

LEXICAL AND SEMANTIC ASPECTS OF PROVERBS

FRANTIŠEK ČERMÁK

KAROLINUM

LEXICAL AND SEMANTIC ASPECTS OF PROVERBS

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INTRODUCTION: LINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF PROVERBS IN SYSTEM AND TEXT

This collection of papers on proverbs in English, Czech and other languages is mostly a second edition of those already published elsewhere. However, most did originate as the author's contribution to his fairly regular participation in *Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs. Colóquio Interdisciplinar sobre Proverbios*, held yearly in Tavira, Portugal. This colloquium, the only one of its kind, has become a lively platform for exchanging views on proverbs, whether linguistic, literary, historic or other, both in English and Portuguese. Due to the limited means and range of publication (through by the care of Runo Soares and Outi Lauhakangas, there appears a separate locally printed volume every year), proceedings of the Colloquia are mostly unknown and it is difficult to find them in shops.

Thanks to the efforts of Wolfgang Mieder, the major background figure on the field of proverbs, author of many books and editor of the unique yearly *Proverbium*, some of my contributions have been published as *Proverbs, Their Lexical and Semantic Features* in 2014. However, the present edition is much more comprehensive since other studies published elsewhere have been added, and some are new. The contributions found here have been read previously by Runo Soares, Outi Lauhakangas, and Wolfgang Mieder, editors who are familiar with them, and they can be considered as reviewed.

The volume is rather broad, linguistic in nature, offering a number of aspects and languages studied, though mostly on lexical, semantic and pragmatic aspects, and corpus findings leading to proveb minima.

Apart from smaller publishers (such as Europhras), all of them are given with each respective paper, the main sources of the papers here are **Actas ICP** and **Čermák Proverbs** (see below):

ACTAS ICP, Proceedings, International Association of Paremiology, eds. Rui Sores, Outi Lauhakangas, *Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs. Colóquio Interdisciplinar sobre Proverbios*, eds. Rui JB Soares, Outi Lauhakangas, Tavira (= **Actas**).

František Čermák PROVERBS: THEIR LEXICAL AND SEMANTIC FEATURES

'Proverbium' in cooperation with the Institute of the Czech National Corpus

The University of Vermont Burlington, Vermont 2014

Supplement Series of Proverbium

Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship Volume 36 (= **Čermák Proverbs 2014**).

PROVERBIUM, Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship, ed. W. Mieder

The traditional field of Proverbs which is being enriched by the colloquia and subsequent proceedings seems to be drawing attention and it is hoped that the present edition might contribute to satisfy the attention.

My thanks go to the reviewers who have enabled this publication.

Reviewed by Rui Soares, Wolfgang Mieder, Outi Lauhakangas.

A
**ASPECTS OF PROVERBS: LEXICAL,
SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC**

The most general and obvious aspect and feature of proverbs is their lexical basis. The nature of their lexical setup is examined here, in part A, mostly in their relation to meaning, a feature often neglected.

1. LEXICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PROVERBS: BASED ON DATA FROM ENGLISH, GERMAN, FRENCH AND CZECH

In *Actas ICP 1, 2011*, 197–207, *Čermák Proverbs 2014*, 91–110.

ABSTRACT

Proverbs in four languages are concentrating around the central key-word 'dog' and 7 other, mostly animal names (bird, cat, gold, hand, horse, stone, water) are examined as to the lexical components that they are made of with the ultimate goal to trace the relations between both levels, that of the lexicon and the sentence. Data used are those from Wictionary, the Czech data, somewhat larger coming from a large and comprehensive Czech Dictionary. On the basis of these, some basic statistics and correlations are calculated and offered arriving at the four vocabularies that the proverbs in the languages inspected are made of. The relevant proverbs are then compared and searched as to correspondences that, surprisingly, are few.

