



TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

**«A pragmatic approach to
proverb use and interpretation»**

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Index

Abstract	
Resumen	
1. Introduction.....	1
2. State of the question.....	4
2.1. Definition	4
2.2. Psycholinguistic approaches to proverb understanding.....	6
2.3. Proverbs as shared assumptions.....	9
3. Pragmatic analysis of proverbs.....	12
3.1. Relevance Theory approach to the study of proverbs.....	12
3.1.1. Relevance Theory justification.....	12
3.1.2. Speaker meaning and hearer recognition.....	14
3.1.2.1. Mutual Manifestness.....	14
3.1.3. Context.....	15
4. Functions of Proverbs.....	18
4.1. Why do we use proverbs?	18
4.1.1. Criticism.....	19
4.1.2. Advice and warning.....	21
4.2. Irony in proverbs.....	21
4.3. Metaphors in proverbs.....	23
4.4. Ellipsis.....	25
5. Uses: Familiarity and unfamiliarity in proverbs.....	28
6. Conclusion.....	30
7. Bibliography.....	31

Abstract

Proverbs are interesting pieces of popular wisdom and tradition belonging to any culture, which help us to foreground the values and shared beliefs held by a speech community. However, its study has received little attention up to now. Thus, this dissertation research aims to analyze the functions and uses of proverbs taking examples from English and Spanish them. In order to achieve this goal, we have applied Sperber and Wilson's Relevant Theory to explain how proverbs allow the speaker to express his/her intention in an implicit way. The findings demonstrate that the main functions of proverbs are criticism, advice and warning. In addition, we have offered an explanation of how their often ironical and metaphorical nature affects proverbs' understanding. Besides, we have studied the use of the ellipsis in proverbs, which takes place in familiar proverbs, analyzing how familiarity and unfamiliarity influences on proverb use. Finally, we summed up our conclusions to achieve a better comprehension of proverbs' functions and uses.

Key words: proverb, function and uses, Relevance Theory, speaker's intended meaning, criticism, advice, warning, irony, metaphor, ellipsis, familiarity.

Resumen

Los proverbios son ejemplos de sabiduría popular y tradición de cualquier cultura que nos ayudan a descubrir los valores y creencias compartidas por una comunidad de hablantes. Sin embargo, este estudio ha recibido poca atención hasta ahora. Por lo tanto, el propósito del presente trabajo es describir las funciones y usos de los proverbios y refranes concentrándonos en refranes de la lengua inglés y española para analizar y explicar las funciones y usos de los proverbios en general. Para conseguir nuestro propósito hemos aplicado la Teoría de la Relevancia de Sperber y Wilson a este estudio para explicar como ellos permiten al hablante expresar su intención de forma implícita. Las conclusiones demostrarán que la mayor función de los proverbios es la crítica, el consejo y advertencia. Además, hemos ofrecido una explicación de cómo su frecuente naturaleza irónica y metafórica influye en la comprensión de los proverbios. También hemos estudiado el uso de la elipsis en los proverbios, que toma lugar en los proverbios familiares, analizando como la familiaridad o el desconocimiento influye en el uso de los proverbios. Finalmente, resumiremos nuestras conclusiones para llegar a una mejor comprensión de las funciones y usos de los proverbios.

Palabras clave: proverbios, refranes, funciones y usos, Teoría de la Relevancia, intención del hablante, crítica, consejo, advertencia, ironía, metáfora, elipsis, familiaridad.

