtedly old sayings"[3] (Ó Muirgheasa 1936: vii). The revised edition ultimately contained 1,800 proverbs, along with a selection of epigrams drawn from manuscript sources, which were appended to the end of the volume (Ó Muirgheasa 1936: 171–208).

In contrast with the first edition, Ó Muirgheasa's 1936 volume is entirely in Irish. The English introduction and the English-language glosses in the 1907 edition are omitted without comment. Significantly, this was the last use of English in any of the three major dialectal collections. This shift away from bilingual presentation reflects a more assertive cultural and linguistic stance from Ó Muirgheasa, one that had already been signalled, as we have seen, in the earlier edition's hesitant engagement with English. While he offers no explicit explanation for the change, the decision aligns with broader revivalist sentiments of the period which, since Dubhghlas de hÍde's 1892 address *The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland*, had placed increasing emphasis on "deanglicization" and linguistic purity. A further development came in 1976, when Nollaig Ó hUrmoltaigh published an updated edition of the 1936 work. This version normalized the text in accordance with *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil*, the standardized form of Irish introduced in 1958, while noting the need to preserve certain dialectal forms for authenticity (1976: xv).

### 3.2.  *Seanfhocail na Mumhan 'The Proverbs of Munster' (1926, 1984, 2003)*

*Seanfhocail na Muimhneach* 'The Proverbs of the People of Munster' by Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha was published in 1926, yet the initial inspiration for this collection was a 16-page pamphlet entitled *Se-*

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[3]     *'nach rabh mórán céille nó eagna ionnta, cé gur sean-ráidhte iad gan amhras.'*

*an-fhocail na Mumhan* 'The Proverbs of Munster' by the scholar
Tadhg Ua Donnchadha (nom de plume Torna), which was pub-
lished in 1902. This earlier work draws on three sources: a collec-
tion of proverbs compiled by Mícheál Ó Longáin titled *Seanfhocail
mhatha a bprós sonn, as an leabhur dárab ainm an Seanduine* 'Good
proverbs in clear prose, from the book called *The Old Person*' (Royal
Irish Academy MS 23 G 20, pp. 85–89); the material published by
John O' Daly in *The Irish Language Miscellany* (1876), and proverbs
collected by Ua Donnchadha from Irish speakers in the province
of Munster. As O'Rahilly (1921: 64) has pointed out, Ua Donnchad-
ha introduced several transcription errors and omitted several of
Ó Longáin's original proverbs. The work was the antecedent for
the first complete collection in the province of Munster *Seanfhocail
na Muimhneach* 'The Proverbs of the People of Munster' published
in 1926. This was collected and edited by Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha
(nom de plume *An Seabhac* 'The Hawk') and contained 2,152 entries
that the author collected from fieldwork in the Irish-speaking ar-
eas of Munster across a period of twenty-five years. Much of the
material included in the collection had previously been published
in the journal *An Lóchrann* between 1916 and 1920. By November
1920, the collection had largely been prepared for print; however,
the burning of Cork City by British forces on 11–12 December 1920
resulted in the destruction of both the printed edition and a sub-
stantial portion of the manuscript (Ó Siochfhradha 1926: iv). The
volume also incorporates a number of expressions drawn from the
work of his predecessor, Tadhg Ua Donnchadha, as Ó Siochfhradha
acknowledges in his introduction.

> I was given full permission from Torna to include in this collection
> some of the things that he himself collected and published in *Seanf-
> hocail na Mumhan* in 1901. There would be a large lacuna in the book
> if I had to omit them.[4] (Ó Siochfhradha 1926: v)

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[4]      *'Fuaireas lán-chead ó "Thórna" neithe bheith sa bhailiú so a bhailigh sé agus a
chuir sé féin i gcló cheana i "Seanfhocail na Mumhan" sa bhliain 1901. Do bheadh
bearna mhór sa leabhar so dá gcaithinn iad san do chur as.'*

As with Ó Muirgheasa, and indeed MacAdam before him, Ó Sioch-fhradha's commentary bears the imprint of nineteenth-century romantic nationalism, particularly in the way he associates the Irish language, and the aesthetic refinement of proverbial expression, with the character of the Irish race and nation. For him, these sayings not only exemplify linguistic beauty but also offer insight into a distinctly Irish mode of thought and *Weltanschauung*.

> Herein [the proverbs] lies the true spirit of our language – in the shapeliness of the expression, in the accuracy of the address, in the revelation of thoughts. Herein lies the clarity and beauty and elegance of the Irish language as it has grown and moved with the growth and movement of our race, serving them and embracing within itself the things that were created in the minds of the Irish. It is certain that here, too, lies the truest expression of the philosophy and spirit of the Irish ancestors from whom we came, and if there is such a thing as an "Irish mind" it is probably in the proverbs that this is clearest.[5] (Ó Siochfhradha 1926: iii)

A note of nostalgia is also evident, as he articulates his uncertainty about the future of the Irish language and a yearning for capturing and preserving linguistic material on the cusp of oblivion:

> It is a sad memory that they are gone and the great wealth that went with them never to be seen again. They were part of the old world that has not remained with us but the last remnants that are escaping us and will not return, whether Irish or Gallic will survive as normal languages in Ireland.[6] (Ó Siochfhradha 1926: vii)

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[5]     *'Is ionnta atá fír-spioraid ár dteangan– i ndeilbh na cainnte, i gcruinneas an ai-thisc, i nochtadh na smaointe. Is ionnta atá blas agus bláth agus slachtmhaireacht na Gaedhilge fé mar d'fhás is do ghluais sí le fás agus le gluaiseacht ár gcine, ag fóghnamh dóibh agus ag cumhdach innti féin na neithe do cruthuigheadh i n-aigne na nGaed-heal. Is deimhin gur ionnta, leis, atá an stilleadh is fírinnighe d'fheallsúnacht agus de mheon na sinnsear Gaedheal ó dtánamar agus má tá an ní sin go n-abarthar "aigne Gaedhealach" ann is dóigh gur ins na seanfhoclaibh seo is soiléire atá san."*
[6]     *'Is brónach an cuimhne é iad imithe agus an saidhbhreas mór d'imigh leo gan faghdáil go bráth arís air. Ba chuid de'n tseana-shaoghal iad nár fhan linn-ne dhe ach iarsmaí deiridh atá ag éalú uainn agus ná fillfidh, pé Gaedhilg nó Gall Bhéarla a mhairfeas mar ghnáth-theangain i nÉirinn.'*

Pádraig Ua Maoileoin produced a new expanded edition of the text (2,607 entries) that was published as *Seanfhocail na Mumhan* in 1984 and republished in 2003 (this title was chosen to fit with the two other dialectal collections). Ua Maoileoin's main contribution was including approximately 400 additional proverbs that he had "gathered together in his own head" (1984: x),[7] and the redistribution and reclassification of the miscellaneous material in Ó Siochfhradha's final chapter *Seanfhocail Éagsúla* 'Various Proverbs' (1926: xxix). He also added proverbial comparisons from a collection entitled *Caint an Chláir* by Father Seoirse Mac Clúin (1940) to a chapter titled *Cosúlóidí agus Comórtais* 'Similarities and Comparisons' (Ua Maoileoin 1984: 200–214). In line with moves towards reforming, standardizing, and modernizing the language, he provided standardized orthography and replaced the old Gaelic script with the more commonly used Roman orthography.

### 3.3. *Sean-fhocla Chonnacht 'The Proverbs of Connaught' (1948 and 1952, 2010).*

Tomás S. Ó Máille was responsible for the most comprehensive of the dialectal proverb collections with the publication of his two-volume *Sean-fhocla Chonnacht* 'The Proverbs of Connaught' in 1948 and 1952. They were reprinted in 1962 and 1966, respectively. It was, and indeed remains, the most extensive proverb collection in the Irish language, featuring 5,034 headwords and countless additional variants, bringing the total number of items to over 11,000. The project originated from a Department of Education (*An Roinn Oideachais*) competition launched in 1933 to determine who could assemble the best collection of Connaught proverbs. Ó Máille won the competition and was given the task of compiling and editing the complete collection.

> The outcome of it was a competition initiated by the Department of Education in 1933 to produce the best collection of Connaught

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[7]     '*…a bhí cnuasaithe istigh i mo cheann féin a chur leis…*'

> proverbs. It was decided that a book would be compiled from the proverb collections that had been gathered, and since I was awarded the prize offered in the competition, the task of editing the book was entrusted to me.[8] (Ó Máille 2010: xvii)

In his introduction to *Sean-fhocla Chonnacht*, Ó Máille explains that the proverbs were drawn not only from oral tradition but from three primary sources: spoken usage, manuscript material, and printed papers and journals (Ó Máille 1948, vii–ix). The second volume includes valuable supporting materials: a subject index of keywords found in the proverbs (Ó Máille 1952: 373–410), explanatory notes clarifying archaic or dialectally specific terms (pp. 411–429), and a list of annotations and corrections (pp. 431–441).

A revised edition, edited by Donla uí Bhraonáin, was published in 2010 as a single-volume work accompanied by a fully searchable CD-ROM. This edition systematically incorporated the original list of *Amendments and Corrections* (*Ath-nótaí agus Ceartúcháin*, 1952: 431–444) into the main body of the text, reintegrated and reclassified the proverbial material previously relegated to the appendices (1952: 258–371), and introduced an electronic cross-referencing tool. The CD-ROM enables users to search proverbs by subject, source, or keyword, significantly expanding the edition's accessibility and scholarly utility. With over 5,000 entries and more than 11,500 when variants are included, *Seanfhocla Chonnacht* continues to serve as a foundational resource for the study of Irish-language proverbs.

## 4. Documentation and Source Attribution

A central requirement in the documentation of proverbs is historical attestation. As Mieder observes, "it is exactly the requirement of all folklore, including proverbs, that various references and pos-

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[8]     'Is é an toradh a bhí leis, comórtas a thosaigh an Roinn Oideachais i 1933 leis an gcnuasacht ab fhearr de sheanfhocla Chonnacht a chur ar fáil. Cinneadh leabhar a chur i dtoll a chéile as na bailiúcháin seanfhocal a fritheadh, agus tharla gur mise a bhain an duais a tairgeadh sa gcomórtas, fúmsa a fágadh an leabhar a chur in eagar.'

sibly also variants are found that attest to oral currency" (2004: 5). Ideally, a proverb should be traceable through oral transmission, literary sources, or historical documentation. Yet such evidence is not always readily available, particularly for oral traditions, where proverbial expressions may have circulated for generations before being recorded, or may have fallen out of use prior to documentation.

This challenge is further compounded in cases where a proverb has disappeared entirely from active speech. Under such circumstances, the role of the folklorist becomes critical. As the folklorist Seán Ó Súilleabháin has emphasized, proper collection depends not only on the transcription of the proverb itself, but on the documentation of its social and communicative context, what he describes as a *sine qua non* of folkloric work. This entails recording the informant's details, situational context, and degree of familiarity with the expression: how it is understood, where and when it has been heard, and whether it remains in current use within the community. He provides the following guidelines:

> The name, age and address of the informants must be written down, in addition to any ancillary information: stories, pieces of information. This must be done always. A story or piece of history is much devalued if we aren't aware of who told it, where he/she lives, where he/she is originally from, etc. (Ó Súilleabháin 1937: iv)[9]

Such contextualization is essential if the proverb is to be examined not simply as a lexical form but as a socially embedded expression whose meaning depends on speaker-addressee relationships and contextual use.

The treatment of sources across the three dialectal collections reveals significant variation in both transparency and methodology.

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[9]    '*Cuirtear síos ainm, aois agus seoladh an té go bhfuarthas an t-adhbhar uaidh i n-éinfheacht le gach scéal, blúire eolais srl. Ní mór é sin a dhéanamh i gcomhnuidhe. Is suarach is fiú scéal nó píosa seanchuis mara n-innstear cé d'innis é, cá bhfuil comhnuidhe air, cad as dó ó thúis, srl.*'

In *Sean-fhocla Chonnacht*, Ó Máille lists the fifteen collectors whose material was submitted for the 1933 competition, acknowledging that the material was gathered from both oral and written sources. He further credits eight others who shared personal collections, and draws on four manuscript sources dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Ó Máille 1948: vii):

- Manuscript Uí Mhurchadha (University of Galway): proverbs from Co. Sligo from the end of the 19th century
- Connaught Manuscripts in the Irish Folklore Collection
- 3 C 21 and 3 B 37 (Royal Irish Academy): proverbial forms from Árainn written after 1864.
- Manuscript 135 (National Library of Ireland): written by Séan and Tadhg Ua Neachtain circa 1741.

These collectors and manuscript sources are noted alongside relevant proverbs in the collection. However, despite these manuscript acknowledgements, the precise origin of individual proverbs remains unclear. The identities of the original informants are not recorded. Even where permission was granted for the republication of earlier collections, no details are given as to the provenance of that material, thus limiting its potential for tracing patterns of transmission or regional variation.

A similar pattern emerges in Ó Muirgheasa's *Seanfhocla Uladh*. In the first edition (1907: vii), he names twelve individuals who assisted in the compilation, though these acknowledgements are omitted in the 1936 and 1976 editions.[10] It is evident that these individuals were collectors rather than informants, and while Ó Muirgheasa does

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[10]     '*Seán Ó Brádaigh i mBaile Loch Ramair, i gCo. a' Chabháin, a rinne an bailiughadh i mBreifne, agus R. J. Walker, i gCluain Eois, Co. Mhuineacháin, a chuir chugam é … Thug naonbhar nó deichneabhar Conallach dornáin bheaga damh, acht an cnuasacht ba mhó a fuaireas annsin ba hé Donnchadh Ó Baoighill, Leitir Catha, Clochán Liath, a rinne í; bhí 121 cinn ann, acht cha rabh níos mó ná 56 aca a bhí úr damh; bhí an chuid eile agam cheana. Fuaireas dornán maith eile ó Pheadar Mac Gaoithín oide scoile agus Gaedheal maith acu i nGleann tSúiligh*' (Ó Muirgheasa 1907: vii).

note the counties from which they gathered their material, allowing for a general sense of geographic distribution, imbalances are evident. Most strikingly, County Donegal, despite being home to the largest Irish-speaking population in Ulster, is represented by only around 200 proverbs out of a total of 1,637. In contrast, Ó Muirgheasa's own home region, bordering Counties Monaghan and Armagh, accounts for most of the entries. As such, the title *Seanfhocla Uladh* 'The Proverbs of Ulster' somewhat overstates the breadth of regional coverage.

In the case of *Seanfhocail na Mumhan,* Ó Siochfhradha (1926: iii) takes a more direct role in field work, claiming to have gathered the material from contemporary Munster speech. He expresses gratitude to a range of contributors, including schoolteachers, neighbours, and even paupers in workhouses, but does not specify the nature or extent of each individual's input. If his account is taken at face value, and there is little reason to doubt it, it would suggest that, like Ó Muirgheasa's earlier work, most of the proverbs were still in active circulation at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, as already noted, Ó Siochfhradha also drew on the earlier *Sean-fhocail na Mumhan* (1902), a manuscript-based collection attributed to Mícheál Ó Longáin and reflecting speech from around 1800. To what extent this earlier material was reproduced remains unclear. Crucially, no provenance details, such as source, region, or informant, are attached to individual proverbs in the published volume.

A related concern is the treatment of annotation within the collections. All three editors of the dialectal collections provide occasional explanatory notes, intended to aid reader comprehension, but these are included inconsistently and without any overarching editorial method. In general, annotation is reserved for proverbs deemed obscure, infrequent, or difficult to interpret. Ó Muirgheasa provides the occasional line or two of explanation, especially in the case of proverbs difficult to understand, but this is rather sporadic. For example, he explains in the case of the arguably self-explanatory *Luigh leis an uan agus éirigh leis an éan* 'Lie with the lamb and rise

with the birds' (U§793) that "The lamb lies down earlier than any other animal in the afternoon, and the birds are moving before any animal in the morning." [11] But other examples provide more ethnographic detail. With regard to this proverb, *Is maith an bhean í ach char bhain sí na bróga di go fóill* (U§134) 'She is a good woman but she hasn't taken her shoes off yet', he explains the following: "This is said in reference to a newly married woman. Country women were usually barefoot around the house, but for some time after the wedding, the young bride would not take off her shoes. The meaning of the saying is that her true self, her mind and character, has not yet been revealed." [12] At other times, he provides a comparative example in another language. He notes, for example, 'Better to rue sit than rue flit'—Scottish proverb, in reference to *Is fearr aithreach agus fuireach ná aithreach agus imeacht* (U§897) 'Better to regret and stay, than to regret and go.' Ó Siochfhradha is much more sparing in his explanatory notes, saving comment for the odd explanation of a dialectal usage or contextual application. He says in relation to *Ní fearr scéalaí maith i dtigh ná drochscéalaí* (M§604) 'A storyteller at home is no better than a bad storyteller', "a storyteller would say that with bitterness when no one would pay him any heed." [13] Such contextual data is especially valuable, as with the passage of time it often becomes irretrievable, leading to the loss of both the situational meaning and the range of applications associated with a given proverb. Ó Máille's is the most comprehensive, in terms of cross-references to comparative material, explanations, and notes on usage. This is not systematic, however, and would lead us to believe that the extent of annotation was largely dependent on the various indi-

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[11] '*Bíonn an t-uan ina luí níos luaithe ná ainmhí ar bith eile sa tráthnóna, agus bíonn na héalaith ag corradh roimh bheithíoch ar bith ar maidin.*'

[12] '*Deirtear seo i dtaobh mná nuaphósta. Ba ghnách le mná tuaithe a bheith cosnochta thart faoin teach, ach le tamall tar éis an phósta cha bhainfeadh an bhrídeog óg a bróga di. Is é an chiall atá tseánra nach bhfuil sé nochta aici go fóill an bhean dáiríre atá inti, a haigne is a tréithe.*'

[13] '*Le searbhas a déarfadh scéalaí é sin nuair nach mbeifí ag tabhart aon chluas dó.*'

vidual collectors who sourced the material for the competition. The most impressive aspect of all is the sheer number of variants that he has for each canonical proverb and the depth of sources. For example, the canonical entry *Is maith an capall a tharraingíos a charr féin.* (C§450) 'It is a good horse than pulls its own car', is not atypical in any way yet has eighteen variants listed directly below it. Likewise the information to sources is extremely thorough, noting sources and manuscripts where relevant.

In an ideal situation, each proverb would be accompanied by basic ethnographic and sociolinguistic detail: where it was heard, how widely it circulated, and the circumstances in which it was used. This kind of information is crucial for any analysis that seeks to move beyond the proverb as a lexical item. Yet the dialectal collections provide little of it. Their purpose was largely recording what remained in oral tradition, rather than documenting the conditions of use. Consequently, our understanding of how many of these proverbs functioned in everyday speech is limited. Apart from occasional examples embedded in literary sources (Ó Corráin's 1989 analysis of idiomatic Irish expressions is a useful template in this regard), we know little about who typically used them, in what settings, or under what social expectations. These contextual factors correspond to what Austin (1962) termed "felicity conditions", the features that give an utterance its force. Their absence limits the sort of ethnographically grounded interpretation championed by Hymes (1971) and by Arewa and Dundes (1964), who stressed the importance of performance context and sociolinguistic function in the study of proverbs.

None of the three collections includes a systematic analysis of proverb content. Ó Muirgheasa, for his part, explicitly addresses this omission, attributing it to the incomplete nature of his work. As he explains:

> As the collection of Irish proverbs is still imperfect, the writer deems it premature to attempt anything like an elaborate analysis of their contents. Such an analysis would be all the more out of

place in this volume, which is admittedly an incomplete collection
of the proverbs of a single province. (Ó Muirgheasa 1907: x)

In other words, the lack of comprehensive coverage, both in terms
of quantity and geographical scope, precluded any sustained engage-
ment with the cultural substance of the material.

## 5. Arrangement and Indexing

Robert MacAdam's collection in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*
(1858–1862) set an editorial template for the dialectal collections in
that he was the first to systematically arrange proverbs according to
themes such as 'Foresight, caution, thrift, prudence' and 'Procrasti-
nation' (Hughes 1998: 80, 100). This was a pioneering decision, and
one which inevitably places a burden of work on scholars, in terms
of the requirement to collect, register, and explain the proverbs (Tay-
lor 1975: 54). Nevertheless, Ó Muirgheasa (38 themes), Ó Siochfhrad-
ha (29 themes), and particularly Ó Máille (152 themes) followed the
methodology, composing their own thematic subject headings relat-
ing to their material. The thematic arrangement has obvious bene-
fits in that it enables the reader to easily access a wealth of proverbs
'relating' to the same subject domain by a simple search. Collectors
were aware of its limitations, nevertheless, and acknowledged that
some proverbs could be equally classified in a variety of thematic do-
mains. As Lauhakangas (2015: 52) has pointed out: "Thematic collec-
tions have different classifications according to the author's interests
or ways to interpret the material to be published." For example, in
*Seanfhocail na Mumhan* proverbs referring to 'man' are predominant-
ly grouped under the thematic heading *An Duine agus a Thréithe* 'The
Individual and His Traits'. However, some proverbs that also centre
on the personality and attributes of men appear instead under the
theme *Saibhreas agus Daibhreas* 'Wealth and Poverty', despite being
equally relevant to the first category. For example:

(5) *Ní coirtear fear na héadála.* (M§1360)

  'The man of profit does not tire.'

(6) *Ní gnáthach fear náireach éadálach* (M§1420)

  'It is not common for a shy man to be prosperous.'

(7) *Is mór an trua fear croí mhóir i mbaile gan airgead.* (M§1364)

  'It is a great pity to have a big-hearted man in a town without money.'

These examples underscore the fluidity of thematic categorization, as each proverb could reasonably be placed under either theme. The decision ultimately reflects Ó Siochfhradha's interpretive judgement, highlighting the inherently subjective nature of thematic classification. This relates to the fact that proverbs are context-dependent, their force is shaped by the specific communicative relationship between speaker and addressee. For this reason, it is difficult to assign fixed meanings to them outside of their situational use (see Arewa and Dundes 1964; Seitel 1969; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1973; Fabian 1990). Although thematic categories are a useful organizational tool, their boundaries frequently overlap, and repeating proverbs under multiple headings in printed collections offers limited practical value. This, of course, is not the case with modern digitized collections, which make it easier to trace and examine thematic overlaps.

Ó Máille (1948, 1952) adopts a thematic approach by organizing proverbs and their variants according to the alphabetical order of selected keywords, assigning each a numerical reference. This method of keyword-based classification, where the primary noun or subject of the proverb serves as the organizing anchor, has since become the preferred system among leading paremiographers. In major modern collections, keywords are also indexed in appendices to facilitate ease of reference. This approach is now standard across several internationally recognized compilations, including *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (Speake 2003), *A Dictionary of American Proverbs*

(Mieder et al. 1992), and *The Prentice-Hall Encyclopaedia of World Proverbs* (Mieder 1986). While Ó Máille's alphabetical system provides a functional and coherent structure, the lack of an internal cross-referencing mechanism limits its navigability. This limitation has been addressed in Donla uí Bhraonáin's 2010 edition, which significantly enhances the collection's accessibility and facilitates comparative analysis. From a comparative perspective, it is also worthwhile noting that Ó Máille includes references to other European languages, including English, French, and Scottish Gaelic, as well to material drawn from historic manuscripts.

While most thematic categories in the dialectal collections are organized around semantic fields, for instance, *Dóchas agus Foighne* 'Hope and Patience' in *Seanfhocail na Mumhan*, *Saibhreas agus Daibhreas* 'Wealth and Poverty' in *Seanfhocla Uladh*, or *Dia* 'God' in *Seanfhocail Chonnacht*, there is also evidence that functional considerations are taken into account, particularly by Ó Muirgheasa and Ó Siochfhradha. This is reflected in categories that emphasize functional or structural form rather than content alone, such as enumerative proverbs (*Trí Nithe* 'Three things' in Ó Muirgheasa), curses (*Mallachtaí* 'Curses' in Ó Siochfhradha), and comparative expressions (*Cosmhalóidí agus Comórtaisí* 'Similarities and Comparisons' also in Ó Siochfhradha).

## 6. Definition, Terminology, and Proverbial Subforms

Archer Taylor's magnum opus, *The Proverb* (1931), first identified the myriad difficulties in the collection and study of proverbs. At the heart of these difficulties was the issue of 'definition'. And Taylor's basic argument was there is no need for a detailed definition, as everyone knows what a proverb is and what it isn't.

> The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone. An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. (Taylor 1931: 2)

The issue of proverb definition has been a bone of contention for scholars since classical times, when the like of Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates contemplated the issue (Whiting 1932). Whiting (1932) is essential reading for any scholar attempting to trace these developments in classical times, but Villers (2024) now provides the most authoritative survey of how modern paremiologists have approached the problem, bringing together a wide range of contemporary definitions and the theoretical assumptions that underpin them.

It is not entirely unexpected, therefore, that the editors of the dialectal collections decided not to attempt their own definitions. Nor do they illustrate the characteristics of the proverbs or the classificatory criteria used for including material. In essence, they were merely echoing Taylor's idea that (Irish) speakers know what (Irish) proverbs are. This is what may be termed an *emic* approach to proverbial identification based on subjective assumption amongst language users within the culture. The *etic* approach, in contrast, uses transcultural analytical frameworks for proverb identification (cf. Dundes 1962). As a result, all the dialectal collections include a diverse array of traditional expressions, many of which do not qualify as true 'proverbs' in the strict sense. Alongside proverbs, we find proverbial phrases, similes, idioms, adages, aphorisms, and other figures of speech.

Closely related and, highly likely contributing, to this confusion is the issue of terminology. Terminological inconsistencies are found in all three dialectal collections. And what we now consider 'true' proverbs are referred to by a variety of terms with no differentiation. These include: *seanfhocail* 'old sayings, = proverbs', *seanráite* 'old sayings, aphorisms', *cainteanna* 'expressions', and the highly polysemic *natháin* 'pithy proverbial sayings, adages, aphorisms'. *Seanfhocal* is the official term for a proverb in Modern Irish (www.tearma.ie).

In his introduction to *Sean-fhocla Chonnacht*, Ó Máille, for one, is clearly aware of the fact that much of his material does not fall under the classification of *proverbs*, but he has included it regardless in the interest of linguistic and folkloristic inquiry:

> The large number of sayings I had to sift through is overwhelming, and there are many places where I had to say with certainty whether a particular saying was a correct proverb, but in the end I decided to include in the book every version, good or bad, that seemed to be a proverb if it could be of interest in terms of chasteness of speech, the meaning of the word, folklore, or otherwise. Therefore, there will be a good deal of sayings in the book that are not proverbs in the strict sense, but old sayings, superstitious sayings, 'proverbial' expressions, or in the odd place, what is really just an amusing word. (Ó Máille 1948: vii)[14]

Ó Máille equates *sean-rá* 'old saying' with *sean-fhocal* 'old word = proverb'. But as we can see, he also makes reference to other non-proverbs with terms such as *sean-chainteanna* 'old sayings' *ráidhte pisreoige* 'beliefs', *leaganacha (sean-fhoclacha) cainte* 'proverbial expressions', and *foca(i)l siamsa* 'amusing word(s)'. While this distinction implies nuanced semantic or functional differences, these distinctions are neither defined nor consistently applied within the body of his collection.

A similar terminological ambiguity is evident in Ó Siochfhradha's *Seanfhocail na Mumhan* (1926: iii), where three terms are used: *seanfhocail* 'proverbs', *seanráite* 'old sayings', and *seanchainteanna* 'old speech or sayings', the latter seemingly serving as an umbrella term. Yet, no explanation is offered to clarify whether these terms denote distinct genres or are used interchangeably. In contrast, Ó Muirgheasa appears somewhat more consistent. His 1907 introduction focuses primarily on *seanfhocail* 'proverbs', though he does at one point describe the material in English as a collection of "proverbs and sayings", suggesting an implicit distinction between the two. This

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14   '*Is áibhéil an mol mór cainteanna a bhí le scagadh agam, agus is iomaí áit a ndeachaigh orm a rá le cinnteacht ar sheanfhocal ceart aon insint áirithe, ach sa deireadh chinn mé gach uile leagan, olc nó maith, a raibh cuma seanrá air, a chur isteach sa leabhar dá bhféadfaí suim a chur ann ó thaobh snoiteacht cainte, ciall focail, béaloidis, nó eile. Dá bhrí sin, gheobhfar riar maith ráite sa leabhar nach seanfhocla sa dearbhchéill, ach seanchainteanna, ráite pisreoige, leaganacha (seanfhoclacha) cainte, nó i gcorráit níl ann ó cheart ach focal siamsa.*'

phrasing is echoed in the revised monolingual edition of 1936, which alternates between *seanfhocal* 'proverb' and *seanrá* 'old saying' again without elaboration. Almqvist (2000: 163) has noted that *seanráite* 'old sayings' encompasses a variety of expressive forms that may resemble proverbs but do not conform to the formal or functional criteria typically used in paremiological classification.

It appears, then, that the dialectal collections contain a range of traditional expressions that could more accurately be classified as proverbial subforms, as they differ structurally and functionally from canonical proverbs. These include: the proverbial phrase or expression, the proverbial comparison, the enumerative proverb, and the Wellerism (see Mac Coinnigh 2005). These subforms have been treated in various ways across the collections, largely due to the approach to arrangement adopted by the compilers. While these are examined in detail in the Chapter 2, it is useful to briefly consider their treatment in the collections now.

The principal distinction between a *proverbial expression* and a canonical proverb lies in its grammatical flexibility: whereas canonical proverbs are typically fixed, proverbial phrases allow for variation in person and tense. In each of the major dialectal collections, proverbial expressions appear alongside true proverbs, without any systematic differentiation. This lack of distinction is notable, particularly given that O'Rahilly (1922) explicitly outlined the structural and functional differences between the proverbs and proverbial phrases, and that Taylor (1931), in his seminal work *The Proverb*, offered a classification of such expressions. A clear distinction would have greatly facilitated scholarly engagement with the material. Of the three editors, only Ó Máille comments on the difference between proverbs and proverbial phrases/expressions. However, in his introduction, as we have already seen, he concedes that no distinction is made in the body of the text, as his objective was to compile "as complete a collection as possible" (Ó Máille 1948: ix).

*Proverbial comparisons* are not explicitly separated from proverbs or proverbial sayings in any of the major dialectal collections. None-

theless, both Ó Muirgheasa and Ó Siochfhradha appear to have recognized a structural or functional distinction, as evidenced by the specific categories under which they grouped these expressions. Ó Muirgheasa, for instance, classifies them under the heading *Ráidhte le céill samhalta* 'Expressions with comparative meaning' (1936: 113–132), while Ó Siochfhradha uses the title *Cosmhalóidí agus Comórtaisí* 'Similarities and Comparisons' (1926: 233). In contrast, Ó Máille does not isolate proverbial comparisons as a separate category but distributes them throughout his collection according to his alphabetically ordered keyword system.

*Wellerisms* are present across all the collections. Yet, of the editors, only Ó Siochfhradha (1926) seems to have recognized the Wellerism as a distinct subgenre, assigning it its own dedicated section titled *A ndubhairt siúd* 'As some say…', which draws attention to one of the defining features of the form, namely, the pairing of a quoted saying with a specified speaker. In his introduction, he remarks:

> Under this title are the Irish expressions that are placed in the mouths of certain people or non-human entities. Both the expression and the speaker are mentioned in the proverb. If the two were to be separated the proverb would be nonsensical. It appears that one illustrates the other, and together they paint a picture that is unsurpassed in terms of clarity and humour. (Ó Siochfhradha 1926: 99) [15]

By contrast, neither Ó Muirgheasa nor Ó Máille comment on Wellerisms, and neither do they treat them as a distinct category within their collections. Their thematic classification systems, which organise material by topic rather than by structural or stylistic features, are less suited to identifying Wellerisms as a distinct type. Still, their

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[15]   *'Fé'n dteideal so tá bailithe cainnteanna Gaedhilge a chuirtear i mbéalaibh daoine áirithe nó go gcuirtear a rádh i leith neithe eile seachas daoine. An chainnt adubharthas agus an té adubhairt í — luaidhtear iad araon sa tseanfhocal. Dá scartaí an chainnt agus an cainnteoir ní fhágfadh san aon bhrí sa tseanfhocal. Is amhlaidh a léirigheann ceann aca an ceann eile agus eatartha araon cuirid pictiúir os comhair an aigne ba dheacair a shárú ar shoiléire agus ar ghreann.'*

introductions contain no reference to the form at all. It can therefore be reasonably concluded that, while examples of Wellerisms may be present in their collections, they were not recognized or treated as a distinct proverbial subgenre.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

Though reflective of the scholarly practices and limitations of their time, the three major dialectal collections remain invaluable records of the proverbial repertoire as it existed among native Irish speakers in the early to mid twentieth century. With the benefit of hindsight—and in light of significant advances in both theoretical and technological domains—it is unsurprising that a presentist reading of the material may reveal certain methodological shortcomings. These include inconsistent documentation, limited source attribution, ambiguous terminology, and the lack of clear differentiation between proverbs and closely related forms.

Nonetheless, such critiques need to be understood in context. Paremiology has developed considerably since these collections were produced, gaining from more precise definitional frameworks and a sharper awareness of the formal variety found within proverbial expression. The interdisciplinary nature of proverb scholarship, drawing on anthropology, sociolinguistics, sociology, and related fields, has also introduced new perspectives that were simply not available to earlier collectors. Moreover, developments in digital technology have transformed the landscape of proverb studies. The open-access availability of major international collections via platforms such as Internet Archive (https://archive.org), the HathiTrust Digital Library (https://www.hathitrust.org), and Project Gutenberg (https://www.gutenberg.org) now allows for rapid cross-linguistic comparison across a wide range of languages, including minoritized languages such as Irish, at an unprecedented scale and speed. These tools, unimaginable to earlier collectors, have greatly expanded the scope and reach of comparative paremiological research.

Recent developments in digital humanities and corpus linguistics have also significantly advanced the study of Irish proverbs, enabling more systematic and data-driven analysis. Three major resources are of particular relevance to paremiological research:

### *Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann* 'National Folklore Collection, NFC'

https://www.ucd.ie/irishfolklore/en/

The National Folklore Collection (NFC) is currently undergoing large-scale digitization, with the aim of providing public online access and a sustainable data management framework for future expansion. Compiled by the Irish Folklore Commission and its successors, the Main Manuscript Collection is among the largest of its kind in Western Europe, encompassing approximately 700,000 pages of material collected from all thirty-two counties, in both Irish and English. Responding to concerns over language decline, the Commission placed a particular emphasis on recording the traditions of Irish-speaking informants. Of special significance to paremiologists is *Bailiúchán na Scol* 'The Schools' Collection', comprising roughly 740,000 pages of folklore and local tradition gathered between 1937 and 1939 by over 50,000 pupils from 5,000 primary schools across the Irish Free State. Children were tasked with collecting oral material, including proverbs, from parents, relatives, and neighbours, resulting in an unparalleled vernacular record of proverb usage and community memory.

### *Corpas Náisiúnta na Gaeilge* 'National Corpus of Irish'

https://www.corpas.ie/en/info/about-this-website/introducing-cng/

The *Corpas Náisiúnta na Gaeilge* (CNG) is a 100-million-word corpus of contemporary Irish (2000–2024), incorporating both written and spoken data from a wide range of genres, registers, and dialects. Carefully balanced to ensure representative coverage, the corpus supports a wide array of linguistic research, including studies in phraseology,

syntax, translation, and language technology. Its search and analysis tools enable users to explore frequency, collocation, and grammatical patterning, making it a valuable resource for identifying proverbial forms and their syntactic environments in modern usage.

### *Foclóir Stairiúil na Gaeilge* 'Historical Dictionary of Irish'

https://www.ria.ie/research-programmes/focloir-stairiuil-na-gaeilge/about-the-historical-dictionary-of-irish/

The *Foclóir Stairiúil na Gaeilge* is a major state-supported initiative to produce a comprehensive historical dictionary of the Irish language, covering the period from *c.*1600 to the present. Building on prior lexicographical work in Old and Middle Irish, the project is corpus-based and diachronic in scope, drawing on a broad range of spoken and written sources. It facilitates the tracing of lexical development and usage across time and domains, and holds considerable potential for diachronic paremiological research, particularly in the identification of lexical and structural change within proverbial expressions.

Looking ahead, there is a compelling case for the development of a national, open-access digital repository of Irish proverbs. Such a project would serve not only to consolidate material from the major twentieth-century dialectal collections into a single searchable platform, but also to incorporate additional sources, ranging from journals and dictionaries to literary texts, that have thus far remained dispersed and difficult to access. Beyond preservation, the initiative would allow for the consistent classification of proverbs according to internationally recognized paremiological standards, addressing long-standing issues of typology and categorization.

Advances in digital infrastructure now make it possible to design agile, modular systems that can be regularly updated, expanded, and curated, capabilities that were unavailable to earlier generations of collectors. Integrating this resource with existing platforms would further enhance its value: *Foclóir Stairiúil na Gaeilge* could supply

historical lexical evidence, while *Corpas Náisiúnta na Gaeilge* could illuminate patterns of contemporary usage. The goal would be to establish a dynamic and evolving resource, one that recontextualizes historical material while simultaneously capturing the living presence of proverbial expression in modern Irish.

# CHAPTER 2
# PROVERBIAL SUBFORMS

## 1. Introduction

This chapter examines the principal subforms that appear alongside so-called 'true' proverbs in the Irish dialectal collections, with particular attention to proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, Wellerisms, enumerative forms (such as triads and tetrads), and proverbial questions. It addresses the methodological challenges faced by collectors, who often subsumed structurally diverse items under the broad label of 'proverb'. Drawing on examples from the the three dialectal corpora and informed by recent advances in paremiological classification, this chapter then identifies the defining features in terms of form and function of each subform. In doing so, it disentangles previously conflated categories and proposes a revised framework for the collection, categorization, and analysis of Irish proverbial material.

## 2. The Proverbial Expression

A proverbial expression is a figurative phrase with currency, typically lacking the fixed syntactic form of a true proverb. This grammatical flexibility is the most significant distinction between a proverbial expression and a proverb. Unlike proverbs, which are grammatically complete and tend to resist variation, proverbial expressions are adaptable in person and tense and are often embedded within larger sentences. Although Taylor does not dwell extensively on the formal characteristics of proverbial phrases in *The Proverb*, preferring to focus on their history, dissemination, origin, and meaning, he clearly identifies this essential difference:

> The proverbial phrase exhibits the characteristic rigidity of the proverb in all particulars except grammatical form. A proverb does not vary in any regard, while a proverbial phrase shifts according to time and person. (Taylor 1931: 184)

Scholars such as Barley (1972: 742), Norrick (2014: 8), and Mieder (1994: 13) generally agree that, while proverbs are sentential, proverbial phrases are incomplete utterances and should be treated as a subgenre. As Norrick (2014: 8) observes, "Its ability to constitute a complete utterance distinguishes the proverb proper from another traditional, characteristically figurative form, the proverbial phrase, which cannot stand on its own, for example, *to kick over the traces*, which lacks a subject." Mieder (1994: 13) concurs, noting that proverbial phrases are typically verbal phrases, offering examples such as *to throw the book at someone*, *to cry over spilled milk*, *to blow one's own horn*, *to be a tempest in a teacup*, and *to look for a needle in a haystack*. The term 'idiom' is often applied to proverbial expressions like these that function metaphorically. Mieder (1994: 13) further identifies other subgenres, namely proverbial comparisons and twin (binary) formulae, which presumably hold equivalent status to proverbial expressions. However, other scholars, such as Norrick (2014: 8), classify proverbial comparisons as a specialized type of proverbial expression.