1. INTRODUCTION

Linguistically, everything about proverbs is proverbially vague, including their meaning, use, variant forms, and many other aspects if they are viewed in general. These include, on the one hand such derived notions as their metaphorical character while, on the other hand, there is hardly any consensus as to what exactly proverbs are and how to distinguish them from other types of phraseology. A part of the problem is due to proverbs sitting proverbially on too many fences, one pertaining to ethnography, one to literary science, one to linguistics, specifically to phraseology, with further background relationships to history, law, etc. Yet, the core of proverbs has never raised any major objection as to its substance. The complicated network of links, ties and adherences is interdisciplinary and does not, accordingly, have any distinctly satisfactory and clear-cut face that would satisfy everyone. It does have, in fact, many faces depending on the point of view taken, as the father of modern linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure has repeatedly stressed, though he has never dealt with proverbs.

Despite these many aspects, sometimes mutually contradictory, there is one indisputable fact, behind all of this, recognized as the very basis of proverbs as well as of anything related to meaning in languages, namely words as building blocks of every single proverb, on which any other interpretation and analysis of any aspect must be based.

2. FROM THE LEXIS TO THE PROVERB: ARE THE TWO SEMANTICALLY LINKED?

Generally, it is acknowledged that some proverbs are viewed almost literally, such as: (1) *Knowledge is power*, while others are not and their interpretation depends on the context much more. Such is the case of, for example, (2) *Barking dogs seldom bite* which can be read in many ways. Here, for example, either a literal or functional approach may be applied:

(a) Dogs who bark instead of bite usually use barking as a defence instead of biting.

Or, a logical one:

(b) What is meant by barking dogs seldom bite? If a dog is using its mouth for barking, how can it bite at the same moment?

Or, an acoustical and psychological one:

(c) Forget about the bite because their bark is just as annoying. So what can be done to stop their nuisance barking?

Or, finally, a metaphorical and causal one, referring to people:

(d) People who say they are going to do something bad to us usually sound like a dog barking that does nothing to us.

Although the last reading usually prevails, it is, without a specific context, still very far from saying what kind of person provided with what authority and under what circumstances is meant, etc.

Obviously, some very simple general questions may and should be asked:

A Is there a Causal Relationship between the Vocabulary Used and the Proverb? If there is,

B What Are the Major Building Blocks of Proverbs?

C Is There a Metaphorical Process Involved?

The first two simple examples above provide a basic answer to the last (C) question. Without going into the intricacies of metaphors, it is the **concrete nouns** and, perhaps, verbs (such as *dogs*, *bite*), as opposed to the abstract ones (*knowledge*, *power*) that are involved in metaphoric formation. That, as we have seen in the interpreta-

tions of (2), can give rise to various readings and meanings. A repeated use of some frequent proverbs may also give rise to fixed meanings and/or related associations. In Tavira 2010 we have shown that there are at least 10 tentative and broad types of meaning related to proverbs based on the *dog* constituent (Čermák – Lindroos 2010), such as:

man threatening is not dangerous • *Pes, ktorej/který štěká, nekouše.* (A barking dog never bites).

Here, the barking dog is consensually associated with danger, being, however, only a part of the overall meaning of the proverb used about the man: in fact, the whole proverb contradicts this general association and expectation. Hence, the semantic link of the component *dog* to the proverb viewed as a whole is, at best, only partial and indirect. In view of the 9 remaining meaning types using the component *dog*, it is obvious that meaning attributes are different in other cases (see Čermák – Lindroos 2010) and there is nothing stable about the semantic role of *dog* in various proverbs.