1. Introduction

“Nothing defines a culture as distinctly as its language, and the element of language that best encapsulates a society's values and beliefs is its proverbs” (Martin, 2015). Every culture and language has their own proverbs, which belong to the popular culture and tradition of their language. There are proverbs dating from ancient history such as “While there’s life, there’s hope” or “Hunger is the best sauce” (Fergusson, 2000: 137-138), well-known proverbs attributed to Cicero in the 1st century BC. Proverbs evolved throughout time and some of them became general observations belonging to folk tradition, for instance “Extremes meet” from Pascal in 17th Century (Fergusson, 2000: 179) or “An apple a day keeps the doctor away” (Fergusson, 2000: 131), dating from the 19th Century. Some of them became an important part of society. We can highlight the proverb: “First come, first served” (Fergusson, 2000: 76), first introduced by Chaucer’s in 1386 in the “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”. This saying became a legal proverb in medieval times used as a law to help grinding the grain of people who were in the queue for the mill first (Mieder, 2004: 44). Other proverbs coming from politics are “From the sublime to the ridiculous is only one step” (Fergusson, 2000: 179) attributed to Napoleon in 1812 or “If we are bound to forgive an enemy, we are not bound to trust him” (Fergusson, 2000: 85), a maxim of the US politician Robert Kennedy by the middle of 20th century. Another common source of proverbs is religion such as “A dios rogando y con el mazo dando” (Junceda, 1995: 26) or “The family that prays together stays together” (Fergusson, 1995: 226). Consequently, there are several origins for proverbs’ birth, but in spite of their different beginnings, many proverbs still belong to the current oral tradition and they are well-known in modern societies.

The fact that proverbs belong to oral tradition makes the task of finding when they were first used difficult. Before they were recorded in a written form - for instance introduced in literature or included in a document - they were already well-known in the oral tradition. Since they spread by word of mouth from generation to generation, it is very difficult to know exactly when they first came out or how their initial forms were. For example, the proverb “Adversity makes strange bedfellows” (Fergusson, 2000: 2) was first recorded by Shakespeare in *The Tempest* (1611) like: “Misery makes strange bedfellows” (Fergusson, 2000: 3). In fact, this proverb was probably well-known before Shakespeare wrote it in his play. Despite its original form, the form of this proverb has changed throughout ages and nowadays it has become a well-known proverb with a slight variation from the original one.

Furthermore, there are some authors who now substitute “adversity” for “poverty” or “politics”. Therefore, we can predict a new future development of this proverb.

Proverbs have been introduced in literature, films, drama, arts and music. One of the most famous characters who first introduced proverbs in literature was Sancho Panza, Don Quixote’s squire. This humble and illiterate character was indeed the first to constantly quote proverbs that, regardless of popularity, had not been previously taken as a serious matter in literary works. The character of Sancho represents the popular knowledge and wisdom conveyed by these proverbs. Regarding graphics arts, there are images illustrating proverbs such as the very common image of the three wise monkeys. This image portrays – without words – the traditional proverb from 17th Century “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil”. Nowadays, proverbs are introduced in dramas’ plots as well as in films’ scripts or songs’ lyrics. Furthermore, they are used in advertising as a tool to convey popular wisdom and shared beliefs or ideas among a speech community.

However, until very recently, proverbs had not been addressed from a linguistic point of view. By the end of 20th Century, researchers started arguing about the metaphorical nature of proverbs and its influence on the mental images of proverbs in people’s mind (Gibbs, 1994; Gibbs, Strom and Spivey-Knowlton, 1997). Other works dealt how the figurative and literal meaning of proverbs interacted in people’s mind to produce an accurate and proper interpretation (Bock and Brewer, 1978; Temple and Honeck, 1999). Furthermore, the influence of the context in determining proverbs’ recognition and their formula had been the scope of some other studies (Katz and Ferreti, 2001-2003). Recently, some research has tried to address the pragmatic function of proverbs in specific instances of literature from different cultures (Ayeni, 2011; Odebunmi, 2008). These research studies approach proverbs’ analysis in literature works such as Rotimi’s *The Gods are not to blame* or Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel* (Odebunmi, 2008; Ayeni, 2011). Even though these recent approaches to the study of proverbs have addressed some aspects of this linguistic phenomenon, the functions and uses of proverbs in language interpretation still remain unexplained.

Consequently, the purpose of the present study was to predict and explore the use and possible functions of proverbs in language comprehension. To achieve this aim, we developed the following hypotheses:

1. Criticizing hearers' behaviour seems to be the main function of proverb use, together with other minor functions such as advising the hearer about something or somebody and preventing the hearer from something or someone, as part of the speaker's intended meaning when uttering the proverb.
2. Secondly, we predicted that irony and metaphorical language also play a role in proverb's comprehension. Therefore, we approached the ironical and metaphorical nature of proverbs exploring how they affect proverbs' recognition and interpretation.
3. Finally, we focused on the ellipsis phenomenon taking place in some proverbs. Our thesis was that we could provide an explanation to the ellipsis in proverbs based on proverb familiarity.