In Irish, O'Rahilly (1922: 125) notes that earlier Irish literature makes no clear distinction between proverbs and proverbial phrases; the terms *derbárusc* (eDIL s.v. *derbárosc*, apophthegm, adage, proverb) *senbriathar*, and *seanfhocal* (eDIL s.v. *senfocul*, an old saying, a proverb) were used interchangeably. Nonetheless, he recognizes a practical distinction based on sentential form. Proverbial phrases are described as "stock phrases, that is to say, expressions (usually metaphorical) which are constantly used with reference to a given set of circumstances … in English we may call them 'proverbial phrases'" (O'Rahilly 1922: 125). In his *Miscellany of Irish Proverbs* (1922), he identifies proverbial phrases appearing both in sentential form, i.e. grammatically complete with verbs (No. 1), and as comparisons (No. 2), and noun phrases (No. 3), both with and without verbs.

(1) *Tá mo phort seinnte.*

'My tune is played.' (= I am finished)

(2) *chomh marbh le hart.*

'As dead as a stone.' (= as dead as a doornail)

(3) *Asachán an chiotail leis an gcorcán.*

'The kettle's reproach to the pot.' (= the pot calling the kettle black)

It is, of course, not uncommon for well-established proverbs to appear in abbreviated form. Naciscione (2010: 251) notes that the *base form* of a proverb, that is, the version stored in the long-term memory of the language user, may surface in discourse either as a core use (identical to the base form) or in an *instantial stylistic use,* where unique modifications in form and meaning occur. With sufficient usage, such abbreviated or adapted forms may develop into proverbial expressions. For example, Elisabeth Piirainen (2012: 41) has shown that the original proverb *It is an ill bird that fouls its own nest* survives in only a few European languages, while the proverbial expression *to foul/befoul one's own nest* is attested in more than twenty languages. A further issue concerning proverbial expressions is their susceptibility to obsolescence. An expression often fall out of use once its original context has been forgotten or when its meaning ceases to be relevant to the linguistic community.

## 3. Proverbial Expressions

In general, none of the editors has attempted to differentiate proverbs and proverbial expressions in their collections. Ó Máille is the only one of the three editors who alludes to an understanding of typological issues, but admits that they were not considered as he wished to make the collection as complete as possible:

> Therefore, you will find a good deal of sayings in the book that are not old words in the strict sense, but old sayings, superstitious sayings, proverbial expressions, or in the odd instance they are really just words of entertainment. (Ó Máille 1948: xix)[1]

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[1]     '*Dá bhrí sin, gheobhfar riar maith ráite sa leabhar nach seanfhocla sa dearbhchéill, ach seanchainteanna, ráite pisreoige, leaganacha (seanfhoclacha) cainte, nó i gcorráit níl ann ó cheart ach focal siamsa.*'

While an inclusive approach to collection yielded a broader corpus of proverbial material, the absence of formal differentiation between true proverbs and related expressions resulted in a lack of structural coherence within the dialectal collections. Sentential forms are frequently intermixed with idiomatic fragments, metaphorical noun phrases, and progressive verbal constructions, obscuring the boundaries between distinct types. Nonetheless, a closer examination reveals that these proverbial expressions may be grouped into a number of broad structural categories, which will be outlined in the sections that follow.

### 3.1. Verbal Phrases

Verbal phrases, sometimes referred to as action-based expressions, consist of verbs or verb-like constructions that convey figurative or metaphorical actions. Examples include *to let the cat out of the bag, to nail the hide to the barn door,* and *to beat one's head against a brick wall* (Kuusi 1974: 901). In the dialectal collections, verbal phrases are arranged in two principal ways: Progressive constructions (*ag* 'at' + verbal noun) without an explicit subject, and fully grammatical sentences as an exemplar to illustrate usage (typically employing the third-person singular masculine pronoun (*sé*) with the proverbial expression). Examples include:

**Progressive constructions (*ag* 'at' + verbal noun) without an explicit subject:**

    (4)   *an t-uan ag múineadh méilí dá mháthair.* (M§2169)
           'the lamb teaching her mother how to bleat.' (= giving advice to someone who knows better)

    (5)   *ag cur cosa maide faoi na cearca.* (C§2203)
           'putting wooden feet under the hens.' (= exaggerating)

(6) *ag sodar i ndiaidh na huaisle is i gcónaí ar deireadh.* (U§558)
'trotting after the gentry and always last.' (= toadying to the powerful but never catching up)

(7) *ag strócadh saic le mála a dhéanamh.* (U§868)
'tearing a sack (in order) to make a bag.' (= spoiling one thing to make another)

**Fully grammatical sentences as an exemplar to illustrate usage:**

(8) *Dhéanfadh sé cat is dhá eireaball.* (U§565)
'He would make a cat with two tails.'

(9) *Ghoidfeadh sé an chros den asal.* (U§1772)
'He would steal the cross from the donkey.'

(10) *D'aireodh sé an féar ag fás.* (M§222)
'He would hear the grass growing.'

(11) *Chuirfeadh sé an dubh ina gheal ort.* (M§598)
'He would persuade you that black is white.'

Although in the second category these base forms are formally complete sentences, like proverbs, it is important to understand that they function primarily as exemplars of usage rather than as fixed sentential proverbs. Like other proverbial expressions, they can be adapted according to subject and tense. They should, therefore, be reduced to phrase-level expressions and categorized alongside comparable material. For example, the expression *Tá sé chomh daor le him na Fraince* (U§1250) 'It is as dear as French butter', when stripped of the subject and tense, yields the proverbial comparison *chomh daor le him na*

*Fraince* 'as dear as French butter' and thus properly belongs within the category of proverbial comparisons.

### 3.2. Nominal Phrases (Noun-Based)

Nominal phrases represent some of the simplest sentence-integrated phrase structures. Kuusi's classification (1974: 897) subdivides these into genitive constructions (e.g. *crocodile's tears, Achilles' heel, the root of all evil*) and adjectival noun phrases (e.g. *hard luck, naked truth, whole heart*). Both types are well attested in the Irish material. Irish nominal constructions often involve the genitive case and frequently feature a personal name. These personal names are sometimes recognizable from literary sources, e.g. the Fenian cycle tale of *Oisín i dTír na nÓg* 'Oisín in the Land of Eternal Youth' in No. 15. Other nominal phrases are expanded with prepositional or adverbial modifiers. Examples include:

(12)  *Gal soip.* (M§1827)
       'Smoke from a wisp of straw.' (= a transitory thing)

(13)  *Tart Fhéilim.* (M§504)
       'Féilim's thirst.' (= unquenchable thirst)

(14)  *Éisteacht na muice bradaí.* (M§220)
       'The hearing of a thieving pig.' (= keen hearing)

(15)  *Oisín i ndiaidh na Féinne.* (M§1605)
       'Oisín after the Fianna.' (= all alone in the world)

### 3.3. Prepositional Phrases

Prepositional phrases in the dialectal collections typically begin with a preposition and express metaphorical relationships of time, place, manner and particularly condition. Figurative meanings are often

conveyed through spatial or circumstantial imagery. Examples include:

(16)  *ar mhuin na muice.* (M§1567)
      'on the pig's back.' (= in luck)

(17)  *faoi bhois cait.* (SM2123)
      'under a cat's hand.' (= trapped, in trouble)

(18)  *i ngalar na gcás* (M§1527)
      'in disease of the concerns.' (= in a quandary)

(19)   *idir dhá thine Bhealtaine.* (M§1525)
      'between two May fires.' (= to be in a dilemma)

Many are metaphorical in nature, embedding cultural associations within seemingly simple descriptions. For example, in No. 19, the phrase *'between two May fires'* alludes to the traditional Irish custom once observed on May Day in which cattle were driven through the divided embers of bonfires as a ritual to ensure their health for the coming year (Doyle 2005). The spatial image of being positioned between two fires, metaphorically captures the sense of being caught in an impossible situation or dilemma. Similarly, Nos. 16 and 17 employ animal imagery within prepositional constructions to evoke contrasting fortunes: riding high on a pig's back (positive) versus being trapped under a cat's paw (negative).

## 3.4. Adverbial Phrases

Adverbial phrases act as adverbial modifiers, typically describing how, when, or to what extent an action occurs. In Irish such phrases often rely on metaphorical or hyperbolic imagery to convey their meanings. Examples include:

(20) *go héag na n-éag.* (U§1705)
'till the death of deaths.' (= forever)

(21) *mar a bheadh púca ar sheanteach.* (C§2373)
'like a ghost in an old house.' (= very quickly)

(22) *faoi mar a chacfadh an t-asal é.* (M§2533)
'as a donkey would defecate it.' (= perfectly)

(23) *ar ais nó ar éigean.* (M§1266)
'backwards or with difficulty.' (= at all costs)

## 3.5. Paratactic Expressions and Twin Formulae

The collections also feature paratactic expressions, often realized as twin formulae. These expressions are syntactically notable for their parallel structure and frequently exhibit additional stylistic features such as alliteration, antithesis, and balanced rhythm. Examples include:

(24) *Gan Murchadh gan Maonas* (M§1405)
'Without Murchadh without Maonas.' (= to fall between two stools, to fail through vacillation)

(25) *Béal druidte, ceann críonna.* (M§421)
'Closed mouth, wise head.' (= least said, soonest mended)

(26) *Fómhar féarmhar, Earrach éagmhar.* (C§142)
'Grassy Autumn, fatal Spring.' (= a good Autumn makes for a lean Spring)

## 4. The Proverbial Comparison

Proverbial comparisons remain one of the most common figurative forms in paremiology, although they occupy only a short section of Archer Taylor's *The Proverb* (1962: 220–223).[2] Taylor acknowledges that they may offer "fewer opportunities for study than the proverb". We can regard the proverbial comparison as a subform of the proverb because it lacks a fixed syntactic structure. Like the proverbial expression in its structure and function, it possesses a quasi-fixed form that allows speakers to apply it across different tenses and adapt it to various subjects depending on the context.

In English, this form is usually referred to as a *simile,* though the terminology varies across disciplines. Scholars have employed terms such as *folk simile* (Hendricks 1960: 245–262), *stock simile* (Norrick 1986b: 39–52), *idiomatic simile* (Carter 1998: 67), *familiar simile* (Fernando 1996: 19), *frozen simile* (McCarthy 1998: 131), and *stereotyped simile* (Moon 1998: 150–152), among others. In Phraseology, the term *fixed simile* is the most used.

Certain syntactic templates are characteristic of fixed similes. As Wikberg (2008: 128) notes "A simile can be defined as a figurative expression used to make an explicit comparison of two unlike things by means of the prepositions *like, (as)...as* or the conjunctions as, as if, and *as though.*" The most common structure follows the general simile frame and appears as *(as)* + Adj + *as* + NP (or the corresponding structure *chomh* + Adj + *le* + NP in Irish). In English, the initial *as* is optional and may be omitted without affecting the grammaticality of the expression. For example, *as deaf as a bat* may occur in either of the following without any change in meaning: (a) *Jack is **as** deaf as a bat,* and (b) *Jack is deaf as a bat.* In Irish, however, the *as* element (*chomh*) and the preposition *le* 'like' are both obligatory; omission results in an ungrammatical sentence. For instance, *Tá Seán chomh*

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[2]     Although this contribution is brief, Taylor published substantial work on proverbial comparisons throughout the mid- to late 1950s (see Taylor 1954, 1956, 1957 and 1958).

*bodhar le slis* (lit. 'Seán is as deaf as a block') is grammatical, whereas *Tá Seán bodhar le slis* ('Seán is deaf with a block') is not.

Other common syntactic frames for proverbial comparisons across languages include: *Inf + conj 'like'* + NP (e.g. *to leave like a streak of lightning*); *not worth* + NP (e.g. *it is not worth a pin*), and *as* Adj *as* VP (e.g. *as sure as there is a sun in the sky*) (cf. Harris and Mieder 1994: 83). Irish proverbial comparisons exhibit several distinct syntactic structures, many of which have analogues in other languages. Common categories are shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Common formulae for comparisons

| Formula | Structure | Example |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | *chomh* X *le* Y | *chomh searbh leis an bhfírinne* 'as bitter as the truth' (C§3173) |
| 2 | *mar a bheadh* X *ann* | *mar a bheadh púca ar sheanteach* (C§2373) 'like a ghost in an old house' |
| 3 | *ar nós* Y | *ar nós na beiche* 'like the bee' FGB s.v. *beach* |
| 4 | *ní fiú* X *é* | *ní fiú an salann sa phraiseach é* 'it is not worth the salt in the porridge' (M§1550) |
| 5 | *is/ní* [superl. Adj] X *ná* Y | *Is buaine clú ná saol* 'Fame is more lasting than life' (U§296) |

It is worth noting that proverbs containing a clear comparative element, as seen in Formula 5, are occasionally misclassified as *similes*. This is misleading, as similes are not typically fixed, fully sentential forms. As we have seen, comparisons of this kind are flexible and can be varied according to person, tense, and mood. Of all these types, the *as*-simile frame is the most common in Irish (Mac Coinnigh 2017).

Moon (2008: 33) characterizes the *as*-simile frame as "an institutionalized syntagmatic structure … [whose] realizations are not problematic to decode". This framework encompasses two distinct types of comparison: (1) literal or equative comparisons, which permit unlimited combinations of vehicle and ground, and (2) proverbial comparisons, in which the vehicle noun is conventionally fixed to

a specific ground adjective. Despite this semantic distinction, both types conform to a quadripartite syntactic structure:

1. **Topic (T = NP):** the entity being compared (also known as the *comparandum*)
2. **Vehicle (V = NP):** the entity to which the topic is compared (*comparans*)
3. **Ground (G = Adj):** the shared feature or quality forming the basis of the analogy (*tertium comparationis*)
4. **Comparison Marker (M):** the explicit linguistic element that signals the comparison

In Irish, the standard comparison marker is *chomh* + Adj + *le* + NP. This can be schematically illustrated as follows:

> *Tá an oíche chomh dubh le pic* 'The night is as black as pitch'
>
> → [T = an oíche] [M = chomh … le] [V = pic] [G = dubh]

While regular equative comparisons allow unlimited variation through substitution of adjectives and vehicles, proverbial comparisons are prefabricated and conventionalized. Their components, particularly the adjective (G) and vehicle (V), are fixed, permitting only minimal variation. In cases involving polysemous adjectives, a single meaning often becomes dominant within the proverbial context. For example, the adjective *glas* (FGB s.v. *glas)* has a wide range of meanings, which can be classified as follows:

**glas[4], a[1].**

1. Green; also: young and fresh, unripe; immature, unseasoned; raw, inexperienced; unwrought; weak in sustenance; pale, sickly-hued
2. Grey; also: (of eyes) grey-blue, light blue; (of metal) lustrous, bright, steely; (of atmosphere) dismal, raw, chilly
3. *Lit*: Blue

Despite this semantic breadth, the proverbial comparisons in Irish, for the most part, activate the *colour = green* sense of *glas*. This demonstrates how the conventionalized pairing of ground adjective and vehicle noun disambiguates polysemous terms. For example:

(27) *chomh glas le cuileann caoin na coille.* (C§4305)
    'as green as the smooth holly of the wood.'

(28) *chomh glas le féar faoi Bhealtaine.* (C§1943)
    'as green as grass in Maytime.'

(29) *chomh glas le geamhar.* (M§2459)
    'as green as springing corn.'

The selection of both ground and vehicle in proverbial comparisons is not arbitrary but motivated by specific perceptual, cultural, or stereotypical associations. These motivations fall into three broad categories.

First, comparisons based on *physical or sensory attributes* select vehicles that possess observable or tangible qualities linked to characteristics such as speed, shape, strength, or colour. In *chomh hard le caisleán* (C§4900) 'as high as a castle', castle functions as the archetypal standard for highness, while *chomh crua le cloch* (C§3070) 'as hard as stone' invokes the widely recognized hardness of stone. Second, comparisons grounded in *character or personality traits* attribute qualities to entities within particular cultural frameworks. The comparison *chomh foighdeach le cat* (U§1299) 'as patient as a cat', for instance, presupposes a cultural perception of cats as patient creatures—a view not universally shared across cultures. Third, comparisons drawing on *cultural knowledge and stereotypes* derive from culturally embedded associations related to institutions, professions, or regional identifiers. The phrase *chomh ramhar le ministir* 'as fat as a minister' (M§2494) mobilizes traditional perceptions of the Protestant clergy in Irish society as enjoying comfortable circumstances (see Chapter 5).

Such patterns demonstrate that Irish proverbial comparisons are anchored in shared cultural frameworks, ensuring that meanings remain both recognizable and resonant for members of the speech community. In practice, however, these categories are not discrete, and many comparisons select vehicles that function on multiple levels, combining, for example, observable physical qualities with culturally specific connotations.

## 4.1. Function

A comparison primarily serves two functions: it either intensifies an adjectival quality through reference to a well-known exemplar, or, when used ironically, produces amusement through an incongruous or unexpected pairing. In its emphatic use, the element being compared (the topic) is typically less immediately recognizable than the element to which it is compared (the vehicle). The association with a more familiar or culturally salient referent serves to clarify and reinforce the quality being attributed to the topic.

At the surface level, proverbial comparisons highlight the relationship between the ground (G) and the vehicle (V). Yet, as Moon (1998) notes, the vehicle often serves not simply as a referent but as a culturally or perceptually prototypical exemplar of the adjectival quality being expressed. In the phrase *chomh bán le sneachta* 'as white as snow' (M§2384), for example, *sneachta* 'snow' functions as an archetypal instance of whiteness, its defining visual attribute being immediately apparent and recognizable. Similarly, *chomh hard le Cnoc Dabhach* 'as high as Knockduff' (C§477) evokes a culturally specific geographical landmark in County Galway, leveraging local knowledge to emphasize height. In these cases, the structure functions as a kind of periphrastic superlative, amplifying the base adjective (*bán* 'white', *ard* 'high') by anchoring it to a referent that is both semantically and culturally resonant.

In contrast, the humorous function of comparison deliberately subverts these conventions by introducing incongruous vehicles that

create a "salience imbalance" (Ortony 1979b: 162) with the adjectival ground. This occurs when the chosen vehicle lacks the expected defining characteristic, disrupting the conventional interpretive pattern. For example, in the English expression *as useful as a chocolate teapot* (Dean 2011: 57–59), the adjective *useful* is contradicted by the vehicle *chocolate teapot*, an object which, due to its physical properties, is entirely unsuited to its supposed function. Here, the humour arises from the deliberate mismatch between expected and actual meanings: the form follows the conventional simile form, but the semantic content subverts it. This disruption of the usual interpretive logic creates irony and humour, relying on the listener's familiarity with the simile form and function to recognize the deviation (Mac Coinnigh 2017: 216).

As proverbial comparisons become fully conventionalized, speakers no longer actively process the semantic relationship between ground and vehicle; recognition of the conventional structure triggers automatic interpretation. Comparisons employing archaic, obscure, or localized vehicles illustrate this process clearly. In *chomh bodhar le bráthair Árláir* 'as deaf as the brother of Arlar' (C§2263) and *chomh bog le garraí Bháitéir* 'as soft as Báitéir's garden' (C§2264) the precise identity of these figures or locations may elude even contemporary speakers, yet the comparisons remain intelligible through their established status as conventional exemplars. Expressions drawing on semi-legendary or proverbial characters function similarly. For instance, *chomh críonna leis an gCeannaí Fionn* 'as wise as the fair-haired merchant' (C§105) evokes the stock figure of a shrewd sea-merchant from Irish folklore,[3] and *chomh dona le Clann Aindriú na maol* 'as bad as the bald-headed clan of Andrew' (C§2288) references a Mayo family long embedded in local caricature.[4] Meaning is preserved through recognition of conventionalized forms whose interpretation relies on shared usage patterns within the speech community.

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[3]    https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921624/4885923/5153605
[4]    https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4427986/4364170/4467632

While Arora (1977: 2) notes that some have dismissed such pro-verbial comparisons as "time-worn clichés whose impact is little more than that of the adjective alone", their persistence suggests otherwise. Proverbial comparisons remain active in discourse, add-ing stylistic nuance and socio-cultural resonance. Their use marks shared cultural knowledge and linguistic competence, locating speakers within the community's expressive conventions. Mastery of such forms is key to what G.L. Permiakov (1973, 1982, 1989) calls the "paremiological minimum": the core repertoire of proverbial and phraseological knowledge needed to participate fully in a linguistic culture.

## 4.2. Humorous Function

As we have seen in Section 4.1, humour in proverbial comparisons emerges when the vehicle disrupts conventional expectations, creat-ing a form of expectation violation (Norrick 1987a). Unlike conven-tional comparisons, where the vehicle reinforces and clarifies the *ground*, humorous comparisons obscure or complicate interpreta-tion through incongruity, exaggeration, irony, or semantic ambigui-ty. There are several recurring strategies in Irish humorous proverbi-al comparisons: whimsical vehicles, hyperbole, and punning.

***Whimsical comparisons*** employ absurd or implausible vehicles that generate humour through incongruous or farcical imagery. These expressions rely on a form of schema conflict (Norrick 1986a), wherein the anticipated use or function of an object is contradict-ed by its unlikely pairing with another. In *chomh ciotach le muc ag dul suas dréimire* 'as awkward as a pig going up a ladder' (C§3876), the humour arises from the contradiction between the pig's physical limitations and the activity of climbing, an action entirely outside its behavioural schema. The result is cognitively deviant, producing an image of farcical awkwardness. Similarly, *chomh ríméadach le cat a mbeadh bróga air* 'as proud as a cat wearing shoes' (C§1379) and *chomh postúil le cat a mbeadh póca air* 'as conceited as a cat with a purse/pouch' (C§1378) anthropomorphize cats with human accessories (see

the European folktale *Puss in Boots*). The humour depends on the incompatibility of *bróga* 'shoes' and *póca* 'a purse/pouch' with feline anatomy and behaviour, creating schema conflict (Norrick 1986a: 229–230) while reinforcing cultural associations of feline vanity. In *chomh sona leis an té a chodail le muc* 'as happy as the person who slept with a pig' (C§3880), the incongruity reverses normative expectations about comfort and hygiene, framing degradation as joy.

*Hyperbolic comparisons* create humour by intensifying description to an exaggerated or grotesque degree. These expressions rely on excess rather than subtlety, pushing familiar qualities beyond realistic bounds. In *chomh dorcha le tóin an phúca* 'as dark as  a pooka's (=hobgoblin's) backside' (M§2430), the vehicle combines myth and crude imagery to render darkness both uncanny and comical. *Chomh bréan le corp as an uaigh* 'as rotten as a corpse from the grave' (M§2397) evokes decay with macabre vividness, while *chomh ramhar le poll mo thóna* 'as fat as the hole of my backside' (M§2495) uses crude exaggeration to heighten comic effect. In each case, the humour lies in the extreme mismatch between the quality described and the absurdity of the comparison. The more disproportionate the vehicle, the greater the rhetorical and comic impact.

*Punning comparisons* derive their humour from semantic ambiguity, typically through the double application of the ground adjective, where one is literal and the other figurative. While explicit puns are rare in Irish, conventionalized examples illustrate this mechanism. In *chomh cam le cos deiridh an mhadra* 'as crooked [= dishonest] as a dog's hind leg' (C§3565), the term *cam* simultaneously suggests physical distortion and moral deviation. The humour lies in the interpretive doubling, where literal description becomes a vehicle for social evaluation.

*Ironic comparisons* arise when the vehicle contradicts the adjectival ground. Conventional comparisons reinforce meaning through illustrative analogy; ironic forms generate humour by subverting expectation. In English, the template *as useful as a X* illustrates this mechanism, with options for the X slot including *chocolate teapot*, *ashtray*

*on a motorbike*, or *deckchair on a submarine*. Such expressions appear only rarely in the Irish corpus, suggesting that irony is a modern development rather than a traditional feature of the genre. Ironic comparisons likely represent a parallel phenomenon to *antisprichwörten* 'anti-proverbs' and Wellerisms, as reflexive, playful reconfigurations of established proverbial forms. The publication dates of the main dialectal collections (1907–1952) support this interpretation, as they largely predate more recent reformulations of comparisons.

### 4.3. The Ground [tertium comparationis]

Clear patterns emerge in the selection of adjectives functioning as the *ground*, the quality shared between the topic and vehicle. These patterns reflect cognitive, linguistic and prosodic tendencies. Irish comparison in the dialectal collections contain 206 distinct adjectives in the ground position, revealing both clustering around a narrow set of adjectives and broad lexical distribution (Mac Coinnigh 2017). The most frequently occurring adjectives denote easily perceived physical attributes: *dubh* 'black', *geal* 'bright, white', *fada* 'long', *díreach* 'straight', and *géar* 'sharp'. This emphasis on directly observable qualities aligns with English-language findings studies (Taylor 1954; Norrick 1987b), where high-frequency adjectives like 'black' and 'bright' also denote visible attributes. Norrick (1987b: 146) suggests that similes operate through analogue rather than digital expression, relying on holistic prototypes that exemplifies a quality rather than discrete, analysable attributes. Adjectives like *dubh* 'black' or *géar* 'sharp' are more effectively communicated through vivid exemplars than formal definitions.

Phonological simplicity also influences adjective selection. High-frequency adjectives tend to be short and phonetically simple, accounting for over half (52 per cent) of Irish comparisons (Mac Coinnigh 2017). While monosyllabic adjectives like *dubh* 'black', *geal* 'bright', and *gear* 'sharp', dominate, polysyllabic adjectives such as *ceanndána* 'headstrong' or *ciallmhar* 'sensible' occur less commonly. This inverse relationship between syllable length and frequency mir-

rors English patterns, where monosyllabic adjectives account for 72 per cent of comparative constructions (Andersson 1971: 224).

## 4.4. The Vehicle [comparans]

The breadth of the vehicle inventory is striking: most vehicles are unique, with terms like *aingeal* 'angel' or *díle* 'flood' appearing only once (Mac Coinnigh 2017). This wide distribution contrasts with what might be expected in fixed or semi-fixed expressions and points to the productivity of the comparative structure in accommodating culturally resonant or context-specific referents. Conventionalization does not depend on a limited set of familiar vehicles, but rather on the associative strength between the vehicle and quality. Frequently occurring vehicles reflect culturally salient prototypes, e.g. animals, natural elements, or common everyday objects, that readily embody the ground adjective and support memorability.

Phonological features also merit attenion. Rhyme does not feature in Irish comparisons, aligning with observations from Spanish comparative studies where rhyme is similarly scarce (Rodríguez Marín 1899; Enet 1957; Arora 1966). However, alliteration appears in approximately 8.9 per cent of examples, contributing modestly to the stylistic shaping of proverbial comparisons (Mac Coinnigh 2017). Examples such as *chomh **b**uí le **b**uachalán* 'as yellow as ragwort' and *chomh **m**ilis le **m**il* 'as sweet as honey' illustrate how alliteration enhances rhythmic and mnemonic appeal. Though not structurally necessary, such phonological patterning reflects a sensitivity to sound that aligns with the oral and performative functions of proverbs.

The selection of vehicles thus reflects clear cognitive and cultural patterns. While previous research has emphasized the lexical diversity, closer analysis reveals underlying regularities that illuminate the figurative habits of Irish-speaking communities. The most frequent categories include human beings (e.g. *child*, *idiot*), animals (e.g. *bear*, *salmon*, *snake*), tools and instruments (e.g. *bullet*, *arrow*), and vegetation (e.g. *grass*, *flower*). Vehicle frequency according to category, as outlined by Mac Coinnigh (2017: 221–222), is shown in Table 2.2:

Table 2.2. Frequency of vehicles by category

| Vehicle Category (Example) | Rank | n | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Nature, elementary phenomena (fire, air) | 1 | 90 | 15.4% |
| Domesticated animals (cat, dog) | 2 | 77 | 13.2% |
| Human beings (child, idiot) | 3 | 74 | 12.6% |
| Animals, fish, reptiles, rodents (bear, salmon, snake) | 4 | 69 | 11.8% |
| Tools, instruments (bullet, arrow) | 5 | 60 | 10.3% |
| Vegetables (grass, flower) | 6 | 52 | 8.9% |
| Food, domestic appliances (bread, sieve) | 7 | 30 | 5.1% |
| Wild birds (raven, eagle) | 8 | 22 | 3.8% |
| Irish mythology (Fionn mac Cumhaill, Goll mac Moirne) | 9 | 20 | 3.4% |
| Church life, religious and other beliefs (hell, angels) | 10 | 19 | 3.2% |
| Insects (bee, spider) | 11 | 18 | 3.1% |
| Domesticated birds (chicken, hen) | 12 | 13 | 2.2% |
| Materials and their qualities (iron, steel) | 13 | 13 | 2.2% |
| Time, calendar customs (Sunday, April) | 14 | 10 | 1.7% |
| House and habitation (house, castle) | 15 | 10 | 1.7% |
| Abstract concepts (death, truth) | 16 | 8 | 1.4% |
| TOTAL | | 585 | 100% |

## 4.5. Natural World and Physical Prototypes

The most prominent group of vehicles is drawn from the natural world, reflecting a cross-linguistic pattern where perceptual salience favours natural elements as figurative baselines (Piirainen 2012). Earth-related vehicles include *chomh íseal leis an dtalamh* 'as low as the ground' (M§2465), *chomh bán le cailc* 'as white as chalk' (M§2384), and *chomh dubh le gual* 'as black as coal' (M§2431). Water provides powerful imagery in *chomh fliuch leis an bhfarraige* 'as wet as the sea' (M§2443), *chomh ciúin le loch* 'as quiet as a lough' (M§2409) and *chomh goirt le sáile* 'as salty as seawater' (M§2462). Weather-based vehicles exploit environmental conditions: *chomh corrthónach leis an ngaoth Mhárta* 'as restless as the March wind' (S§2421), *chomh fuar le sneachta* 'as cold as snow' (M§2449), and *chomh geal leis an ngréin* 'as bright as the sun' (M §2451). Fire-based comparisons, though less common, provide potent imagery, as in *chomh te le tinte Ifrinn* 'as hot as the fires of Hell' (M§2509) and *chomh dearg leis an dtine* 'as red as the fire' (M§2423).

Animals are particularly frequent. Cats, dogs, pigs, and foxes dominate comparisons, with slight cultural variations: in Irish, the cat slightly outranks the dog, a reversal of English norms (Taylor 1954). Physical traits are linked to these animals, e.g. *chomh mín le cat* 'as smooth as a cat' (M§2485), *chomh ramhar le muic* 'as fat as a pig' (M§2494), while behavioural traits like cunning and stubbornness are culturally entrenched, e.g. *chomh glic leis an sionnach* 'as sly as a fox' (C§306). Tools and instruments share a tendency towards literal, observable attributes. Comparisons like e.g., *chomh díreach le bairille gunna* 'as straight as a gun barrel' (M§2427) and *chomh cruaidh leis an bhac* 'as hard as the hob' (U§1287), exemplify how functional properties inform metaphorical use, with physical clarity ensuring cognitive accessibility. Vegetation and food similarly rely on visually or texturally salient properties: greenness in *chomh glas le féar* 'as green as grass'(C§1943), redness in *chomh dearg leis an rós* 'as red as the rose' (M§2423), and softness in *chomh bog le him* 'as soft as butter' (M§2395). Vehicle selection reflects Irish rural life, with few exotic or non-native references reinforcing the cultural embeddedness.

## 4.6. Cultural and Social Types

Human beings serve as another major source of vehicles, classified by gender, age, occupation, or name. Notably, there is minimal evidence of gendered stereotyping. References to *fear* 'man' and *bean* 'woman' are semantically neutral, requiring contextual modification to specify characteristics e.g. *chomh glic le fear na méaracán* 'as cunning as the thimble-rigger' (M§2460). Occupational types carry long-established stereotypes: butchers symbolize corpulence in *chomh ramhar le búistéara* 'as fat as a butcher' (C§1420), while tailors represent deceitfulness *chomh bréagach le táilliúr* 'as treacherous as a tailor' (U§1298). Body parts feature prominently, particularly the hand and foot, often symbolizing baldness *chomh maol le croí mo dhearnan* 'as bald as the palm of my hand' (M§2478) or blindness *chomh dall le bonn do choise* 'as blind as the sole of your foot' (U§1290). The preference for externally visible extremities over internal organs suggests a figurative emphasis on perceptible features.

Ethnic and local references also feature. Englishmen and Frenchmen appear as vehicles for treachery and swarthiness: *chomh fealltach le Sasanach* 'as treacherous as an Englishman' (U§1313), and *chomh buí le Francach* 'as swarthy as a Frenchman' (C§2742), reflecting long-standing European traditions of *blasons populaires* (see Chapter 5). As we have seen, dialectal comparisons encode communal knowledge through local figures: *chomh bréagach le Máire Bhéil* 'as untruthful as Máire Bhéil' (M§2396), *chomh saibhir le Déamar* 'as rich as Déamar' (M§207), and *chomh láidir le Seán Mór Ó Luasaigh* 'as strong as Big Seán Ó Luasaigh' (M§2468). The shelf life of these comparisons is limited, as their meaning is often anchored in socio-cultural contexts that are no longer resonant. Once detached from their original referents, they lose much of their communicative power.

## 4.7. Religious and Mythological Sources

Religious vehicles surprisingly constitute a minor category. Specific biblical figures are rare, but generally include Solomon, Job, and Samson, e.g. *chomh ciallmhar le Sola* 'as wise as Solomon' (M§2406), *chomh foighneach le Iób* 'as patient as Job' (M§2446), *chomh láidir le Samson* 'as strong as Samson' (C§2275). Some references risk semantic opacity without intertextual knowledge, such as *chomh mall le teachtaireacht an fhiaigh ón Áirc* 'as late as the raven's errand from the Ark' (C§3810) in the case of the Old Testament. Mythological figures from Irish tradition, such as Fionn mac Cumhaill, are rarer still, suggesting myth plays a limited role in everyday proverbial expression.

Of particular significance are ecclesiastical figures, especially the *sagart* 'priest', who is consistently cast as a positive moral exemplar: *chomh glan le sagart* 'as innocent as a priest' (M§2458),[5] *chomh hoir-*

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5    In instances involving polysemous adjectives—such as *glan* (which may denote 'clean' or 'innocent') and *oiriúnach* (which can mean 'suitable' or 'benign')—Ó Siochfhradha frequently includes parenthetical glosses to indicate the intended adjectival sense, e.g. *chomh glan le sagart* (*neamhchiontach*) 'as innocent as a priest' (M§2458), *chomh hoiriúnach le sagart* (*neamhdhíobhálach*) 'as benign as a priest' (M§2490)

*iúnach le sagart* 'as benign as a priest' (M§2490), and *chomh macánta leis an sagart* 'as honest as the priest' (M§2479). Unlike mythological or biblical comparators, the priest represents a culturally immediate and socially recognizable figure. One particularly illustrative example, *chomh discréideach le bosca na faoistine* 'as discreet as the confession box' (M§2428), anthropomorphizes a religious object to highlight the sanctity and confidentiality of confession. This demonstrates again that elements of material culture, when sufficiently embedded within collective religious practice, can function as effective cognitive frames for proverbial expression.

## 5. Wellerisms

Wellerisms are a subcategory of proverbs, named after Sam and Tony Weller, two celebrated characters from Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), who frequently employed humorous and ironic expressions. Mieder and Kingsbury (1994: ix) note that the term Wellerism was first defined in the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* by James Murray: "A Wellerism, a speech or expression employed by, or typical of, either of these characters," referring to Sam and Tony Weller (Murray et al. 1928: 294).

In contrast to traditional proverbs, Wellerisms conform to one of two structural schemas designed to evoke wit and humour: the binary structure or the tripartite structure. In the binary structure, two obligatory elements are present—namely, a statement and a speaker. The humorous effect arises from the semantic incongruity between these elements, as the speaker and the statement exhibit an unusual or atypical relationship, as illustrated in the following example:

(30)  *Ag lorg mná – a dúirt an gabhar.* (M§996)
      '[I'm] Looking for a woman (i.e. wife) – said the goat.'

In the tripartite structure, a third contextual element is added to increase the incongruity:

(31)  *"Gach aon neach mar a oiltear é,"* ars an traona ag dul sa ne-

*antóg.* (U§30)

'"Everyone as he is trained," said the corncrake going into the nettle.'

Although scholars formally identified and named the concept in the nineteenth century (Murray et al. 1928: 294), the form itself is much older. Sumerian, Ancient Greek, and Latin literature contain similar structures. For example:

(32)  *ka5.a idigna-šè kàš ì-sur-sur-ra a.eštub.ktu6 ba-zi-ge-en-e. še'*

'The fox urinated into the Tigris: "I am causing the high tide to rise!" [he said].' (Alster 1975: 212)

(33)  As the man said when he led the way across the river, Theaetetus, it [the water] will show for itself . (Rowe 2015: 83)

Wellerisms are found in wide range of languages in the modern era. Taylor (1931: 200) notes their prevalence in Germanic and Scandinavian languages, while Dundes (1964) provides evidence from African languages. More recently, Unseth et al. (2017: 26) have demonstrated their presence in European, Middle Eastern, and Indian languages, though not in Chinese or many other Asian languages. The Celtic languages are no exception as Archer Taylor observes in *The Proverb*: "the Celts employ the Wellerism with evident ease and freedom" (1931: 312).

Despite this widespread use, the terminology for Wellerisms varies considerably across languages. The term *Wellerism* itself has equivalents across a diverse range of languages: *wellerismo* (Italian), *Wellerismi* (Finnish), *Wellerismus* (German, Slovakian), *Wellerism* (Norwegian), W ‌ولیسم† (*wlrasm*) (Persian), *Веллеризм* (Russian), demonstrating broad linguistic and cultural reach (see Unseth et al. 2017: 2). Grzybek (1994: 286) shows, however, that German employs multiple terms: *Anekdotenspruch, apolog(et)isches Sprichwort, Beispiel(s)-Sprichwort, Sag-(sprich)wort,* and *Schwankspruch.* The Irish language lacked a term until Almqvist (1982–1983: 37) proposed 'fri-

otalfhocal' 'expression-phrase', a term he considered consistent with *Sagwörter*.

## 5.1. Wellerisms and Scholarship

Archer Taylor's *The Proverb* (1931) established the foundational framework for analyzing the Wellerism, tracing its historical development and identifying key structural features. Subsequent scholarship has examined definitional questions across various cultural contexts: Danish (Kjær 1971), Estonian (Baran 2017), Irish (Almqvist 1982–1983), German (Neumann 1966), Italian (Corso 1947–48, 1948), Spanish (Hoyos Sancho 1954; Orero 1997, 1998, 2000), and Swedish (Järvö-Niemen 1959), with additional studies focusing on geographical distribution (Carson Williams 2010; Unseth et al. 2017).

Defining Wellerisms morphologically remains challenging due to structural differences between languages. While general discussions on structure exist (Taylor 1959; Opata 1988; Carson Williams 2007) alongside functional analyses (Dundes 1964; Spevoni 1953; Opade 1980b; Oreto 2000), Baer's (1983) work on *The Pickwick Papers* remains the most extensive, demonstrating that Wellerisms are more complex than initially apparent and revealing significant literary, social, and psychological functions.

Unlike proverbs, individual Wellerisms are rarely the primary focus of scholarly research, though notabale studies exist. For example, Almqvist (1982–1983) conducted a systematic study of Irish Wellerisms, focussing in particular on *"Ná siúlófá díreach" a dúirt an seana-phortán leis an bportán óg* '"Would you not walk straight?" said the old crab to the young crab' (see Mac Coinnigh 2014: 29). Related forms have also attracted scholarly interest, including riddle vocabulary (Cray 1964) and Tom Swifties (Litovkina 2014a, 2014b).

Research on Wellerisms has been conducted not only in European languages but also in African languages, with significant studies on Igbo (Emenanjo 1989; Opata 1990), Yoruba (Dundes 1964; Lindfors and Oyeran 1975), and Enuani (Onicha-Oloba dialect) (Monye

1987). However, it is notable that Piirainen's cross-linguistic studies on European idioms (2012, 2016a, 2016b) did not include Wellerisms. Although a comprehensive global analysis is lacking, Unseth et al. (2017) explored their transnational occurrence, particularly in central and eastern Asia.