3. PROVERB DATA AND THEIR COMPARISON

In order to get at a more consistent picture of this semantic part vs the whole relationship, one would need to examine more data that would be representative. As we know, paremiological minima, which are far from being wide-spread (Čermák 2003, Mieder 2004, etc.) are widely different and represent a mostly subjective collection (with the exception of those for Czech and English based on large corpora). The only option left for a kind of comparative proverb data seems, then, to be what Web-based Wiktionary (Wikiquote) offers. Despite obvious problems and discrepancies in size and approach applied, the proverb lists offered by Wiktionary (spring 2011) have been used for English (755 proverbs), German (214), and French (308), as there is nothing else even remotely useful. Since the Czech Wikipedia collection was too small (82), data for this language have been selected from a recent comprehensive and very large dictionary of the Czech phraseology (Čermák et al. 2009, offering 876 proverbs). Hence, data for English and Czech are similar in size, while data for German and French are about 3–4 times smaller. It is hoped that the list has been compiled with the best of intentions aiming at a representative picture, although one does have some doubts about this, cf., for example, an odd inclusion, such as:

The difference between a man and a cat or a dog is that only a man can write the names of the cat and the dog.

Please don't retouch my wrinkles. It took me so long to earn them.

4. LEXICAL STOCK OF PROVERBS

Breaking down these probably basic English, German, French, and Czech lists separately in word forms, some statistics (despite unequal sizes of the collection compared) and word lists could be obtained. First the overall statistics:

English: 755 proverbs, Word : Proverb ratio = 2.15 words per 1 proverb (Wiki)

1,624 words altogether, 386 types, Word: Type ratio = 4.21

German: 214 proverbs, Word : Proverb ratio = 3.06 words per 1 proverb (Wiki)

655 words altogether, 92 types, Word: Type ratio = 7.12

French: 308 proverbs, Word : Proverb ratio = 2.55 words per 1 proverb (Wiki)

785 words altogether, 638 types!, Word: Type ratio = 1.23 words per 1 proverb

Czech: 876 proverbs, Word: Proverb ratio = 2.82 words per 1 proverb (SČFI)

2,470 words altogether, 458 types, Word: Type ratio = 5.41

It is the proportions that are of interest here. Note, at least, the highest word-type ratio for German meaning that German proverbs rely heavily on a repetition of words which is in sharp contrast to French, where the ratio is the lowest of all (while the number of types is the highest of all languages). This picture would be different, should all the variants, plentiful in Czech due to its high inflection, be included.

Since the figures are rather high but most of the words belong to low frequency levels, it has been decided, on the basis of four frequency dictionaries based on the four proverbs collections, to cut-off the data at frequency 3 (inclusive).

This has led to reduced data having a similar and, hopefully, comparable qualities. Thus, English data (frequencies 3-3) were reduced to 23.77% (386 words), German data (frequencies 4-3) were reduced to 14.02% (92), French data (frequencies 3-3) were reduced to 18.73% (147), Czech data (frequencies 190-3) were reduced to 18.54% (458).

While figures for hapaxes and near-hapaxes (frequency 1 and 2) are prone to chance and there is nothing systematic there, it might be of some interest to give, on the other hand, (predictable) figures for the most frequent words found here, namely:

English: *the, a, is, to, you*

German: *ist, der, nicht, die, das*

French: *la, le, qui, pas, les*

Czech: *se, je, kdo, na, a*

It is obvious that the proverb meaning is carried and built by nouns that name entities, people, places, etc., and, to some extent, by verbs that tell what relations, actions, states, etc., are named. All the grammar words are, basically, negligible in that they do not express content notions; a separate study of relations related to

these, would be a different study. Going thus into content and meaning, at least in a moderate way, the following frequency lists have been compiled (actual frequencies preceding):

English: 40 man, 34 it's, 34 are, 30 will, 28 life, 26 make, 26 have, 22 makes, 21 do, 20 can, 20 can't, 19 get, 18 know, 14 you're, 13 want, 12 world, 12 things, 12 lie, 12 give, 12 love, 12 take, 12 time, 11 doing, 11 day, 11 let, 11 put, 11 thing, 11 go, 11 gets, 11 has, 10 need, 10 heart, 10 horse, 10 cry, 10 mouth, 9 may, 9 truth, 9 try, 9 say, 9 success.