Thus, this study first provides an accurate definition of proverbs and explores the different approaches which have dealt up to now with proverbs' understanding in section 2, offering different psycholinguistic approaches to proverbs' comprehension and defining proverbs as shared assumptions. In Section 3, we apply Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory to the analysis of proverbs to find out the role the context plays in and how the notion of mutual manifestness influences on proverbs' understanding. Section 4 deals with the functions and uses of proverbs, ranging from criticism and irony to advice. The aspect of proverb familiarity and unfamiliarity is approached in Section 5. Finally, we draw some conclusions and provide recommendations for further research in proverb' understanding among different cultures or languages in Section 6.

2. The State of question

2.1. Definition

Proverbs allow a given speaker from a speech community to express common ideas or beliefs using a fixed phrase in the appropriate context (Ayeni, 2011: 1, quoted from Levinson, 1983: 24). As “language expresses the patterns and structures of cultures” (Odebunmi, 2008: 1), proverbs are a tool of language considered in different ways by different cultures. For instance, proverbs in English are considered as “expressions of wisdom” (Ayeni, 2011: 3, quoted from Adedimeji, 2003: 54). Other authors like Trench support this idea considering proverbs as “condensed quintessential wisdom” (Ayeni, 2011: 10, quoted from Alabi 2009: 515). In this sense, Egbkewogbe states that African proverbs are “a distillation of the wisdom of people” (Ayeni, 2011: 10, quoted from Adedimeji, 2009: 545). A more developed definition of proverbs is given by Methangwane, who considers them as “relatively short expressions, which are usually associated with wisdom and are used to perform a variety of functions” (Odebunmi, 2008: 2, quoted from Methangwane, 2003: 408). Many of the definitions we find of proverbs are related to wisdom and sagacity considering proverbs as expressions of common or shared cultural beliefs and wisdom.

Furthermore, it is stated that proverb performance in certain societies in Africa is considered more valuable than in Western cultures (Finnegan, 1970; Monye 1996; Penfield and Duru, 1988; in Temple and Honeck, 42). Thus, it remains to be seen whether these definitions are restricted to a particular speech community or whether they can be applied to any culture. Proverbs are generally defined in English language as “a well-known phrase or sentence that gives advice or says something that is generally true” (Oxford learner’s dictionary, 2015). If we look up for the definition of proverbs in the Real Academia de la Lengua Española, we find the following: “Dicho agudo y sentencioso de uso común” (RAE, 2015). Furthermore, proverbs have been commonly defined as “an adage, saying, maxim, precept, saw or any other synonym of such that expresses a conventional truth” (Ayeni, 2011: 10, quoted from Adedimeji 2003: 55). Hence, proverbs are commonly considered as relatively short, well-known sentences expressing conventional or commonly held ideas or beliefs from a speech community.

But how to apply the theory to the study of proverbs still remains an open question. First of all, Ayeni (2011) makes a full review of scholars who have approached speech act theories from Austin to Adegbija including Searle, Grice, Bach and Harnish among other¹ (Ayeni, 2011: 14). She focuses on the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts postulated by Austin and the further categories Searle drew from this illocutionary act theory, pointing out categories such as assertive, directive, commissive, expressive and declarative (Ayeni, 2011: 14-18). Furthermore, she mentioned the term proposed by Adegbija ‘pragma-sociolinguistics’, whose main studied aspects are the participants and the state of mind and mutual belief of speaker and hearer in an exchange. (Ayeni, 2011: 19-20). This is due to communication relying, from Adegbija’s point of view, very heavily on the mutual contextual beliefs and the socio-cultural background of both, speaker and hearer. According to Adegbija, social knowledge is a key aspect to achieve a correct interpretation and the ignorance of social rules would lead the speaker and hearer to a misunderstanding in the process of communication (Ayeni, 2011:20). Finally, she refers to Bach and Harnish and the difference between literal and non-literal speech acts, stating that the success of a speech act relies on the recognition of the illocutionary intention of the speaker (Ayeni, 2011: 19). However, she barely makes use of this theory to deal with proverb analysis, but she focuses on other pragmatic aspects such as context, presupposition, implicature, intention, inference and mutual contextual beliefs to carry out her analysis. Thus, in my opinion the use she makes of the speech act theory does not help us in the analysis of proverbs.