Scholarly focus has increasingly shifted toward collection and documentation. Alongside Mieder and Kingsbury's (1994) extensive English-language compilation, numerous smaller collections have appeared in academic publications (Speroni 1948; Perusini 1948; Taylor 1949; Koch 1959, 1960), though systematic analyses remain scarce. In the Irish context, Carson Williams' *Wellerisms in Ireland: Towards a Corpus from Oral and Literary Sources* (2002) provides a magisterial collection of over 900 Wellerisms from Irish and Hiberno-English sources. Besides all that are in the three dialectal collections under investigation, and other printed sources, much of this material is from *Bailiúchán na Scol* 'The Schools' Collection' (1937–1939), though contemporary examples are also included.

As outlined in Chapter 1, numerous Wellerisms are attested in dialectal proverb collections. While Wellerisms feature in all of these collections, Ó Siochfhradha is the only editor to explicitly differentiate them from other proverbial forms. In *Seanfhocail na Muimhneach* (1926: 99–104) he introduces the category *A ndubhairt siúd* 'As some say' to demarcate Wellerisms, foregrounding their distinctive structural hallmark: a quoted utterance attributed to a speaker (1926: 99).

## 5.2. Structure, Content, and Function

At its most basic structural level, a Wellerism consists of a two-part structure in which a simple statement, typically a proverb, saying, or cliché, is attributed to a speaker (see Carson Williams 2007). In most cases, the statement can be understood independently, without requiring additional information about the speaker or the context. However, incongruity arises from the unexpected relationship

between the statement and the speaker, often resulting in humour (Carson Williams 2010).

This structure typically foregrounds the statement, which is followed by an attributional phrase, or what may be termed an introductory formula, such as *arsa* X, *mar a dúirt* X, or *a dúirt* X 'as X said', wherein X denotes the speaker. This syntactic schema is clearly exemplified in one of the earliest recorded Irish attestations of a well-known international Wellerism: *"Má mhairimid beo chífimid súd," a dúirt an dall* '"If we live, we shall see it," said the blind man' (M§78). An analogous form appears in English as early as 1533 in John Heywood's work: *"Mary, that wolde I see," quod blynde Hew* (Taylor 1959: 287). Substantial evidence suggests that this syntactic template circulated widely across European languages in the Early Modern period, retaining its structural integrity across linguistic boundaries. Variants are attested in Italian (*"Staremo a vedere," disse il cieco*), French (*"Nous verrons," dit l'aveugle* (Quitard 1842: 86)), and Scottish Gaelic (*"Chi sinn, mar a thuirt an dall"* (Nicolson 2011 [1881]: 150)).

There is some flexibility in the structure of the Wellerism in Irish, where the introductory formula occasionally precedes the statement, as in *Mar a dúirt an gabhar bacach – "ní fheadar cé acu is fearr luas nó moilleas"* 'As the lame goat said – "I don't know whether speed or slowness is better"' (M§80). This variation is not unique to Irish, however; similar constructions appear in Spanish, e.g. *Dijo la sartén al cazo: "Quita allá, que me tiznas"* 'As the frying pan said to the cauldron: "go away, you stain me"' (Orero 1997: 463).

Contextual information about the speaker is usually embedded within the name itself. In many cases, a descriptor such as 'blind' provides the key to resolving the underlying incongruity, for instance, by highlighting the irony of a speaker commenting on vision despite an inability to see. This characterization is frequently conveyed through a noun–adjective genitive construction, which serves to encode a defining trait or circumstance essential to the interpretation of the utterance. For example:

(34)   *Ní gearánta dhom– a dúirt fear na coise briste.* (M§978)

      'I've no reason to complain– said the man with the broken leg.'

(35)   *"Bímis ag súgradh ach seachnaímis sála a chéile," a dúirt fear na sáile tinne.* (M§77)

      '"Let's play, but let's avoid each other's heels," said the man with the sore heel.'

Loukatos (1967: 193) noted that one can sometimes omit the speaker in Wellerisms if the language community is familiar with the reference or allusion. He refers to these as 'latent Wellerisms'. However, I have encountered no instances of this phenomenon in Irish material.

As noted earlier, these structures are typically bipartite, consisting of a statement followed by an attributed speaker. In many instances, however, the introduction of an incongruous or contextually inappropriate element (whether relating to the speaker or the situation) serves to heighten the effect. Within this expanded tripartite class, two distinct structural patterns can be identified:

1. Statement + one speaker + context (qualifying subclause)

(36)   *Cúis gháire chughainn – mar a dúirt Peadar nuair a fuair sé an t-asal báite.* (M§962)

      'Here comes a reason to smile – as Peter said when he found his donkey drowned.'

2. Statement + speaker + listener (person, animal or object)

(37)   *"An té a bhíos go maith duit, bí go maith dó," Arsa cailleach Mhaigh Eo le cailleach Thír Eoghain.* (U§24)

      '"Whoever's good to you, be good to him," said the Mayo hag to the Tyrone hag.'

(38)  *"Luí gan éirí chugat," ars an madadh rua leis an chaora.* (U§103)

 '"[May you] lie without rising," said the fox to the sheep.'

(39)  *Is iomdha glór díomhaoin id cheann – a dúirt an madarua leis an gclog (nó le clog an teampaill).* (M§995)

 'There are many idle voices in your head – said the fox to the bell (or to the church bell).'

Taylor (1950: 1169) argues that Wellerisms in which the speaker is an animal form a distinct subcategory within the tradition. International evidence suggests that animal speakers are often more frequent, sometimes appearing at twice the rate of their human counterparts (Unseth et al. 2017: 25). In the Irish context, animal-based Wellerisms are also common, with personification, particularly anthropomorphism, playing a key role in their structure. Non-human characters are routinely depicted with human qualities and behaviours, most notably the ability to speak. For example:

(40)  *Chonac cheana thú – mar a dúirt an cat leis an mbainne beirithe (nó te).* (M§989).

 'I've seen you before – as the cat said to the boiled (or hot) milk).'

This motif's connection to mythological and symbolic thinking aligns with the German *Tier genannt, Mensch gemeint* 'An animal is named, but a human is meant' (Müller-Hegemann and Otto 1970: 132). In such cases, the animal speaker serves as a vehicle for culturally embedded stereotypes or moral characteristics. The fox, for example, who is commonly associated with cunning and strategic insight, frequently delivers the expression, as illustrated in:

(41)  *"Beidh mise i bpáirt leat," mar a dúirt an sionnach leis an gcoileach* (C§851).

 '"I'll stand with you," as the fox said to the rooster.'

Unlike their German counterparts, where Aesop's fables have popularized animal figures, Irish Wellerisms tend to feature a recurring set of native animals and birds with stereotypical characteristics. The wren, fox, and goat are the most frequently represented. Interestingly, foreign influences are not evident in the speakers of Irish Wellerisms, and references to exotic or non-indigenous animals, such as the camel, lion, or elephant, are actually quite rare.

Intertextuality is also a recurring feature in Wellerisms, as evidenced in the following example:

(42)   *'Glór mór ar bheagán olla – mar a dúirt an táibhirseoir nuair a bhí sé ag bearradh na muice.* (M§963)

'Much noise with little wool – as the Devil said when he was shaving the pig.'

Evidence suggest that this Wellerism developed from a drama circulated in England, France, and Spain (1367–1413) satirizing a motif from the biblical story of David and Nabal, in which the Devil mistakenly shaves a pig instead of a sheep (see Reed 1823: 109). This tale's core message later became the proverb, "the greater the noise, the less the wool," with equivalents across multiple European languages: Norwegian *mye skrik og lite ull* 'much screaming and little wool', Dutch: *veel geschreeuw en weinig wol* 'a lot of shouting and little wool', German *viel Geschrei und wenig Wolle* 'much noise and little wool', Latvian *liela brēka, maza vilna* 'big commotion, little wool', and Estonian *liela brēka, maza vilna* (Meyer 1944: 37–42; Piirainen 2012: 354; Singer 1944: 159–160). These cross-linguistic parallels show that this Wellerism, like some others, is part of a broader European tradition of intertextual proverbial expressions.

Certain features of Wellerisms also surface in other linguistic genres, particularly "smart talk", which Davidson (1951) defines as playful manipulation of established sayings, often with a satirical twist designed to provoke humour.

> Smart sayings are a variety of folk humour phrases [used] to illustrate the superior cleverness of the speaker, often to the chagrin of the listener if they are verbal tricks. Smart retorts are also cherished by the young … Some smart sayings are folk-bandyings or epigrams and telling lines from poetry, oratory and other literature. (Davidson 1951: 44)

Wellerisms function simultaneously as linguistic play and social commentary. Almqvist (1982–1983) proposes that Wellerisms may have originated among young people as a means of mocking the received wisdom of older generations. This view resonates with Partridge's (1977) observations that American Wellerisms were especially popular among schoolchildren. However, without sociolinguistic data on their historical usage in Irish-speaking communities, these claims remain speculative.

According to Almqvist, the clearest instances of mockery occur in Wellerisms that subvert traditional proverbs. As Baer (1983: 181) notes, "Wellerisms incorporate socially acceptable utterances and belligerent, destructive acts." The following Wellerism illustrates this subversive process.

(43)  *"Tá an ghlanacht an-luachmhar, ach is annamh a dhéantar í," arsa an bhean a d'iompaigh a léine seacht n-uaire i mbliana.* (C§317)

"'Cleanliness is of great value, but rarely done," said the woman who turned her shirt seven times this year.'

This phenomenon is by no means unique to Irish; structurally analogous Wellerisms are attested in at least nine other European languages. For instance, the following German example demonstrates the same pattern of ironic attribution: *"Reinlichkeit is de Hauptsak," seggt de oll Fruu un kihrt tau Pingsten her Hemd üm* "'Cleanliness is the most important thing," said the old woman when she turned her shift at Whitsun' (Neumann 1996; Carson Williams 2002: 32). Such cross-linguistic parallels suggest that the use of Wellerisms to satirize traditional wisdom is a widespread phenomenon, not an exclusively Irish linguistic feature.

It would be easy to dismiss Wellerisms as mere verbal play designed for comic effect. However, there is clear evidence that certain Wellerisms formed part of an active oral tradition and that the variants which gained traction within that tradition reflect the social and cultural values of the community. As Mieder observes, "Wellerisms thus frequently serve as indicators of the value system of the society in which they are coined and used; folklore mirrors everyday attitudes and common culture" (1994: xi).

Some Wellerisms also exhibit macaronic features. Taylor (1931: 207) links macaronic expression the influence of Humanist education and classical languages—particularly Latin—during the latter half of the sixteenth century. In the Irish context, however, no Latin-inflected Wellerisms have been recorded. Instead, macaronic features appear through English words and phrases embedded in Irish language examples, reflecting the bilingual realities of twentieth-century Irish-speaking communities.

(44)  *Go n-éirí leat go geal – mara dúirt an* sweep *lena mhac.* (M§985)
      'May you get on brightly – as the sweep said to his son.'

(45)  "Now for it" – *mar a dúirt an chailleach agus í ag rith lena scáth'.* (M§970)
      '"Now for it" – as the hag said when as she was running with her shadow.'

The question of translation is particularly interesting, as Wellerisms can be difficult to carry across languages without losing their effect. In some cases, though, there is good reason to believe that certain forms are translations, since they appear in both Irish and Hiberno-English. For example:

(46)  "More light," *ars an chailleadh nuair a bhí an teach le thine.* (Carson Williams 2002: 24)

(47)  "More light!" said the hag when the house was on fire. (Carson Williams 2002: 24)

While Wellerisms often resist translation: "language boundaries form a major obstruction to the spread of Wellerism" (Grambo 1972: 101), certain forms nonetheless lend themselves to cross-linguistic transfer with relative ease. A striking example is *an túlán ag tabhairt tóin dubh ar an bpota* 'the kettle calling the pot black-bottomed' (C§120), which appears in multiple variant forms within the Irish tradition. However, unlike in many other European languages, this expression has not been transformed into a Wellerism in Irish. A range of comparable examples may be found in Paczolay (1997: 318–321):

(48)  *Sartagin zarak partzari: Ua ortikan, beltz ori.* – Basque
      'The pot tells the kettle, You black bottom'

(49)  *"Svei Þer, svo svartur, Þu ert," sag i grytan vi leirpottinn.* – Icelandic
      '"Poor you, how black you are," said the iron pot to the clay pot.'

(50)  *La padella dice al paiuolo: Fatti in là che mi tingi.* – Italian
      'The pan tells the kettle: get off, do not make me dirty.'

(51)  *Ve dig så svart du är, sa grytan till kitteln.* – Swedish
      'How black you are, said the pot to the kettle.'

(52)  *Tencere tencereye "dibin kara" demiş.* – Turkish
      'One pot tells the other: "Your face is black!"'

Instead, in Irish, it is more common for the donkey to serve as the vehicle for expressing the original idea. For example: *"A amadáin na gcluasa fada," ars an t-asal lena dheartháir* '"You big-eared fool!" as the donkey said to his brother' (U§152).

## 5.3. Theories of Humour and Wellerisms

The Incongruity-Resolution (INC-RES) theory of humour (Koestler 1964; Suls 1976; Attardo 1994) suggests that humorous acts involve two incompatible cognitive scripts or frames (Raskin 1985), which the listener must reconcile. Although scholars differ on the precise number and nature of the processing stages involved (see Attardo and Raskin 1991; Attardo 1994, 1997; Oring 2011), they broadly agree that humour arises when an initial interpretation leads to semantic failure, prompting a reinterpretation through the discovery of a hidden, compatible meaning. This theoretical model has been expressed using various terms, including frames of reference, isotopes, and schemas, but all point to the same underlying mechanism.

Wellerisms exemplify this incongruity-resolution process. They typically operate across two incompatible cognitive frames: the literal meaning of the proverb or cliché and the speaker or context to which it is attributed. The humour arises when the listener detects a semantic or pragmatic mismatch, such as the inappropriateness of the speaker or the incongruity of the context, and resolves it through reinterpretation. A textual cue or script trigger facilitates this shift (Raskin 1985: 99; Brône and Feyaerts 2003: 4), allowing the listener to uncover the intended ironic or satirical meaning.

Consider the following example: *"More water", arsa an Sasanach 's é dhá bháthadh* '"More water," said the Englishman as he was being drowned' (C§3704; M§969). The cognitive structure of the Wellerism involves three key components: the utterance, the speaker, and the context. In this case, the context "as he was being drowned" creates a clear semantic contradiction. Under normal conditions, the phrase "more water" would indicate a request to satisfy thirst; yet here, it is uttered in a scenario where water is already present in excess and is the cause of imminent death. The contradiction lies in the irrationality of the request: a reasonable speaker would not ask for something that directly contributes to their own demise.

The designation "Englishman" functions as a script-switch trigger, guiding the listener toward a culturally conditioned reinterpretation. In Irish folklore, the English have often been associated with traits such as greed, arrogance, or folly (Mac Coinnigh 2013a: 162–163). If greed is understood as the relevant frame, the incongruity is resolved by inferring that the Englishman is so avaricious he demands more of something, even at the cost of his own life. The humour, in this reading, is driven by ethnic or cultural stereotyping, in which the target of the joke is a representative figure embodying socially constructed negative traits (Attardo 1994: 219).

### 5.4. Exaggeration

Exaggeration is a highly effective device for expressing incongruity in Wellerisms, particularly when a clear discrepancy exists between the statement and its context because of an unlikely, absurd, or impossible situation. In this context, exaggeration positions a statement either higher or lower on the cognitive spectrum than logic dictates, thus resulting in amplification (auxesis) or diminution (meiosis) (Norrick 2004: 1730). A meaningless or implausible context is often introduced to generate an unlikely mental image. The schematic conflict arises between natural order, i.e. the real-world expectations based on lived experience, and the atypical, unrealistic image presented in the Wellerism. This contrast produces the schema conflict (Norrick 2006: 229–230). For example, in *A Dhia ghléigil, nach fairsing í Éire – arsa an bhean nuair a chonaic sí an radharc ó Bharra an Chlasaigh i nDún Chaoin* (M§972) 'O glorious God, isn't Ireland vast – said the woman when she saw the view from Barr an Chlasaigh in Dún Chaoin', the exaggeration is immediately evident. Cultural knowledge informs the listener that viewing the entirety of Ireland from one location is impossible, reinforcing the hyperbolic nature of the remark and its comic effect.

The humorous effect of Wellerisms is frequently enhanced using personification, which attributes human characteristics and senses to animals and non-human objects. The selection of speakers reveals

two identifiable patterns: *1. Entities with clear physical characteristics:* These include people, animals, insects, or birds that serve as the epitome of a particular quality. For example, the fly embodies smallness: *"Nach mise a thóg an dusta?" arsa cuileog i ndiaidh an chóiste* (U§108) '"Isn't it I who raised the dust?" said the fly after the coach'. *2. Entities with well-established stereotypical traits, including people, animals, insects, or birds that carry culturally recognized attributes within the linguistic community* (see Grzybek 1994: 287). For instance, the donkey is commonly associated with slow-wittedness: *"A amadáin na gcluasa fada," ars an t-asal lena dheartháir* (U§152). '"You long-eared fool," said the donkey to his brother'.

For the most part, Irish Wellerisms align with the cultural stereotypes commonly found in the broader European proverbial tradition (see Piirainen 2012, 2016a, 2016b). One of the most widely shared stereotypical associations across European languages and cultures is the depiction of foxes as symbols of cunning (see Uther 2006). An example is: *Ní lia ísleán sona ná ardán dona ann – mar a dúirt an madarua agus é ag ithe píobán an ghandail* 'The happy hollows are not more numerous than the unhappy heights – as the fox said while eating the gander's neck/throat' (M§979).

Ar previously noted, the wren holds particular significance in Irish Wellerisms, though unrelated to its erotic symbolism in broader European traditions (Wentersdorf 1977: 198). While European folklore established the wren as a symbol of Eros, the god of love, the Irish tradition emphasizes the bird's pride in accomplishing impressive feats. This pride or arrogance likely stems from its traditional status as the king of birds, as illustrated in the following examples:

(53)    *Is mór an ní an neart – arsa an dreoilín nuair a chaith sé an chiaróg leis an bhfaill (nó nuair a tharraing sé an phiast as an sioc, nó nuair a tharraing sé an fhrigh as an mbualtach)* (M§981).

'Strength is a great thing – said the wren when it threw the beetle against the cliff. (or when it pulled the worm from the frost, or when it pulled the mite from the cow-dung).'

(54) *'Comaoin ort, a fharraige mhór – mar a dúirt an dreoilín nuair a mhún sé sa bhfarraige'* (M§1008).

'You owe me one, ocean – said the wren when it urinated into the sea.'

These examples belong to a group of Wellerisms in which an insignificant character boasts of a mighty achievement, a motif described by Smith and Ó Laoire (2009: 54) as "an unimpressive protagonist boasting of some petty deed perceived by him or her as requiring great strength". The second example in No. 54—the wren urinating in the sea—is among the oldest Wellerisms in Europe. It appears in English sources as early as 1605: *"Every little helps," quoth the wren when she pissed in the sea* (Mieder and Kingsbury 1994: 75).

The original image of a character urinating into the sea can be traced back to Sumerian cuneiform texts, where the fox, rather than the wren, serves as the protagonist (Gordon 1959: 222; Alster 1975: 212). Related versions of this motif continue to circulate in European languages today, as seen in the Dutch expression: *"Alle beetjes helpen," zei de mug, en ze piste in de zee* '"Every little bit helps," said the mosquito, and she urinated in the sea' (Mandos and Mandos-van de Pol 2003: 62). This evidence highlights the cross-cultural adaptability of Wellerisms, showing their capacity to transcend temporal and linguistic boundaries.

## 5.5. Punning

Punning is closely related to the concept of linguistic ambiguity, primarily arising from discrepancy or conflict between two interpretations of a word or a phrase. This ambiguity often results from homophones, near homophones, polysemic clusters, idioms, or grammatical structures (Delabastita 1994: 223). While punning is a common feature in international Wellerisms, evidence from Irish suggests it occurs infrequently. Puns operate in various ways. Consider the following example:

(55)  *"Ní bheidh sé rófhada anois," mar dúirt an moncaí nuair a gear-*
      *radh an ruball dó.* (Carson Williams 2002: 229)

      '"It won't be too long now," said the monkey when its tail was
      cut off.'

Because of linguistic experience, we recognize "It won't be long now"
as a fixed phrase, calque, or cliché, where the pronoun "it" does not
refer to a literal subject but to an abstract concept of time, implying
that something is about to happen soon. However, when interpreted
literally within a new context, the pronoun is reanalysed as referring
to the monkey's tail, requiring the original script to be reread with a
literal meaning. This is an example of structured punning, where the
humour arises from semantic re-evaluation, leading to an unexpect-
ed or double-layered interpretation.

## 5.6. Polysemy

The following Wellerisms provide examples of lexical wordplay gen-
erated through the exploitation of polysemous terms:

(56)  *"Cé chaoi a bhfuil tú, a mhac bán?" mar a dúirt an fear leis an*
      *m*black. (C§259)

      '"How are you, my white-headed son?" as the man said to the
      black person.'

(57)  *'Go n-éirí leat go geal – mar a dúirt an* sweep *lena mhac.*
      (M§985)

      'May you get on brightly – as the sweep said to his son.'

In the first example, the word *bán* is highly polysemous in Irish.
While its primary meaning is 'white', it also carries a hypocoris-
tic meaning (lit. 'white-headed') signifying 'darling' or 'beloved' (Ó
Dónaill 1977: bán²). In everyday usage, a listener would typically in-
terpret "*Cé chaoi a bhfuil tú, a mhac bán?*" in this figurative sense as
'How are you, my darling son' However, when the phrase is placed
within a specific context, i.e. *mar a dúirt an fear leis an mblack* 'as

the man said to the black person', the inter-linguistic discrepancy between 'white' and 'black' becomes apparent. The listener is then required to reinterpret the original script, recognizing the semantic contrast as a source of humour. In other instances, wordplay arises from homophony. For example:

(58) *"Go mba fearr amáireach thú," mar a dúirt Colmcille lena mháthair.* (C§319)

'"May you be better tomorrow," as Colmcille said to his mother.'

The words *fearr* (the superlative form of the adjective 'good') and *fear* ('man') are near homophones in Irish, making them suitable for punning when used in conjunction with *máthair* ('mother'), which serves as the script trigger switch. This phonetic similarity creates a double meaning, allowing for a reinterpretation of the original phrase within the humorous context of the Wellerism, i.e. May you be a man tomorrow.

The humour in these expressions is not always light-hearted, however, and there are a few examples that refer to crude humour and scatology. As examples:

(59) *An té nach bhfuil tobac aige cacadh sé ina phíp! – arsa an fear ná raibh aon easpa air féin.* (M§974)

'He who has no tobacco, let him shit in his pipe! – said the man, who wanted for nothing.

(60) *"Nuair a lasfas tú, déanfaidh tú tine," arsa an sionnach nuair a chac sé ar an sneachta.* (C§328)

'"When you light it, you will make a fire," said the fox when he shitted on the snow.'

Moreover, serious matters are frequently reduced to triviality, with death, especially within the marital setting, treated as something of little weight. This is clear in the following examples:

(61) *Seadh, tá an méid sin de ghnó an Earraigh déanta agam – a dúirt an fear nuair a chuir sé a bhean.* (M§1003)

'Well, that's another bit of spring business taken care of – said the man when he buried his wife.'

(62) *Aimsir mhaith chughainn – mar a dúirt an bhean nuair a fuair sí a fear báite.* (M§961)

'Good weather ahead'– said the woman when her husband drowned.'

In both cases, the language and tone diminish the gravity of death, reinforcing what could be described as a darkly humorous perspective in which mortality is framed as an ordinary or even routine occurrence.

Scholars such as Taylor (1962: 217) and Mieder and Kingsbury have observed that misogynistic attitudes are frequently present in Wellerisms.

> it must be emphasized that the misogyny of wellerisms is very troublesome indeed. There is no doubt that wellerisms, like so many other folklore genres, are the products of a patriarchal society. They are blatantly anti-women and show the worldview of historical periods during which respect for women was sorely missing. (Mieder and Kingsbury 1994: xi–xii)

Interestingly, although misogynistic attitudes are widespread in Irish proverbs, such sentiments are notably less evident in Irish Wellerisms. This relative absence is somewhat surprising, given the deeply patriarchal nature of Irish society at the time these expressions were collected. One plausible explanation is that editors or collectors may have deliberately excluded Wellerisms of a vulgar or subversive character, many of which, as Almqvist (1982–1983: 40) notes, were overtly anti-establishment and frequently misogynistic, alongside other obscene or indecent material during the editorial process.

A closely related form to the Wellerism has developed in American English, the *Tom Swifty*, which emerged in the twentieth century and has been identified by Litovkina (2014b: 56) as a possible modern successor to the Wellerism tradition. The term derives from Tom Swift, the protagonist of a popular series of adventure novels authored by Edward Stratemeyer (1862–1930). Tom Swifties characteristically consist of three components: a quoted statement, the attribution to "Tom" as speaker, and an adverb or verb phrase that functions as a pun. The humour hinges on lexical ambiguity, with the punning adverb bearing a double reference—modifying both the manner of speech and the semantic content of the statement. Heller (1974: 271) refers to these as "non-disambiguational puns", since the phrase permits two plausible interpretations depending on contextual cues. Examples provided by Litovkina (2014a: 58) include:

(63) "I haven't developed my photographs yet," said Tom negatively.

(64) "I think I'll use a different font," said Tom boldly.

(65) "Would anyone like some Parmesan?" asked Tom gratingly.

Tom Swifties appear to be most prevalent in American English, and there are no examples in Irish as far as I am aware.

## 6. Enumerative Proverbs

Enumerative proverbs are a distinct subcategory within the Irish proverbial tradition, characterized by their patterned listing of noun phrases, typically arranged in groups of three (triads) or four (tetrads). These phrases are generally presented asyndetically, that is, without the use of explicit conjunctions (e.g. *and, but, or*), and are framed by introductory or concluding formulae that clarify the logical or categorical relationship between the listed elements.

## 6.1. Structural Features

The enumerative structure lends itself to rhetorical clarity and cognitive retention, often appearing in moral, practical, or observational statements. For instance:

**Triad:**

(66) *Trí neithe ná múintear: guth, féile ná filidheacht.* (M§1857)

'Three things that are not taught: voice, generosity, and poetry.'

**Tetrad:**

(67) *Na ceithre nídh is féarr do'n bhuailteoir: lámhchrann cuilinn, buailtín coill, punann amháin, agus urlár glan.* (U§46)

'The four best things for the thresher: a holly handle, a hazel striker, a single sheaf, and a clean floor.'

Doctor (1993: 51) has proposed that any proverb involving numbers should be categorized as a type of enumerative proverb. He uses the broader term *numerical proverbs* (*Zahlensprüche*) to describe this grouping. However, this approach risks overextension: virtually any lexical category (adjective, plural noun, or collective noun) could serve as the basis for similar classification. Thus, while these proverbs share a reference to number, they do not exhibit any further syntactic or stylistic features that would justify treating them as a unified type.

(68) *Faigheann beithíoch **ceithre** chos truisle.* (C§1323)

'Even a **four**-legged animal stumbles.'

(69) *Is iomaí cor sa saol agus is iomaí athrú i **seacht** mbliana.* (C§4562)

'There are many twists in life and many changes in **seven** years.'

(70)   *Triáil **naoi** n-uaire é sula gcaillir do mhisneach.* (C§3697)
       'Try **nine** times before losing hope.'

These expressions are better understood as discrete proverbial statements with numerical content, rather than as instances of the enumerative subform per se.

## 6.2. The Triad

The triad is the most prominent and persistent form within the enumerative tradition, a pattern deeply rooted in Irish and across classical and Indo-European cultures. As Kelly (2004: 1) notes, triads appear in Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Hebrew, and many other literary traditions. Their prominence in Irish may reflect both native stylistic preferences and broader religious or cultural influences.

> The arrangement of ideas in groups of three is attested from most recorded literatures, both oral and written. Thus we find triads in Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Russian, English, Chinese, Japanese and many other languages. However, nowhere—to my knowledge—does one get triads in such profusion as in the Celtic languages. (Kelly 2004: 1–2)

The symbolic and organizational significance of the triad has been explored extensively in comparative scholarship. Usener's *Dreiheit: Ein Versuch mythologischer Zahlenlehre* (1903) was among the first studies to trace the mythological and religious functions of triadic structures. In Roman antiquity, the number three was considered the "perfect number" (*tres numerus super omnia*), a concept reflected in legal, medical, and literary domains. Goudy (1910) demonstrates how Roman legal reasoning employed triadic patterns, while Tavenner (1916) investigates their ritual and magical significance, especially in practices related to health, protection, and agriculture. These classical associations resonate in Irish tradition, where triads often serve as mnemonic devices for encoding the same type of culturally valued knowledge. Göbel (1930), in his study of epic triads in Greek poetry, further attests to the literary utility of tripartite struc-

turing across traditions. Whether due to Indo-European inheritance or specific historical developments, the triad endures in Irish dialectal collections as a dominant structural form.

Meyer (1906: xii) suggested that Irish triads, tetrads, and pentads may have been modelled on biblical enumerative forms, particularly those found in *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*. He also speculated that Christian doctrine, particularly the influence of the Trinity, shaped the prominence of the triad in Celtic imagination—an argument later deemed speculative by Kelly (2004: 3). More plausibly, such forms persist because they provide an efficient and memorable means of organizing information, especially when reinforced by prosodic devices such as alliteration.

## 6.3. Enumerative Proverbs in Early Irish Literature

Enumerative structures are also prominent in Early Irish literature, particularly within collections of instructional maxims attributed to royal, mythological, or legendary figures. These sayings, typically labelled *teagasca* 'teachings', function pedagogically and stylistically as formulaic expressions of moral, legal, or philosophical counsel. As Robinson (1981) observes, their proverbial character is marked by structural regularity and stylistic economy.

The principal texts containing such material include *Audacht Morainn* (ed. Kelly 1976), *Tecosca Cormaic* (ed. Meyer 1909), *Briathra Flainn Fína* (ed. Meyer 1910; Hull 1929; Ireland 1999), and *Senbhríathra Fithail* (ed. Thurneysen 1912–13; trans. Smith 1928). Although these sources provide a substantial corpus of proverbial material, there remains uncertainty about the extent to which such expressions circulated in oral tradition. Evidence concerning frequency, geographic distribution, or performative context is lacking, complicating efforts to determine whether these represent literary stylizations or genuine vernacular speech.

Despite these limitations, the formal characteristics of these literary sayings, particularly their triadic organization, merit closer

structural analysis. Kelly (2004: 18) characterizes *The Triads of Ireland* as "a hotchpotch of ideas—some banal, some highly original—on human psychology, the structure of society, the workings of nature, the geography of the country, and other topics". Their lack of systematic classification suggests that triadic patterning operated not as a rigid genre but as a flexible cognitive and mnemonic device.

## 6.4. Dialectal Collections

All three dialectal collections include a distinct section for enumerative proverbs, although none of the editors explicitly acknowledge or discuss this arrangement in their introductions. Ó Muirgheasa (1936: 1–7) calls the section *Trí Nídh* 'Three Things', and he included tetrads in a separate section called *Ceithre Nídh* 'Four Things' (Ó Muirgheasa 1936: 7–9). Ó Máille (1948, 1952) classified them under *Tréidhí*, a dialectal form of the word 'Triads', without any ancillary information. Ó Siochfhradha introduced the form under the heading *Tréanna* 'Triads' with a short descriptive piece focusing on the key elements:

> The triad is found in Irish literature as far back as our knowledge goes, and the same form and characteristics are attached to it now as they have always been, although all these are Modern Irish triads. They have the characteristics of the Irish mind, closeness of speech, knowledge of nature and a penchant for satire and humor. There is cleverness in the selection of the three things in each triad, and they are full of mocking comparisons for the sake of humor or satire.[6] (Ó Siochfhradha 1926: 190)

At this point it should be noted that most triads in these collections also feature in Meyer's *The Triads of Ireland* (1906), which would indicate that these forms are literary expressions as opposed to popular

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[6]   '*Tá an tré i litríocht na Gaeilge chomh fada siar agus a théann ár n-eolas, agus is é an chuma chéanna agus na tréithe céanna atá ag gabháil anois leis agus a ghabhadh riamh bíodh is gur tréanna Nua Ghaeilge iad seo uile. Tá tréithe an mheoin Ghaelaigh leis iontu, cóngar cainte, eolas ar nádúr agus fonn aoir agus grinn. Tá clisteacht i dtoghadh na dtrí nithe i ngach tré, agus comparáid mhagaidh ina lán acu ar son grinn nó aortha.*'

ones. Ó Rahilly (1922: 65) included tetrads in a chapter titled 'Modern Irish Triads' although, despite this title, he was primarily referring to enumerative proverbs in general.

Kelly argues that most of the triads in the early Irish collections are from the hand of one individual—Russell's "the wit of one"—as opposed to having folk origins, and that they show a "definite personal stamp" (Kelly 2004: 5–6).

The relationship between Modern Irish triads and those found in the manuscript tradition is difficult to decipher. For example, Kelly (2004: 10) notes the similarity between the following example (No. 71) from the Old Irish collection and a triad found in Ó Muirgheasa's Ulster material (No. 72) This also appears in the Munster collection, as seen No. 73:

(71) *Tí úathaid ata fherr sochaidi: úathad dagbríathar, úathad bó i féor, úathad carat im chuirmthig.*

'Three fewnesses which are better than plenty: a fewness of fine words, a fewness of cows in grass, a fewness of friends in an alehouse.'

(72) *Beagán síl in áiridh choir, Beagán bó i bhféar mhaith, Is beagán cairde i dtoigh an óil, Ná trí ní is fearr ar bith.* (U§1)

'A little seed in a good seed-bed, A few cows in good grass, And a little credit in the public house: (These are) the three best things.'

(73) *Beagán síl i dtalamh cóir, beagán bó i bhféar maith, beagán cairde i dtigh an óil– na trí nithe is fearr amuigh.* (M§2278)

'Few seeds in decent land, a few cows in good grass, a few friends in the public house: the three best things.'

## 6.5. Structure

Enumerative proverbs have two constituent elements, termed variously 'title-line' and 'list' (Roth 1965: 5), or 'topic' and 'comment' (Doctor 1993: 53). In the latter, the comment contains both proprium, i.e. shared feature, and the numerical attribute. From a structural perspective it is possible to use Doctor's (1993: 53) structural arrangement, i.e. S N.(P). T > $(t_1, t_2, ..., t_n)$, as a basis for developing the following formula: $S = \{T_1, T_2, ..., T_N\} \mid P(T)$, where:

- **S** = the set (exists)
- **N** = the number of elements is implicitly determined by the number of **T** (topic) elements.
- $\mathbf{T_1, T_2, ..., T_n}$ = the elements in the set, each of which exhibits the property **P** (propria).
- **P(T)** = the defining characteristic or attribute applying to all T elements.

Thus, we may read the following in the case of the triad:

(74) *An triúr is géire radharc– seabhac ar chrann, cú i ngleann, nó cailín i lár cruinnithe* (M§2303)

'The three (things) with the sharpest view– a hawk on a tree, a hound in a glen, or a girl in the middle of a crowd.'

$S = \{T_1, T_2, ..., T_N\} \mid P(T)$

$S$ = {hawk on a tree}, {hound in a glen}, {girl in a crowd} | P = (sharpest view)

To read this we can say that the set $S$ consists of three elements (N = 3) implicitly determined by the proverb's triadic form. These elements, a hawk on a tree, a hound in a glen, and a girl in a crowd, are linked by a shared characteristic rather than taxonomic similarity, forming a conceptually motivated structure. In terms of elements in the set $(T_1, T_2, T_3)$ and their function, each member of the set exemplifies heightened perceptual awareness:

- $T_1$ {hawk on a tree} visual acuity from an elevated vantage point.

- **T$_2$** {hound in a glen} keen sensory perception in tracking.

- **T$_3$** {girl in a crowd} heightened social awareness in a dynamic setting.

Although these three elements belong to different categories, avian, mammalian, and human, they are structurally aligned through their shared characteristic of (P) = "sharpest view". Their inclusion within the same proverbial set *S* is motivated by functional rather than categorical similarity.

### 6.6. Triads and Tetrads

Triads and tetrads typically follow one of three structural patterns. The first presents the listed elements at the outset, followed by a contextual or summarizing phrase that offers interpretation or clarification. This can be described as a *topic + comment* structure. The second pattern inverts this order: an introductory phrase appears first, providing a framework or context for the items that follow, i.e. *comment + topic*. The third pattern omits any framing altogether, offering the three (or four) elements without contextualization. In such cases, a title-line may be absent, and the connection among the elements is either implicit or assumed to be understood by the addressee.

Topic + Comment

(75) *An roc, an rón agus an ronnach, Na trí rudaí is luaithe ar na tonna.* (C§5169)

'The ray, the seal and the mackerel, the three quickest things on the waves.'

Comment + Topic

(76) *Na trí cairde is fearr is na trí naimhde is measa— Tine, gaoth, is uisce.* (U§10)

'The three best friends and the three worst enemies— fire, wind and water.'

Comment (Topic implicit)

(77) *Seamhóin, Sean-ór, Seanfhéar.* (C§4905)

'Old turf, old gold, old hay.' (i.e. the three best things in a house)

These proverbs use syntactic structures to create *mise en relief*, accentuating a specific element through contrastive emphasis. The high levels of syntactic parallelism enhance contrast in the triads, be that at the level of single lexical items (No. 78) or complex noun phrases (No. 79):

(78) *Na trí rud is deacra a phiocadh, bean, speal is rásúr* (C§5173)

'The three most difficult things to pick, | a woman, | a scythe | and | a razor. |'

(79) *An oíche a bhfuil an churaíocht réidh, An oíche a bhfuil an fómhar san iothlainn, is an oíche a bhfuil a chíos díolta aige: Na trí hoíche a gheibheas an scológ codladh sócúlach.* (U§23)

'The night he has the sowing (of the crops) finished, | The night he has the harvest in the rickyard, | And the night he has the rent paid |: These are the (only) three nights in the year that the farmer sleeps comfortably. '

In old Irish triads, Kelly (2004: 10) believes that each of the three elements of the triad should have equal weight, as shown by their interchangeability. The collections show evidence of this, with the second and third elements interchanged, although not verbatim, as in ABC smoke + woman + leak (No. 80) vs. ACB smoke + leak + woman (No. 81.).

(80) *Na trí rudaí is measa i dteach ar bith, simléar deataí, báirseach mná, an braon anuas.* (C§5138)

'The three worst things in any house: a smoky chimney, a bad-tempered woman, a leak.'

(81) *Na trí rudaí is measa bhí i dteach ariamh, toit, braon anuas, bean chabach* (C§5138)

'The three worst things that were ever in a house, smoke, a leak, talkative wife.'

Later developments in triadic structuring differ significantly from earlier examples, with the final element often functioning as a punchline or climax—frequently introducing a humorous or unexpected twist. This reflects a broader stylistic tendency described by Behaghel's Law of Increasing Members (*das Gesetz der wachsenden Glieder* (GwG)), which states that "constituents of a sentence that are dependent on one another are arranged so that that which is grammatically or semantically more complex follows that which is simpler" (Behaghel 1909). As Galjanić (2010) has demonstrated, this principle is clearly observable in early Celtic languages, including Old Irish and Welsh.

In the case of triads, where overall brevity precludes syntactic elaboration, the law manifests instead through increased semantic weighting: the final item carries the most novel, humorous, or impactful meaning. This conforms to the end-focus principle, which holds that new or significant information is typically positioned at the end of a sentence for rhetorical emphasis. As Southern notes, "In its most frequent and compelling form, Behaghel's GwG becomes a Law of Triads" (2000: 264). The following example illustrates this tendency:

(82) *Na trí drochnósa, Ag ól na gloine, Ag caitheamh an phíopa, Ag leagan drúchta ag teacht abhaile san oíche* (C§5192)

'The three bad habits: drinking the glass, smoking the pipe, and flattening the dew coming home at night.'