German: 46 ist, 23 man, 13 kommt, 13 was, 10 es, 9 hat, 7 muss, 6 ende, 6 macht, 5 sagen, 5 brot, 5 will, 5 morgen, 4 arbeit, 4 teufel, 4 sind, 4 machen, 4 wird, 4 taten, 4 kartoffeln, 3 haben, 3 wahrheit, 3 hunde, 3 leute, 3 hand, 3 gott, 3 gold, 3 vater, 3 lass, 3 sein, 3 not, 3 ehrt, 3 gedanke, 3 gehen, 3 lernt.

French: 34 est, 28 faut, 24 fait, 20 c'est, 17 n'est, 15 vaut, 13 peut, 12 sont, 11 veut, 9 n'a, 7 faire, 7 l'argent, 6 fais, 5 chose, 5 font, 5 jour, 5 dieu, 4 dort, 4 avoir, 4 mange, 4 dire, 4 monde, 4 chat, 4 loup, 4 nuit, 4 chien, 4 femme, 4 beurre, 4 vérité, 4 amis, 4 ennemis, 3 porte, 3 l'homme, 3 passe, 3 place, 3 fin, 3 chasse, 3 âne, 3 vole, 3 ont, 3 chiens, 3 vent, 3 vient, 3 vin, 3 aime, 3 mort, 3 mettre, 3 rit, 3 trouve, 3 vivre, 3 jeunesse, 3 perdu, 3 temps, 3 poison, 3 vache.

Czech: 110 je, 56 není, 46 má, 22 chce, 19 štěstí, 15 člověk, 13 voda, 13 bude, 13 rozum, 13 nemá, 13 peníze, 12 být, 12 konec, 12 musí, 11 smrt, 11 pravdu, 10 pán, 10 poznáš, 10 pánbůh, 10 být, 10 člověka, 10 strom, 10 láska, 9 bývá, 9 jest, 9 čas, 9 máš, 9 jsou, 9 nebylo, 9 bůh, 9 dává, 9 slovo, 9 chválí, 9 děti, 9 chodí, 9 život, 8 víno, 8 chyby, 8 práce, 8 srdce.

In the following, the view about the primary semantic (and motivational) role of nouns and, even more so, a much more important role played here by **Concrete** nouns as opposed to Abstracts (see examples (1) and (2) above) will be supported. It is primarily Concrete nouns, such as *gold* or *horse*, that have been selected for comparison and an inspection of their semantic contribution to proverbs. The reason for this is their obvious capacity to form metaphorical meanings in the sense we have seen above in (2), namely *dog* → (**angry**) *man*.

Proportions of Nouns and Concrete Nouns (the classification may be arbitrary):

English: 66/37, German: 17/8, French: 27/11, Czech: 89/37.

However, before going into this, let us, briefly, have a look at the verb and the type of meaning it contributes to the proverb meaning. Using German as the smallest set (without frequencies), namely:

ist, kommt, was, hat, muss, macht, sagen, will, sind, machen, wird, haben, lass, sein, ehrt, gehen, lernt

it is evident that verbs expressing, broadly, static, relational meanings are represented, such as *sein, haben, lassen, ehren, müssen*, while dynamic verbs are represented only by verbs of motion and general activity, such as *kommen, gehen* and *machen*. Even further on, in lower frequencies, very specific verbs are scarce. Thus, the burden of conveying the bulk of meaning rests with nouns.

Coming back to (concrete) nouns, it was surprising to find out that there are very few nouns that are common to all four languages inspected so that this could become a basis for proverb identification in the Wiki lists (and the Czech dictionary data). On the basis of its highest frequency, it was **dog** again, that proved to be quite basic. The rest, inspected in the following (5) consisted of only 7 (concrete) nouns, namely:

bird, cat, gold, hand, horse, stone, water,

nouns that are mutually exclusive and rather different.