Until now Grice’s cooperative principle has been the theory most applied to the study of proverbs, since it presupposes that the speaker is trying to be cooperative and makes his or her contribution appropriate to the conversation. However, the authors who approach Grice’s theory in their work such as Ayeni (2011) or Temple and Honeck (1999), do not explore in depth works, its relationship with proverb’s analysis. On the one hand, Ayeni (2011: 16), analyses Grice’s cooperative principle and the maxims (Quantity, Quality Relevance and Manner), but she does not apply Grice’s theory to the analysis of proverbs. On the other hand, Temple and Honeck (1999) partly use Grice’s cooperative principle to support the multistage model, which will be further explained in the section 2.2. Nevertheless, the pragmatic contribution of other researchers to the study of proverbs is still very little.

¹Ayeni (2011:16) also mentioned the politeness principle of Leech which was intended to be an alternative and deviation from Grice’s CP. This theory covers the maxims of tact, generosity, approbation and modesty (Ayeni, 2011:17).

2.2. Psycholinguistic approaches to proverb understanding.

In the last few decades, some researchers have proposed several models that have attempted to explain the process involved in proverb understanding. The *literal-first model* argues that the comprehension process deals first with the literal meaning rather than with the non-literal meaning (Katz and Ferretti, 2003: 20). Similarly, the *multistage model*², also called *The extended conceptual base theory* by Gibbs (1997: 106), predicts that processing the figurative meaning of a proverb would take longer than literal meaning. This is explained by the fact that the figurative meaning of a proverb involved “problem solving, entailing understanding and integration of the proverb topic, discourse context, figurative meaning and speakers’ pragmatic points” (Temple and Honeck, 1999: 66). Therefore, from a multistage model’s perspective, a speaker would have to undergo a process of literal understanding before reaching the figurative reading of the proverb. Whereas from a first-literal model scope, the hearer would only seek for the non-literal meaning of a proverb, once it is realised that the literal meaning is not valid for the given context. To sum up, these two models agree on placing the processing of the figurative meaning in a second place.

However, these two models contradict Kemper’s findings of “no difference between literal and figurative reading” (Temple and Honeck, 1999: 44). In contrast to the multistage and first-literal model, Kemper was the first to state that the processing time for figurative understanding was actually faster than for the literal meaning. He says that the judgment of the appropriateness of the context would lead the reader to “unnatural or artificial processing strategy” rather than helping him to understand the proverb (Temple and Honeck, 1999: 45). In short, Kemper defends the idea that the literal meaning does not need to be generated before the figurative meaning as it is “automatically selected from memory” (Temple and Honeck, 1999: 44). He explained it by the fact that background information, the context and mutually shared information generate strong expectations in the hearer that help him to process the proverb directly (Temper and Honeck, 1999: 46). Bock and Brewer (1978: 68) support that idea and contradict the first-literal model since they state that “literal anomaly is not a necessary condition for the processing of the figurative meaning”. The graded saliency

² The multistage model states that processing the figurative meaning in proverbs takes longer than the literal meaning. This proverb comprehension model implies five steps: Literal meaning construction, recognition that this meaning is inadequate, literal transformation of the literal meaning, construction of a figurative meaning and instantiation of this meaning (see Temple and Honeck, 1999).

position agrees with the fact that the nonliteral meaning of familiar proverbs is automatically activated without the necessity of processing the literal reading (Katz and Ferretti, 2003).

As we have noticed, there is a discrepancy between models priming the literal meaning against models believing in the automatic selection of figurative meaning. Consequently, there is not a consistent model to explain the process of literal and figurative meaning in proverb understanding. In fact, as Bock and Brewer (1978: 60) pointed out, “none of the mechanisms suggested for the comprehension of figurative language by current theories is fully satisfactory”. Several researchers have studied how speakers and hearers make sense of proverbs in spite of the discrepancy between their literal and figurative meaning (Temple and Honeck, 1999; Gibbs, 1994). From these studies, we can assert that the interpretation of a proverb involves a mapping process leading the hearer to search for a correspondence between the literal statement and its meaning within the context (Temple and Honeck, 1999; Gibbs, 1994). What is more, “individual parts of proverbs refer to common metaphorical mapping between source and target domains” (Gibbs, Strom and Spivey-Knowlton, 1997: 84). In this mapping process, Temple and Honeck (1999) placed familiarity as one of the main contributors to the identification of the proverb’s right interpretation saying that “familiar proverbs are understood in a nonliteral fashion more quickly than unfamiliar proverbs” (Case, 1991; Turner and Katz, 1990 in Temple and Honeck, 1999).