## 6.7. Content and Function

Doctor (1993) divides enumerative proverbs into two main types based on whether their message is direct or implied. The first grouping is *Prescriptive Enumerative Proverbs* (also known as *Overt Enumer-*

*ative Proverbs*), which provides explicit advice stating rules of behaviour to follow (prescriptive) or avoid (proscriptive). Doctor uses 'Euphoric' and 'Dysphoric' proverbs, to describe the method of advice given, i.e. prescription or proscription:

*Euphoric:* these enumerate virtues, desirable behaviours, or elements of well-being, reflecting traditional values associated with stability, security, and diligence.

> (83) *Trí nithe a bhaineas le sonas: fál, fascadh, agus mochóirí.* (M§2319)
>
> 'Three things related to contentment: enclosure, shelter, and early rising.'

This triad conveys the practical wisdom of preparedness and order, illustrating how security (*fál* 'enclosure,' *fascadh* 'shelter') and discipline (*mochóirí* early rising) contribute to a stable and contented life. The inclusion of *mochóirí* 'early rising' in this instance aligns with the ethic of industry, a recurring theme in Irish proverbs, paralleling the well-known *The early bird catches the worm* in English.

*Dysphoric:* in contrast, these enumerate undesirable things to be avoided, often framed as humorous or exaggerated warnings.

> (84) *Na trí rud ba chóir do dhuine a sheachaint, straois mada, tóin capaill, gáire Sasanaigh* (C§5196)
>
> 'The three things a person should avoid: a dog's grimace, a horse's backside, an Englishman's laugh.'

This triad relies on cultural presuppositions and humour. The first two elements, a grimacing dog and a horse's rear, invoke physical unpredictability and potential danger of which we should all be aware. The final element, 'an Englishman's laugh,' shifts from physical danger to political satire, juxtaposing the expected hazards of animals with a more culturally charged warning. It alludes, of course, to the notion of *Perfidious Albion* and reflects long-standing historical tensions between Ireland and England (see Schmidt 1953, and also Chapter 5).

The second grouping is *Covert Enumerative Proverbs.* These do not directly give advice, neither prescription nor proscription, but express general truths accessible to the language community. These proverbs operate through presupposition, expecting the audience to infer meaning based on shared experience and contextual knowledge or what is termed "cultural literacy" (Hirsch 1983). Users understand these as overt proverbs after processing.

(85)   *Trí nithe nach aon iontaoibh iad: lá breá sa gheimhreadh, sláinte duine críonna, focal duine uasail gan scríbhinn.* (M§2326)

'Three things that cannot be trusted: a fine day in winter, the health of an old man, the word of a gentleman without [it in] writing.'

This triad exemplifies a sceptical worldview, recognizing the unreliability of certain appearances. Each element represents an expectation prone to failure: *A fine day in winter* suggests the transient nature of good fortune, as winter weather is notoriously unpredictable. *The health of an old man* underscores the fragility of life in advance age. And *The word of a gentleman without writing* emphasizes the necessity of formal agreements over verbal promises particularly when dealing with the upper classes. Unlike overt proverbs, which explicitly instruct, covert triads require cognitive engagement. The elliptical nature of such triads means that they may sometimes be misunderstood or misinterpreted, particularly as oral traditions decline.

## 6.8. Source Domains

Beyond their formal structure, Irish triads encode cultural wisdom through general commentary on life, human behaviour, and the natural world. They frequently draw from household, agricultural, fishing, and animal-related domains, providing examples rooted in everyday experience. Their mnemonic qualities enhance their popularity, often aided by rhythmic and prosodic embellishments, with alliteration being a particularly noticeable stylistic device. Examples of these alliterative patterns are shown below:

(86) *Trí ní a bhaineas le bligeard: **f**eirc, **f**eadaíl, agus **f**iafraitheacht.*
(M§2317)

'Three things associated with a blackguard: paunch, whistling and inquisitiveness.'

(87) *Na trí éisc is mire: **r**otha, **r**anga agus **r**ón.* (M§2294)

'The three quickest fish: a mackerel, a ray and a seal.'

(88) *Trí ní nach **f**éidir a fhoghlaim, **f**onn, **f**éile, **f**írinne.* (C§5160)

'Three things that cannot be learned: desire, generosity, truth.'

Although rare in modern collections, geographical triads preserve traces of local rivalry and *blason populaire*s. These triads reflect a long-standing tradition of communal identity formation through contrast, sometimes playful, sometimes derogatory. Mocking is usually directed at the stereotypical traits of certain families (often qualified by their place of residence), places, or trades. In No. 89, we see references to familial and regional traits, reinforcing kinship-based identity within a localized cultural framework, whilst No. 90's triad adopts a topographical perspective, using paradoxes to highlight the extraordinary nature of local landmarks. The final example (No. 91) demonstrates occupational humour, categorizing people by the perceived dirtiness of their trade. The cobbler and fuller are included due to their contact with dye, leather, and waterlogged materials, while the pig serves as the ultimate metaphor for filth. The triad's effectiveness lies in its escalating imagery, moving from human trades to the animal world as a hyperbolic punchline.

(89) *Ó Máille Bhéal Léime, Ó Flatharta an Oileáin, Féiríní an Chalaidh.* (C§5178)[7]

'The O'Malleys of Baillinaleama, the O'Flahertys of the Island, and Fearons of Callow.'

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[7]    The three most well-known and honourable ancestors.

(90)  *Trí iontas Bhaile Fhobhair: Muileann gan sruth, Ancaire i
      gcloch, agus mainistir ar fhásach.* (U§18)

      'Three wonders of Fore: a mill without a stream, an anchor
      in a stone, and a monastery in the wilderness.'

(91)  *Gréasaí, úcaire, is muc – an triúr is sailiche (bréine) amuigh.*
      (M§2290)

      'A cobbler, a fuller and a pig – the three dirtiest (foulest) in
      existence.'

A notable subset of Irish triads reflects gendered stereotypes, social
anxieties, and misogynistic perspectives. No. 92 employs a structural
parallelism in listing three forms of 'excess' that are framed as use-
less or disruptive. The punchline—*An iomarca ban gan cardáil* 'wom-
en without carding'—links the social and economic value of women
to their productivity. This often occurs as a punchline. In No. 93, the
direct comparison of women to livestock reinforces the idea of stub-
bornness as a shared quality, and reflects deeply entrenched patriar-
chal views. In No. 94, the structure introduces two naturally energet-
ic  young animals (a kitten and a kid) before adding the unexpected
social metaphor (a young widow). The implied commentary reflects
anxiety over female sexuality and independence.

(92)  *Na trí rudaí is dona i dteach ariamh, An iomarca cúití (.i. cún-
      na) gan fiach, An iomarca capall gan treabhadh, An iomarca
      ban gan cardáil.* (C§5137)

      'The things worst things in a house ever, too many hounds
      without a raven, too many horses without ploughing, too
      many women without (wool-)carding.'

(93)  *Bean, muc agus múille, Na trí ní is deacra a mhúnadh.* (C§5124)

      'A woman, a pig, and a mule—the three hardest things to
      train.'

(94) *Na trí ní is mó giodam: piscín cait, meannán gabhair, nó bain-treach óg mhná* (M§2335)

'The three giddiest things: a cat's kitten, a goat's kid, and a young widow.'

In terms of rhetorical and cognitive structuring, Irish triads frequently employ contrastive juxtaposition, using literal elements followed by an (unexpected) abstract concept in end-position to create a narrative framing that enhances the proverb's rhetorical effect. For example:

(95) *Na trí nithe is géire ar bith, dealg múnlaigh, fiacail con, focal amadáin.* (C§5157)

'The three sharpest things: a thorn in sullage, a hound's tooth, a fool's word.'

This structure moves from physical sharpness (thorn, tooth) to metaphorical danger (a fool's word), reinforcing the proverb's didactic function. A hidden thorn in wastewater presents danger if stepped on; a hound's tooth causes injury if bitten; similarly, trusting a fool's word is equally dangerous. The escalation from concrete to abstract increases its persuasive impact. Whilst tetrads are not as common, we can see that they often make explicit comparisons between types of people based on physical appearance. The barb occuring in end-position also:

(96) *Fear dubh dana, Fear fionn glídiúil, Fear donn dualach, Fear rua scigiúil.* (U§44)

'A black-haired man is bold, A light-haired man is timid, A brown-haired man has luxuriant hair, a red-haired man is a scoffer.'

Many Irish triads are deeply embedded in cultural contexts, making their meaning opaque to outsiders or those unfamiliar with historical references and linguistic nuances. This issue is particularly pronounced in cases where the topic is omitted or unstated, leaving the listener to infer meaning through association. Unlike more explic-

it triads that provide a clear theme or evaluative framework, these elliptical triads rely on shared communal understanding. Two such examples illustrate the challenge of decoding:

(97)  *Fear grafa, fear fiaigh, agus fear gaoithe.* (M§2287)
      'A hoer/grubber, a huntsman, and a boaster.'

On the surface, this triad presents three distinct types of men—one who toils in the soil (*fear grafa* 'hoer/grubber'), one who chases after game (*fear fiaigh* 'huntsman'), and one who speaks much but does little (*fear gaoithe* 'boaster'). Without additional context, the connection between these categories may seem unclear, albeit that the 'boaster' is negative. A translation found in O'Rahilly (1922: 72), clarifies that 'huntsman' should not be understood in the positive occupational sense, but as a reference to a 'pleasure seeker.'[8]

(98)  *Tigh i liúb, ba dubha, agus bean mheirgeach.* (M§2310)
      'A house in a nook, black cows and an irritable woman.'

The triad in No. 98 is also cryptic, offering no explicit connection between its elements. Read through the lens of agricultural and domestic life, however, the logic emerges: a sheltered house, valuable cattle, and a formidable woman are all assets in their own right. The triad catalogues things worth having, grounded in pragmatic rather than abstract wisdom.

## 7. The Proverbial Question

The "proverbial question" has been recognized by folklore scholars, such as Dundes (1967), and Doyle (1975, 2008), as a distinct subform within the broader category of proverbs. Common Irish examples include sayings such as *Cad é bheifeá ag brath ar chat ach pisín* 'What should you expect from a cat but a kitten?' (U§264) and *Cad a dhéan-*

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[8]    *Tá trí saghas fear ann, –fear graftha, fear fiadhaigh, agus fear gaoithe* 'There are three kinds of men— the worker, the pleasure-seeker, and the boaster.' (O'Rahilly 1922: 72)

*fadh mac an chait ach luchóg a ghabhail* 'What should the son of a cat do but catch a mouse?'(M§2121).

Various terminological designations have been proposed for proverbial questions. Dundes (1967: 29–30) described them as "pointed rhetorical questions", while Doyle (1975, 2008) referred to them as "sarcastic interrogatives". Other scholars have adopted alternative terms, including "proverbial rhetorical questions (PRQs)" (Badarneh 2016). Doyle (2008: 9) has noted that linguistic scholarship often overlaps with but does not fully engage with the folklore tradition, identifying a wide range of linguistic labels for the phenomenon: "rhetorical questions used as answers" (Pope 1976: 2), "transparent questions" (Bowers et al. 1977: 237; Wilson 2002: 91), "apparent counter-questions" (Norrick 1984: 198), "irrelevant rhetorical questions" (Winegar and Valsiner 1992: 148), "rhetorical-questions-as-retorts" (Schaffer 2005: 435–437), among others. [9]

In many respects, proverbial questions resemble what Driver (1984: 299) terms *metaquestions*, which are second-order questions posed in response to first-order inquiries. Their full meaning depends on their relationship to the original question. Rather than offering a direct answer, metaquestions serve to challenge, clarify, or redirect the original inquiry, inviting further reflection or adjustment. Proverbial questions, although technically functioning as metaquestions insofar as they respond to an initial query, operate differently: they are not intended to open dialogue but rather to affirm shared cultural certainties and foreclose debate. In effect, the second-order question operates as an implicit answer to the first.

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[9]    "indirect answers" (Nofsinger 1976: 172–181), "indirect responses" (Pearce and Conklin 1979: 82–83), "interrogatively-coded answers" (Driver 1984: 308), "indirect affirmation" (Corbett 2003: 49), "statements by way of asking a question" (Bach 2004: 468), examples of "pragmatic shift associated with indirect assertion" (Sorensen 1988: 446), "a response rather than a reply" (Sherzer 2002: 127), a kind of "phrasal lexeme" (Moon 1998: 95), a kind of "formulaic implicature" (Bouton 1999: 67–70), a kind of "formulaic rhetorical" (Börjars and Burridge 2001: 127), a type of "echo question" (Teschner and Evans 2000: 88), a category of "questions with known answers" (Saeed 2003: 221)

A hypothetical example illustrates this dynamic. In conversation, a speaker might remark that a neighbour, seeking help from a politician, was summarily turned away. A respondent could answer with *Cad é bheadh súil agat a fháil ó bhó ach preab* 'What should you expect to get from a cow but a kick?' (U§267), signalling that the outcome was entirely predictable given the politician's character. Here, instead of questioning the situation or proposing alternatives, the proverbial question reinforces communal wisdom: certain behaviours are natural and inevitable. Thus, while metaquestions tend to destabilize the original inquiry, proverbial questions consolidate cultural knowledge into a rhetorically complete and socially endorsed response. As Driver (1984: 308) notes, such cases may be classified as "interrogatively coded answers".

Although proverbial questions are structurally framed as interrogatives, these expressions have the illocutionary force of strong assertions and are designed not to solicit an answer (Quirk et al. 1985: 825). Instead, their function is to reinforce obviousness. Their operation within discourse is fundamentally metaphorical, often relying on culturally salient imagery drawn from rural life and natural phenomena. Doyle (1975: 34) describes their function succinctly:

> The function of each such question is to respond derisively to a prior query, itself calling for a yes or no answer, so as to suggest that the answer to the original query is too obvious to be worth proffering seriously.

Typically used in reply to genuine information-seeking questions, proverbial questions preserve the surface form of *wh-* (open) or *yes–no* (closed) questions. However, they point not to new information but to an answer understood as obvious through implicature, depending heavily on shared cultural assumptions between speaker and hearer (Schaffer 2005). Their rhetorical force often acts as a playful rebuke, implying that the original question should not have needed to be asked. The answers to these questions are typically positive according to Dundes (1967), "most examples of pointed rhetorical questions express intense affirmation in response to a previous

question". Some Irish examples are shown below. As we can see, in the case of *wh*-questions, they all may be glossed as: *This is extremely natural, unexpected and unavoidable*. The *yes–no* question reveals an emphatic *yes*.

### wh-questions

(99) *Cad é dhéanfadh mac an chait ach luchóg a ghabhail.* (U§262)
  'What should the son of a cat do but catch a mouse?'

(100) *Cad é bheadh súil agat a fháil ó bhó ach preab.* (U§267)
  'What should you expect to get from a cow but a kick?'

(101) *Cad é an bac le mála na scadán boladh scadáin a bheith air?* (U§1674)
  'What should prevent the herring bag from having the odour of the herrings?'

(102) *Céard a bheadh súil agat a chloisteáil ó mhuc ach gnúsacht?* (C§2741)
  'What would you expect to hear from a pig but a grunt?'

### yes–no questions

(103) *An maith leis an gcat bainne leamhnachta?* (U§1766)
  'Does the cat like new milk?'

The content of proverbial questions relies overwhelmingly on what Schaffer describes as *synthetic truths*: statements that are true by virtue of real-world knowledge rather than purely definitional logic. For example, *An maith leis an gcat bainne leamhnachta?* 'Does the cat like new milk?' (U§1766) expects the rhetorical answer 'yes', a conclusion drawn from common knowledge of animal behaviour rather

than any analytic definition of 'cat' or 'milk'. Thus, proverbial rhetorical questions predominantly presuppose synthetic truths based on shared experience, particularly from agricultural and rural contexts. Expressions such as *Cad é bheifeá ag brath ar chat ach pisín* 'What should you expect from a cat but a kitten?' or *Cad é bheadh súil agat a fháil ó bhó ach preab* 'What should you expect to get from a cow but a kick?' exemplify this tendency. Doyle (1975: 34) has noted that such expressions frequently involve references to animals and natural life and often possess a distinctly rural flavour. Schaffer (2005) further demonstrates that proverbial quotations—or RQs-as-retorts—typically draw upon cultural knowledge relating to religion, wildlife, natural phenomena and human body functions.

While scholars such as Schaffer (2005), Dynel (2009), and Badarneh (2016) observe that humour often plays a central role in such forms—"being funny is yet another clearly intended purpose of the RQ in addition to answering a preceding question and implying the obviousness of that answer" (Schaffer 2005: 446)—this is less prominent in the Irish material at a decontextualized level. Haas (2013: 37), however, notes that they are 'almost always uttered with humorous intent, and they are interpreted as more humorous than more direct responses.' Below are some of the modes of creating humour identified by Schaffer (2005: 446–449).

- Incongruity: unexpected or bizarre phrasing imagery (*Do you enjoy acid rain?*)

- Superiority: mockery or playful aggression toward the original speaker (prompting question: Do you mind if I smoke? Response: *Do you mind if I fart?*)

- Corruptions: punning on familiar forms (*Is a bear Catholic? Does the Pope poop in the woods?*)

- Vulgarity: deliberate crudeness (*Does a snake shit close to the ground?*)

In English, proverbial questions frequently adopt a cruder or more humorous tone, particularly in informal speech. Expressions such

as *Does a bear fart [shit] in the woods?*, *Does shit stink?* (Doyle 1975: 34), *Has a cat got an ass?*, and *Does a rabbit shit cannon-balls?* (Dundes 1967: 29) serve the same rhetorical function as their Irish counterparts, namely, to affirm obvious truths, but do so through a markedly irreverent and colloquial register. Like Wellerisms, these expressions rely on vivid, earthy imagery to heighten rhetorical force and foster a sense of solidarity among ingroup speakers familiar with the form. It is likely that such expressions are more common among younger speakers and typically occur in spontaneous, peer-group conversation.

## 8. Concluding Remarks

Proverbial subforms—proverbial expressions, fixed comparisons, Wellerisms, enumerative proverbs, and proverbial interrogatives—deserve recognition as integral components of the Irish paremiological system. Though collectors have understandably grouped them with canonical proverbs, close analysis reveals their distinctive structural and functional properties. Proverbial expressions shift according to context, person, and tense; fixed comparisons trade on vivid cultural analogies; Wellerisms exploit syntactic schemata and semantic incongruencies for comic effect; enumerative proverbs organize knowledge through parallelism and rhythm; proverbial questions compress cultural wisdom into elliptical, often ironic form. What emerges from this examination is a mnemonic architecture built on contrast, parallelism, and semantic compression—devices that mirror canonical proverbs while also extending and parodying their functions.

The structural and stylistic strategies examined here sustain the mnemonic durability of Irish proverbial material. Yet as oral tradition recedes and the social contexts that nurtured these forms disappear, different subforms face different fates. Wellerisms and enumerative proverbs risk misrecognition or outright loss, while proverbial expressions, comparisons, and interrogatives adapt more readily and will likely continue in use, most probably in reduced form or as

translations of existing English forms. Documenting their structures clarifies the mnemonic principles that enabled these forms to circulate in Irish oral tradition and reveals why some may prove more adaptable than others as that tradition erodes.

# CHAPTER 3
# SYNTAX AND STRUCTURE

## 1. Introduction

This chapter investigates the syntactic and structural features of Irish proverbs as central elements of their mnemonic design. It examines how recurring syntactic patterns and formal markers contribute not only to the memorability of proverbs but also to their generative capacity within oral tradition. Particular emphasis is placed on emphatic constructions—such as clefting, left dislocation, and marked word order—which serve to foreground salient information and aid retention. The copular comparative structure (e.g. *Is fearr* X *ná* Y 'Better X than Y') is analysed as a foundational syntactic template, alongside classificatory and metaphorical copular forms that underpin a wide range of proverbial expressions. Through detailed analysis of these structures, the chapter demonstrates that Irish proverbs operate within a systematic syntactic framework, aligned with optionality in stylistic features, that supports both oral performance and the creative adaptation of traditional forms. This framework acts as a mnemonic architecture that ensures the durability of established proverbs while also enabling the formation of new expressions grounded in familiar structural models.[1]

## 2. Sentential and Phrasal Structures

Numerous academic studies have examined the syntactic, phonological, and semantic features that differentiate the proverb from

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[1]     Some of the analysis in this chapter is based on a syntactic survey of Irish proverbs first presented in Mac Coinnigh (2012), which examined a randomly selected corpus for structural patterns and formal markers. While the present chapter expands and recontextualizes those findings within the broader argument of the monograph, detailed citation of the earlier study is not repeated throughout for the sake of clarity and flow.

ordinary speech. Among these, the prevailing view, articulated by scholars such as Taylor (1931), Whiting (1932), Seitel (1969), Mieder (1993b), and Winick (2003), is that sentential brevity constitutes one of the proverb's most defining characteristics. The proverb is a sentence, and it is usually a short one:

> "An incommunicable quality tells us this <u>sentence</u> is proverbial and that one is not." (Taylor 1931: 3)

> "It is usually <u>short</u>, but need not be" (Whiting 1932, in Harris and Mieder 1994: 80)

> "That proverbs are <u>short</u> and traditional is a generally accepted feature of definition." (Seitel 1969: 144)

> "A proverb is a <u>short</u>, generally known <u>sentence</u> of the folk…" (Mieder 1985: 119)

> "Proverbs are <u>brief (sentence</u>-length) entextualized utterances…" (Winick 2003: 595)

Apart from Mieder (1985), these conclusions are not supported by quantitative analysis. The matter is further complicated by certain terminological ambiguities. Firstly, the adjective 'short' is subjective, and it is difficult to quantify what qualifies as a 'short' proverb, or when a 'short' proverb becomes a 'long' proverb. Secondly, the term 'sentence' relates to grammatical language units that comprise a minimum sense of unity and completeness (Greenbaum and Quirk 1990: 12), but this is not an entirely accurate description of proverbs, as some proverbs take the form of an ungrammatical phrasal unit, in which semantic relations must be inferred. For example, the verbless: *Garbage in, garbage out*. A quantitative analysis of word length in Irish-language proverbs reveals considerable structural variation that challenges the general assumption of proverbial brevity, with differences emerging according to sentence type (Mac Coinnigh 2012).

The four principal sentence types will now be examined in turn. Table 3.1 presents an overview of each structural category alongside a representative example (cf. Downing and Locke 2006).

Table 3.1. Sentence types in Irish proverbs

| Sentence Type | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Simple | Contains one independent clause and no dependent clauses. | *Aimsíonn an dall a bhéal* (M§211) 'The blind person finds their mouth.' |
| Compound | Contains two or more independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction (e.g. *and*, *but*, *or*) or a semicolon. | *Éist le fuaim na habhann agus gheobhair breac* (M§229). 'Listen to the sound of the river and you will catch a trout.' |
| Complex | Contains one independent clause and at least one dependent (subordinate) clause. | *An té ná bíonn bólacht ar cnoc aige bíonn suaimhneas ar sop aige.* (M§1354) 'He who has no cattle on the hill has peace on the straw.' |
| Compound-Complex | Contains two or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause. | *Ní hiad na fir mhaithe a bhaineann an fómhar go léir, Ach is iad na fir mhaithe a ghlacann na mná gan spré.* (M§340) 'It is not the good men who reap the entire harvest, but it is the good men who take wives without dowries.' |

## 2.1. Simple Sentences

Among the various syntactic structures represented in Irish proverbs, the simple sentence, comprising a single independent clause, is the most common. Approximately 57 per cent of all sampled Irish proverbs are simple sentences (Mac Coinnigh 2012). It can rightly be considered the quintessential proverb type in Irish, a pattern mirrored in both Hungarian and Russian traditions, as previously observed by Tóthné Litovkina (1990: 244). On average, simple sentence proverbs contain 6.5 words, and in line with Dundes' (1975) topic–comment theory, they tend to be declarative and non-oppositional in nature. That is, they present assertions or generalizations without relying on contrastive or antithetical elements. Consider the following:

(1)   *Aimsíonn an dall a bhéal.* (M§211)
      'The blind man finds his mouth.'

(2)   *Is deacair an saol a bharraíocht.* (C§3609)
      'It is difficult to understand/cope with life.'

(3)   *Is beag é toradh bó aonair.* (M§1996)
      'The yield of a single cow is small.'

The comparative structure *comparative + nominative + dative* is responsible for the high frequency of simple sentences as this is one of the most common structures in the dialectal collections, occurring in both positive (Nos. 4 and 5) and negated forms (No. 6), across a wide range of adjectives (Mac Coinnigh 2012):

*Comparative + nominative + dative*

(4)   *Is fusa scaipeadh ná cruinniú.* (U§774)
      'It is easier to scatter than to gather.'

(5)   *Is treise dúchas ná oiliúint.* (M§1610)
      'Heredity is stronger than training.'

(6)   *Ní críonna an cat ná an coinín.* (C§459)
      'The cat is no wiser than the rabbit.'

According to Ireland (1999: 10–11), this was one of the three principal formulae that were characteristic of three-word maxims found in the gnomic wisdom literature of Old Irish (*c.* AD 500–900). These patterns continue into Modern Irish, with evidence of sustained use of alliteration, a prominent feature in Old Irish maxims. Examples in Modern Irish not only replicate these syntactic patterns but also show the same attachment to alliteration, with some (e.g. No. 8) even showing the use of *epizeuxis*, i.e. "a rhetorical figure by which a word

is repeated for emphasis, with no other words intervening" (Baldick 2015– *epizeuxis*). According to Ireland (1999: 11), over 75 per cent of these three-word forms alliterate on the second and third words. Below are examples of these formulae:

*Verb + nominative + accusative*

    (7)   *Déanann ciste carthanacht.* (C§4442)

          'Wealth makes charity.'

    (8)   *Aithníonn spailpín spailpín eile.* (U§266b)

          'A wandering labourer recognizes another wandering labourer.'

    (9)   *Bailíonn brobh beart.* (M§1149)

          'A rush gathers a bundle.' (i.e. many a mickle makes a muckle)

*Noun + genitive + nominative*

    (10)  *Deireadh an donais an seanchapall bán.* (U§517a)

          'The end of all misfortune – the old white horse.'

    (11)  *Leigheas gach bróin comhrá.* (C§1187)

          'The cure for every sorrow – conversation.'

    (12)  *Lia gach boicht bás.* (M§195)

          'The physician of all poor – death.'

In addition to these long-standing proverbial structures, many of the simple sentence proverbs originate in simple maxims which, though unembellished, attain proverbial status through frequency and applicability. As Taylor (1931: 5) notes, they "consist merely of a bald assertion which is recognized as proverbial only because we have heard it often and because it can be applied to many different situ-

ations". It is unsurprising that many of these simple sentence state-
ments are from the familiar domains of sea and land, and rooted in
observations of the life within.

(13)  *Is maith iad na fir go ham caite cuid.* (M§99)
      'Men are good until mealtime.' (i.e. their work isn't to be
      praised after they eat)

(14)  *Ná bíodh amharc rófhada in do shúile.* (U§989)
      'Don't have a too far-away look in your eyes.'

(15)  *Ná bí dána ar an bhfarraige.* (C§1899)
      'Do not be bold on the sea.'

Simple sentence structures are also dominant in metaphorical prov-
erbs, as noted by Ezejideaku and Okeke (2008: 80–81). This form fre-
quently employs direct linguistic metaphor, wherein a familiar con-
cept (the vehicle) is used to express a broader principle (the topic)
with a clear semantic incongruity between the two domains (Cam-
eron 1999b: 118):

(16)  *Is iad na scadáin féar na farraige.* (C§355)
      'Herrings are the grass of the sea.'

(17)  *Is maith an t-eolaí an t-uireasa.* (M§1665)
      'Want is a good teacher.'

(18)  *Is maith an cuan an cúinne.* (M§1852)
      'The corner is a good harbour.'

## 2.2. Compound Sentences

The compound sentence, in which a coordinating conjunction (*and,
but, or*) joins two independent clauses, is found in fewer than one in
ten Irish proverbs (8 per cent).

(19)  *Imíonn an t-ór agus fanann an óinseach.* (M§342)

'Gold goes and the fool remains.'

(20)  *Is maith comhairle ach is fearr cabhair.* (M§1015)

'Advice is good but help is better.'

It is significant that, although it has more clauses than the simple sentence proverb, the compound sentence proverb is typically shorter and contains on average 5.8 words. In terms of word length, it is also the shortest of all the other types of sentential and phrasal structures. In spite of how uncommon these forms are, certain structural, grammatical, and thematic patterns are evident. The use of syntactic or structural parallelism is frequent, typically, for example, presenting two balanced parallel clauses that follow contrastive or comparative thematic patterns:

(21)  *Is é do mhac do mhac inniu, ach is í d'iníon d'iníon go deo.* (U§124)

'Your son is your son today, but your daughter is your daughter forever.'

(22)  *Is fada a bhíos duine ag fás ach is gearr a bhíos an bás á thabhairt leis* (C§4557)

'Long is a person growing but short is death in taking them away.'

A second noticeable pattern is the use of a conditional structure along the lines of the pattern 'do X and Y will happen'. The pattern creates a clear cause-and-effect relationship where performing or refraining from an action leads to a positive outcome or prevents a negative consequence. Proverbs are formulated on the grammatical pattern Imperative + Future Tense or Negative Imperative + Negative Future Tense.

*Imperative + Future Tense (both positive)*

    (23)  *Mol an óige is tiocfaidh sí.* (M§262)
          'Praise youth and it will flourish.'

    (24)  *Blais den bhia is tiocfaidh dúil agat ann.* (C§2096)
          'Taste the food and you'll develop a desire for it.'

    (25)  *Déan an fál nó íocfaidh tú foghail.* (C§640)
          'Make the fence or you'll pay for plundering.'

*Imperative + Future Tense (both negative)*

    (26)  *Ná bain le geis agus ní bhainfidh geis leat.* (C§39)
          'Don't meddle with a prohibition and the prohibition won't
          meddle with you.'

    (27)  *Ná bac le mac an bhacaigh is ní bhacfaidh mac an bhacaigh leat.*
          (M§98)
          'Don't meddle with the beggar's son and the beggar's son
          won't meddle with you.'

    (28)  *Ná bí lom leis an talamh agus ní bheidh an talamh lom leat.*
          (U§1532)
          'Don't be sparing with the land and the land won't be sparing
          with you.'

Thematically, the parallel structure of the compound sentence proves especially effective in framing contrast, where opposing ideas are set against each other, and in expressing reciprocity, where it highlights the mutual consequences that follow from a particular course of action. Some examples follow:

*Contrast*

    (29)  *Is milis fíon agus is searbh a íoc.* (C§4130)

'Wine is sweet, its payment is bitter.'

*Reciprocity*

(30) *Bain le ruincín agus bainfidh an ruincín leat.* (U§948c)

'Meddle with a peevish person and the peevish person will meddle with you.'

### 2.3. Complex Sentences

Complex sentences, comprising one main clause and at least one subordinate clause, account for roughly a quarter of Irish proverbs (Mac Coinnigh 2012). These constructions are syntactically denser than the simple sentences already discussed and tend to be longer, with an average length of 10.4 words. A notable stylistic feature is the frequent fronting of subordinate clauses to the beginning of the sentence, a rhetorical strategy that foregrounds particular semantic elements. This inversion functions primarily to heighten emphasis, enabling the subordinate clause to frame the interpretive context before the main assertion is introduced. This can be seen in the following examples:

(31) *Má thiteann cloch le fána(idh) is sa gcarnán a stadfaidh sé.* (U§510)

'If a stone falls down a slope, it will stop in the heap.'

(32) *Nuair a bhíos an deoch istigh, bíonn an chiall amuigh.* (U§684a)

'When the drink is in, the reason is out.'

Within the category of complex sentences, complex constructions favor a single subordinate clause over multiple layers of subordination. This preference reflects the proverb's pragmatic requirements: cultural knowledge must be conveyed in a form that remains concise, memorable, and effective in oral transmission.

*Singular*

(33) *An té a bhíos breoite ní bhíonn feoil air.* (M§170)

'The person who is sick, he does not have flesh.'

*Multiple*

(34) *An ní nach bhfeictear nó nach gcluintear, cha bhíonn trácht air.*
(U§1494)

'The thing that is neither seen nor heard, it is not talked about.'

→ Two subclauses (*nach bhfeictear, nach gcluintear*) before the main clause.

(35) *Is cuma leis an leanbh cá mbíonn a aghaidh nuair a ghoileann sé.* (M§110)

'The child doesn't care where his face is when he cries.'

→ Two subclauses (*cá mbíonn, nuair*) after the main clause.

The subordinate clauses found in complex sentences exhibit notable functional diversity, encompassing conditional, temporal, and concessive relationships to their governing clauses. This range allows proverbs to encode complex logical relationships while maintaining a relatively compact syntactic form. Particularly prominent is the use of conditional subordination, which succinctly captures the cause-and-effect reasoning. Examples include:

(36) *Má bhíonn dhá cheann an tí thrí thine, ní sheasfaidh an lár.*
(C§2960)

'If the two ends of the house are on fire, the centre will not stand.' [Conditional]

(37) *Nuair a fhágas na cait an baile bíonn na luchóga ag rince.*
(U§1350)

'When the cats leave home, the mice are dancing' [Temporal]

(38) *Cé gur fada an oíche, tig an lá fá dheireadh.* (U§574c)

'Though the night is long, the day comes at last.' [Concessive]

A closer examination of the internal structure of these complex sentences reveals distinctive patterns of complementation and modification that set them apart from those typically found in ordinary discourse. These patterns point to genre-specific syntactic conventions—structures that appear to have evolved in response to the rhetorical and pragmatic demands of the proverb as a form. In particular, the use of relative clauses with indefinite antecedents (e.g. *an té a …*'the person who') serves not only a grammatical function but also a didactic one, allowing the proverb to generalize behaviour and consequence through a compact, repeatable form. This is clearly illustrated in examples such as:

(39)  *An té nach gcaomhnaíonn beagán, cha bhíonn mórán aige.* (U§804)

'The person who will not spare a little, he will not have much.'

(40)  *An té nach bhfuil léim aige, cuimlíodh sé a thóin den gclaí.* (C§4868)

'The person who cannot jump, let him rub his backside on the fence.'

(41)  *An té a mbíonn an donas air ní chuirfeadh Éire an sonas air.* (M§1543)

'The person who is afflicted by misfortune, Ireland could not even bring him happiness.'

In these cases, the relative clause constructs a generic figure whose actions frame the moral logic of the statement, illustrating how structural choices in complex sentences are finely attuned to the communicative function of the genre.

## 2.4. Compound-Complex Sentences

The compound-complex structure is rarely found in Irish proverbs, possibly due to the fact that the syntax is more complicated due to

the multiplicity of clauses and subclauses (1 per cent). Evidence shows that these sentences are generally longer on average, at 10.3 words per proverb (Mac Coinnigh 2012). This structural complexity may hint at a literary source, as such extended forms are less suited to oral transmission and memorization than their simpler counterparts.

We have evidence of several distinctive patterns within these compound-complex structures. Particularly significant is the parallel construction pattern, where balanced clauses are juxtaposed to create symmetrical expressions of contrasting or complementary ideas (Nos. 42–44):

(42) *An té a bhíonn suas óltar deoch air, is an té a bhíonn síos luítear cos air.* (M§1383)

'The person who is up gets a drink in his honour, and the one who is down gets stepped on.'

(43) *Más maith leat do cháineadh, pós; más maith leat do mholadh, faigh bás.* (U§178)

'If you want to be criticized, marry; if you want to be praised, die.'

(44) *Maireann an chraobh ar an bhfál is ní mhaireann an lámh a chuir.* (M§186)

'The branch lives on the hedge but the hand that planted it doesn't live on.'

These compound-complex proverbs show syntactic complexity that enriches expression but places demands on memorability. Multiple clauses allow for nuanced relationships, and parallel structures create rhythmic patterns suited to oral delivery. However, as noted, the degree of extended syntactic parallelism in some of the proverbs may indicate literary compositions.

## 2.5. 'Non-sentential' Proverbs

Less than a tenth of Irish proverbs are phrasal (7 per cent). They are generally longer in terms of word length than any of the sentential proverbs, containing on average 13.4 words (Mac Coinnigh 2012). Although this may seem unexpected, in that there is no explicit grammatical connection between these phrases, it should be remembered that other factors facilitate an extended structure, particularly syntactical repetition (often together with lexical parallelism), parataxis, and ellipsis of redundant verbal constructs. We will examine these issues in greater detail in later sections.

## 3. Syntactic Parallelism

Parallelism, particularly syntactic and structural parallelism, is one of the most distinctive rhetorical strategies in proverbial expression. It involves the repetition of grammatical patterns across coordinated elements, whether these are individual words, phrases, clauses, or full sentences. Baldick (2015–*parallelism*) defines it as "The arrangement of similarly constructed clauses, sentences, or verse lines in a pairing or other sequence suggesting some correspondence between them. The effect of parallelism is usually one of balanced arrangement achieved through repetition of the same syntactic forms."

In Irish, this kind of structural symmetry often takes the form of *syndetic coordination,* using conjunctions like *agus* 'and', *nó* 'or', and *ach* 'but', or *asyndetic coordination,* where the connection between elements is conveyed by juxtaposition alone, without any linking word. This alignment of structure serves several rhetorical purposes: it reinforces meaning, aids memorability, highlights contrast and contributes to the rhythmic pacing that characterizes proverbial performance.

One especially common pattern involves the pairing of syntactically similar elements that are semantically linked, either through synonymy or contrast. Where the relationship is overtly oppositional, the result is often referred to as *antithetic parallelism.* Proverbs of

this kind frequently deliver evaluative or moral claims in a form that is both compact and rhetorically forceful.

Rothstein (1968: 269) identifies three main functions of parallelism in proverbial language: first, an aesthetic function, making the structure formally balanced; second, a semantic function, allowing comparisons to be drawn through syntactic mirroring; and third, a unifying function, where repeated patterns consolidate the proverb into a cohesive whole. Fabb (1997: 145) adds a further distinction between *structural* and *syntactic* parallelism, arguing that *syntactic* parallelism requires not just formal symmetry but also consistency in word class, grammatical role, and constituent order.

Parallelism has long been recognized as a defining feature of proverbial style across linguistic and cultural traditions. Taylor (1962: 143) considers it nearly ubiquitous, even in proverbs that lack metaphor, and notes that it often works hand-in-hand with contrast. In her work on Yiddish proverbs, Silverman-Weinreich (1981) points to the regular presence of parallelism, sometimes reinforced or replaced by other stylistic devices such as rhythm or non-canonical word order. Similarly, Arora (1994: 11) highlights the importance of syntactic symmetry in Spanish proverbs, often accompanied by ellipsis or contrast, and regards these features as grammatical markers of proverbiality. Mahgoub (1968: 37), in a rare quantitative study, found that nearly one-third of the Cairene proverbs she examined employed syntactic parallelism.

In the Irish tradition, syntactic parallelism is no less prominent. Robinson (1981: 281) and Ó Bric (1976: 35) both highlight its frequency, particularly in set constructions such as *Is fearr* X *ná* Y 'Better X than Y'. Robinson (1945: 4) calls this one of the most widespread syntactic templates in Irish proverbs, citing over a hundred instances in *Briathra Flann Fína* (Meyer, 1910). This comparative formula is also found cross-linguistically and was identified by Dundes (1975) as one of the five most frequent syntactic patterns in English proverbs.