Surprisingly, the basic stock of proverbs examined lacked words such as *bread, hat, coat, house, sand, foot, apple* in French (*pain, chapeau, manteau, maison, sable, pied, pomme*) or *tree, tooth/teeth, pig* in German (*Baum, Zähne, Schwein*), *knife* or *bread* in Czech (*nůž, chleba*), or *wine* and *gold* in English. However, all, if not most of them are to be found in lower frequency words.

5. SOME FREQUENT PROVERBS EXAMINED IN 4 LANGUAGES

Most proverbs, also in this kind of core selected from Wikiquote, are widely different in the four languages examined. Therefore, only those few based on 7 nouns that the four languages share are briefly looked into, although only the *dog*-proverbs will be given in full, the rest is to be found in the Appendix 1.

The few correspondences across languages are indicated.

DOG Proverbs

English: 16 proverbs

Barking dogs seldom bite. **Ger, Fr, Cz**

Brag is a good Dog, but Holdfast is better.

The difference between a man and a cat or a dog is that only a man can write the names of the cat and the dog.

The dog is nude though the clothing cost a penny.

Even a dog can distinguish between being stumbled over and being kicked.

Even a dog can make it to the top when there's a flood.

Even an old dog likes to be patted on the head and told, 'Good boy!'

Every dog has its day.

Give a dog a bad name and hang him.

Let sleeping dogs lie. **Ger**

Lie down with dogs, wake up with fleas. **Fr**

Meaner than a junk-yard dog.

An old dog will learn no tricks. **Cz**

Rather be a dog in peace, than to be a man in chaos.

Straighten not the dog's tail even in the bamboo hollow.

Take an old dirty, hungry, mangy, sick and wet dog and feed him and wash him and nurse him back to health, and he will never turn on you and bite you. This is how man and dog differ.

German: 4 proverbs

Bellende Hunde beißen nicht. **En**

Den Letzten beißen die Hunde.

Der Knochen kommt nicht zum Hund, sondern der Hund zum Knochen.

Schlafende Hunde soll man nicht wecken. **En**

French: 7 proverbs

Chien qui aboie ne mord pas. **En, Cz**

Les chiens aboient, la caravane passe.

Les chiens ne font pas des chats.

Qui m'aime aime mon chien.

Qui se couche avec les chiens se lève avec des puces. **En**

Qui veut noyer son chien l'accuse de rage.

Un chien regarde bien un évêque.

Czech: 14 proverbs

Mrtvej/mrtvý pes nekouše/neštěká.

Pes psa nekouše.

Pes je nejlepší přítel člověka.

Pes, ktorej/který štěká, nekouše. **En, Ger, Fr**

Starýho/starého psa novejm/novým kouskům nenaučíš. **En**

Kdo chce psa bít, hůl si najde.

Mnoho psů, zajícova smrt. n. Mnoho myslivců zajícova smrt.

Život je pes.

Ranní déšť, ženský pláč a psí kulhání nemají dlouhého trvání.

Kde nesvrbí, ndrbej a psa, když chce spát, za vocas netahej.

Pánbůh /pánbu psí hlas neslyší.

Tím řeka není horší, že z ní pijí psi.

Lepší dobrá vejmluva než psí hovno.

Out of the varying number and content of these proverbs, there is only a single one that the data have in common, namely *Barking dogs seldom bite* which refers, though in a roundabout way, to the semantic feature of danger. The remaining correspondences

are scarce. Oddly enough, only one other semantic feature out of the ten mentioned above and analysed for *dog* elsewhere (Čermák – Lindroos 2010, see also Appendix 2) may be found here, too, namely the one where *dog* is a victim of maltreatment, cf. *Give a dog a bad name and hang him* and, possibly, *Even a dog can distinguish between being stumbled over and being kicked*. Let us notice, yet again, a rather odd inclusion of a not so frequent proverb in English, ascribed to Lord Byron, namely:

Take an old dirty, hungry, mangy, sick and wet dog and feed him and wash him and nurse him back to health, and he will never turn on you and bite you. This is how man and dog differ.