Gibbs (1999) agrees with Temple and Honeck in the sense that contextual information helps the speaker to make sense of the proverbs. What is more, without this contextual information, the familiarity with the proverb would be decisive to understand the proverb’s comprehension. Consequently, contextual ambiguity is avoided because familiar proverbs are identified as such, even in the absence of a context. However, Gibbs (1994) proves the speakers’ ability to recognise novel proverbs or proverbs from different languages or even cultures, in spite of its unfamiliarity. He explains that in terms of a psycholinguistic analysis, since “proverb understanding appears to involve conceptual mapping of one specific level schema from a source domain onto a generic-level schema from a target remain” (Gibbs, 1994: 314).

In other words, one of the main features of proverbs is that they provide “mechanisms for understanding the general in terms of the specific” (in Gibbs, 1994: 313)³. Bock and Brewer (1978: 69) agrees on the comprehension of unfamiliar proverbs in the absence of a context is supported by a “strategic use of processing operations”.

Nevertheless, there is a further distinction between familiar and unfamiliar proverbs. In the study of Katz and Ferretti (2001), it is proved that in familiar proverbs the figurative meaning is processed prior to the literal meaning. Therefore, the context is not a determining contribution to the reading of a familiar proverb. Consequently, “once the proverb is confirmed as a well-established fixed expression, the literal and nonliteral senses are equally easy to integrate into an emerging meaning structure” (Katz and Ferretti, 2001:208). Conversely, in the case of unfamiliar proverbs the literal meaning is processed first and once you realise this literal sense does not match with the context, then there is a search for the nonliteral reading. Thus, in non-familiar proverbs, context plays an important role in solving ambiguity (Katz and Ferretti, 2001).

A further unclear aspect of proverbs is how people draw mental images of proverbs (Gibbs, 1994). From a psycholinguistic point of view, Gibbs (1994) comes to the conclusion that people draw nearly the same mental images of proverbs and they are mostly consistent and detailed for everyone. The fact that these shared mental images are consistent and detailed in people’s mind can be explained by the fact that there is a motivated link between the proverb and its figurative meaning (Gibbs, 1994). Even though people are unaware of that, they have intuitions about the relationship that can be drawn between the literal and figurative meaning of a proverb (Gibbs, 1994) and their comprehension and memory of proverbs might be influenced by these mental images (Gibbs, Strom, and Spivey-Knowlton, 1997: 86).

These intuitions make them able to find an interpretation of novel proverbs or proverbs from other cultures, in spite of their unfamiliarity, and search for a link between the literal reading and the figurative meaning (Gibbs, 1994). What is more, people often have more detailed and consistent mental images of proverbs rather than other figurative definitions of them or even

³ “It is better to let sleeping dogs lie” is an example of Gibbs to illustrate the generic to specific –level schema. At first, the generic-level schema could be taken as: it is better let dogs sleep rather than wake them up in order not to provoke them. This generic situation may be applied in several instances such as if an unpleasant situation is ignored, it is better not to reveal it. Thus, we reach a specific-level interpretation that leads us to the figurative understanding of this proverb in the given context (Gibbs, 1994: 313-314).

literal phrases. Consequently, this intuitive conceptual mapping means that the figurative meaning of proverbs is motivated by conventional images and conceptual metaphors in many cases. This does not imply that people construct a mental image automatically when they hear the proverb for the first time, but rather that “proverbs are understood as a result of conceptual metaphors” (Gibbs, Strom, and Spivey-Knowlton, 1997: 106). Therefore, it might explain how people are able to make sense of a proverb or why are they as representations *contagious* as Sperber describes them (1989: 179), not only because of the conventional knowledge, but due to the “rich, detailed conceptual metaphor” they form (Gibbs, Strom, and Spivey-Knowlton, 1997: 106).