Ó Bric further observes that parallel structures in Irish are often reinforced by sound devices such as alliteration, as well as by con-

trastive pairings, both of which enhance their memorability. Mac Coinnigh (2012) notes that approximately one-quarter of Irish proverbs exhibit some some form of syntactic parallelism, a proportion similar to Mahgoub's results for Cairene proverbs. In Irish, this symmetry appears across various grammatical levels, from word-pairings and phrasal groupings to full clauses, and occurs with or without overt coordinating conjunctions.

Overall we can see that structural parallelism is much more than just a stylistic embellishment. It functions as a key organizational principle in the shaping of Irish proverbs, supporting clarity, rhythm, and memorability, and it plays a central role as a *proverbial marker*. Its presence across cultures and languages only reinforces the point: this is not just a matter of form, but an important cognitive and stylistic device in proverbial language. We can now look at some examples.

### 3.1. Coordination: Syndetic and Asyndetic

Rothstein's (1968: 279) claim that parallelism is the basis for comparison and antonymy is clearly demonstrated in Irish. This is especially clear with regard to syndetic coordination, but there are also asyndetic examples in which a synonymous relationship is implied.

### 3.1.1. Syndetic Coordination

(45)   *Is fada a bhíonn an féar ag fás **is** is gearr a bhíonn an bás á chloí.* (M§187)

'Grass grows for long **and** death swiftly mows it down.'

(46)   *Fanann duine sona le séan, **agus** bheir duine dona dubhléim.* (U§934)

'The lucky man waits for prosperity **and** the unlucky man takes a blind leap.'

(47)   *Is maith comhairle **ach** is fearr cabhair.* (C§1351)

'Advice is good **but** help is better.'

### 3.1.2. Aysndetic Coordination

(48)  *I bhfad as amharc, I bhfad as intinn* (U§222)
      'Out of sight, out of mind.'

(49)  *Báisteach gheimhridh, báisteach mhillteanach*. (C§87)
      'Winter rain, terrible rain.'

(50)  *An chéad bhliain bliain na bpóg, An dara bliain bliain na ndorn.*
      (M§330)
      'The first year is the year of kisses, the second year is the
      year of punches.'

In Irish, the emphatic comparative copula structure has a syntactic structure that automatically generates parallel items, i.e. COP Comparative Adj X *than* Y, and, as a result, is the source of much of the parallelism. Krikmann's (2009) work on formal and content elements is relevant here. Formal elements (*f*-elements) in proverbs include structural components like relational words, modal terms, and syntactic patterns (e.g. conditional, comparative, and correlative structures). These elements form the logical framework of proverbs. Content elements (*c*-elements) are the meaning-carrying words in proverbs, divided into literal ($c^1$-elements) and figurative ($c^2$-elements) components. While *f*-elements provide the structure, *c*-elements deliver the proverb's specific message, either directly or metaphorically.

If we examine the lexical components in these proverbs in terms of the formal elements (*f*-elements) and content elements (*c*-elements) (Krikmann 2009: 22–23), it is clear that in cases of two single words or simple phrases in parallel, there are limited possibilities for assigning poeticality to the *c*-elements.[13]

> We treat the proverb text as internally heterogeneous and try to divide its lexical components into "content elements" (*c*-elements) and "formal" elements (*f*-elements) … the essence of this approach

is that it does not assign poeticalness to the proverb text as a whole – poeticalness is assigned only to some elements of it, e.g., to c-elements. (Krikmann 2009: 22–23)

## 3.2. Prosodic Markers

Optional poetic devices, such as rhyme, alliteration, and lexical repetition, are frequently found in these comparative structures. This would suggest that many were consciously shaped as poetic compositions rather than arising as spontaneous speech forms. It is likely, too, that an early rhythmically crafted exemplar served as a model for others that followed. Phonic markers such as these are especially common in proverbs containing parallelism, with rhyme to be found in over a quarter (28 per cent) and alliteration in almost two-thirds (39 per cent) (Mac Coinnigh 2004). As is well established, these poetic features play an important mnemonic role. The examples below illustrate how end rhyme, alliteration, and lexical repetition often work in tandem to enhance both form and function.

(51)  *Fómhair féarmhar, Earrach éagmhar.* (C§142)
      'A grassy autumn, a lean spring.'

(52)  *Millfidh bó buaile ach millfidh bean baile.* (C§4318)
      'A cow will destroy a milking-place but a woman will destroy a home.'

(53)  *Is fearr síorualach ná sárualach.* (M§1276)
      'Better a constant load than a heavy load.'

(54)  *Is fearr fuíoll madaidh ná fuíoll magaidh.* (U§1564b)
      'Better the victim of a dog than the victim of mockery.'

### 3.3. Chiasmus

We also find instances where lexical items are repeated in reverse order in the second half of a parallel structure, forming what is known as an AB:BA pattern. This rhetorical device is called *chiasmus*. Baldick (2015–*chiasmus*) notes the following:

> A *figure of speech by which the order of the terms in the first of two parallel clauses is reversed in the second. This may involve a repetition of the same words … in which case the figure may be classified as *antimetabole, or just a reversed parallel between two corresponding pairs of ideas. The figure is especially common in 18th-century English poetry, but is also found in prose of all periods. It is named after the Greek letter chi (χ), indicating a "crisscross" arrangement of terms.

Chiasmus not only contributes to the rhythmic cadence of the proverb but also reinforces the contrast at its core. The following examples illustrate these patterns in action:

(55)  *Is fearr eolas an oilc ná an t-olc gan eolas.* (C§2108)
      'Better the knowledge of misfortune than the misfortunate without knowledge.'

(56)  *Glacfaidh gach dath dubh ach ní ghlacfaidh an dubh dath.* (U§346)
      'Every colour will take black but black will not take (every) colour.'

### 3.4. Contrast: Antonymic

Many Irish proverbs rely on *antonymic opposition* to create rhetorical contrast. This is often achieved by pairing lexical items from semantically opposed fields such as size, time, direction, or moral character. These contrasts, embedded within syntactically parallel structures, heighten recall and memorability. The images are often memorable also. Consider, for example, No. 57, with the contrastive

pairing of *leon craosach i d'aghaidh* 'a ravenous lion in your face' versus *maidrín fealltach i do dhiaidh* 'a treacherous small dog behind you', which fuses threat with physical orientation and size. The following examples demonstrate opposing elements in structured comparison (*before/behind, small/large, early/late,*) with the contrast reinforced not just lexically but rhythmically.

(57) *Is fearr leon craosach i d'aghaidh ná maidrín fealltach i do dhiaidh.* (U§226)

'Better a ravenous lion before your face than a treacherous small dog behind you.'

(58) *Is fearr tine bheag a ghoras ná tine mhór a loscas.* (U§441)

'Better a small fire that warms than a large fire that burns.'

(59) *Is fearr éirí moch ná suí mall.* (U§794a)

*'Better to rise early than to sit late.'*

## 3.5. Gapping

'Gapping' is a term coined by Ross (1967, 1970) to describe the ellipsis of verb(s) in a series of coordinations. In coordinate clauses, redundant material found in the immediately preceding clause is 'gapped' or deleted in the second. Johnson (2014: 1) gives the following example:

(60) Some ate bean and others, rice.

In this example, the verb 'ate' is not repeated. The deleted verb can be indicated in subscript as follows: 'Some ate bean and others $_{ate}$ rice.'

In proverbial expressions that employ syntactic parallelism, particularly where clauses are coordinated, either syndetically or asyndetically, gapping can occur when identical or near-identical verb forms are shared across clauses. This ellipsis serves not only to

reduce redundancy but also to enhance rhythm. The following examples illustrate gapping in Irish proverbs. In each case, the elided material is indicated in subscript and smaller font:

(61) *Chan dual Satharn gan grian, ná ~~Chan dual~~ Domhnach gan aifreann.* (U§1446)

'It is not natural for Saturday to be without sun or <sub>It is not natural for</sub> Sunday without Mass.'

(62) *Tabhair do ghrá do do mhnaoi agus ~~tabhair~~ do rún do do dheirfír.* (M§47)

'Give your love to your woman and <sub>give</sub> your secret to your sister.'

(63) *As a ceann a fhaigheann an bhean fuacht; as a chosa ~~a fhaigheann~~ an fear ~~fuacht~~.* (M§168)

'Out of her head the woman gets cold; out of his feet the man <sub>gets cold</sub>.'

(64) *Ná labhair go deo nó ~~ná~~ smaoinigh fá dhó.* (C§658)

'Don't ever speak or <sub>don't</sub> think twice.'

(65) *An áit a mbíonn deatach, bíonn tine ~~ann~~.* (M§2554)

'Where there is smoke, fire is <sub>in it</sub>.'

In each of these cases, gapping allows the proverb to retain formal symmetry while omitting repetitive elements. This enhances syntactic economy and mnemonic fluency. As seen, it is particularly common in asyndetic constructions, where prosodic rhythm must carry the structural cohesion that is usually provided by repetition.

## 4. Parataxis

Parataxis (from Greek παρά 'beside' + τάξις 'arrangement') refers to the juxtaposition of equipollent constructions—structures of equivalent grammatical and semantic rank (Lakoff 1971)—linked through adjacency or punctuation rather than explicit coordination or subordination markers. This stands in contrast to hypotaxis (from Greek ὑπό 'beneath' + τάξις 'arrangement'), which employs conjunctions to establish hierarchical relationships between clauses. As Halliday et al. point out:

> Degree of interdependency is known technically as taxis; and the two different degrees of interdependency as parataxis (equal status) and hypotaxis (unequal status). Hypotaxis is the relation between a dependent element and its dominant, the element on which it is dependent. Contrasting with this is parataxis, which is the relation between two like elements of equal status, one initiating and the other continuing. (Halliday et al. 2014: 440)

Scholarly opinion remains divided on the precise scope of parataxis. De Vries (2008), Fowler and Kress (1996), and Turner (1973) include coordination within the paratactic domain, whereas Short (1996) and Wales (2001) argue that coordination lies outside the paratactic framework. This chapter adopts the latter, more narrowly defined interpretation.

The absence of explicit connectives in paratactic structures necessitates that readers infer relationships between adjacent elements through alternative means: logical progression, temporal sequence, causal connection, or similarity of manner (Wales 2001: 285). Whilst parataxis creates a relation between linguistic elements of equal status, the semantic relationship remains implicit rather than overtly marked. The cognitive effect is significant: paratactic coordination challenges the addressee to actively construct grammatical and semantic relationships between contiguous constituents and synthesize a coherent, unified meaning from seemingly discrete elements. Hauser captures this interpretive dynamic:

> The lack of conspicuous links between the parts presents the au-
> dience with disjointed and seemingly unrelated elements, causing
> the audience to ask questions and use its imagination in an attempt
> to fill the gaps and relate the adjacent members to one another. As
> a result of its search, the audience comes to see that the elements
> which initially seem to exist independently of one another, or even
> to clash, are in fact part of a more basic unity which lies behind all
> the parts. (Hauser 1980: 26)

This rhetorical power extends beyond classical rhetoric into ev-
eryday communicationm, making parataxis extremely common
in ordinary speech and, consequently, in oral literature, including
proverbs. Studies of proverbial style have documented paratactic
structures across a diverse range of traditions, including Ancient
Greek, Arabic, Czech, English, French, German, Latin, Polish, Rus-
sian, Spanish, and Yiddish (cf. Arora 1961; Mahgoub 1968; Rothstein
1968; Russo 1983; Silverman-Weinreich 1981).

Despite its cross-linguistic presence, however, parataxis occupies
a surprisingly marginal position in the hierarchy of proverbial sty-
listic features. Neither Mahgoub (1968: 37) nor Silverman-Weinreich
(1981: 76) identify parataxis as a dominant structural marker in their
statistical analyses, even when it appears with syntactic and seman-
tic parallelism or contrast. Quantitative analysis reveals parataxis in
merely 6 per cent of the Irish proverb corpus (Mac Coinnigh 2012).

Several conclusions may be drawn regarding the nature and form
of parataxis in Irish proverbs. From a syntactic perspective, juxta-
posed noun phrases constitute the predominant elements (84 per
cent, Mac Coinnigh 2004). In these instances, noun phrases are posi-
tioned in juxtaposition:

(66)  *Ceo soininne ar aibhnibh, ceo doininne ar chnocaibh.* (M§1857)
      'Fair-weather mist on rivers, storm-weather mist on hills.'


(67)  *Céadghrá mná, dara grá fear.* (C§3321)
      'A woman's first love, men's second love.'

Ellipsis of the verb, particularly the verb 'to be', remains a common feature of paratactic proverbs. Irish, as a VSO (Verb Subject Object) language, differs fundamentally from English in that potentially redundant verbs do not occupy central syntactic positions separating parallel structures, as in the English example 'first come [is] first served'. Instead, in identificatory sentences, the copula occupies sentence-initial position followed by definite noun phrases. Certain proverbs featuring this sentence type demonstrate ellipsis of the initial copula, with subsequent concatenation of adjacent phrases marked by punctuation (in transcription, punctuation, typically a semicolon or comma, indicates a pause in oral delivery). Consider these examples:

(68)   [Is é] *Mac an duine shona ábhar an duine dhona.* (M§1562)
       'The son of the happy man is the makings of the bad man.'

(69)   [Is é] *Mac an tsaoir ábhar an tuata.* (M§1183)
       'The carpenter's son is the making of the layman.'

(70)   [Is é] *Múnadh an mhadaidh múnadh an teaghlaigh.* (C§419)
       'The manners of the dog is the manners of the household.'

There is some evidence for asyndetic coordination of simple sentences. In contrast, compound sentences, which rely on overt coordination, appear to be infrequent. More syntactically complex constructions, such as complex and compound-complex sentences, do not exhibit paratactic structures at all, since they are by nature built on subordination and the hierarchical relationship between main and subordinate clauses. The following example illustrates the juxtaposition of simple sentences without coordinating markers:

(71)   *Deireadh gach cumainn scaoileadh, deireadh gach cogaidh síoth.* (C§1679)
       'The end of every union is separation, the end of every war is peace.'

In contrast to Hauser's (1980: 26) assertion of a "lack of conspicuous links" between juxtaposed elements more generally, Irish proverbs often exhibit stylistic devices that subtly bind such constituents together. These cohesive strategies, which serve to establish relationships between noun phrases or clauses, include lexical and grammatical parallelism, as well as prosodic devices like rhyme and alliteration. Of these, lexical repetition is particularly prominent, often employed not merely for emphasis but to mark contrastive relationships between parallel structures. As Hoey (1991: 20) notes, repetition creates a structural frame that orients the hearer or reader toward novel material in subsequent clauses, or, in the case of Irish proverbs, more typically in the succeeding phrase.

The following examples illustrate a common rhetorical strategy, the repetition of a fixed structural formula, such as *fear gan* 'a man without' in this instance, with a minimal paradigmatic substitution in the final lexical slot. These structures are notable for their syntactic predictability, which contrasts with the semantic suspense generated through the last term. The closing lexical item not only completes the grammatical frame but also carries the weight of the proverb's pragmatic force.

(72)  *Fear gan leabhar, fear gan eolas.* (M§1227)
      'A man without a book, a man without knowledge.'

(73)  *Fear gan airgead, fear gan tairbhe.* (C§807)
      'A man without money, a man without benefit.'

(74)  *Fear gan bróga, fear gan sólás.* (C§2108)
      'A man without shoes, a man without joy.'

Syntactic parallelism constitutes another significant collocational feature of these proverbs. This symmetrical structuring signals semantic correlations between constituents, often simultaneously incorporating additional poetic embellishments such as stress and

rhythmic equivalence. O'Rahilly (1921) traces the origins of many such expressions to the poetic tradition of the Early Modern period, attributing their composition to members of the professional bardic class. He categorizes these stylized utterances under the term *dánf-hocail*, which are epigrammatic forms rooted in the conventions of syllabic verse (1921: Preface). The example below epitomizes such literary constructions, exhibiting an identical syntactical structure, repeated initial lexical items (*Deireadh gach* 'The end of every …'), and parallel initial consonantal patterns (D-G-C-S):

(75) **D**eireadh **g**ach **c**umainn **s**caoileadh, **d**eireadh **g**ach **c**ogaidh **s**íoth. (C§1679)

'The end of every relationship separation, the end of every war peace.'

Similarly in No. 76, this four-part proverb showcases perfect isocolon in quatrain form, with syntactic repetition of the *Deireadh gach* X Y structure. The lexical substitution in each phrase builds on the conceptual motif of transience and inevitable decline. Not only are the grammatical forms mirrored, but the rhythmic cadence is preserved across each line until broken in the fourth final element with *osna* 'sigh'. This 'sigh' delivers the emotional culmination, giving the proverb a tonal descent that echoes its thematic content. This example also has been collected in O'Rahilly (1921: 50).

(76) *Deireadh gach loinge báthadh, deireadh gach áithe loscadh, deireadh gach coirme cáineadh, deireadh gach gáire osna.* (U§40a)

'The end of every ship [is] sinking, the end of every kiln [is] burning, the end of every feast [is] reproach, the end of every laugh [is] a sigh.'

Phonic markers are among the most striking and recognizable features of paratactic proverbs in Irish. Rhyme appears in roughly two-fifths of cases (34 per cent), while alliteration is found in well over half (59 per cent) (Mac Coinnigh 2012). Given these frequencies, it is not surprising that many proverbs feature both devices working to-

gether. These sound patterns often accompany lexical repetition and syntactic parallelism, contributing to the proverb's entextualization as a distinct, quotable utterance set apart from ordinary speech.

(77)  *Sagart b**albh**, sagart de**albh***. (C§2053)
       'A mute priest, a statue priest.'

(78)  *Suairc an taobh amu**igh**, duairc an taobh ist**igh***. (U§1006)
       'Cheerful the outside, gloomy the inside.'

(79)  *Páighe an asail, **b**ata agus **b**óthar*. (C§1572)
       'The donkey's pay: a stick and road.'

(80)  ***F**ómhair **f**éarmhar, **E**arrach **é**agmhar*. (C§142)
       'A grassy harvest, a barren spring.'

This particular combination of lexical, syntactic, and prosodic stylistic devices in paratactic structures facilitates cognitive processing and cultural transmission rather than serving merely ornamental purposes.

## 4.1. Semantic Patterns in Juxtaposed Irish Proverbial Structures

In the case of asyndetic juxtaposition in Irish phrasal proverbs, meaning often arises from the associative relationship between adjacent phrases. These relationships may be difficult to discern, particularly when proverbs are encountered in isolation or removed from their original performance context. Nevertheless, close analysis of stylistic features and conventional usage reveals consistent semantic patterns. Across Irish proverbs, three primary relational types emerge in such juxtapositions: equivalence structures, causal relationships, and contrastive oppositions.

### 4.1.1. Equivalence Structures

The first structural type comprises constructions that demonstrate *semantic equivalence or identity* between two conjoined elements. In these expressions, the first phrase is echoed or complemented by the second, establishing a propositional relationship that can be represented as X = Y. This parallelism serves a rhetorical purpose by reinforcing the message through formal symmetry. Such expressions often appear as rhythmically balanced pairs, which enhances their memorability. The examples below illustrate this structural and semantic pattern.

(81) *Éagóir os cionn gach éagóra, éagóir a dhéanamh ar dhuine maith.* (U§359)

'Injustice beyond all injustice, to do an injustice to a good person.'

(82) *Moladh na máthar cáineadh na hiníne* (M§87)

'The mother's praise the daughter's criticism.'

(83) *Cairde go lá, cairde go brách.* (U§545)

'A postponement till morning a postponement forever.'

### 4.1.2. Causal Relationships

The second category consists of proverbial constructions that express a *causal or conditional relationship* between two elements. Typically, the first phrase introduces a situation, trait, or condition, while the second presents the resulting outcome—establishing a sense of logical sequence or inevitability. These patterns can be broadly abstracted as *If* X*, then* Y, or *Possession of A leads to consequence B*.

(84) *Lánchuid ghaolta, gannchuid chairde.* (U§232)

'A great many relatives, few friends.'

(85)  *Beagán a rá, furasta a leigheas.* (U§419a)
      'Little to say, easy to cure.'

(86)  *Máthair choséadrom iníon choséadrom.* (M§93)
      'A light-footed mother, a light-footed daughter.'

### 4.1.3. Contrastive Oppositions

The final structural category consists of proverbs whose meaning and rhetorical impact rely on *contrastive or antonymic pairing*. These constructions set opposing ideas in deliberate juxtaposition, allowing meaning to emerge from the tension between them. This kind of contrast often produces a deeper semantic effect than either phrase could achieve alone. They usually feature bipartite or quadripartite repetition, and are often enhanced by rhyme, alliteration, or other prosodic markers. Here are some examples:

(87)  *Bogha fliuch na maidne, bogha tirim an tráthnóna.* (U§1453)
      'The wet rainbow of the morning, the dry rainbow of the evening.'

(88)  *Suairc an taobh amuigh, duairc an taobh istigh.* (U§1006)
      'Cheerful the outside, gloomy the inside.'

(89)  *Lá brónach dá phósadh, lá deorach dá chur.* (C§683a)
      'A sad day for one's marriage; a tearful day for one's burial.'

(90)  *Suí mhic i dteach a athar, suí leathan socair; Ach suí an athar i dteach a mhic, suí cruinn corrach.* (U§103)
      'A son's sitting in his father's house, a long comfortable sit; but a father's sitting in his son's house, a short, restless sit.'

## 5. *Emphatic Word Order*

The concept of *emphatic word order* has received sustained attention in paremiological research as a distinguishing grammatical feature of proverbs (Arora 1984: 11). While its prominence varies cross-linguistically, it is widely recognized as a key strategy for marking proverbial utterances. Silverman-Weinreich (1981: 75), in her analysis of Yiddish proverbs, regards emphatic word order as one of the more frequent "optional" markers, often found alongside conditionals, comparatives, imperatives, and rhetorical questions. However, she notes that emphatic syntax and syntactic parallelism rarely co-occur within individual proverbs. By contrast, Mahgoub's (1968: 32) quantitative study of Cairene Arabic proverbs finds little evidence of emphatic constructions, which appear only once in a sample of 900, suggesting that their stylistic significance is language specific.

In Irish, where prosodic stress is not available as a focusing device, syntactic foregrounding becomes the principal mechanism for emphasis. This is most often achieved through cleft constructions, wherein a constituent (subjects, objects, adjectives, verbal noun complements, and prepositional or adverbial phrases) is fronted via the copula and followed by a relative clause, thereby highlighting the semantic weight of the fronted element (Filppula 1999; Stenson 1981: 99; Mac Eoin 1986; Ó Siadhail 1989).

> The rigidity of the VSO order, together with the fact that Irish does not use sentence stress as a focusing device, explains why one particular structural device, namely the so-called copula construction, has come to be the major means of focusing in Irish. (Filppula 1999: 243)

As Hickey (2012: 152) argues, such structural reorganization in proverbs also serves a mnemonic function. The marked word order creates cognitive salience that enhances memorability. Furthermore, Filppula (1999: 243–245) suggests that the prevalence of cleft constructions in Irish proverbial discourse represents a distinctive feature of Celtic linguistic aesthetics more broadly, contributing to

the rhetorical character of Irish speech. Cleft sentences in Irish are relatively common (13 per cent of proverbs contain the structure, Mac Coinnigh 2012). They are typically simple sentences containing a single clause and are only infrequently negated (1 in 10 on average). Fronting occurs across a broad range of constituent elements:

**Noun phrase**

(91)   *Is é **an madarua** is túisce a fhaigheann boladh a bhroma féin.* (M§2119)

'It is **the fox** that first smells its own stink.'

(92)   *Ní hé **an crann a bhíos i bhfad ag crith** an chéad chrann a thuiteas.* (C§2886)

'It is not **the tree that trembles the longest** that falls first.'

(93)   *Is é **an gad is giorra don scornaigh** is córa a réiteach ar dtúis.* (M§1576)

'It is **the noose closest to the throat** that should be loosened first.'

**Adverb**

(94)   *Is **minic** cuma aingil ar an diabhal féin.* (U§1042)

'It is **often** the appearance of an angel on the devil himself.'

(95)   *Is **annamh** a thigeas fear na síochána sábháilte.* (U§885b)

'It is **seldom** the peacemaker comes off safe.'

(96)   *Is **socair** a chodlaíos duine ar chneá dhuine eile.* (U§221)

'It is **soundly** that a person sleeps on another person's wound.'

**Adverbial phrase**

(97)   *Is **tar éis stoirme** a thig síth.* (U§1538)

'It is **after the storm** that peace comes.'

(98) Is **_beagán ar bheagán_** *a d'ith an cat an scadán.* (M§2150)

'It is <u>little by little</u> the cat ate the herring.'

**Prepositional phrase**

(99) Is **_den imirt mhaith_** *an choimhéad.* (U§890)

'It is **of good play** caution.'

(100) Is **_as an chuideachta mhór_** *is minic a thig an dúbhrón.* (U§1586)

'It is **from great company** that sorrow often comes.'

Not all constituents are subject to high levels of fronting, however, and Stenson (1981: 99–100) claims that there is a particularly low level of adjectival fronting in Irish because not all adjectives can be clefted freely, and because, overall, those that may be clefted are usually found in interrogative or exclamatory forms, e.g. *Nach dána atá tú*! 'Aren't you BOLD!'. Ó Siadhail (1989: 237), on the other hand, says that adjectival fronting is restricted to a contrastive function (e.g. *Tá sé tinn* 'He is sick' may be clefted as *[Is] tinn atá sé* 'He is *sick*') as adjectives in fronted positions would demand a straight copula sentence as opposed to a cleft construction. There are examples, nevertheless:

(101) Is **_buíoch_** *a bhíos an bocht ar an mbeagán.* (C§1039)

'It is **grateful** the poor person is for little.'

(102) Is **_sásta_** *a bhíonn an bhó nuair a bhíonn an lao lena chois.* (M§258)

'It is **content** that the cow is when the calf is beside it.'

In the Irish language, as in numerous other linguistic systems, ellipsis functions as a grammatical mechanism for eliminating predictable sentential components to achieve emphasis. The copula, occupying a highly anticipated sentence-initial position in cleft constructions, is particularly susceptible to ellipsis. However, this phenomenon operates within specific constraints. As Ó Siadhail observes in his sem-

inal work on Modern Irish grammar, copula ellipsis, while possible, faces significant restrictions:

> A very general rule which seems to apply to all dialects is that the copular form *is* may be deleted at the start of a sentence. This can be stated negatively by saying that the copula may not normally be deleted when marked for mood, tense, negation, interrogation or when embedded in a sentence. (Ó Siadhail 1989: 244)

Two types of copular constructions in Irish proverbs exhibit ellipsis. Particularly common is the omission of the initial copula in identificatory, or equative, sentences, i.e. those that assert identity between two noun phrases (Nos. 103 and 104). It is important to differentiate identificatory structures from cleft constructions, in which the copula serves not to equate but to highlight a specific constituent for emphasis. Although both equative and cleft constructions may involve ellipsis of the copula and appear superficially similar, they are grammatically distinct. The equative construction expresses nominal predication, while the cleft introduces contrastive or focal emphasis. The ellipsis observed in equative sentences functions independently of the discourse-pragmatic mechanisms associated with clefting and should therefore be treated as a separate syntactic and functional phenomenon.

**Identificatory sentence**

(103)  [Is é] *An t-earra deireanach an t-earra is fearr.* (C§3292)
  '[It is] the last item that is the best.'

(104)  [Is é] *An chuid is lú den dlí an chuid is fearr.* (C§2605)
  '[It is] the smallest part of the law that is the best.'

*5.1. Left Dislocation and Topicalization*

Beyond copular constructions, Irish employs two additional principal syntactic mechanisms for constituent foregrounding: *left dislocation* and *topicalization*. Whilst exhibiting superficial structural sim-

ilarities, these constructions manifest distinct clefting patterns with significant pragmatic implications for proverbial discourse.

### 5.1.1. Left Dislocation

In left-dislocation constructions, a sentential constituent occupies the sentence-initial position, while its canonical syntactic slot within the main clause is simultaneously filled by a co-referential anaphoric element. This is typically a pronominal form or prepositional pronoun, or lexical noun phrase. Consider the following examples:

(105)  *An fear a cháineas mo ghearrán, ceannóidh **sé** mo ghearrán.* (U§1020a)

'The man who dispraises my horse, **he** will buy my horse.'

(106)  *An saol mór is an domhan donn, cha chuirfeadh **sé** feoil ar thóin lom.* (U§744)

'The world and the solid earth, **it** would not put meat on a bare posterior.'

(107)  *An chailleach is sine is **í** is míne.* (M§64)

'The oldest hag, **she** is the most gentle.'

This type of syntactic reduplication produces a distinct pragmatic effect: the dislocated constituent is thematized—that is, placed in initial position for emphasis—while the clause retains its canonical argument structure. Left dislocation occurs most frequently in spontaneous speech and narrative contexts, particularly when the topicalized element includes a complex or extended relative clause. In such cases, this strategy helps avoid semantic ambiguity or interpretative confusion by clarifying referents before the main clause unfolds (cf. Ó Siadhail 1989: 213). By fronting the referent and repeating it within the main clause, the structure offers a clear frame for interpreting more complex content.

Left dislocation with topic repetition is especially common in proverbial expressions. As Ó Siadhail (1989: 212) notes, it frequently appears in what he refers to as "maxim-type" sentences, especially those beginning with *an té* 'the person who', where the absolute topic is stated initially and then repeated nominally in the main clause. Some illustrative examples follow:

(108)   *An té a chaomhnaíonn an slat, milleann **sé** an mac.* (U§110)
          'He who spares the rod, **he** spoils the child.'

(109)   *An té a bhíos bocht bíonn **sé** scéaltach.* (C§794)
          'He who is poor, **he** is news-bearing.'

(110)   *An té a théas i bhfad, téann **sé** chun siobairne.* (C§2936)
          'He who goes far, **he** falls into neglect.'

Three additional recurrent base formulae, *an áit* 'the place where', *an ní* 'the thing that', and *an rud* 'the thing that', function similarly to *an té* 'he who' in proverbs exhibiting left dislocation. In each case, the element to be foregrounded is positioned sentence-initially, and followed by a main clause containing an anaphoric pronominal reference back to this initial constituent.

(111)   *An áit a rachaidh an lámh, caithfidh an chos a dhul **ann**.*
          (U§1370)
          'Where the hand goes, the foot must go **in it**.'

(112)   *An ní nach n-itear agus nach ngoidtear, gheofar **é**.* (U§1549a)
          'The thing that is neither eaten nor stolen, **it** will be found.'

(113)   *An rud a ghintear sa gcnáimh, is deacair **a** bhaint as an bhfeoil.*
          (C§2730)
          'The thing that is bred in the bone, it is hard to take **it** out of the flesh.'

Of course, there are also more specific examples of fronted noun phrase subjects containing a relative clause:

(114) *An bharrainn a bhíonn mór, bíonn an fata mór **fúithi**.* (C§1920)
'The stalk that is large, there is a big potato **under it**.'

(115) *An duine a cháineas a thír is a cheileas a mhuintir, níl aon mhaith **ann**.* (C§3920)
'The person who criticizes his country and denies his people, there is no good **in him**.'

(116) *An lon dubh a sheinneas go binn sna Faoillidh, Golfaidh **sé** go crua sa Mhárta.* (U§1419a)
'The blackbird that sings sweetly in February, **it** will cry bitterly in March.'

Stenson (1981: 47) contends that the fronting of simple noun phrase (NP) subjects is not permitted in Irish syntax, describing such usage as "decidedly weird" and suggesting that only complex NPs, particularly those involving relative clauses, may occupy sentence-initial position. However, examples drawn from the dialectal collections challenge this position. There are instances where simple NPs are clearly fronted, without the presence of a copula at the beginning of the sentence or a relative clause following the dislocated element (Mac Coinnigh 2012). These constructions, as with many other proverbs, are marked by stylistic features typical of literary formulations, including the use of alliteration and syntactic parallelism, which serve to enhance their mnemonic appeal:

(117) *Duine le Dia, b'fhearr leis bia ná bean.* (U§93)
'A person with God (=pious person), he would prefer food to a woman.'

(118) *Leanbh gan mháthair, ní binn é a ghol agus ní geal é a ghaire.* (M§109)

'A child without a mother, its cry is not sweet and its laugh is not happy.'

(119)   *An iomarca aithne, méadaíonn sé an tarcaisne.* (C§1634)
        'Too much familiarity, it increases contempt.'

## 5.1.2. Topicalization

Topicalization constructions, by contrast, involve the fronting of a constituent element through clefting processes, thereby establishing it as the discourse *topic*. This movement creates a syntactic gap in the main clause which the fronted element is interpreted as filling. This pattern aligns with cross-linguistic topicalization phenomena documented by Gregory and Michaelis (2001: 1665), who note that topicalization typically involves the establishment of contrast sets in discourse. For example:

(120)   *In am na ceithre aithnítear an charaid.* (U§186b)
        'In the time of need a friend is known.'

(121)   *I lár an tsóláis cuir deireadh leis.* (U§967b)
        'In the middle of joy end it. (i.e. stop when the going is good)

## 5.2. Subclausal Fronting

Irish proverbs frequently employ clause-initial positioning of subordinate elements, with conditional constructions demonstrating this structural tendency most prominently. The conditional system in Irish operates through a binary distinction: the particle *má* (with its negative counterpart *mura*) signals realistic or feasible conditions (realis), whereas *dá* (negative form *mura*) introduces hypothetical or counterfactual scenarios (irrealis). This systematic differentiation allows for nuanced expression of possibility and probability within proverbial discourse. The syntactic arrangement typically positions the conditional clause (*protasis*) at the beginning of the utterance,

followed by the consequential clause (*apodosis*), a pattern that creates distinctive rhythmic and rhetorical effects characteristic of traditional Irish proverbial speech.

*realis* Condition

(122) *Má bhíonn dhá cheann an tí thrí thine, ní sheasfaidh an lár.* (C§2960)

'If the two ends of the house are on fire, the middle will not stand.'

*irrealis* Condition

(123) *Dá mbeadh cuingir ag an bhfiach, ba mhinic a liach fliuch.* (C§3845)

'If the raven had a yoke, its tongue would often be wet.'

Temporal adverbial subordinate clauses frequently appear in sentence-initial position in Irish proverbs, especially those introduced by the particle *nuair* 'when' followed by a relative clause. As we have seen already, this type of syntactic fronting departs from the canonical word order and creates emphasis through displacement. Its regular occurrence in proverbial discourse—particularly in complex sentence structures—suggests that this marked word order is not actually incidental but is a preferred rhetorical strategy within the genre. This pattern reflects a broader tendency in Irish oral tradition to use syntactic foregrounding to enhance both memorability and pragmatic impact.

**Fronting**

(124) *Nuair a thiocfaidh lá tiocfaidh comhairle.* (M§1013)

'When the day will come, counsel will come.'

(125) *Nuair a bhíonn bolg an chait lán, ghnídh sé crónán.* (U§251)

'When the cat's stomach is full, he purrs.'

*5.3. Emphasis in Classificatory Copulative Sentences*

In Irish, classificatory copula constructions, where a copula is fol-
lowed by an indefinite noun and then a pronoun or definite noun,
e.g. *Is fear é* 'He is a man', allow for a stylistic manipulation in which
an attributive adjective is fronted for the purposes of emphasis. This
is achieved by placing the adjective immediately after the copula and
converting the noun phrase into a definite construction:

(126)   *Is fear mór é.*
        'He is a big man.'

(127)   *Is mór an fear é.*
        'He is a big man.' (with emphatic focus on *mór* 'big')

This form of adjectival fronting is not simply a syntactic variant but
functions as a rhetorical strategy, particularly in proverbial contexts.
It serves to foreground the quality being ascribed, and thus enhanc-
es the evaluative or metaphorical force of the utterance. What is par-
ticularly noteworthy is that this pattern frequently occurs in meta-
phorical proverbs, where the relationship between tenor and vehicle
domains is marked by a degree of semantic incongruity or abstrac-
tion. Moreover, a significant number of these expressions feature the
adjective *maith* 'good' as the fronted qualifier, suggesting the exis-
tence of a productive proverbial template centred on this structure.
Some examples are below:

(128)   *Is **maith** an scáthán súil charad.* (U§186)
        'A friend's eye is a **good** mirror.'

(129)   *Is **maith** an scéalaí an aimsir.* (M§1946)
        'Time is a **good** storyteller.'

(130)   *Is **maith** an t-ancaire an t-iarta.* (M§1853)
        'The hob is a **good** anchor.'

The final structural type involves the use of abstract nouns of degree or quality to express comparative relationships. In this pattern, the comparative force is carried not by adjectives alone, but by the noun phrase itself, which serves as the standard against which another state or outcome is measured. Examples include:

(131) *Dá fheabhas an chuartaíocht, is fearr an baile.* (C§3952)
'However pleasant visiting is, home is better.'

(132) *Dá dhonacht é an baile, is fearr é ná an choimhthíocht.* (C§3952)
'However bad home is, it is better than the foreign.'

(133) *Dá mhéad grá máthar dá céadmhac, is seacht mó a grá dá haonmhac.* (C§1577)
'However great a mother's love for her first son, the love of her only son is seven times greater.'

(134) *Dá laghad an gabhar, is cabhair do Phádraig é.* (C§2164)
'However small the goat, it is a help to Patrick.'

In each case, the *comparative concessive clause* (*dá* + degree form), establishing a scalar framework which is then countered or resolved in the main clause.

### 5.4. Comparative Copulative Structures

The emphatic copular construction in Irish derives from the more neutral base form featuring the substantive verb *bí*. This unmarked pattern typically takes the form:

(135) *Tá* X *níos fearr ná* Y.
'X is better than Y.'

By contrast, the marked copular form is syntactically distinct and rhetorically more forceful:

(136)  *Is fearr* X *ná* Y.

       'Better X than Y.'

The latter belongs to what Thompson (1974: 40) describes as the "value comparison" structure, a configuration with deep roots in biblical and wisdom literature, particularly across the Middle Eastern tradition (cf. Humbert 1929). Within the Irish-language proverb tradition, Robinson (1945: 4) identifies this comparative copular construction as one of the most enduring and characteristic syntactic types, attested from the earliest times.

The syntactic parallelism found in these expressions, often involving balanced comparisons of adjectives, nouns, or full noun phrases, makes them particularly well suited to proverbial form. But what really sets them apart is the layering of stylistic and rhetorical features that give them a highly conventional, almost literary, quality. Alongside their structural symmetry, we frequently find phonological devices like rhyme and alliteration, as well as semantic strategies such as contrast and antithetical pairing. These elements work together to mark the structure as distinct from ordinary speech.

**Rhyme**

(137)  *Is fearr* l**eath** *ná* m**eath**. (M§1416)

       'Better half than decay.'

**Alliteration**

(138)  *Is fearr* **l**om *ná* **l**éan. (C§495)

       'Better poverty than grief.'

**Antithetical parallelism**

(139)  *Is fearr deireadh féasta ná tús troda.* (C§2403)

       'Better the end of a feast than the beginning of a quarrel.'

While the comparative adjective *better* is by far the most common in the Comparative Adj X *than* Y structure, it's worth noting that other comparative adjectives also occur in the same position:

(140)   *Is measa an atuitim ná an chéad tinneas.* (C§4803)
           'Worse a relapse than the first illness.'

(141)   *Is éascaí neoin ná maidin.* (U§529)
           'Livelier evening than morning.'

(142)   *Is fusa an t-olc a chosc in am ná in antráth.* (M§1507)
           'Easier to prevent harm in time than when too late.'