The profusion of dog-proverbs in English contrasting with the other languages, may reflect a rather special character of *dog* in the English-speaking countries, but any speculation along these lines is just that, speculation.

A detailed comparison of these proverbs would be interesting but there is no scope for this here.

The seven proverb components mentioned above, given in their proverb form in Appendix 1 below, also record correspondences between languages, if any, and similar modest observations about their semantic character and features may be followed here. Perhaps, the sheer disproportion of specific components in proverbs in some languages is worth noticing. Thus, it is conspicuous that *bird-*, *gold-* and *water-*proverbs are so highly represented in Czech, not giving much grounds for any reasonable explanation, while the predominance of *horse-*proverbs in English may be perhaps vaguely explained.

6. SUMMARY

Though laborious and data-burdened, this contribution should not be viewed as anything more than an attempt and illustration of the initial line of thinking for at least two reasons. First, the data are problematic as to their content, way of composition and size, and second, the data is too small to allow for any safe generalization. Accordingly, one might wonder why there are no more objective paremiological minima, based on corpora perhaps, that would enable such comparison and, hence, offer an insight into the cultures compared, not to speak of their usefulness in school, in the dictionary-making business, etc.

In doing so, the status of proverbs, at least from the linguistic point of view, should be reviewed, and some proverbs excluded, such as the English *Not enough room to swing a cat* which is an idiom all right but may formally defy the proverb definition. Likewise, the status of such expressions (all of them being uncritically included here) such as *A camel is a horse designed by committee*, could be revised.

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APPENDIX 1

BIRD PROVERBS

English: 4 proverbs

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Birds of a feather flock together.

The early bird catches the worm. **Cz**

Fine feathers make fine birds.

German: 1 proverb

Friss, Vogel, oder stirb!

French: 1 proverb

Petit à petit l'oiseau fait son nid.

Czech: 12 proverbs

Člověka po řeči, ptáka po peří poznáš.

Kůň k tahu, pták k letu a člověk k práci.

Každý pták svůj hnízdo chválí.

Vrabec je taky pták.

Každý pták tak zpívá, jak mu zobák narost.

Pečený ptáci/holubi tam nelítají/nelítají do huby.

Neuč rybu plavat a ptáka létat.
 Ptáka poznáš po zpěvu.
 Jen drápkem uvíz, a chycen je ptáček celý.
 Ranní ptáče dál doskáče. **En**
 Když ptáčka lapají, pěkně mu zpívají.
 Pečení ptáci tam nelítají do huby?

CAT PROVERBS

English: 7 proverbs

All cats love fish but hate to get their paws wet.
 A cat may look at a king.
 The difference between a man and a cat or a dog is that only a man can write the names of the cat and the dog.
 Not enough room to swing a cat.
 Put a cat amongst the pigeons.
 There's more than one way to skin a cat.
 When the cat is away, the mice will play. **Fr, Cz**

German: 2 proverbs

Die Katze im Sack kaufen.
 Bei Nacht sind alle Katzen grau. **Cz, Fr**

French: 5 proverbs

Chat échaudé craint l'eau froide.
 Il ne faut pas réveiller le chat qui dort.
 La nuit tous les chats sont gris.
 Les chiens ne font pas des chats.
 Quand le chat n'est pas là, les souris dansent. **En**

Czech: 4 proverbs

Potmě je každá kočka/kráva černá. **Ger, Fr**
 Kočce o myších se snívá.
 Když není kocour doma, mají myši pré. **En, Fr**
 Nemá vždycky kocour posvícení.

GOLD PROVERBS

English: 4 proverbs

All that glisters is not gold. **Cz, Ger**
 Old is Gold.