Therefore, the transmission of proverbs is explained by Sperber as *the epidemiology of representation* since the transmission of representation means a process of transformation and duplication of thoughts (Sperber, 1989: 180). This is the model he uses to explain the distribution of representations. For him, the propagation of these public representations means a chaining of communications involving a global macro-mechanism which includes micro-mechanisms: “individual mental mechanisms and inter-individual mechanisms of communications” (Sperber, 1989: 181). Then constructed and transformed mental representations are easily memorable together with other factors that make this public representation successful.

2.3. Proverbs as shared assumptions

The functions and aims of proverbs in language have been also widely questioned. We came across definitions like Krikman’s about proverbs aims:

“to promote an endorsement to...statements and opinions, forecast something, express doubt, reproach someone..., accuse something, advise against something or interdict somebody from doing something and so on”
(in Ayeni, 2011:10 quoted from Alabi 2009: 515).

Furthermore, Odeunmi (2008: 2) introduces the allusive, ironic and sarcastic character of proverbs as their potential functions. In addition, we can observe instances of persuading and

encouraging proverbs such as: “The moon moves slowly but by daybreak it crosses the sky” or “by trying often, the monkey learns to jump from tree to tree without failing” (Odebunmi, 2008: 5, quoted from Rotimi, 2000: 60). However, other functions of proverbs as criticism, advice or warning– that we will analyse in section 4 - remained unexplored

Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that the main characteristic of a proverb is as well as its functional or utilitarian function in communication, the elegance and artistic performance it conveys (Odebunmi, 2008: 2, quoted from Ogbaa 1981: 5). In fact, proverbs have been said to work as an instrument of the poetics of the mind, representing metaphorical conceptualizations of particular experiences appropriate to particular situations (Gibbs, 1994: 309). When it comes to the study of proverb acquisition, it is important to take into account that not all the knowledge we acquire is explicitly communicated. Nevertheless, an individual has the ability to learn it by a process of observation and imitation from others.

Actually, this acquisition is not only based on imagination, but on a routine that eventually implies an “individual construction stimulated by the observation of others” (Sperber and Hirschfeld, 2007: 9). The cultural transmission focuses on “a basic structure of the causal chains of culture [...] in an alternation of mental and public episodes” (Sperber and Hirschfeld, 2007: 7). This stability of contents is held by two main types of processes called imitation and communication which may overlap for the transmission to succeed in the reproduction of the mental representation and the public production. This acquisition process could be applied to the cultural transmission of proverbs transmitted from generation to generation. Sperber and Hirschfeld determined that the oral transmission of tales “corresponds to a causal chaining of public and remembered mental stories” (2007: 2).

They defend that the tale propagation implies the reformulation of the memorized story as a new, but closely related narrative. From my point of view, this idea can be applied to proverbs as they are also orally transmitted as public representations. However, the fact that proverbs are shorter makes them easier to remember word by word and formulate them in the same way you memorised them. Somehow, everyone taking part on this cultural level of distribution has to understand and remember the proverb in order to be able to propagate it (Sperber and Hirschfeld 2007: 4). Nevertheless, we have to take into account the importance of a certain degree of stability for the propagation of this cultural representations or practices.

Proverbs as public representations of culture can be studied from the point of view of any language and differ from culture to culture. From the study of Sperber on *Culture and Modularity* we can say that cultural facts depending on oral transmission are conditioned by local factors as well as by more general cognitive or motivational dispositions (Sperber and Hirschfeld, 2007: 5). If we change the speech community we come across new values, new norms, new institutions, new artefacts that would influence the culture and, consequently, the human behaviour, human thinking and eventually, human language (Odebunmi, 2008: 1). Consequently, proverbs as content of cultural representations and practices must be stable enough in a speech community for their performance and understanding by the members of a specific speech community (Sperber and Hirschfeld, 2007:5).

Furthermore, we can talk about interpretative generalisations, which consist in taking an interpretation of a phenomenon in a culture and trying to generalise it to all similar phenomena in other cultures (Sperber, 1989: 171-172). The fact that “in spite of superficial variations, living-kind classification exhibits strong commonalities across cultures in a manner that does suggest the presence of a domain specific cognitive module” (Sperber, 1994: 41), this can be applied to proverb propagation across cultures, but there are some limitations: “a gain in generality means a loss in faithfulness” (Sperber, 1989: 172). It can be explained by the fact that these generalisations are decontextualized and, therefore, they refer to different local ideas, not fitting in some contexts (Sperber, 1989: 172).