## 6. Concluding Remarks

To conclude, we can state that Irish proverbs predominantly take the form of complete sentences, with simple sentence structures prevailing—unsurprising given their oral origins. Yet this sentential simplicity masks considerable sophistication. The most distinctive feature of Irish proverbial style is sustained syntactic and semantic parallelism, which creates balance, rhythm, and memorability through matched clauses or phrases. This parallelism, using both explicit conjunctions (syndetic coordination) and juxtaposition (asyndetic coordination), often produces semantic mirroring: synonymous structures for emphasis or paired oppositional elements for contrast. Parataxis, though less frequent, also follows clear patterns. When it appears, it typically involves phrase-level juxtaposition marked by prosodic ornamentation. Emphatic word order through, particularly clefting and left dislocation, are used to key constituents. It is clear that there is a case to be made for these structures being considered as Irish proverbial formulae, especially those expression that have formulaic openers such as *An té* … 'He who …', *An áit* … 'Where …', or *An rud/ní* … 'The thing that …'. Likewise, structures that contain fronted subordinate clauses—particularly temporal or

conditional clauses introduced by *nuair* 'when' or *má* 'if'—may also be considered formulae. As we have seen, prosodic devices—rhyme and alliteration—frequently intensify many of these structural patterns, suggesting origins in poetic registers rather than spontaneous speech. The cumulative effect of these formal and prosodic strategies gestures toward what Archer Taylor (1931) termed "literary proverbs"—utterances shaped by inherited conventions of verse and stylized repetition. Nevertheless, they are key to the entextualization of proverbs in speech. It is the combination of these structural formulae and optional stylistic markers that provides the framework for recalling and using established proverbs, as well as the creation of new proverbial material.

# CHAPTER 4
# SEMANTICS AND STYLE

## 1. Introduction

In keeping with this study's central argument that the structural and stylistic features of Irish proverbs are optimized for memorability and creative reuse, this chapter turns from structure to semantics and prosody. The previous chapter demonstrated that Irish proverbs are shaped by a repertoire of syntactic structures, ranging from emphatic constructions to copular and paratactic forms, which play a crucial role in enhancing memorability and performance. Building on that foundation, the present chapter turns to the semantic architecture of Irish proverbs, focusing on metaphor as a central organizing principle. It distinguishes between explicit metaphors, that is, linguistically encoded within the proverb, and implicit ones, which emerge through use and contextual activation. Particular attention is given to the syntactic realization of metaphor through copular constructions, especially the X *is* Y and XYZ patterns, as well as the copular comparative form, all of which serve to map abstract conceptual domains onto culturally salient schemas. The section also considers personification, where human traits are regularly projected onto abstract or inanimate entities, as the dominant metaphorical subtype. The concluding section of the chapter explores how alliteration and rhyme function as prosodic proverbial markers in Irish-language proverbs. Often overlooked in linguistic analysis, these prosodic devices enhance rhythm, memorability, and rhetorical force, and are integral to the mnemonic style of Irish proverbs.

## 2. Metaphor

Metaphor has become one of the most intensively examined areas within contemporary paremiology. Mieder's *International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology* (2010) registers over 4,000 studies

engaging with metaphor in proverbial and phraseological construc-
tions, attesting to the scale and diversity of the field. Much of this
work has arisen from distinct disciplinary contexts, each offering
a different perspective on metaphor's function and interpretation.
Its prominence reflects this wide-ranging interdisciplinary appeal,
but also the influence of new theoretical frameworks, particularly
those emerging from cognitive linguistics. Among the most influen-
tial contributions to the study of figurative language is the founda-
tional work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), whose *Conceptual Metaphor
Theory* repositioned metaphor as a central organizing principle of
thought, language, and culture. This model has since been extended
through the development of *Conceptual Integration Theory* (Fauconni-
er and Turner 1998, 2002), which deepens our understanding of the
cognitive processes underlying metaphor, particularly the dynamic
blending of mental spaces in real-time language use.

*Conceptual Metaphor Theory* continues to provide a productive
framework for analysing the mapping between source and target do-
mains in proverbial expressions (Lakoff and Turner 1989; Honeck
1997; Krikmann 1994; Krikmann and Sarv 1996; Tóthné Litovkina
and Csábi 2002). In lexicography, studies by Weinreich (1969), Doyle
(1996, 2007), and Pätzold (1998) have examined how metaphorical
proverbs are defined and represented in dictionaries, highlighting
the tensions between figurative meaning and lexicographic practice.
While in translation studies, scholars such as Hwang (1985), Navar-
ro Salazar (1999), and Miller (2005) have explored the semantic and
pragmatic difficulties that arise in rendering metaphorical proverbs
across languages. Studies in the field of psychology by Kemper (1981),
Katz and Ferretti (2001), and Cieslicka (2002) have investigated com-
prehension patterns, cognitive load, and developmental factors in
the processing of figurative content in proverbs.

Ethnolinguistic and pragmatic approaches have brought further
nuance to the discussion, emphasizing the socio-cultural and perfor-
mative roles of metaphorical proverbs in oral tradition. Notable con-
tributions in this area include the work of Arewa and Dundes (1964),

Seitel (1977), and Fabian (1990). Literary scholars, by contrast, have tended to focus on metaphor's aesthetic and rhetorical functions within narrative settings (Abrahams and Babcock 1977; Bradbury 2002). In pedagogical contexts, metaphorical proverbs have been recognized as both an obstacle and a resource in second-language learning (Nuessel 1999; Cieslicka 2002).

## 2.1. Metaphor as a Proverbial Marker

Metaphor has long played a central role in defining the proverb, featuring prominently in foundational paremiological scholarship (Taylor 1931; Whiting 1932; Mieder 1985, 1996a). Linguo-stylistic research into the formal and aesthetic structure of proverbs has consistently identified metaphor as one of the most distinctive markers of proverbial discourse. Metaphor offers crucial contrastive cues in determining whether a given utterance qualifies as a proverb across a broad range of linguistic and cultural contexts (Seitel 1969; Barley 1972; Cram 1983; Dundes 1975).

> One of the most effective indicators of proverbiality is metaphor, the sudden shift in topic that disrupts the normal conversational flow and signals by its "out-of-context" quality that the statement in question is to be interpreted figuratively and not literally. (Arora 1984: 12)

A range of language-specific studies affirms metaphor's structural centrality. Klimenko (1946: 65–73) identifies it as integral to Russian proverbs, where it often co-occurs with allegory and antithesis. Silverman-Weinreich (1981: 76) identifies allegory as a central semantic marker of proverbial style in Yiddish, while Arora (1984: 11) argues that metaphor serves as the most consistent indicator of proverbiality in Spanish, a claim she presents as broadly applicable across languages.

In the case of Irish, however, this consensus must be qualified. Quantitative analysis of the most salient phonological, syntactic, and semantic features in Irish proverbs indicates that metaphor does

not occupy the dominant position attributed to it by Ó Bric (1976: 35), who claimed that it lay "at the heart of Irish proverbs." Rather, metaphor occurs in approximately 17 per cent of examples, on par with subclausal fronting and rhyme (both 15 per cent), and is significantly less frequent than either alliteration (29 per cent) or syntactic parallelism (27 per cent) (Mac Coinnigh 2004). These latter features, given their frequency and structural prominence, align with Silverman-Weinreich's (1981) typology of "primary proverbial markers". Metaphor, by contrast, is best understood as a "secondary primary marker": while not ubiquitous, it occurs with sufficient regularity to merit inclusion among the core structuring devices of the genre. It remains, however, the most important *semantic* indicator of proverbiality. This finding corroborates Arora's conclusions regarding Spanish and suggests that, although metaphor may not dominate the formal organization of Irish proverbs, it retains a central semantic function.

Silverman-Weinreich (1981) offers a useful typological refinement by distinguishing between two kinds of proverbs: (i) allegorical proverbs, which refer obliquely to rules of behaviour and operate through applied metaphor at the discourse level, and (ii) direct proverbs, where metaphor is more localized and occurs at the lexical or phrasal level without displacing the overt subject. This distinction is relevant for understanding the functional range of metaphor across traditions, and for contextualizing variation in its structural realization.

Broader scholarly discourse on metaphor in proverbs suffers from several methodological inconsistencies. Chief among these is the absence of agreed criteria for identifying metaphorical usage. As MacKay (1986: 88) has observed, the lack of definitional clarity and selection principles has given rise to a proliferation of incompatible claims, owing largely to the conflation of divergent types of metaphor under a single descriptive term.

This problem is compounded by a general lack of statistical rigour. With few exceptions (notably Arora 1984 and Mac Coinnigh 2013c),

studies in this area do not quantify the relative frequency of metaphor, relying instead on anecdotal data. As Cameron (2004) and others have argued, meaningful cross-linguistic comparison of metaphor requires both definitional precision and statistical transparency.

In the case of Irish, further constraints arise from the decontextualized nature of the dialectal collections themselves. As Krikmann (2009: 15) has noted, such decontextualized corpora necessitate a "purely semantical" or virtual mode of analysis, one that isolates metaphorical structures based on inherent semantic properties, rather than attempting to reconstruct pragmatic meaning from sparse or absent usage data. While this approach limits contextual interpretation, it provides a necessary foundation for identifying metaphor in structurally consistent terms.

## 2.2. Defining Metaphor: Classical and Contemporary Approaches

Metaphor has long occupied a central place in both linguistic inquiry and rhetorical theory, with early reflections by Homer, Isocrates, and Plato laying the groundwork for more systematic treatments in classical rhetoric. Their observations on figurative expression anticipate many of the concerns that continue to shape metaphor studies today. A detailed account of these early contributions is provided by Kirby (1997: 521–531). However, it is in the work of Aristotle that we find the first sustained attempt to define metaphor in formal terms. Drawing on the insights of his predecessors, Aristotle articulates a typology of metaphor based on conceptual displacement:

> Metaphor is the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus or from one species to another or else by analogy. (Levin 1982: 24)

At its core, therefore, metaphor is a linguistic mechanism that connects two conceptual domains, allowing one entity to be understood in terms of another. While Aristotle's foundational definition has proved durable, subsequent scholarship has generated a wide array

of theoretical refinements. Many of these, however, have been criticized for their reliance on constructed or decontextualized examples, often selected arbitrarily to illustrate pre-existing assumptions (Cameron 1999: 106). A further complication arises from the proliferation of metaphor subtypes, such as personification, dead metaphor, mixed metaphor, and synthetic metaphor, which render the formulation of a single, unified theory increasingly difficult (Gibbs 1999: 36).

Despite this taxonomic complexity, several recurring structural principles can be identified across theoretical frameworks. Most notably, metaphor requires two essential components: the literal subject to which the metaphor refers, and a secondary or contrasting conceptual field from which attributes are drawn. These elements have been variously labelled across traditions. Richards (1936) and Perrine (1971) refer to them as *tenor* and *vehicle*; Black (1979: 28) employs the terms *primary subject* and *secondary subject*; and in cognitive linguistics, the same relationship is expressed through the *source* and *target domain* distinction (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Turner 1989), which highlights the asymmetrical directionality of conceptual mapping.

Black's (1962) frame-focus model refines how metaphoric meaning emerges from semantic disruption within an otherwise literal linguistic frame. From a pragmatic perspective, Searle (1993: 103) proposes that metaphor arises when a literal utterance appears defective or contextually inappropriate, prompting the hearer to infer an alternative, non-literal reading through interpretive effort. Alternatively, scholars such as Davidson (1978: 42) have argued that only the 'truth/falsity' element is applicable. The notion of 'semantic nonsense' is covered by the 'truth/falsity' criterion, i.e. if an utterance is semantically nonsensical then it must be *patently* false.

## 2.4. Explicit and Implicit Metaphors

This section applies established models of metaphor analysis to Irish-language proverbs, with a view to illustrating how different

types of metaphor operate within proverbial discourse. Drawing on the typology developed by Steen (1999) and Seitel (1981), it distinguishes between *explicit metaphors*, linguistic constructions in which both tenor and vehicle are overtly stated, and *implicit or applied* metaphors, which depend on context for their figurative interpretation. Two Irish proverbs are examined to demonstrate these distinctions in practice.

*Explicit Metaphor*: The first, *Is maith an scéalaí an* aimsir 'Time is a good storyteller' (M§1640), exemplifies an explicit metaphor in Steen's terms. It operates through direct cross-domain mapping, equating the abstract concept of *aimsir* 'time' (tenor / primary subject / target domain), with *scéalaí* 'storyteller' (source / vehicle / secondary subject), a term typically reserved for animate agents capable of speech, memory, and intention. The semantic incongruity introduced by attributing narrative agency to time foregrounds the metaphorical structure of the utterance (cf. Black 1962; Kittay 1987). Time cannot literally tell stories. If the listener recognizes the correspondence between these domains, they can map qualities of storytelling, such as characters, conflict, and resolution, onto the effects of time. In this way, the proverb presents time as an interpretive agent, capable of clarifying or justifying past events through the lens of hindsight (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 50–51; Brown 2004: 135). This construction offers a canonical instance of an *explicit metaphor*: both the source and target domains are embedded in the surface structure of the proverb, and the figurative interpretation is activated by semantic cues rather than by speaker intention or contextual use.

*Implicit metaphor*: In contrast, the proverb *An té a bhuailfeadh mo mhadadh, bhuailfeadh sé mé féin* 'He who would strike my dog would strike me' (U§196) exemplifies an *implicit metaphor*. On the surface, it is a literal statement about a hypothetical act of violence against a dog. However, in use, it functions metaphorically, typically invoked to express loyalty or solidarity, particularly in defence of a close friend or relative. The metaphor does not lie in the wording itself, but in its contextual activation. The listener understands that the state-

ment is not about a dog, but about the social bonds that make harm to a loved one equivalent to harm to oneself.

This figurative reading is made possible through analogical projection: the relationship between the dog and its owner is mapped onto the relationship between the speaker and their associate. Using Seitel's A:B :: C:D heuristic, the analogy can be diagrammed as follows:

| A (dog) | → relation (harm, affiliation) | B (speaker/owner) |
|---|---|---|
| C (close associate/ family/friend) | → relation (harm, loyalty) | D (speaker) |

**Mapping:**

A is to B as C is to D

Striking the dog = striking the owner

≈

Attacking a friend = attacking the speaker

In this case, the metaphor arises from social inference rather than semantic deviance. There is no overtly metaphorical phrasing; instead, the figurative meaning is shaped by pragmatic interpretation, cultural knowledge, and situational relevance. It exemplifies what Steen (1999: 82–84) terms an *implicit metaphor*, and what Seitel (1981) characterizes as the "social use of metaphor", an expression that functions not just as language but as social action.

## 2.4. Identificational Criteria for Linguistic Metaphors

Although the dialectal collections draw upon oral tradition, as we have already seen in Chapter 1, they seldom preserve information about the original context, social function, or intended meaning of individual proverbs. This lack of contextual metadata rules out discourse-based interpretation. As such, we must use what Krikmann (2009: 15) describes as a "purely semantical" or context-independent mode of analysis, focusing on metaphor as it is realized within the surface structure of the proverb itself. Metaphor is therefore treated

as a semantic feature internal to the proverb's linguistic text, rather than as a product of speaker intention or situational use.

The identification of metaphor in decontextualized proverbs depends primarily on the co-occurrence of both tenor and vehicle within the same expression, or what we have already referred to as *an explicit metaphor*. A key indicator of such metaphorical constructions is the presence of a semantic "breaking point", as described by Krikmann (2007: 8), where a contradiction or incongruity arises between distinct elements of the proverb. More specifically, this involves a clash between the conceptual domain of the vehicle and that of the topic (or tenor). This incongruity, sometimes referred to as a "metaphorical twist" (Beardsley 1962), disrupts the literal reading of the sentence and prompts the construction of a new, figurative meaning.

Proverbs containing *explicit metaphors* have been selected from the Irish dialectal collections using Cameron's (1999: 118) criteria for identifying metaphor in textual data. These three indicators (N1–N3) form the foundation of the methodological approach adopted here, allowing for the consistent recognition of metaphor based on linguistic form alone, independent of contextual or performative cues.

> N1 it contains reference to a Topic domain by a Vehicle term (or terms) and
>
> N2 there is potentially an incongruity between the domain of the Vehicle term and the Topic domain and
>
> N3 it is possible for a receiver (in general, or a particular person), as a member of a particular discourse community to find a coherent interpretation which makes sense of the incongruity in its discourse context, and which involves some transfer of meaning from the Vehicle domain.

As a necessary qualification to the identification criteria outlined above (N1–N3), it is important to acknowledge certain grey areas in metaphor analysis—particularly those shaped by linguistic and cultural convention. These include so-called *dead* and *delexicalized*

metaphors: expressions that may be metaphorical in origin but are no longer perceived or processed as metaphors by speakers of the language.

### 2.5. The nominal metaphor

The simple nominal metaphor, which is typically realized in the copulative form X *is* Y, is a common syntactic pattern in Irish. Approximately one in five metaphorical proverbs adopt this structure (Mac Coinnigh 2013c). In such cases, metaphor arises from a clear semantic incongruity between tenor (topic) and vehicle (source), which blocks a literal reading and compels a figurative interpretation. As Leech (1969: 89) observes, these constructions involve semantic violations that disrupt conventional category assignments, signalling a cross-domain transfer.

Such violations occur when the predicate attributes to the subject a category membership that is incompatible under normal classificatory logic. This process exemplifies what Glucksberg and Keysar (1990) describe as a *class-inclusion metaphor*, in which the subject is presented as a member of a conceptually deviant or atypical category. On the surface, the metaphor fails to satisfy the usual conditions for categorical coherence, yet it is precisely this mismatch that activates the figurative reading.

This pattern can be seen in the proverb *Is é an duine an t-éadach* 'The person is the cloth' (M§1023), where the human subject *an duine*, 'the person' is equated with an inanimate object *an t-éadach*, 'the cloth'. Interpreted literally, the statement is semantically nonsensical: no person, in any conventional sense, can be considered a piece of cloth. The metaphor thus violates category constraints by placing a human being into a material object class (Levin 1977: 118). This incongruity alerts the listener to the metaphorical function of the utterance.

To make sense of the metaphor, the listener engages in a selective act of comparison, mapping certain features from the source

domain (*éadach* 'cloth') onto the target domain (*duine* 'person'). Crucially, only those attributes that make contextual or conceptual sense are transferred, such as surface appearance, adaptability, or style, while irrelevant details, like the cloth's material composition, are filtered out. This kind of mapping aligns with the 'salience imbalance model' (SIM) (Ortony 1979b), which holds that metaphor interpretation involves projecting *prominent* features from the vehicle onto less salient aspects of the topic.

In this case, the metaphor *the person is the cloth* encourages us to understand identity not in essentialist or physical terms, but through outward presentation. As with cloth, what is visible becomes the basis for social judgement. The emphasis falls on appearance, whether through dress, demeanour, or public persona, while internal qualities are backgrounded. The proverb thus subtly frames identity as something performed. Or in the case of *Is é do phóca do charaid* (U§762) 'Your pouch/wallet is your friend' the inanimate *póca* 'pouch/wallet' is personified as a *cara* 'friend', attributing loyalty and support to a material object. This proverb relies on metonymic association (the pouch as a repository for money or other useful items) to construct a metaphor in which friendship is reinterpreted in economic or utilitarian terms. In each of these cases, the violation of expected verb–noun collocations compels the reader to seek a non-literal, metaphorical interpretation, highlighting the central role of semantic anomaly in the figurative logic of Irish proverbial language. Other examples include:

(1)  *Is é Dia an lia is fearr.* (C§2478)
     'God is the best healer.'


(2)  *Is é an t-airgead an saol go léir.* (M§1342)
     'Money is the whole of life.'

A particularly notable stylistic feature of metaphorical proverbs in Irish is that many of those conforming to the X *is* Y pattern do not appear in the form of a neutral, unmarked copulative sentence. In-

stead, they are frequently constructed as emphatic identificatory copulative expressions, in which the adjectival modifier of the vehicle noun phrase is syntactically fronted, that is, placed immediately after the copula, for the purpose of semantic and rhetorical emphasis. This construction serves to highlight the evaluative force of the proverb and draws particular attention to the quality or attribute being projected from the vehicle onto the topic. The following examples illustrate this pattern:

(3)   *Is **trom** an t-ualach putóga folmha.* (M§411)
    'Empty intestines are a HEAVY burden.'

(4)   *Is **maith** an cuan an cúinne.* (M§1852)
    'The corner is a GOOD harbour.'

(5)   *Is **searbh** an rud an fhírinne.* (C§3173)
        'Truth is a BITTER thing.'

### 2.6. The XYZ Metaphor

Metaphors do not universally follow the straightforward X *is* Y structure. In proverbial language, meaning is frequently conveyed through the interplay of multiple conceptual elements. One of the most common frames is what Turner (1991) terms the "XYZ metaphor", or what Krikmann (2007: 11) refers to as "Aristotelian structures with an 'absent fourth'". Such metaphors adopt a syntactic construction of the form NP(X) *be* NP(Y) *of* NP(Z), necessitating complex semantic and pragmatic processing. According to Turner (1996: 105), interpreting this structure involves understanding that element X from a target domain corresponds metaphorically to element Y from a source domain, while Z in the target domain aligns with an implied, yet unstated, fourth element (W) from the source domain.

> An XYZ metaphor prompts us to understand the conjunction between X and Z metaphorically in terms of a conceptual domain

containing Y. In particular, we are to find some W in our conceptual knowledge that stands in a relation to Y which we can refer to conventionally by the expression "Y of W", and we are to map the relation between Y and W onto the conjunction of X and Z. (Turner 1991)

Within Irish proverbial material, this syntactic pattern appears primarily in two variants: firstly, a classificatory copula structure in which the predicate is a prepositional noun phrase (*ØCOP Predicate NP + PP + Sub NP*); and secondly, an identificatory structure featuring a simple NP as the subject and a genitive noun phrase as the predicate (*ØCOP Predicate NP (N + Gen) + Sub NP*). These can be seen in No. 6 below:

*ØCOP Predicate NP + PP + Sub NP*

> (6)    *Dearthár don ghrafán an turn (=tuirne).* (M§2524)
>
>        COP Brother to the grubbing-hoe the spinning wheel.
>
>        'The spinning wheel is brother of the grubbing-hoe.'

Here, the predicate *dearthár don ghrafán* 'brother of the grubbing-hoe' precedes the subject *an turn* 'the spinning wheel', producing an identificatory statement with metaphorical implications.

The structural elements are as follows:

- X = *an turn* 'the spinning wheel'
- Y = *dearthá(i)r* 'brother'
- Z = *an grafán* 'the grubbing-hoe'
- Implied W = *another human sibling* (unstated, from the source domain of human kinship)

In its literal, source-domain usage, a 'brother of Z' (Y of Z) implies a human sibling pair: e.g. *Tomás is the brother of Seán*. Such a relationship presupposes shared parentage, common status, and often a close personal connection. The metaphorical tension in this proverb arises from the category violation involved in assigning such kinship to inanimate tools. The noun *dearthár*, firmly situated in the human social domain, is applied here to non-human, non-sentient objects.

This prompts the hearer or reader to activate a metaphorical mapping that resolves the incongruity. According to Turner's model, the interpretation involves identifying a missing fourth element (W), which makes the metaphor semantically coherent by linking it to a source domain with a familiar structure.

Table 4.1 Mapping Domains in the XYZ Metaphor 'The spinning wheel is brother of the grubbing-hoe.'

| Role | Element | Domain |
|------|---------|--------|
| X (target) | *an turn* 'the spinning wheel' | Target domain (tools/labour) |
| Y (source) | *deartháir* 'brother' | Source domain (human kinship) |
| Z (target) | *grafán* 'the grubbing-hoe' | Target domain (tools/labour) |
| W (source) | another sibling of the grubbing-hoe (implied) | Source domain (human kinship) |

According to the metaphor structure, we must find an implied W in the source domain: a human sibling who is brother to Z (the grubbing-hoe). The function of Y (brother) is then to define a relational bond that may be metaphorically transferred to the target domain. Once this projection is established, i.e. brother is to human sibling (W) as spinning wheel is to grubbing-hoe (Z), we understand that the metaphor posits a functional or symbolic parity between the two implements. We map this familiar kinship structure onto the target domain of manual tools. The metaphorical claim is that *the spinning wheel* and *the grubbing-hoe* are functionally parallel, perhaps as labour-intensive domestic tools in different domains (spinning/textile vs. farming/digging), but nonetheless metaphorically "siblings". Thus, we reconstruct the conceptual mapping: *As Tomás is to Seán (brothers in the same family), so the spinning wheel is to the grubbing-hoe (analogous tools in the world of labour).*

In No. 7 we find another instance of the XYZ metaphor, this time realised through a fully regular copular construction in which the subject appears immediately after the copular pronoun and is followed by a relational predicate. The structure is straightforward:

*COP + Pronoun + Sub NP$_1$ + Predicate NP$_2$*

(7)  *Is é an dóchas lia gach anró.* (C§2653)

   'Hope is the physician of every hardship.'

Here, the subject *an dóchas* 'the hope' is linked to the predicate *lia gach anró* 'the physician of every hardship' through the standard copular frame *Is é*. The construction maps an abstract state (*hope*) onto a culturally familiar schema drawn from the domain of healing and medical care. The elements can be parsed as follows:

- X = *an dóchas* 'hope'
- Y = *lia* 'healer, doctor, remedy'
- Z = *gach anró* 'every hardship'
- Implied W = *a human patient* (unstated, from the medical/healing schema)

In its literal, source-domain sense, a *lia* ('physician') functions within a medical relationship in which a patient receives treatment. When this role is assigned to *an dóchas*, the proverb draws on that familiar structure while redirecting it toward an internal, abstract phenomenon. The category shift—placing a professional healer within the domain of emotional states—produces the interpretive prompt: the listener must supply an implied fourth element (W), the patient who would ordinarily benefit from the doctor's intervention.

Table 4.2 Mapping Domains in the XYZ Metaphor 'Hope is the physician of every hardship.'

| Role | Element | Domain |
|---|---|---|
| X (target) | *an dóchas* 'hope' | Target domain (psychological state) |
| Y (source) | *lia* 'physician' | Source domain (medical/healing schema) |
| Z (target) | *gach anró* 'every hardship' | Target domain (adversity/suffering) |
| W (source) | a human patient (implied) | Source domain (patient–healer relationship) |

Once this inferred W is in place, the relational structure of the source domain can be projected onto the target domain: as a doctor treats a patient, so hope addresses hardship. The underlying conceptual mapping, then, casts emotional resilience in the role of healer and frames hardship as the condition requiring remedy. Other examples of this type of XYZ metaphor are below:

(8)  *Is é an Diabhal athair na mbréag.* (C§910)
     'The Devil is the father of lies.'

(9)  *Is é an bia capall na hoibre.* (C§726)
     'Food is the horse of work.'

(10) *Is é an cuileann caoin rí na coille. (C§4305)*
     'The gentle holly is the king of the woods.'

## 2.7. Predicative Metaphor

Predicative metaphor (Miller 1979) constitutes a significant category within the broader study of metaphor, particularly in the context of linguistic and conceptual metaphor theory. In these forms, the subject component of the topic domain and the predicative component of the vehicle domain are incompatible. In contrast to attributive metaphors, where metaphorical meaning is conveyed through modifiers (e.g. 'a *thorny* problem'), or nominal metaphors that involve direct identification (e.g. 'That lawyer is a *shark*'), predicative metaphors centre the metaphor within the predicate structure, often inviting a more dynamic interpretation through processes of action, transformation, or evaluation. In such constructions, it is the verb, adjective, or predicate noun phrase that carries the metaphorical meaning (see Glanzberg 2008).

Typically, a predicative metaphor attributes a metaphorical quality, identity, or action to a subject, thereby facilitating a conceptual mapping between two domains. Similarly, verbs frequently function

metaphorically in this structure, as in 'She *attacked* his argument', where the predicate 'attacked' metaphorically frames intellectual critique as a form of physical aggression. Adjectives, too, may operate predicatively in this regard, as in 'His words were *sharp*', whereby a sensory descriptor is metaphorically applied to a verbal expression, evoking an impression of emotional or rhetorical impact.

In literal language, the semantic compatibility between verbs and their noun phrase arguments is typically governed by selectional restrictions, constraints that limit which types of entity can plausibly co-occur in grammatical constructions. When these restrictions are violated, the sentence becomes anomalous under a literal interpretation, prompting a metaphorical reading instead. This can be seen in:

(11)  *Dá ndéanfadh caint casóg bheadh cóta agatsa.* (U§1729)

'If conversation could make a jacket, you'd have a coat.'

The expression 'to make a coat' ordinarily requires a concrete, agentive subject capable of carrying out an act of fabrication—for example, a person, tool, or machine. When the noun *caint* 'conversation', an abstract activity rather than a physical agent, occupies that position, it disrupts these selectional expectations.

This anomaly—where an abstract noun is treated as if it could perform a material action—triggers what Levin (1977) terms a *readjustment rule*, redirecting interpretation from literal to figurative. In this context, *conversation* is metaphorically construed as an agentive force capable of producing material outcomes. The proverb, therefore, does not suggest that speech can literally manufacture clothing, but rather comments ironically on the futility of idle words.

Likewise in No. 12, the semantic incompatibility of the verb and noun phrase combination defies literal expectations. The phrase *sagart a dhéanamh de* 'to make a priest of sb.' cannot apply literally to *adhmad* 'wood', i.e. one cannot make a priest from wood, and this incompatibility invites a metaphorical reading.

(12)   *Ní de gach adhmad is cóir sagart a dhéanamh.* (U§77)
       'It is not of every timber it is right to make a priest.'

One of the most widely attested syntactic patterns in proverbial discourse across languages is the copular comparative construction, typically expressed as COP + Comparative Adj + X (NP) + *than* Y (NP). This syntactic frame, which Thompson (1974: 40) terms a "value comparison", is likewise well represented in Irish, accounting for approximately 10 per cent of proverbial forms (Mac Coinnigh 2012: 125). Silverman-Weinreich's (1981: 78) analysis of Yiddish proverbs demonstrated the cross-linguistic prevalence of this structure, particularly in the comparison of abstract entities—frequently involving one generic term juxtaposed with a more narrowly defined abstraction (e.g. *gezunt kumt far parnose* 'health precedes income'). In Irish, this comparative pattern frequently facilitates metaphorical predication. Notably, it often features atypical noun phrases in the subject or complement positions, thereby violating standard selectional expectations and inviting figurative reinterpretation.

For example, in No. 13, the syntactic pattern of comparative evaluation *Is fearr* X *ná* Y is employed to create a metaphor through semantic incongruity. The phrase *lán doirn* 'fistful' ordinarily denotes a physical quantity of tangible material—money, for instance—and thus aligns literally with *ór* 'gold' as a measurable, concrete substance. However, *ceird* 'trade' or 'craft' is an intangible skill or social role, not a substance that can be grasped or contained within a physical space like a fist.

(13)   *Is fearr lán doirn de cheird ná lán doirn d'ór.* (U§827)
       'Better a fistful of a trade than a handful of gold.'

This metaphor arises from the projection of material properties onto an immaterial concept, thereby enabling *ceird* to be treated as if it were a quantifiable commodity. The phrase *lán doirn de cheird* is thus semantically anomalous when taken literally, as skills cannot be held in the hand. This incongruity triggers a metaphorical reading

in which skill or practical knowledge is conceptualized as a tangible resource, something one can possess and carry, like wealth.

## 2.8. Personification: Theoretical and Linguistic Background

Personification, or *prosopopeia*, is both a rhetorical device and a cognitive strategy with deep roots in pre-classical thought. It is frequently linked to early animistic worldviews, in which natural or abstract entities were understood as possessing human-like qualities. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 33) have noted, personification functions as a central ontological metaphor, allowing us to make sense of the non-human world through human experience. MacKay (1986: 87) similarly treats it as a prototypical form of metaphor, grounded in our embodied understanding of what it means to be human.

At its core, personification involves attributing human traits, whether physical, emotional, behavioural, or intellectual, to entities that would not normally possess them. Paxson (1994: 1) describes it giving a human identity or 'face' to the inhuman. Yet the history of personification is far from linear. As Paxson points out, there is a recurring temptation to treat its evolution as a neat progression from simple to complex forms. But, in reality, its development resists such phylogenetic models. He argues that treatments of personification constantly rehash the original musings of Demetrius, Cicero, and Quintilian (1994: 9).

The trope entered the Western literary tradition through classical authors such as Prudentius, Boethius, and Martianus Capella, whose allegorical writings helped shape the conventions by which abstract concepts and natural phenomena could be represented as agents (Bloomfield 1963: 162). Definitions of personification vary depending on disciplinary focus, of course—linguists, cognitive theorists, and literary critics all approach it somewhat differently—but they converge on the idea that it enables the human mind to project what it knows of itself, whether physical, emotional, behavioural, or intellectual, onto the world around it (Dorst 2011: 117).

This act of projection is well captured in Lakoff and Turner's (1989) model of the *Great Chain of Being* (see Table 5.1), which arranges entities in a loose hierarchy from inanimate matter at the bottom to fully conscious human beings at the top. Personification works by transferring attributes from the highest ontological category, i.e. human beings, to entities lower down the chain: animals, objects, forces of nature, and abstract ideas. It allows us to make sense of the unfamiliar or the impersonal by imagining it as somehow human.

Table 5.1. The *Great Chain of Being* (Lakoff and Turner 1989)

|  |  |  | Specifically human features |
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | Instincts | Instincts |
|  | Biological features | Biological features | Biological features |
| Physical features | Physical features | Physical features | Physical features |
| **Things, Substances** | **Plants** | **Animals** | **Human beings** |

Personification is often flagged by a mismatch between the grammatical structure of a sentence and the expectations it sets up. It becomes especially visible when human-specific verbs or adjectives, those requiring animacy or intention, are used with inanimate or abstract subjects. As we have already seen, these violations of selectional restrictions (Levin 1977: 60) prompt us to interpret the expression metaphorically rather than literally.

The presence of personification in proverbial language has long been recognized. Taylor (1962: 142) notes that "simple metaphors which verge on personification are of course common to proverbs in all lands; abstractions are assigned the powers of human beings." However, its prominence varies from language to language. In Yiddish, for instance, Silverman-Weinreich (1981: 77) describes personification as a relatively rare device. In the Irish tradition, by contrast, it appears to be more deeply embedded, occurring in almost half (48 per cent) of metaphorical proverbs (Mac Coinnigh 2013b).

## 2.9. Linguistic Forms of Personification in Irish Proverbs

Linguistically, personification may be expressed across a variety of word classes (Dorst 2011; Crisp 2008):

> **Verbs**, where animate or intentional actions are ascribed to inanimate subjects. For example, the verb 'breed' indicates ability to feed, nourish, or rear, characteristics that are not literally applicable to the abstract concept of 'profit' *Beathaíonn an fáltas an leisce* (M§1389) 'Profits breeds laziness'.

> **Adjectives**, particularly those reflecting emotional or psychological states. For example, the quality of being loyal conveys human intention, yet is employed here metaphorically to the abstraction of 'memory' *Bíonn an chuimhne i gcónaí dílis.* (C§697a) 'Memory is always loyal'.

> **Nouns**, especially in metaphorical appositions or roles. For example, the abstract noun phrase 'end of the day' is equated with a concrete human agent 'guide' in *Is maith an t-eolaí deireadh an lae* (M§1639) 'The end of the day is a good guide'.

Dorst (2011) notes that the identification of personification in discourse typically relies on metaphor identification protocols to assess whether the lexical meaning of a word in context is distinct from its more basic, human-centred usage. When such a discrepancy is observed and when the contextual use involves a non-human subject, a personification is likely to be present. These linguistic signals of personification do not exist in isolation; they frequently operate alongside other figures such as metonymy, and they may vary in intensity and recognizability depending on conventionality. In the case of proverbs, where recognizability and familiarity are key to usage, their metaphorical force may be partially obscured by habitual usage.

Various types of metaphoric projection are responsible for the incongruity. In the case of Irish proverbs, these may be classified into seven distinct formulaic subcategories according to the aspect

of human physical, cognitive, emotional, or social behaviour that is projected onto inanimate objects and abstract concepts. Of all the projections, the transferral of typical human physical and social behaviour (Category 1; see Table 5.2) to the inanimate or abstract is the commonest (Mac Coinnigh 2013b). This concurs with Bloomfield's grammatical analysis of personification allegory in English, where he states:

> Of all the grammatical signs of personification it seems to me that the use of animate verbs and predicates is the most characteristic and important … Personification allegory combines the non-metaphoric subject with metaphoric predicate and yokes together the concrete and the metaphoric in the presentation of generality. (Bloomfield 1963: 165–169)

For instance, consider the proverb *Char thacht an fhírinne fear ariamh* 'Truth never ever choked a man' (U§409). In this example, the verb *thacht* 'choked' or 'strangled' is conventionally associated with animate agents, typically a person or animal capable of exerting physical force. However, in this case the subject is *an fhírinne* 'truth', an abstract concept that lacks the physiological capacity or volition necessary to perform such an action. The sentence, if interpreted literally, produces a semantic anomaly: it is not physically possible for *truth* to engage in the act of choking.

The metaphorical tension in the proverb is resolved by reimagining *truth* as a human-like agent, one capable of deliberate, even forceful, action. In this way, the expression follows a classic pattern of personification, in which a non-human subject is assigned a predicate that implies animacy, agency, or intent. The figurative charge of the sentence lies not in the subject itself, but in the verb—*thacht* 'choked'—a transitive verb typically reserved for animate actors. It is this linguistic dissonance that activates the metaphor, prompting the reader or listener to reinterpret the statement at a conceptual level. Table 5.2 provides examples that help to illustrate the nature of this type of projection.

Table 5.2. Categories of personification

| Category | Proverb |
|---|---|
| 1. Human physical and social behaviour | *Char thacht an fhírinne fear ariamh.* 'Truth never ever choked a man.' (U§409); *Cha dtéid anam ar scáth a chéile.* 'A soul does not protect its partner.' (U§87); *Cha dteachaigh drochearra chun sráide riamh nach dteachaigh dallmhargaí chun a cheannach.* 'Bad goods never went to a street where an unwary buyer didn't go to buy them.' (U§322) |
| 2. Emotional and cognitive functions | *Is cuma leis an éadach cé a chaitheas é.* 'The cloth does not care who wears it.' (C§3353); *Aithníonn an fhuil an gaol.* 'The blood recognizes the relation.' (C§2490); *Nuair a bhíonn an bolg lán is mian leis an gcnámh síneadh* 'When the stomach is full the bone wishes to stretch.' (M§139) |
| 3. Human sensory | *Folaíonn grá gráin agus chíonn fuath a lán* 'Love conceals hatred and hatred sees all.' (C§3329); *Is searbh gach éan a labhrann leis féin* 'Every bird that speaks to itself is bitter.' (M§550); *Labhair leis an donas nuair a thiocfas sé.* 'Speak to misery when it comes.' (U§524) |
| 4. Human physical features ("body-part personification" Dorst 2011: 128) | *Bíonn cluasa ag na ballaí.* 'The walls have ears.' (C§3996); *Bíonn cluasa ar na claitheacha agus súile ar an mhachaire.* 'The walls have ears and the field has eyes.' (M§228); *Tá ceann caol ar an óige.* 'Youth has a narrow head.' (C§4089) |
| 5. Predictive behavioural attributes | *Nuair atá an bolg lán, bíonn na cnámha ag iarraidh an tsámhais (nó tsócúil).* 'When the stomach is full, the bones crave rest.' (U§643b) *Cha raibh bolg mór fial ariamh.* 'A large stomach was never generous.' (U§1582); *Bíonn an grá caoch.* 'Love is blind.' (C§2530) |
| 6. Human relationship structures | *Níl cara ag cumhaidh ach cuimhne.* 'Loneliness has no friend except memory.' (C§689a); *Is ait an mac an saol.* 'Life is a strange son.' (M§1480) |
| 7. Human occupations | *Is é an dóchas lia gach anró.* 'Hope is the healer of every misery.' (C§1905); *Is maith an scéalaí an aimsir.* 'Time is a good storyteller.' (M§1946) |

In some proverbs, the metaphorical projection of traits need not rely exclusively on attributes that are uniquely human. Rather, several of the features being transferred can also be found in beings lower on the ontological hierarchy outlined in Lakoff and Turner's (1989) *Great*

*Chain of Being*—particularly among non-human animals. Creatures like dogs, cats, and other familiar animals possess a range of biological and perceptual capacities: they see and hear, they reproduce, and they engage in instinctive behaviours such as jumping, barking, or fleeing. These traits are not solely the domain of humans, and their presence in animal life complicates any strict division between animate and inanimate metaphorical projections.