3. Pragmatic analysis of proverbs.

3.1. Relevance Theory approach to the study of proverbs

3.1.1. Relevance Theory justification

Relevance Theory (RT from now onwards) defines communication as a process involving two different mechanisms of information-processing devices. The first one is about the modification of the physical environment of the hearer. For Sperber and Wilson (1995), in oral communication the hearer always tries to modify the hearer's environment to entertain some particular thoughts that the speaker wants to share with the hearer, which is, then, the second device to create/build representations similar to the ones of the hearer a. With these two approaches, Sperber and Wilson (1995) are trying to propose two questions: what is communicated and how is communication achieved?

Hence, pragmatics assumes that what is communicated is the speaker's meaning that conveys a set of assumptions expressed either explicitly or implicitly. Decoding will be the main device to achieve explicit communication, but implicit communication is mainly inferred. As communication is a matter of degree, some assumptions can be more or less manifest to an individual depending on whether it is non-verbal, implicit verbal or verbal communication. Despite the fact that Sperber and Wilson never approached the study of proverbs, from my point of view we can apply their theory to proverbs' analysis since their meaning relies mainly on the identification of the speaker's intention and the inference of implicit communication rather than decoding what is explicitly stated.

Until this point, we can say that RT agrees with Grice's main originality that as long as there is some way of recognizing the communicator's intentions, then communication is possible (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 25). However, Sperber and Wilson propose a definition for 'relevance' in as: "an assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context" (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 122). Thus, this definition can be applied to the analysis of proverbs since having some contextual effect is a necessary condition for the relevance of a proverb.

Furthermore, Sperber and Wilson (1995: 119) also assume people are able to identify relevant from irrelevant information or, what is more, more relevant and less relevant information (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 119). It does not mean that relevance cannot be achieved by expressing irrelevant information, because expressing something irrelevant might be very relevant too. In fact, what is explicitly stated in proverbs commonly seems irrelevant to the context at first because of the mismatch between the literal meaning and the given context. For instance, if two interlocutors are talking about a new situation they have to face and they do not know how and one of them says: “When in Rome, do as Romans do” (Fergusson, 2000: 36), it might seem irrelevant at first since they are not in Rome or talking about Romans. However, it achieves relevance due to the familiarity of this proverb and its figurative meaning.

Why do we choose Relevance Theory to explain proverbs and not the Gricean approach instead? Grice’s Cooperative Principle has been applied to the study of proverbs because the hearer expects the speaker to be cooperative. Although Grice never approached proverbs in his theory, they would imply a flouting of the maxims of relevance- make your contribution relevant for the context- and quality – do not say what you believe to be false- since the speaker would say something blatantly false or irrelevant. For instance, “Hasta los gatos quieren zapatos” (Junceda, 1995: 249) would be nonsensical since cats and shoes have no apparent relation. Thus, from Grice’s point of view, the hearer would be impossible to recover what the speaker really means (a criticism of people who ask for unnecessary things or something that they do not deserve), but s/he would only interpret it literally (‘cats want shoes’). However, the non-literal or figurative meaning is something related to what the speaker means when using this piece of language. Thus, the non-literal meaning of proverbs goes beyond its literal meaning. Despite the fact that Grice creates the maxims and established some rules giving for granted the cooperation between interlocutors, communicators do not always stick to the norms, “but may also violate them to achieve particular effects: and the audience uses its knowledge of the norms in interpreting communicative behaviour” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 162). It means that, even though speakers use tools such as metaphorical languages, irony, non-finished sentences and all kind of language phenomena, hearers are able to recognize their intentions achieving communication. So a distinction has to be made between pragmatic inference contributing to the recovery of the explicitly communicated content and pragmatic inference involved in implicated assumptions.

3.1.2. Speaker meaning and hearer recognition

Most of the times people are able to automatically recognise the intended meaning of a proverb after hearing it. This leads us to what Sperber and Wilson (1995) called *presumption of relevance*, as they said that every act of ostensive communications (every time we talk) communicates a *presumption of relevance*. This presumption of relevance can be applied to the processing the meaning of a proverb, since the hearer is aware that what the speaker commonly communicates is something s/he considers relevant for the context. In fact, this process is determined by:

1. The effort needed to process it optimally.
2. The cognitive effect this optimal processing achieves (Sperber and Wilson, 1995).