From a conceptual standpoint, many of the shared features found in Category 3 (Human sensory) and Category 4 (Human physical features) correspond closely to what Lakoff and Turner classify as "Specifically human features" within the framework of the *Great Chain* metaphor. While personification in proverbs often involves the projection of distinctly human traits onto non-human entities, not all cases conform to a strictly anthropomorphic model. In some instances, the attribution involves generalized sentience or animate behaviour rather than clearly human characteristics, a looser form of animacy that nonetheless sustains the figurative mapping. For example, *Folaíonn grá gráin agus chíonn fuath a lán* 'Love **conceals** hatred and hatred **sees** all.' (C§3329);

Despite certain overlaps in behaviour across species, however, proverbial discourse remains fundamentally anthropocentric. Even when the traits being projected, such as seeing, hearing, or breeding, are not uniquely human, their metaphorical weight is shaped by human perception and cognitive framing. In other words, our understanding of these actions is filtered through our *own* embodied experience of them. Proverbs do not rely on 'ethological' precision but instead reflect the interpretive schemas through which humans make sense of the world.

What this suggests is that the figurative power of such metaphors does not rest on an objective resemblance between domains but on the salience these actions hold within *human cognition*. As MacKay (1986: 99) puts it, "even though animals do *eat up*, *catch up*, *give birth to*, *attack*, *outwit*, and *destroy*, humans typically and most saliently do these things in everyday experience". The figurative force of a prov-

erb, then, is more likely to evoke a metaphorical person than a metaphorical animal, both for those who produce such sayings and for those who interpret them.

This human-centred perspective underlies the downward projection of traits along the *Great Chain of Being*. Even when metaphor draws on behaviour that is observable in non-human life, its structure and emphasis are governed by human cognitive models. The non-human subject in the proverb, be it an animal, object, or abstraction, does not act as an autonomous agent, but rather serves as a vessel for metaphorical inference derived from human experience. In this way, the personifying logic of proverbial metaphor tells us less about the nature of the entities being described and more about the organizing principles of human thought and cultural expression.

From a syntactic perspective, proverbs that employ personification tend to follow a number of recurring structural patterns. Among these, three stand out as particularly characteristic. The first is the familiar X *is* Y construction, typically realized as a copulative identificatory sentence. In such cases, the adjective qualifying the Y-noun phrase is often placed immediately after the copula. This positioning serves a rhetorical purpose: it brings the evaluative or descriptive quality into sharper focus, enhancing its prominence within the sentence:

(14)  *Is* **trom** *an t-ualach an leisce*. (C§1345)
       'Laziness is a HEAVY burden.'

The second pattern features a substantive sentence in which a definite or indefinite noun is modified by a predicative adjective that is semantically incongruent or non-attributable in literal terms:

(15)  *Cha raibh bolg mór fial riamh.* (U§1582).
       'A large stomach was never generous.'

The third involves a present-tense verbal construction of the form 'Verb + X + Y', wherein the verb is semantically incompatible with

at least one of the accompanying noun phrases, thereby requiring metaphorical interpretation:

(16)  *Molann an obair an saor.* (C§747)
      'The work praises the craftsperson.'

## 3. Prosody: Alliteration and Rhyme in Irish Proverbs

This section turns to prosodic patterning in Irish proverbs, extending the argument that stylistic features facilitate memorability, oral performance, and creative reproduction. Rhyme, alliteration, and rhythmic balance serve both aesthetic and mnemonic functions. The discussion explores how these sound-based strategies interact with syntax and semantics to reinforce structural cohesion and heighten rhetorical effect.

Despite their prominence in oral traditions, prosodic features in Irish proverbs have received relatively limited scholarly attention. Yet recurring phonological patterns—particularly rhyme and alliteration—are clearly identifiable in the material and merit closer analysis. These features, often overlooked in formal linguistic accounts, regularly embellish proverbial form and facilitate transmission. Their presence in Irish aligns with broader cross-cultural trends, as documented in the paremiological studies of Mahgoub (1968), Silverman-Weinreich (1981), Arora (1994) and others. Whiting (1994: 41) likewise affirms the importance of prosodic elaboration in proverb formation:

> we often find that pains have been taken to give the proverb a form which could only come from more or less conscious artistic polishing. Alliteration is often found, and rhyme as well, while some have been found set to music.

Given the broad scope of prosodic phenomena that might be examined, this section limits its focus to the two most widely attested devices in decontextualized examples: alliteration and rhyme.

### 3.1. Alliteration

Alliteration refers to the repetition of initial consonant sounds in stressed syllables of proximate words. In Irish, this can involve either exact repetition or phonological similarity (as in pairings like *b/p* or *d/t*). The device typically engages the root consonant or vowel, with certain rules governing lenition and consonant clusters. Although repeated sounds may occur through coincidence, true alliteration in the context of proverbial expression is best understood as a deliberate poetic strategy. Its function is to enhance rhythm, contribute to the proverb's musicality, and support its retention in oral memory. However, the distinction between intentional alliteration and incidental sound patterning is not always clear-cut. In marginal cases, one must rely on contextual clues and broader pattern recognition to determine the likely rhetorical intent behind the phonological form.

### 3.1.1. Alliteration in Comparative Perspective

Alliteration is among the most salient markers of proverbial style in the Irish-language tradition, appearing in nearly one in three proverbs (29 per cent) (Mac Coinnigh 2004). Its frequency and function have been widely recognized in comparative paremiology. Taylor (1962: 136–137) notes its presence in both ancient and modern expressions, observing that it may arise spontaneously or be consciously crafted for sonic effect: "Some alliterative phrases are old, while others have arisen in much more recent times from the love of a jingle."

Mahgoub (1968) reports a lower frequency of alliteration (approximately 12 per cent) in Cairene Arabic proverbs, while Arora (1994) confirms its occurrence in Spanish, though she finds it less diagnostic of proverbiality than rhyme, due to its commonness in everyday speech. In contrast, Ó Bric (1976: 35) emphasizes alliteration's interaction with other rhetorical features in Irish, such as parallelism and contrast, enhancing both the expressive and mnemonic dimensions:

> There is much that can be said about the layout of proverbs … Alliteration is fairly common, and parallelism and contrast are also

employed to reinforce the proverb's impact. This structure contributes greatly to its power, as it makes the proverb easy to remember.[1]

Kapchits (2000: 152) identifies an even higher incidence of alliteration in Somali proverbs (50 per cent+), suggesting that in some traditions, sound patterning significantly influences both lexical choice and structural design. While Irish does not show such high frequencies, it is clear that alliteration similarly informs proverb composition. For example:

(17)   *Cha chruinníonn cloch chasaidh caonach.* (U§778a)

'A rolling stone gathers no moss.'

In many cases, alliteration appears to be an organizing principle, with lexical items selected to maximize phonological cohesion. Yet not all studies provide statistical backing for such claims. General references to the presence of alliteration are common, but systematic cross-linguistic comparisons are hindered by uneven data. Ó Bric (1976: 36), for instance, remarks simply that "alliteration is quite common", while Silverman-Weinreich (1981: 77), writing on Yiddish, suggests that alliteration is too frequent in ordinary speech to function as a reliable proverbial marker. In response, Thompson (1974: 63) contends that while alliteration may be less pervasive than often assumed, it nonetheless plays a meaningful role in marking proverbial style. Russo, writing on Ancient Greek, similarly concludes that alliteration is a frequent and concentrated feature of proverbial expression:

> The acoustic aesthetic of Greek proverbs is exactly what we would expect from what we know of Greek poetry, except that it seems even more concentrated in proverbs. (Russo 1992: 123)

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[1]   '*Tá go leor rud is féidir a lua i dtaobh leagan amach seanfhocal...Tá uaim coitianta go maith agus úsáidtear comhthreomhaireacht agus codarsnacht freisin d'fhonn cur le cumhacht an tseanfhocail. Cuireann an crot seo go mór leis an seanfhocal mar is furasta don duine breith leis.*'

In quantitative terms, Irish proverbs show higher rates of alliteration (29 per cent) than those in Egyptian Arabic (21 per cent) (Mahgoub 1968: 24). While absolute frequencies vary, the typological patterns of alliteration across traditions are broadly comparable. Mahgoub identifies four principal subtypes, three of which are also attested in Irish. The first, full consonantal agreement across all elements, is relatively rare, with clearer examples typically involving repetition of initial syllables:

(18) *Crínneacht cinnteacht.* (M§278)
'Wisdom [brings] certainty.'

More often, intervening function words break the sequence, resulting in near-alliterative constructions:

(19) *Filleann an feall ar an bhfeallaire.* (M§1607)
'Treachery returns to the traitor.'

(20) *Más mall is mithid.* (M§1290)
'Though slow, it is timely.'

(21) *Ná déan deimhin dod dhóchas.* (M§1685)
'Do not bank on your hope.'

The most frequent type is partial alliteration, where some but not all key elements repeat initial consonants. This accounts for 24 per cent of the Irish data, double the rate reported by Mahgoub in her Arabic corpus (12 per cent). Examples include:

(22) *Ní féidir an fhoighid a fhoghlaim.* (C§2481)
'Patience cannot be learned'.

(23) *Níl cara ag cumhaidh ach cuimhne.* (C§689a)
'Loneliness has no friend but memory.'

(24)  *Taise le truaighe is troid le tréan.* (C§1870)

'Compassion with [the] weak and fight with [the] strong.'

Mahgoub's third subtype involves alliteration through the repetition of inflectional morphemes, typically prefixes. This has limited applicability in Irish, where verbal agreement is primarily suffixal. However, the fourth subtype—lexical repetition—is notably more prominent in the Irish corpus (16 per cent) than in Mahgoub's findings (6.9 per cent). This often takes the form of *diacopic repetition*, where a repeated term is separated by intervening material:

(25)  *Is é do mhac do mhac inniu, is í d'iníon d'iníon go deo.* (U§124)

'Your son is your son today, and your daughter is your daughter forever.'

This can also appear as *epizeuxis,* with unbroken repetition:

(26)  *Faigheann iarraidh iarraidh eile.* (U§808a)

'A request begets another request.'

(27)  *Aithníonn ciaróg ciaróg eile.* (U§266)

'One beetle recognizes another beetle.'

In some cases, the repeated item is adjacent to other alliterating words:

(28)  *Is baile bocht, baile gan toit gan tine.* (U§808a)

'It is a poor home, a home without smoke or fire.'

(29)  *Is fearr comhairle le ceannach ná comhairle in aisce.* (M§1015)

'Better advice that is paid for than advice given for free.'

### 3.2. Rhyme

In Irish, rhyme occurs both as full or perfect rhyme—where the stressed vowel and final consonant coincide—and as half rhyme,

which relies on approximate phonological correspondence. Although rhyme typically appears in final position, it can also occur internally, though this is less common. Its phonological effect lies in combining auditory similarity with structural prominence, usually centred on the stressed syllable. While everyday speech may occasionally produce incidental rhyme, its presence in proverbs is seldom accidental.

## 3.2.1. Rhyme in Comparative Perspective

Rhyme has long been recognized as a stylistic hallmark in proverbial traditions. Taylor (1962: 153) highlights its early use in Latin proverbs and notes that rhyme can even override syntactic regularity in oral forms: "Oral tradition is very likely to make such changes in order to find a rhyme." Arora (1994: 12) considers rhyme a highly salient marker of proverbiality in Spanish, where it signals both frequency of usage and rhetorical effect. Silverman-Weinreich (1981) similarly underscores the prominence of rhyme in Yiddish proverbs, while Mahgoub (1968: 43), writing on Cairene Arabic, notes that rhyme, whether perfect or approximate, commonly divides proverbial expressions into balanced, memorable segments.

## 3.2.2. Distribution of Rhyme

Unlike alliteration, which occurs more freely in everyday language, rhyme is more strongly associated with poetic and folkloric registers. Odlin (1986: 129–130) argues that rhyme functions as a distinctive marker that alerts the listener to the proverb's formal status: "Rhyme is not generally used except in verse and proverbs … The purpose of rhyme in proverbs is likely similar to the purpose of other formal devices: to signal to the listener that something is indeed a proverb." In addition to this rhetorical function, rhyme also serves as a mnemonic device, enhancing memorability and aiding oral transmission.

Quantitative data, however, reveals important cross-linguistic variation in rhyme frequency. In Irish, rhyme appears in approximately 15 per cent of proverbs (Mac Coinnigh 2004), roughly half the

rate of alliteration (29 per cent). This figure is slightly higher than that reported for English and Cairene proverbs (10 per cent in both cases), and significantly lower than Spanish, where Arora (1994) records rhyme in 66 per cent of Mexican proverbs. Arora also describes rhyme as "an outstanding contrastive clue in Spanish [of proverbiality], both in terms of frequency and its effectiveness". Mahgoub (1968) further subdivides rhyme in Cairene Arabic into phonological and grammatical categories, although her overall frequency remains modest.

General remarks by Thompson (1974), Silverman-Weinreich (1981), and Russo (1992) affirm the importance of rhyme but lack the support of statistical analysis. Russo (1992), for instance, notes that vowel concord is common in Ancient Greek proverbs, though strict end rhyme is less frequent. Thompson (1974: 63) acknowledges rhyme, along with alliteration and assonance, as characteristic features of proverbs, while conceding that such features are less commonly referenced in relation to early Hebrew materials. Silverman-Weinreich (1981) views rhyme as a marker of proverbiality in Yiddish, yet also notes its inconsistency across examples.

These studies point to a shared recognition of rhyme's rhetorical function but also reveal the limitations of purely qualitative assessments. Without consistent quantitative data, cross-linguistic comparison remains difficult. In the case of Irish, the presence of rhyme in 15 per cent of the corpus suggests a stylistic feature of moderate prominence. Though less pervasive than alliteration, it nonetheless plays a meaningful role in the formal shaping of proverbial discourse, one that aligns Irish with broader stylistic tendencies observed in oral traditions worldwide.

Grammatical rhyme in Irish proverbs typically results from the repetition of verb forms or noun inflections. In most cases, it is the verb ending that produces the rhyme, as seen in the following examples:

(30)   *Chan mar a shílt**ear** a chríochnaít**ear**.* (U§497a)
       'Things do not end as one thinks.'

(31) *Neart a rith**eann** agus mire a léim**eann**.* (M§233)
'Strength runs and madness leaps.'

(32) *Ní hé an té is fearr a thuill**eann** is mó a fhaigh**eann**.* (M§1770)
'It is not the person who most deserves that receives.'

Grammatical rhyme can also occur between nouns, particularly when both appear in the dative case. Such instances are classified here as grammatical rhymes as well:

(33) *Ceo soininne ar aibhn**ibh**, ceo doininne ar chnoc**aibh**.* (M§1859)
'Fair-weather mist on rivers, storm mist on hills.'

(34) *Is fearr éan ar an **láimh** ná dhá éan ar an gcr**aoibh.*** (M§2256)
'A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.'

Repetition of the same noun or adjective also contributes to rhyme in several proverbs, with the rhyme arising from repeated use as well as additional rhyming elements:

(35) *Tá cead aige ceann an **tí** cac i dtóin an **tí**.* (M§1754)
'The head of the house has permission to defecate at the lower end of it.'

(36) *Is fearr fuíoll **madaidh** ná fuíoll **magaidh**.* (U§1564b)
'Better the victim of a dog than the victim of mockery.'

(37) *Nuair a thig an **chaill** tig an **fhaill**.* (U§862)
'When loss comes, the opportunity comes.'

Phonological rhyme—defined as the repetition of identical or nearly identical phonemes—is also present. End rhyme is by far the most common manifestation, as seen in:

(38) *Is minic s**aoi** ó dh**aoi**.* (U§108)
'Often a wise man from a fool.'

(39) *Is treise cinn**iúint** ná oil**iúint**.* (U§1743)

'Stronger destiny than upbringing.'

As in Yiddish, internal rhyme is attested in Irish, although it occurs infrequently. Examples include:

(40) *Ná bac le mac an bhac**aigh** agus ní bhacf**aidh** mac an bhac**aigh** leat.* (M§98)

'Don't bother with the beggar's son, and the beggar's son won't bother with you.'

(41) *Fear gan bh**ean** gan chl**ann** fear gan bh**eann** ar aoinne.* (M§39)

'A man without a woman or child is a man without regard for anyone.'

Additional variations are also present. In some cases, rhyme occurs between adjacent words, though such examples are less frequent than those involving separated phrases:

(42) *Bíonn an fear deirean**ach** díobhál**ach**.* (M§1516)

'The last man is dangerous.'

(43) *Cloíonn n**eart** c**eart**.* (M§1717)

'Strength conquers right.'

Other proverbs contain multiple rhyming pairs, typically in contexts where syntactic parallelism also features prominently:

(44) *Deireadh ceatha c**eo** agus deireadh catha gl**eo**.* (C§4135)

'The end of a shower is mist, and the end of a battle is clamour.'

(45) *Ní **céasta** go **pósta** agus ní **féasta** go **róstadh**.* (M§354)

'No torment until marriage and no feast until roasting.'

There are no examples in the Irish dialectal collections in which words were coined for the sole purpose of achieving rhyme. It seems highly unlikely that meaningless or invented terms are deliberately used in Irish proverbs to satisfy rhyming patterns. This contrast is noteworthy from a comparative perspective, particularly in light of Silverman-Weinreich's (1981: 27) observation that, in Yiddish, "It is usual practice in proverbs to use nonsensical words to obtain rhyme."

## 4. Concluding Remarks

This chapter has shown that, although metaphor is not the most common feature in Irish proverbs, it plays an important part in how these sayings organise meaning and achieve their stylistic force. Metaphors arise mainly through nominal structures (X is Y) and through predicative constructions that disrupt normal selectional patterns, prompting the listener to shift from a literal to a figurative reading. They draw on a small but reliable set of syntactic frames—the X is Y pattern, the copular comparative (*Is fearr X ná Y* 'Better X than Y'), and more elaborate XYZ forms—that allow one domain of experience to be understood with reference to another. Within this range, personification is particularly noticeable, extending human traits to non-human subjects and drawing on a conceptual hierarchy consistent of agency and behaviour consistent with Lakoff and Turner's *Great Chain of Being*. The chapter has also underlined the extent to which stylistic form is built into Irish proverbial expression. Rhyme and alliteration, found in roughly 15 per cent and 29 per cent of the corpus, are not incidental embellishments but part of the way these utterances work. They frequently coincide with syntactic parallelism and lexical repetition, creating the balance and patterning that give proverbs their distinctive sound. These stylistic resources set proverbs apart from everyday speech and mark them as crafted formulations with cultural standing. Overall, the evidence supports the study's central claim: Irish proverbs rely on the interplay of syntactic structure, stylistic and prosodic patterning to achieve their characteristic form to assist recall and use.

# CHAPTER 5
# A SOCIAL FUNCTION OF IRISH PROVERBS

## 1. Introduction

This chapter examines a particular subtype within the Irish prover-
bial tradition: the *blason populaire*. As part of this study's broader ar-
gument that the structure and style of Irish proverbs serve not only
mnemonic and performative purposes but also significant social
functions, this chapter investigates how proverbial expressions op-
erate as vehicles for stereotyping, group differentiation, and social
commentary. These expressions employ many of the same formal
strategies—syntactic parallelism, enumeration, and structural fram-
ing—that elsewhere support memorability and rhetorical force. The
*blason populaire* thus represents a particularly revealing intersection
of form and social function, where the same structural devices that
aid retention simultaneously encode and transmit cultural attitudes
about identity and belonging.

## 2. The Blason Populaire

The term *blason populaire* (lit. 'popular emblem') denotes an ethnic
and cultural verbal stereotype about a folk group or the inhabitants
of a particular region (Gryzbek 1994: 19). These stereotypes are man-
ifested in a wide array of folkloric genres, including proverbs, other
traditional sayings, nicknames, jokes, songs, rhymes, and football
chants. All share a common function in that they are invoked to high-
light positive aspects of the in-group by explicit auto-stereotyping or,
alternatively, to identify the negative characteristics of out-groups.
The explicit positive stereotyping of an in-group may often implicit-
ly suggest negative characteristics of a rival out-group (Gregor 1963:
162).

The value of the *blason populaire* as an area of interdisciplinary study has long been identified by scholars such as Archer Taylor (1931), J. D. A. Widdowson (1981), Alan Dundes (1994), Peter Gryzbek (1994), and Wolfgang Mieder (2004: 138). Its analysis has yielded benefits not only to the folkloristics fraternity but also to the related fields of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and ethnography. Moreover, the potential for research in the field has not been hindered by a paucity of raw data, as regional, national, and international collections of *blasons populaires* have been published in a variety of languages since the mid nineteenth century. Of these, the most notable are: *Blason populaire de la Normandie* (Canel 1859), *Internationale Titulaturen* (Von Reinsberg-Düringsfeld 1863), *Blasons populaires de la France* (Gaidoz and Sébillot 1884), *Lean's Collectanea* (Lean 1902), *Hessische Blätter für Volkskunde* (Strack 1902), and *A Dictionary of International Slurs* (Roback 1944). Notwithstanding these collections and the potential for interdisciplinary research in the field, few scholars have engaged with the subject matter of the *blason populaire* in any rigorous, comprehensive study. The lack of any clear typology has been the main obstacle to the systematic analysis of the genre (Dundes 1994: 190).

The term *blason populaire* can be traced back to Alfred Canel's (1859) seminal collection of regional stereotypes in the French province of Normandy, although it is more often associated with the more comprehensive national collection of Henri Gaidoz and Paul Sébillot (1884). Archer Taylor's ground-breaking work in the field of paremiology, *The Proverb* (1931: 99), brought the term to the fore in the twentieth century, illustrating both the presence of a German synonym, *Ortsneckereien* (literally, 'bantering about geographical origin') and the absence of any recognized term in English. The following decade saw Roback (1944: 251) attempting to fill this vacuum by coining the term "ethnophaulism" (combining the Greek *ethnos* 'a national group' and *phauliso* 'to disparage'). In the 1960s, Dundes (1965: 43) proposed that *blason populaire* could be rendered as a synonym for 'ethnic slur' in English, although many scholars have challenged

this categorization on functional grounds: when the in-group stereotypes itself, a pejorative expression may become positive. In more recent years, Lynne Ronesi's work in paremiology has advocated a distinction between blasons populaires and "more vehement expressions of disparagement towards out-groups" or what she terms "ethnophaulic proverbs" (2000: 330). There is no equivalent term for the genre in the Irish language and, consequently, proverbs concerned with the blason populaire are not subcategorized as distinct forms in the collections (see Mac Coinnigh 2007).

## 3. Function and Type of Stereotype

The lack of any clear typology in the genre raises questions regarding the common function of blasons populaires. Some scholars identify the instigation of group rivalry, albeit usually humorous, as the primary function of blasons populaires (Dundes 1994: 191; Scott 1975: 9). This function equates with the "superiority theory" of humour through which those seeking to buttress their own dominance direct laughter at those perceived to be subordinate and inferior (Zenner 1970b: 93). Others, however, subscribe to the idea of dual functionality and believe that blasons populaires can be used to (a) define and unify a particular (in)group or region by presenting a shared identity in a positive light (integrative function), and (b) initiate conflict through the denigration and maligning of one or more other particular groups or regions (divisive function) (Roback 1944: 302–306; Widdowson 1981: 36; Luhrs 2008: 235).

Underlying all examples of blasons populaires is a basic in-group/out-group dichotomy based on a centre–periphery distinction. Christie Davies suggests that the centre–periphery model may be used to understand the general use of humour in society (2002: 9–10). In this model, the stereotype functions unidirectionally from centre to periphery, i.e. those in the dominant centre of the culture have a tendency to mock their imitators on the periphery, be that the geographic, economic, or linguistic periphery. Symmetrical relationships also occur in which there is reciprocal bidirectional stereotyping, usually

humorous, but this is limited to the concept of "joking relations" on the basis of differences in identity (cf. Alfred Radcliffe-Brown 1940). The degree to which an item of blason populaire fulfils an integrative or divisive function will depend on a number of factors, not least the form of the folkloric genre, the sociolinguistic context of its utilization, the socio-economic and socio-historical relationship between the groups involved, and the type of stereotypical characterization.

Walter Lippman first introduced the concept of the 'stereotype' as a simplified 'picture in our heads', a cognitive tool that assists us in processing knowledge by selecting salient features to represent the whole (1922: 3). Often stereotypes in blasons populaires are nothing more than benign descriptions of the salient characteristics of a people or place, mere drollery based on interethnic or intercultural rivalry between competing factions in society. Subscribers to the social psychology theory of 'kernel of truth' have even posited that stereotypes may contain elements of accuracy in the characterization (Prothro and Melikian 1955; Brigham 1971: 26; Lee et al. 1995). However, the dominant view is that, from a factual perspective, stereotypes are incorrect generalizations or overgeneralizations (Brown 1965; Gardner et al. 1970; Mackie 1973). Not only that, but there is a real danger that the perpetuation of stereotypes in verbal forms promotes prejudice and discrimination, especially when applied against ethnic or minority groups within a particular society (see Mieder 1982, 1993a, 1996b).

Stereotypes vary due to temporal, geographical, and cultural conditions, yet in spite of such natural variations, it appears that ingroups generally have a penchant for stereotypes based on (a) ethnicity and associated characteristics (skin colour, facial features, language), (b) personality and behavioural characteristics (stupidity, dirtiness, idleness, drunkenness, cowardice, sexual promiscuity, and perversion), and (c) socio-economic factors (proximity to metropole, degree of perceived civility, standard of literacy). Most stereotypes are based on what may be considered socially or culturally 'unacceptable' traits, yet some that are commonly viewed as being 'desir-

able', when skewed through embellishment and hyperbole, can become the source of disparagement, e.g. extreme cleanliness, thrift, sobriety, punctuality, or piety.

## 4. *The* Blason Populaire *and Paremiology*

Scholarship in the field of paremiology is scant and there have been no studies of blasons populaires in the Irish language. Some important region-specific studies have been carried out, however, especially those concerned with ethnicity. Ronesi (2000) has examined prejudice in the proverbs of the Nuri in Sudan, and in the indigenous peoples of the Americas; Shirley Arora (1994) has also dealt with colonial stereotypes relating to the indigenous populations of central and south America; Walter Zenner (1970a) has studied ethnic stereotypes in Arabic proverbs; Janet Sheba (2005) has used a similar approach with regard to the Yoruba in southwest Nigeria, and J. Olowo Ojoade (1980a) has looked at the representation of the white man in African proverbs. Many studies are not focused on the blason populaire per se, however, and often diverge into related areas such as 'worldview' (Mifsud-Chircop 2001) and 'inter-group relations' (Opata 2000).

### 4.1. Nations in Irish Proverbial Material

The Irish proverbial material is almost devoid of any blasons populaires relating to other nations, with the possible exception of the multi-group international comparison. These comparisons are often manifested in epigrammatic form in European languages (Taylor 1931: 100–103; Roback 1944: 135–243; Dundes 1994: 194–201), with the most salient and representative stereotypical trait being attributed to the nations involved (what Billig (1995) refers to as "banal nationalism"). Enumerative structures, usually tri- or quadripartite formulae, are the favoured apparatus. The syntactic and semantic juxtaposition of negative traits for comparative purposes is then counterbalanced by the positive representation of one nation, usually in final position, most commonly the in-group that invokes the comparison. Below is

a nineteenth-century German example (Reinsberg-Düringsfeld 1863: 5) in which there is no apparent in-group.

(1) *Die Italiener fluchen, Die Franzosen schreien, Die Engländer essen, Die Spanier trotzen, Und die Deutchen betrinken sich.*

'The Italians curse, the French scream, the English eat, the Spanish defy, and the Germans get drunk.'

Only two examples of multigroup national comparisons are found in the Irish language material. The first (No. 2, below) highlights the stereotypical characteristics of English greed and French cowardice, and compares these unsavoury traits with the untrustworthy cobbler, who in Irish tradition is commonly viewed with both suspicion and distaste. These are common negative personality characteristics attributed to these two 'nations', and serve both to denigrate these out-groups and to enhance the 'social identity' (Tajfel and Turner 1979) of the Irish in-group. The explicit identification of these out-group traits implicitly suggests that the Irish do not possess them. Historical links with both the colonial English, and with France, a one-time religious and political ally, support the thesis that blasons populaires relate to groups with which the in-group has had some form of direct contact. It should be noted, however, that that term *Sasanach* could refer to an Englishman, a Saxon, or a Protestant (see Dineen 1904: 597).

(2) *Cheithre Shasanach nach bhfuil santach, cheithre Fhrancach nach bhfuil buí, cheithre ghréasaí nach bhfuil bréagach, sin dáréag nach bhfuil sa tír.* (C§2742)

'Four Englishmen that aren't greedy, four Frenchmen that aren't cowardly, four cobblers that aren't untruthful, that is twelve that aren't in the country.'

The example in No. 3 challenges the view that stereotypes travel from centre to periphery in that, although the comparison is in the Irish language, the characterization is self-denigrating. It is actually the Scots who are portrayed as the worst affected group, as a result

of English gluttony and Irish inebriation. *Albanach* is commonly used in the Ulster dialect to refer to a Presbyterian or Protestant (settler) residing in the north of Ireland (Dinneen 1904: 23). The fact that this is a Munster proverb that is not found in any of the other dialects indicates that this is not the intended meaning in this example. It may be the case that this example is in fact of Scottish origin, although the major Scottish proverbial collections (Nicolson 2011 [1882] and MacDonald 1926) provide no evidence to support this.

(3)  *An tÉireannach ar leathmheisce, an Sasanach is a bholg lán, agus an tAlbanach agus ocras air.* (M§1109)

'The Irishman half-drunk, the Englishman with his stomach full, and the Scotsman hungry.'

At the level of the 'nation', which in itself is a problematic social and political category (see Anderson 1983; Hopkins and Moore 2001), the English are the most frequently targeted group. It could be argued that this is a result of the political, social, and economic conditions brought about by English colonization, which would support the view (Birnbaum 1971; Salazar and Rodriguez 1982; Brewer 1985; Ponton and Gorsuch 1988) that, generally, the group maligned has had a turbulent historical relationship with the in-group. The English are portrayed negatively not only in epigrammatic comparisons, but also in proverbs, proverbial comparisons, and Wellerisms. Perfidy is the stereotypical trait underlying these forms and, as a result, caution and vigilance are advocated in all matters concerning England.

(4)  *Críonnacht Sasanach is mírún Gael; sin an rud a níos an dolaidh.* (U§1633)

'The shrewdness of the Englishman and the openness of the Gael; that is what does the harm.'

(5)  *Ná lig do rún le fear Gallda, Bíonn sé i gcónaí ar shlí do mheall-ta.* (U§962)

'Don't trust your secret with the foreigner [i.e. Englishman]: he is always ready to betray you.'

(6)  *Ina dhiaidh a fheictear a leas don Éireannach is roimhe don tSasanach.* (C§3782)

'It is after the event that the Irishman sees the benefit, and it is before the event that the Englishman [sees the benefit]'.

Proverbial comparisons explicitly attribute treachery and avarice to the English, as in Nos. 7 and 8. Such expressions give an insight into the implicit historical and political tensions between rival nations, as Joseph Raymond has shown with other European examples: "jealous as a Turk", "dumb as a Swede", and "obscure as a Greek" (1956: 155). Taylor argued that "literal proverbial comparisons which single out some obvious and familiar quality offer little of interest" (1931: 221), yet our evidence shows that when comparisons buttress the stereotypes found in other related forms, these become important in elucidating elements of the group psyche, or what Dundes (1971) termed "folk ideas", i.e. commonly held perceptions in a particular group.

(7)  *chomh fealltach le Sasanach.* (U§1313)

'as treacherous as an Englishman.'

(8)  *ag síorchaint ar an mbia, mar a bhíos an Sasanach.* (C§2247)

'constantly talking of food like the Englishman.'

English perfidy is tacitly implied in the enumerative proverb in No. 9, where the initially apparently innocuous *Englishman's laugh* is juxtaposed with various portents of danger, such as *a cow's horn, a horse's hoof, a dog's snarl/tail/tooth* (cf. C§5196; M§1113). Once again, the anomalous, marked element is in final position. This subtle implicit alignment leads the listener to make logical linkages between the items, and to infer that the abstraction (i.e. Englishman's laugh) has a similar potential for injury as that of the physical objects. In other variant examples the warning appears in an explicit imperative introductory formula (No. 10) or in an overt comparison (No. 11). A final triad (No. 12) maligns the English for their lack of religious devotion and Christianity through a comparison of *an Englishman in a*

*church* with other improbable situations. In terms of the level of slur, this form is more ethnophaulic in nature and focuses not merely on general personality traits but on the specific cultural and religious character of the English.

(9)  *Adharc bó, crúb capaill, drannadh mada nó gáire Sasanaigh.* (C§5196)

'A cow's horn, a horse's hoof, a dog's snarl, or an Englishman's laugh.'

(10) *Na trí rud ba chóir do dhuine a sheachaint, Straois mada, Tóin capaill, Gáire Sasanaigh.* (C§5196)

'The three things a person should avoid: a dog's grimace, a horse's backside, and an Englishman's laugh.'

(11) *Is measa gáire Shasanaigh ná drannadh mada.* (C§3892)

'An Englishman's laugh is worse than a dog's snarl.'

(12) *Punann i bhfaiche, ronnach in easca, Sasanach in eaglais.* (C§5318)

'Sheaf in a lawn, mackerel in a bog, an Englishman in a church.'

The insatiability of English greed is mocked in a Wellerism (No. 13) through the absurd image of a drowning man requesting more water. The underlying barb indicates that when greed is so deeply ingrained, it subdues the most basic survival instinct.

(13) *'More water', arsa an Sasanach 's é dhá bháthadh.* (C§3704; M§969).

'"More water," said the Englishman as he was being drowned.'

It would be inaccurate to say that there is systematic disparagement of the English in the proverbial material, yet there is evidence of something more vituperative than mere inoffensive observational

stereotyping. The emphasis on greed, perfidy, and godlessness is a clear manifestation of bitterness towards the colonizers and the legacy of colonization. It is strange, however, that there are extremely few blasons populaires directed at groups representative of the English colonial influence in Ireland. The police are absent entirely, whilst there are only a few benign swipes at landlords and the Protestant clergy. Further analysis of other verbal genres is required to determine if this narrative is consistent across the board and if the Irish exhibit an ethnophaulic tendency towards the English.

The absence of blasons populaires relating to other European nations, or those further afield, may be considered in terms of the following factors: (1) These international comparisons were, in the main, literary forms which emanated from Latin texts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and which were primarily transmitted in written translation (Taylor 1931). The Irish material in the collections was collected primarily from oral tradition and thus contains more 'popular' as opposed to 'learned' expressions (Mac Coinnigh 2007). The extended complex formula may also have been prohibitive to their acceptance in common speech. (2) Ireland's geographically insular, isolated position on the fringes of the continent meant that in many instances, common European material outside of the ecclesiastical or literary canon—in this case accepted racial stereotypes—may not have been comprehensively translated into Irish. (3) The paucity of references to historical events in Irish may be an indication that very few phrases were composed in modern times (Ó Muirgheasa 1907: xii–xiii). They may not, therefore, be an accurate record of the history and development of modern Ireland, especially since the rise in nationalism from the late eighteenth century (see Arora 1994). (4) The editors omitted offensive material that was considered to be "gross or indecent" (Ó Muirgheasa 1907: viii). Blasons populaires would have fallen into this category. It may be that a conscious effort was made to exclude any inflammatory or racist material for fear that it might be offensive to particular groups.

## 4.2. Provincial Blasons Populaires

Provincial blasons populaires are common in the Irish collections and there is evidence of strong regionalism between the four provinces of Connaught, Leinster, Munster, and Ulster. If we consider that the population of Ireland in this period (1858–1952) was almost entirely of the same ethnic and religious make-up (Caucasian and Christian), it should be expected, according to Palmore (1962: 443), that stereotypes would highlight prominent cultural features, such as language and personality, instead of physical ones. The Irish material supports this thesis.

The main dialects of the Irish language are coterminous with the provincial framework, although Leinster no longer has a specific dialect of its own. Moreover, the dialects of Connaught, Munster, and Ulster exhibit idiosyncratic phonological, morphological, and lexical features, which often form a basis for comparison. An example of such linguistic rivalry may be found in No. 14, in which the in-group (Connaught) apparently mocks the stereotypical linguistic deficiencies, i.e. pronunciation and accuracy, of the out-groups, whilst demonstrating its own linguistic perfection. There is a clear three-tier hierarchical gradation, with Connaught at the acme, Leinster at the base, and the other two provinces vying in median position. This supports the work of Palmore (1962: 443), Birnbaum (1971: 251), Mullen et al. (2000: 10), and Luhrs (2008: 242–243), amongst others, who have all noted how speech communities that are peripheral to what is perceived to be the linguistic norm are maligned for being "inarticulate, guttural or dissonant in speech" (Snell 2003: 12). Intra-ethnic and intra-national blasons populaires of this type are particularly effective if one considers the importance of language as a tenet of 'nationality' and group attachment. The inability to master the native vernacular properly raises questions of cultural and political purity/alterity for out-groups, yet correspondingly asserts and unifies the in-group in central, dominant position.

(14)   *Tá blas gan ceart ag an Muimhneach, Tá ceart gan blas ag an Ultach, Níl ceart ná blas ag an Laighneach, Tá ceart is blas ag an gConnachtach.* (C§2340)

> 'The Munsterman has the accent without the propriety; the Ulsterman has the propriety without the accent; the Leinsterman has neither the propriety nor the accent; the Connaughtman has the accent and the propriety.'

It appears, however, that this particular comparison may not be a 'popular' expression, but instead a literary form. Ó Máille says it was not found in speech during this period and was most probably copied from a literary source of the nineteenth century, such as O'Donovan's *A Grammar of the Irish Language* (1845) from where the translation above is taken. It is also found in English twenty years earlier in Dutton's *Statistical and Agricultural Survey of the County of Galway* (1824: 463). Most telling of all, however, is the fact that the Archbishop of Armagh, Peter Lombard, paraphrased the same sentiment in Latin over two centuries earlier in his *De Regno Hiberniae, Sanctorum Insula, Commentarius* (1632) (see Moran 1868: 7).

Stereotypical personality traits of each province are compared in the three dialectal collections, often ostracizing one particular province due to negative qualities such as thievery and cunning. The binomial Munster version in No. 15 espouses the stereotypical ingroup quality of pleasantness (*lách*), whilst tagging the neighbouring out-group as crafty (*spleách*). The Connaught versions reverse the stereotypes and, depending on the variant, cast the Munstermen as 'obsequious', 'cunning', or 'crafty' (No. 16). Extensions of this epigram featuring all four provinces are found in both the Ulster and Connaught collections (Nos. 17 and 18).

(15) *Muimhneach lách agus Connachtach (nó Laighneach) spleách.* (M§1104)

'An affable Munsterman and a crafty Connaughtman (or Leinsterman).'

(16) *Connachtach lách, Muimhneach bladarach.* (C§2280)

'An affable Connaughtman, an obsequious Munsterman.'

(17) *Connachtach lách, Muimhneach spleách, Laighneach tláith, Ultach bradach.* (C§2280)

'An affable Connaughtman, a boastful Munsterman, a mild Leinsterman, a thieving Ulsterman.'

(18) *An Laighneach lách, An Muimhneach spleách, An Connachtach béalbhinn, is an tUltach beadaí.* (U§41)

'The affable Leinsterman, the boastful Munsterman, the flattering Connaught man, and the impudent Ulsterman.'

Another multi-group comparison espouses the stereotypical industry of one province at the expense of another. The structure is similar in function to the English phrase 'before you could say Jack Robinson', only Irish uses the imagery of a man from one particular province being able to have potatoes dug, washed, mashed, and eaten before his neighbour from the next province could say the very word. This comparison plays on the dialectal phonological differences for the terms for 'potatoes': Connaught *fata* [fata], Ulster *préataí* [pre:tai], Munster *prátaí* [pra:'tai:]. Variants are found in both Connaught (C§2256) and Ulster (U§1639) and, although retaining the potato imagery, the structure also permits a degree of interchangeability in the choice of in-/out-group, depending on which group is utilizing the expression.

(19) *Bheadh na préataí bainte, nite, bruite, ite i gCúige Uladh a fhad is bheadh an Muimhneach ag rá prátaí.* (U§1639)

'The potatoes would be picked, washed, mashed, and eaten in Ulster before the Munsterman could say "potatoes"'.

(20) *Bheadh na fataí nite, bruite agus ite ag an gConnachtach, a fhad is a bheadh an Muimhneach ag rá 'prátaí'.* (C§2256)

'The Connaughtman would have the potatoes washed, mashed, and eaten before the Munsterman could say "potatoes"'.

(21)  *Bheadh na fataí nite, bruite, ite ag fear Chonnacht faid a bheadh an Ciarraíoch ag rá 'prátaí'.* (M§1105)

'The Connaughtman would have the potatoes washed, mashed, and eaten before the Kerryman could say "potatoes"'.

Not all provincial epigrams contain a slur or disparagement. Some are neutral generalizations, and although highlighting the traits, abilities, and prowess of the in-group, they do so in a way that does not maliciously offend those in the out-group(s). A case in point is No. 22, in which the traditional stereotypical military abilities of each province are highlighted: the Ulster marksmen, the Connaught pikemen, and Leinster horsemen. The final line of the epigram deviates, in both style and structure, from the previous three and clearly exalts the Munstermen as the in-group.

(22)  *Gach Ultach ar an ngunna, Gach Connachtach ar an bpíce, Gach Laighneach ar an gcapall, Is iad rogha na bhfear na Muimhnigh.* (M§1106)

'Every Ulsterman with his gun, every Connaughtman with his pike, every Leinsterman on his horse, but the pick of the men are the Munstermen.'

Two entries in the Connaught collection are examples of demonym-like nicknames for the provinces. They represent a stereotypical view of all Munster people on account of one single image or event. The first refers to 'the thieving Munsterman of the goat', a phrase which, according to Ó Máille, alludes to the folk belief that St Patrick's goat was stolen in County Clare. The second maligns the 'sneaky Munsterman of the sour buttermilk', which is a soubriquet frequently attached to villages and counties.

(23)  *Muimhneach bradach na ngabhar.* (C§2311)

'The thieving Munsterman of the goats.'

(24)  *Muimhneach spleách na bláthaí géire.* (C§2280)

'The cunning Munsterman of the sour buttermilk.'

A final trait mocked in provincial blasons populaires is that of religion. A Wellerism used in Ulster and Connaught derides the neighbouring province for its lack of religion. The motivation behind this expression is unclear without information relating to context and performance, however. The expression could possibly be an example of the mutual raillery and verbal jousting amongst neighbours, but it could also be considered more malicious, if one considers the lack of secularity in Ireland and the attachment to Christianity amongst a devout rural Gaelic-speaking population.

(25)   *'An Críostaí thú?' arsa an sagart leis an fhear; 'Ní hea', ar seisean, 'ach Connachtach'.* (U§72)

       '"Are you a Christian?" the priest asked the man. "No," he replied, "I'm a Connaughtman".'

(26)   *'Críostaí thú?' arsa an sagart le fear. 'Ní hea', arsa an fear, 'ach Ultach'.* (C§2281)

       '"Are you a Christian?" the priest asked a man; "No" the man replied "I'm an Ulsterman".'

## 4.3. County Cracks

At county level, attachment to the group identity is extremely high and, as a result, the mockery and ethnic humour is as acerbic as anything exhibited at national level. Strangely, this type of blason populaire does not occur in the Ulster material at all, possibly due to an editorial decision, as these nicknames are not technically proverbs. There is ample evidence of derogatory ethnonyms in the other two provincial collections, however, even though "the tradition of inter-village misanthropy" (Snell 2003: 9) is not prevalent.

Stereotyping counties with a particular food, or lack thereof, is common in Irish material, which is consistent with Palmore's theory that groups focus on cultural differences in mono-ethnic societies (1962: 443). From a negative perspective, County Clare is mocked in numerous examples as the county of the sour (or foul) buttermilk,

and its neighbour, Limerick, is branded with the appellation 'fat lumpers'. The 'lumper' is a type of potato that was particularly susceptible to the potato blight (*Phytophthera infestans*) of the Irish Famine.

(27) *Contae an Chláir na bláthaí géire (bréine).* (M§1097); (C§481) (C§508)
'County Clare of the sour (or foul) buttermilk.'

(28) *Contae Luimnigh na luimpirí méithe.* (C§1098)
'County Limerick of the fat lumpers.'

The absence of contextual annotation means that other county nicknames are difficult to decipher, unless they are taken at face value. Methodologically, of course, this is an unsafe approach, as many nicknames are antiphrastic, i.e. their meaning is ironic. The provenance of Kerry's inquisitiveness, the penchant of Waterford for begging, or the contention between Cork and Kerry is unclear; further contextual information is required before a literal or ironic interpretation can be arrived at.

(29) *Contae Chiarraí ag fiafraí a chéile.* (M§1099)
'County Kerry questioning each other.'

(30) *Contae Phort Láirge ag iarraidh déirce.* (M§1101)
'County Waterford begging.'

(31) *Corcaigh agus Ciarraí ag iarraidh a chéile.* (C§482)
'Cork and Kerry asking for each other.'

There are also a small number of declarative, unadorned, unembellished judgements and epithets postulating a claim about a certain county, such the barrenness of Cork (No. 32), or the fineness of Tipperary (No. 33). These, of course, may be considered a form of auto-stereotyping. Once again, without context it is difficult to decipher

whether No. 34 is a literal commendation of the men of Galway, or if they are actually being mocked in an ironic manner.

(32)   *Contae Chorcaí is gortaí in Éirinn.* (M§1100)
       'County Cork the most barren in Ireland.'

(33)   *Contae Thiobraid Árann is breátha in Éirinn.* (M§1102)
       County Tipperary the finest in Ireland.

(34)   *Contae na Gaillimhe na mbuachaillí tréana.* (C§481)
       'County Galway of the strong lads.'

A comparative declaration is also found in a curious blason populaire in which the local rivalry between two Ulster counties is articulated. The finest quality in each county is described, i.e. the horses of Armagh and the fine girls of Down, and these are then compared in a parallel couplet, in this case at the obvious expense of Armagh (No. 35). One final rhyming expression seizes upon the unfavourable weather in the south of Clare as a source of mockery (No. 36).

(35)   *Tig na gearráin as Contae Ard Macha, Is na cailíní deasa as Contae an Dúin.* (U§1491)
       'The horses come from County Armagh and the nice girls from County Down.'

(36)   *Ní scallann an ghrian ach uair sa mbliain ar íochtar Chontae an Chláir.* (C§505)
       'The sun only shines once a year in the south of County Clare.'

## 4.4. Local Rivalry

The mocking verbal jostling between towns and villages, as demonstrated in France (Canel 1859; Gaidoz and Sébillot 1884), Germany (Von Reinsberg-Düringsfeld 1863), and England (Scott 1975; Widdow-

son 1981; Luhrs 2008) is the commonest form of blason populaire in the Irish collections. These traditional expressions of group identity are indicative of local rivalries, animosities, and insecurities, and demonstrate both in-group braggadocio and invective aimed at the neighbours. The Irish material is rarely malignant or ethnophaulic, probably due to the almost negligible ethnic variation in these communities in matters of culture, language, and religion. Socio-economic and class differences are present, however.[1]

The strength of these rivalries has possibly waned in the past few centuries due to the political, economic, and social changes that have affected Irish demographics. The "end of tradition" in Ireland was brought about by seismic changes in Irish society during the nineteenth century, most significantly: the linguistic and educational impact of colonization, the endemic emigration, population shifts from rural to urban centres, and the decimation of the rural proletariat through the death and emigration of the Great Famine of the 1840s (Ó Giolláin 2000: 15–17). The dialectal proverb collections span a period of time in which some of these blasons populaires were still in currency, however, and reflect rivalries between townlands, villages, and small towns.

Some places are identified not by a group characterization of the population but by a salient physical, geographical, or social feature associated with it; for example, *Dún Garbhán na seanbhád* 'Dungarvan of the old boats' (M§1123), or *Baile Viocáire na bpocán ag méiligh* 'Vicarstown of the bleating goats' (M§1084). Whilst not technically proverbs, these nicknames were included in the proverbial collections because they were traditional expressions that were known to a substantial proportion of the 'folk'. Although they do not contain any explicit stereotypical characterization of the local population, it

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[1]     The Irish novel, *Cré na Cille,* by Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1949), features a particularly caustic swipe at the fictional townland of 'Gort Ribeach'. Its barreness and destitution are targetted by the protagonist, Caitríona Pháidín, who frequently invokes the blason *Gort Ribeach na Lochán a mblitear na lachain ann*, 'Gort Ribeach of the Lakes where the ducks are milked' (Ó Cadhain 1996: 21).

could be argued that the inhabitants are implicated by association. Even simple appendages such as 'fat pigs' or 'shiny churns' may be symbolically representative of a deeper narrative, i.e. that the pigs are well fed or that the churns are new and shiny because the people are wealthy. These simple, yet effective, appendages can function to activate one or more of the accepted, underlying stereotypical assumptions that an in-group has about an out-group, which Dundes has termed "a folk idea" (1971: 96). The onomastic activator may, therefore, be as subtle as those above, as long as a substantial number of members of the in-group are cognizant of the cultural axiom in question.

From a structural perspective, one pattern appears frequently in these proverbial monikers: a phrase relating to one particular aspect of farm-life is attached to a place-name to indicate a common feature of that place. These phrases usually appear as genitive complements, as in the examples below.

(37)   *Gleann Loic na muca méithe.* (M§1085)
       'Glanlick of the fat pigs.'

(38)   *Baile an Ghleanna na meadracha gléigeal.* (M§1086)
       'Ballinglanna of the shiny churns. '

(39)   *Baile Ícín na smísmín caorach.* (M§1087)
       'Ballyickeen of the sniffling sheep.'

(40)   *Baile na Rátha na bláthaí géire.* (M§1088)
       'Ballynaraha of the sour buttermilk.'

The degree of negativity or disparagement, if indeed there is any at all, is unclear, as neither the source of the proverb nor the relationship between the groups is mentioned. The lack of annotation relating to place-names also causes difficulties when attempting to

elucidate the meaning of decontextualized forms. On occasion, by virtue of the absence of context, or by the loss of the original meaning, misinterpretation may occur. A literal reading of a nickname or proverbial expression may imply a pejorative or negative meaning, even when this is not intended (Ronesi 2000: 330). This is the case with example No. 41 where the literal expression seems to be derogatory. However, the original application was in fact positive: the name was attached to Ballyvourney because so many beggars went there on account of the kindness and generosity of the local population.

(41) *Baile Mhúirne na mbacach.* (M§1092)
'Ballyvourney of the beggers.'

Other expressions are more exoteric and contain an explicit negative slur. Thus, there is no need for any explication of the casual disregard for the worthless Ballynahow with its 'senseless women', nor for Ballynabooly, which is castigated on account of the absence of a peat bog for fuel and a well for water.

(42) *Baile na hAbha, baile cois abhann, baile beag briste lámh le huisce, is mná gan tuiscint ann.* (M§1090)
'Ballynahow, a town beside a river, a small worthless town beside water, with senseless women in it.'

(43) *Baile na Buaile—baile na fuaire, baile gan tine, gan uisce gan luaithre.* (M§1082)
'Ballynabooly—a town of coldness; a town without a fire, without water, without ashes.'

There are very few derisive nicknames in which the stereotypical personal characteristics of a particular group are explicitly targeted, but some do exist. The hypocrisy of the people of Keel, on Achill Island, is alluded to in No. 44, whilst the inhabitants of the Galway townlands of Camus, Turlough, and Rosmuck are tarred with the same proverbial brush in the comparative triad in No. 45.

(44)  *Diaganta, diabhalta, mar mhuintir an Chaoil.* (C§487)

      'Pious, mischievous, like the people of Keel.'

(45)  *Mangairí an Chamais, amhais an Turlaigh, is pocaidí dubha Ros Muc.* (C§498)

      'Dealers of Camus, hooligans of Turlough, and the playboys/ scamps of Rosmuck.'

The absence of ancillary annotation is also a major obstacle to deciphering the provenance of the expressions. In many instances, a particular place-name is found numerous times not only within the same county but also in other counties within the province, and indeed beyond its provincial borders. An interesting example is the case of Baile na bhFaoiteach (also Baile an Fhaoitigh) (Ballyneety or Ballineetig), which is found in four of the Munster counties: Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary, and Waterford. The town is castigated for its stray dogs and tied stones.

(46)  *Is mairg a théann go Baile na bhFaoiteach: Bíonn clocha ceangailte is madraí scaoilte ann.* (M§1103)

      'Pity the person who goes to Ballyneety: there are stray dogs there and the stones are tied down.'

The remark itself epitomizes an international tale or jest, and ascriptions of it to Irish places are numerous. The late Professor Dáithí Ó hÓgáin assigned the quip to Ballyneetig, County Limerick (of which there are three), contextualizing it in a full narrative:

> I come from County Limerick and there's a town there, Ballyneety (Baile an Fhaoitigh). Whitestown, it means actually, and there was a beggerman passing through there one day … and a dog ran out, a savage dog and he bent down to pick up a stone to keep the dog away from him, naturally. But the stone was stuck to the ground and so the dog went and tore the arse out of the poor man. And all he could say was … "Is olc an baile, Baile an Fhaoitigh, go bhfuil clocha ceangailte ann agus madraí scaoilte!"" ("Ballyneety is a bad place because the stones are tied there and the dogs are loose!"). (Ó hÓgáin 2004)

Nineteenth-century versions, mostly reduced to the allusive "punch line" of the jest, relate to Ballyneety or Whitestown, County Waterford (O'Daly 1876: 68; Ó Dúnlainge 1897: 151) and to a 'Baile an Mhurdair' in Leinster (Hyde 1930: 157). Marshall (1931: §68) also gives a version in Ulster English that refers to County Tyrone: 'Bad luck to you, Cookstown, where the stones are chained and the dogs loose.' All those texts represent locally adapted variants, or 'oikotypes' (von Sydow 1948), of the migratory jest that can be found as early as the thirteenth century, in the *Gulistan* of the Persian poet Sadi:

> A poet went to the chief of a band of robbers and recited a panegyric upon him. He commanded them to strip off his clothes and turn him out of the village. The dogs, too, attacked him in the rear. He wanted to take up a stone, but the ground was frozen. Unable to do anything, he said, "What a villainous set are these, who have untied their dogs and tied up their stones." (Sadi 1979: 154)

Scarcity of food and provision is also a common theme. Certain places are identified for their lack of food and sustenance, which is grave condemnation when one considers the legacy of hunger on the *Volksgeist* of rural Ireland in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, the same proverb is applied to three of these places in the collections: Ballaghderren in County Roscommon (C§492), Glenflesk in County Kerry (M§1080), and Inismaan island in County Galway (C§492). The proverb denigrates each for being mean and miserable, and warns that one should take food there or risk a long fast.

(47)  *Bealach an Doirín an chrainn, An baile gann gortach; Mara raibh tú istigh in am, Beidh tú an tráth sin i do throscadh.* (C§492)

'Ballaghderreen of the tree, the mean miserable place, if you aren't there in time, you will spend that time fasting.'

According to Ó Máille (2010: 34), some expressions have arisen out of actual events, and this is particularly the case with regard to the tradition of beggars travelling to Achill Island for the remnants of wool left over after spinning. From this custom, the proverb warns the visitor to go early, as the alternative is to be without wool.

(48)  *Bí mall in Acaill, is ar beagán den olann.* (C§474)

      'Be late in Achill, and (you will be) short of wool.'

Endogamy is often taunted, particularly with regard to the inhabitants of geographically isolated areas, such as rural or island districts. This, of course, concurs with the centre–periphery theory of stereotyping. There is also the implicit suggestion that concomitant levels of hereditary defects associated with inbreeding and incest—usually slow-wittedness, foolishness, or physical abnormality—are present in these marginal communities (see Widdowson 1981: 42; Snell 2003: 12). The jibe at marriages within the local community can be seen in the case of Bear, in the southwest of Cork, in which the proverb warns prospective suitors that marriage to one of the women equates to marrying the entire area (No. 49). This proverbial structure is common to all dialects, except that it does not focus on a particular town but generalizes to the inhabitants of an island, a glen, or a mountain.

(49)  *Pós bean ó Bhéara is pósfair Béara go léir.* (M§1117)

      'Marry a woman from Bear and you will marry all of Bear.'

(50)  *Pós bean ón sliabh is pósfaidh tú an sliabh uilig.* (C§4403; cf. U§132 and U§133)

      'Marry a woman from a mountain and you will marry all the mountain.'

(51)  *Pós bean oileáin is pósfaidh tú an t-oileán uilig.* (U§131)

      'Marry an island woman and you will marry the whole island.'

There is also a proverbial phrase that owes its origin to the rivalry between the unfortunate people of Erris, who used to be regularly mocked and jibed by their neighbours in Tirawley in County Mayo, as they passed on their way to Sligo (Ó Máille 2010: 35). Thus, No. 52 has become a proverbial phrase synonymous with 'an unpleas-

ant welcome' in the same manner as other proverbial phrases utilize antiphrasis, e.g. *bodhaire Uí Laoire / Mhic Mhathúna* (O'Leary's / McMahon's deafness = feigned deafness) or *tabhartas Uí Bhriain* (Ó Brian's gift = a gift grudgingly given) (for further examples, see O'Rahilly 1922, 143–44).

> (52)  *Fáilte Mhuintir Iorrais i dTír Amhlaidh.* (C§489)
>
>     'The welcome for the people of Erris in Tirawley.'

Some proverbs clearly identify their place of origin and, indeed, the pride of the inhabitants, as in Nos. 53–54 below. This is an example of the type of blason populaire in which an individual place (and its inhabitants) is exalted without any denigration of another group. The local pride is such that the in-group within the townland of Oghil, on the Aran island of Inishmore, believes it to be the best place in Ireland. Similarly, No. 54 displays the intellectual and scholarly virtues of the parish of Prior in Iveragh, County Kerry.

> (53)  *Má bhíonn tú in Éirinn bí in Árainn, is má bhíonn tú in Árainn bí in Eochaill.* (C§496)
>
>     'If you are in Ireland, be in Aran, and if you are in Aran, be in Oghil.'

> (54)  *B'fhearr seachtain sa Phriaireacht ná bliain ar scoil.* (M§1095)
>
>     'Better a week in Prior than a year at school.'

## 4.5. Miscellaneous

One final generic type of blason populaire found in the collections is a racial slur used in Wellerisms. A form found in both Connaught and Munster plays on polysemous adjectives. The terms *bán* and *gléigeal* literally mean 'white' or 'fair', but when used as adjectival qualifiers in terms of endearment may be understood as 'good' or 'decent'. These common hypocorisms are employed in relation to 'a black person' as a means of showing incongruence between the literal and hypocoristic meaning. Here a physical feature, i.e. complexion or

skin colour, is used to illustrate the ethnic differences between immigrant groups and the majority of the in-group.

(55) *Tá an ceart agat, a dhuine uasail bhreá ghléigil -arsa Tadhg Ó Sé leis an mbleaic*. (M§968)

'You're right, oh fine, fair gentleman – said Tadhg Ó Sé to the black person.'

(56) *'Muise, do chabhail ghlégeal', mar a dúirt Seán Ó Néill leis an mblack.* (C§3827)

"'Well, my fair friend," as Seán Ó Néill said to the black person.'

(57) *'Cé chaoi a bhfuil tú, a mhac bán?' mar dúirt an fear leis an mblack.* (C§3827)

"'How are you, my fair fellow?" as the man said to the black person.'

## 5. Conclusions

It must be reiterated that this is a synchronic study of one folkloristic form related to the blason populaire. It is by no means representative of the entire genre, but it is a first step in the compilation of a comprehensive, systematic analysis of blasons populaires in Irish. If we consider currency to be a prerequisite of proverbiality, then we must accept that a significant proportion of the 'folk' recognized, and indeed used, these blasons populaires. They are evidence of social relationships during this period at a local, regional, and national level, and reflect what Dundes (1971) has termed "folk ideas".

There is an inverse correlation between the number of blasons populaires in these proverbial collections and the size of the geographical region: the larger the region, the fewer the blasons populaires. Proverbial materials relating to international comparisons and slurs are few, whilst at a local level, between towns, villages, and townlands, there are numerous examples. The evidence shows that

people do affiliate with larger groups of social organization, particularly the 'nation', the province, and the county, and that such in-groups use stereotypes to articulate their loyalty to a shared identity, and their prejudice to out-groups. Geography and historical associations are at the base of these stereotypical characterizations. Groups mock and jibe those with which they are most familiar: towns and villages mock neighbouring towns and villages, counties mock their closest neighbours, and, at the level of the nation, the Irish focus on their colonial neighbour, England.

There is an extremely limited number of blasons populaires relating to England, however, even when we include slurs on groups representative of Englishness, such as police, landlords, and Protestant clergy. A possible explanation is the fact that many expressions in the collections predate the rise in nationalism in the late eighteenth century. Nevertheless, there is evidence of something more malicious than innocuous observational stereotyping at work, especially when one considers that English perfidy and greed are the underlying stereotypes in nearly all of them. This fits with the conclusion that the blason populaire is primarily a local phenomenon, in which aspects of currency, traditionality, and recognizability are more easily established than the promulgation of fixed expressions on a national level (especially during the period 1858–1952). The theory that mocking is directed from centre to periphery may also explain why the English colonizers were not maligned for aberrant personal characteristics relating to sanitation, sexuality, or intelligence. Another point worthy of note is the fact that the Irish language was in a severe state of decline during this particular period. English was the dominant language in Ireland, especially in towns and cities, and it may have been the case that anti-colonial slurs were vented in the English tongue. The lack of any comprehensive collection of Hiberno-English proverbial material is an obstacle to a comparative examination with Irish-language material, but the archives of the National Folklore Collection in University College, Dublin, are a worthy starting point.

Nevertheless, the evidence also shows that it is with the most immediate, local societal unit, i.e. the townland or parish, that people are primarily attached and associated. Loyalty to a shared local identity is buttressed by strong kinship ties, allegiance to the land, legal borders, working-habits, dialect, and sporting pastimes. There is a sense of what Snell has termed "the culture of local xenophobia" (2003: 3) to be found in the material. Salient geographical attributes of places are highlighted, as well as the agricultural practices common to the area. The relatively homogeneous ethnic make-up of the population during this period meant that out-group stereotypes usually focused on salient cultural differences, such as language and food, as well as negative characteristics relating to socio-economic conditions, such as hunger and scarcity. Physical differences do not feature. The direction of the stereotyping follows the central–periphery model in nearly all the material, especially mocking those who are on the geographical, social, and linguistic periphery.

Uncommon are insults directed at the anti-social habits of people, however; there is very little emphasis on themes of sexual licentiousness, poor sanitation, or scatology. Moreover, Irish proverbial material does not exhibit the same extent of vitriol and bitterness as is found in some of the other languages in which such material has been gathered. There is no reason to suggest that the Irish are different in this regard, however, and the most likely explanation is that the collections were subject to a high degree of editing and sanitization, as openly admitted by one author: "I have treasured everything I could get in the way of proverbial sayings, except what was gross or indecent" (Ó Muirgheasa 1907: xiii). The rationale becomes clear if one considers that the collections were all published in the early years of the twentieth century, almost all after the foundation of the Irish Free State (1922), when a fledgling state was grappling with political and economic independence. Cultural revival was intertwined with these projects, of course. As a result, the romantic idea of the Irish peasantry as a national *Mutterschicht*, plus the revivalist background of the folklore collectors undeniably shaped the nature of

folklore collections (Ó Giolláin 2000: 141). It is doubtful that blasons populaires*,* especially crass, sectarian, misogynistic, ethnocentric, or racist forms, would have been welcomed in this cultural awakening.

# CONCLUSION

## 1. Conclusion

This study documents the mnemonic architecture of Irish proverbs—the formal features through which they achieve memorability and remain available for recognition and reuse. The findings confirm that Irish proverbs, though characteristically brief, are structurally sophisticated. Beneath their apparent simplicity lies a systematic network of syntactic, semantic, and prosodic markers. These are not incidental features; they are the means by which proverbs persist.

## 2. Summary of Findings

The syntactic analysis showed that simple sentences account for approximately 57 per cent of all sampled Irish proverbs, making this the quintessential proverbial sentence type—a pattern also observed in Hungarian and Russian traditions. These proverbs average 6.5 words in length. The comparative copular structure (*Is fearr X ná Y* 'Better X than Y') is among the most common templates, appearing across a wide range of adjectives in both positive and negated forms; this structure has antecedents as far back as Old Irish gnomic literature. More striking still is the pervasiveness of parallelism—both syndetic and asyndetic—which creates balance, rhythm, and memorability through matched clauses and phrases. Irish proverbs also show a marked preference for emphatic word order, particularly clefting and left dislocation, foregrounding key constituents for rhetorical effect. Formulaic openers such as *An té...* 'He who...', *An áit...* 'Where...', and *An rud/ní...* 'The thing that...' function as reliable proverbial markers, setting the expression apart from surrounding discourse as soon as they are uttered. Fronted subordinate clauses introduced by *nuair* 'when' or *má* 'if' fulfil a similar role, though the cue to proverbial status is less pronounced.

Metaphor, while not the most frequent stylistic feature in the corpus, plays a central role in how Irish proverbs organise meaning and achieve rhetorical force. Metaphorical meaning typically emerges through nominal constructions (X is Y) and predicative structures that disrupt ordinary selectional patterns, prompting a shift from literal to figurative interpretation. These metaphors draw on a limited set of syntactic templates: the X is Y frame, the copular comparative, and more elaborate XYZ structures. Personification is especially prominent, projecting human traits onto non-human subjects in ways consistent with Lakoff and Turner's (1989) account of the *Great Chain of Being*. Prosodic features reinforce these patterns: rhyme appears in roughly 15 per cent of the corpus, alliteration in approximately 29 per cent. These devices frequently coincide with syntactic parallelism and lexical repetition, producing the patterned balance that sets proverbial utterances apart from ordinary speech.

The study also addressed long-standing definitional and terminological ambiguities by analysing proverbial subforms: proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, Wellerisms, proverbial questions, and enumerative forms. Although these subforms appear throughout the dialectal collections, collectors rarely defined or distinguished them, subsuming structurally diverse material under the broad heading of 'proverb'—a conflation that has obscured their formal and functional distinctiveness. Each subform operates as a mnemonic schema in its own right: the grammatical flexibility of proverbial expressions, the culturally embedded analogies of comparisons, the semantic incongruity of Wellerisms, the implicit assertion of proverbial questions, and the structural symmetry of enumerative proverbs.

## 3. The Prospects of Subforms

One of the most striking findings concerns the differing futures these subforms face. Wellerisms and enumerative proverbs—dependent on specific structural schemata and cultural contexts—risk misrecognition or outright loss as oral tradition recedes. In the case

of enumerative proverbs, many may not have been current even at the start of the twentieth century; editors, conscious of their literary history in Ireland, included them as distinctively Irish forms. The overlap between folklore and literary sources is evident: all collectors, Ó Máille's *Seanfhocla Chonnacht* in particular, drew on manuscript and literary sources as well as oral tradition. Wellerisms likely enjoyed wider currency in an earlier period, but their use appears to be waning. If familiarity with existing proverbs and fixed expressions (to formulate the utterance) is a prerequisite for generating new Wellerisms, it seems unlikely that new forms will emerge. The shift from oral culture to social media—emphasising the visual over the oral—does not appear to favour the retention of such forms. A search of 'Wellerism' on Google Books Ngram Viewer suggests steady decline since the 1980s.

Proverbial expressions, comparisons, and proverbial questions appear to adapt more readily—though often as translations of English forms rather than as traditional Irish material. The changing nature of the idiomatic corpus is reflected in the *New English-Irish Dictionary* (NEID) (https://www.focloir.ie). A central challenge for the NEID team was creating an Irish-language style guide for thousands of items without translation precedents; they adopted a descriptive, currency-based approach, prioritising "this is how I would say it" over inherited prescriptive norms. This policy introduced extensive new coinages and, as Ó Mianáin (2019: 158) notes, contributed to the "normalization of the ever increasing influence of English on the Irish language either by transliteration or by directly translating phrases and grammatical structures". The implication for the paremiological minimum is paradoxical: the total stock of fixed expressions available to speakers may be expanding through translation, even as the core of traditionally Irish forms contracts.

Proverbial questions emerged as a particularly distinctive subform: although framed as interrogatives, they function as strong assertions that foreclose debate. They are the fewest in number in the collection, yet this very scarcity may aid their retention: speak-

ers may preserve them as the go-to forms for such rhetorical moves. Proverbial comparisons, by contrast, are tied to vehicles no longer recognisable to many contemporary Irish-speakers: domestic animals, natural phenomena, objects from rural contexts. This raises questions about their currency and about the extent of the paremiological minimum among Irish speakers generally. Evidence from the *New English-Irish Dictionary* (NEID) suggests that, while traditional forms remain in the dictionary, the translation of current English comparisons is the more likely path of development.

## 4. Contributions

This study makes four principal contributions. First, it offers a systematic account of the structural and stylistic features that give Irish proverbs their recognisable form. By tracing recurring syntactic frames, figurative patterns, and prosodic devices, it establishes a descriptive model not previously articulated for Irish-language material. Irish proverbs operate within a systematic yet flexible framework—one that supports both the preservation of traditional expressions and the generation of new ones. A small cohort of formulae recurs: subclausal fronting (*An té/ní/rud/áit* 'The person/thing/thing/place...'), paratactical noun and verb phrases organised along parallel lines, the copular comparative *Is fearr X ná Y*, and the emphatic copular sentence containing *maith* 'good' (*Is maith an X an Y*).

Second, it provides a framework for classifying proverbial items in archival and digital settings. The typology developed here—encompassing proverbial expressions, Wellerisms, enumerative proverbs, proverbial comparisons, and proverbial questions—supports clearer identification and annotation. This has practical application for the future digitisation of collections, which could be linked to existing initiatives in Irish. The Gaois project (https://www.gaois.ie/en), for example, offers a platform where precise linguistic categorisation would enable proverbial material to be integrated alongside other resources: folklore, placenames, dialectal data, and idioms.

Third, the study clarifies how established structural patterns can serve as templates for contemporary use. Although intergenerational oral transmission has weakened in many Irish-speaking regions, the patterned frames documented here continue to support cultural literacy (the capacity to recognize and interpret proverbial forms) and offer both learners in educational settings and New Speakers stable models of idiomatic grammar and natural usage.

Fourth, the analysis demonstrates that fixed proverbial frames can anchor long-standing cultural evaluations, including unfavourable ones. This is most apparent in *blasons populaires*, where regional, gendered, or social characteristics are articulated through the same formal strategies that lend proverbs their memorability and rhetorical force. The Irish material, however, is striking for its relative restraint: *blasons populaires* of the early to mid-twentieth century rarely stray into racially or ethnically charged invective, remaining focused on the fine-grained distinctions that structure local social worlds.

## 5. Boundaries of the Present Study

The twentieth-century dialectal collections remain foundational sources for Irish paremiology, though not without limitations. As seen in Chapter 2, metadata is inconsistent, genre distinctions often blurred, contextual annotation minimal, and there is little information on usage, frequency, or speaker demographics. The collectors worked under considerable time pressure, often in Irish-speaking communities where the language was in rapid decline; their priority was preservation rather than detailed linguistic documentation. The *blasons populaires* analysed in Chapter 5 represent, of course, a synchronic snapshot of early to mid-twentieth-century attitudes. Moreover, the relative mildness of the recorded material may partly reflect editorial bowdlerisation, with 'gross or indecent' forms culled by collectors (Ó Muirgheasa 1907: viii).

Cross-referencing the dialectal sources with the recently digitized archive of the National Folklore Collection would help validate

proverbial material, particularly the lists compiled in the Schools' Collection. Comparison with raw folkloric data would also be valuable, as would drawing on recently digitized lexicographic resources such as *Foclóir Mháirtín Uí Chadhain* (https://focloiruichadhain.ria.ie/english/), which "draws heavily on speech and idiom to elucidate the meaning and use of words", particularly in idiomatic contexts. Such resources could sharpen definitions of subforms and address terminological inconsistencies through naturally occurring data.

This study has concentrated on the structural and stylistic features of proverbs as recorded in the dialectal collections. It is not a sociolinguistic analysis of contemporary usage; questions of frequency, recognition, and active deployment among different speaker communities remain largely unexplored. Nor is it a comprehensive diachronic analysis tracing changes in proverbial form from the early twentieth century to the present, though the continuity of certain structural preferences has been noted throughout.

## 6. Future Directions

The findings point toward several directions for future research. Most pressing is the need for a national, open-access digital repository of Irish proverbs. Such a resource would consolidate material from the major dialectal collections into a single searchable platform while incorporating additional sources: journals, dictionaries, literary texts, and the Schools' Manuscripts Collection. Beyond preservation, the initiative would allow for consistent classification according to internationally recognized paremiological standards, addressing long-standing problems of typology and categorisation. Proverbs could be tagged for syntactic type, figurative strategy, prosodic features, and regional provenance, enabling qualitative and quantitative research at scale.

Integration with existing digital infrastructure would add considerable value. Digitised dictionaries (Ó Dónaill 1977; de Bhaldraithe 1959; Ó Mianáin 2013) could supply lexical evidence; historical sourc-

es such as *Foclóir Stairiúil na Nua-Ghaeilge* (c.1600–2000) could trace diachronic change; and contemporary corpora like *Corpas Náisiúnta na Gaeilge* (2000–2025) could illuminate patterns of current usage. The digitised National Folklore Collection (www.duchas.ie) could also provide ethnographic context. Online proverb repositories remain rare internationally, and the Dúchas project is among the most comprehensive in any language. It is also notably accessible and easy to use, allowing proverbs to be retrieved from the Schools' Collection or the Main Manuscript Collection with a simple search. The Peadar Ó Laoghaire Idiom Collection (https://www.gaois.ie/en/idioms/about), offering a corpus-based inventory of stable phrasemes, is also of particular relevance. Proverbs, with their relatively constrained syntax, lend themselves well to automated parsing; a syntactic parser for Irish could target the structural elements that recur throughout the corpus—copular frames, comparative patterns, cleft constructions—and generate enriched metadata to support classification and retrieval.

A structured digital corpus would open the door to sociolinguistic research on current usage. Important questions remain about whether traditional mnemonic schemata are known, recognized, or actively employed by contemporary speakers—both New Speakers (see O'Rourke and Walsh 2020), who have acquired Irish outside Gaeltacht environments, and native speakers in Gaeltacht communities, where patterns of intergenerational transmission are increasingly variable (see Ó Curnáin, Ó Giollagáin, and Ó hIfearnáin). Census data underscore the gap between nominal competence and active use: approximately two million people across Ireland report some knowledge of Irish—almost 1.9 million in the South (2022) and 228,600 in the North (2011)—but only around 116,000 use the language daily. It is possible that while proverbs remain culturally visible, their structural and stylistic conventions are no longer fully internalised or spontaneously used by younger speakers. Clarifying this will require dedicated fieldwork aimed at mapping current patterns of recognition and production. Longitudinal corpus data could track whether

proverbial forms are being retained, reconfigured, or receding into passive cultural memory.

The structural and stylistic features documented here also invite comparative work. Piirainen's (2012, 2016a, 2016b) research on widespread idioms across European languages offers one framework for assessing whether the patterns identified in Irish are language-specific or reflect broader typological tendencies. More immediately, comparison with other Celtic languages, particularly the other Goidelic languages, Scottish Gaelic and Manx, could illuminate shared inheritances and points of divergence. Nicolson observed as early as 1882 that sayings "almost identical" across Scottish Gaelic, Irish, and Manx "must have originated in a prehistoric period, when the Isle of Man, the north of Ireland, and the south-west of Scotland, and the Hebrides, spoke the same Gaelic tongue" (Nicolson 2011 [1882]: xx). A Celtic paremiological typology has yet to be developed; the Irish material documented here provides a foundation for such work. Beyond the Celtic languages, the prominence of parallelism, copular structures, and clefting in Irish proverbs raises broader typological questions: do verb-initial languages show similar preferences for marked word order in proverbs? Are certain figurative strategies more prominent in oral traditions?

Future research might also apply cognitive linguistic frameworks more systematically. Metaphorical mappings could be catalogued according to source and target domains, revealing whether certain conceptual metaphors—drawn from agricultural, maritime, or religious experience—are particularly productive in the Irish tradition. Blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner 1998, 2002) could illuminate how speakers creatively adapt proverbial templates within established frames.

On the pedagogical front, the structural templates documented here could be exploited more systematically in language teaching. Proverbial frames such as *Is fearr X ná Y* 'Better X than Y' or *An té a… 'The person who..'.* offer learners stable models of copular and relative clause syntax. Proverbs also model a distinctive feature of Irish: the

language relies heavily on syntactic formulae for emphasis rather than on changes in stress, loudness, or intonation. This is particularly relevant to cleft structures, where phrases are fronted by the copula (compare *Tá sé tinn* 'He is sick' with *Is tinn atá sé* 'He is SICK'; Ó Siadhail 1989: 236–7). How proverbs are currently used in formal Irish-language education—whether in Gaeltacht schools, Irish-medium schools, or adult language courses—remains an open question.

This study has focused on the documentary record rather than contemporary production, but the question of how proverbial forms circulate in digital contexts deserves attention. Are proverbs being adapted, parodied, or modified into anti-proverbs in Irish-language social media, journalism, or creative writing? One example encountered online and in speech is *Níl aon tóin thinn mar do thóin thinn féin* 'There is no sore bottom like your own sore bottom'—an anti-proverb based on the style of *Níl aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin* (C§3952) 'There is no hearth like your own hearth'. How common such creative transformations are, and whether certain structural types lend themselves more readily to adaptation, are questions a corpus of contemporary Irish-language media could begin to answer.

Diachronic research could also attend more closely to change: which proverbial forms appear to be falling out of use, and which remain productive? Are certain structural types, such as triads, Wellerisms, or proverbial questions, more vulnerable to obsolescence? Corpus data drawn from *Foclóir Stairiúil na Gaeilge* could enable systematic tracking of lexical and structural change over the past four centuries.

## 7. *Closing comments*

Irish proverbs continue to function as adaptable, structurally marked expressions in contemporary contexts. Their most active use appears to lie with highly proficient speakers who draw consciously on the *paremiological minimum* (Permiakov 1973, 1982, 1989), and with learners exposed to proverbs through formal Irish-language educa-

tion, where they often serve as foundational linguistic models. Yet important questions remain about the living status of these forms among the wider community of speakers—questions that only dedicated sociolinguistic research can answer.

The proverbial form lends authority to the statements it encodes, naturalising social observations (and indeed social distinctions) through the weight of tradition and the aesthetic appeal of patterned language. This study has demonstrated that the formal architecture of Irish proverbs—their syntactic templates, figurative strategies, and prosodic textures—provides a durable framework for cultural transmission. These structures have persisted across centuries. Whether they will persist into the next remains an open question, and one that merits sustained attention from linguists, educators, and language planners. To that end, a fully digitized, tagged, and openly accessible national corpus of Irish proverbs would be of considerable value—not only for exploring the rich material that survives, but for placing Irish paremiology in dialogue with broader comparative and typological work.

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