It means that on the effort side that the level of effort required on processing the utterance should not be more than needed to achieve cognitive effect. On the effect side, the effects achieved should not be less than is needed to make the stimulus worth processing. Regarding proverbs, on the effect side, the speaker would communicate a set of assumptions with a proverb that he believes to be relevant enough to make the stimulus worth processing.

On the effort side, the speaker would choose a proverb because he or she believes it to be the most relevant stimulus; i. e., the one involving less processing cost and achieving more cognitive effects. Thus, the *presumption of optimal relevance* would be fulfilled since what is trying to be communicated would be relevant enough to make it worth processing and the ostensive stimulus (in this case, the proverb) would be the most relevant one the communicator could have chosen to communicate a set of assumptions. Consequently, I will argue that the use of proverbs meets the *presumption of optimal relevance* as the process involved in their interpretation offsets the cognitive effects they achieve. Therefore, following Sperber and Wilson's (1995: 124) approach, we can state that proverbs are worth processing if and only if they achieve a number of cognitive effects at a reasonable processing cost.

3.1.2.1. Mutual Manifestness

In the process of proverb's recognition it is also important what is made manifest to both participants. The mutual manifestness notion includes the shared facts and assumptions

manifest to speaker and hearer during the conversation. When this happens, the cognitive environments of these two interlocutors intersect and they share a mutual cognitive environment. When the speaker utters a proverb he is making manifest a set of stereotypical assumptions to the hearer. Even though they never share their total cognitive environment, the speaker expects the hearer to recognize this set of assumption he is trying to make mutually manifests. For instance, the proverb: “Cría cuervos y te sacarán los ojos” (Junceda, 1995: 144) will not only manifest one or two assumptions, but a set similar to the following:

1. People sometimes are very ungrateful.
2. Although you treat people well, they may not return it back.
3. People may betray you.
4. Do not trust everyone.
5. Do not do a favor to everyone.

Therefore, every manifest assumption made by this proverb is mutually manifest to both, speaker and hearer. Hence, when the speaker chooses uttering a familiar proverb is because he is making manifest a set of stereotypical assumptions shared with the hearer. However, with unfamiliar proverbs this set of stereotypical assumptions is more difficult to achieve since “the more complex assumptions get, the less likely they are actually to be made” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). Therefore, using a familiar proverb guarantees the speaker that the hearer would build a set of correct assumptions avoiding misunderstandings since mutual manifestness claims about shared cognitive environments between the speaker and hearer.

3.1.3. Context

As aforementioned, the context might be a main contribution for the identification and inference of the implicit meaning in proverbs. By the context, we are referring to the set of premises involved in interpreting an utterance and a subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world where this utterance is interpreted. Consequently, we can state that the context does not merely rely on the assumptions expressed or implicated during the immediate conversation or the immediate physical environment, but also depends on the encyclopaedic entries attached to the concepts carried by these assumptions.

Regarding proverb analysis, the identification of the concepts underlying proverbs and their corresponding encyclopaedic entries is one of the first stages of the proverb comprehension process. These encyclopaedic entries are determining in the recognition of proverbs' meaning since, to achieve some contextual effects, the hearer has to have some previous knowledge as part of this cultural knowledge. Thus, there would be some instances when the information is easily recovered in one simple stage, for instance, in the case of familiar proverbs: "Curiosity killed the cat" (Ferguson, 2000: 145). Since it is a very familiar proverb, it is easily recognized and the set of assumptions conveyed will be immediately recovered. Nevertheless, there may be cases when reaching this information may be more difficult. This would be the case of unfamiliar proverbs which involve in each step an extension of the context for the hearer to recover the speaker meaning

The process of recovering the speaker's intended meaning within the context of the exchange is explained by Sperber and Wilson in terms of maximal relevance stating the following:

"At the start of each deductive process, the memory of the deductive device contains an initial set of assumptions: a set of premises [...] by the end of the process, if no contradiction has resulted, the memory of the deductive device constrains all the original premises, possible strengthened, and all the newly derived conclusion" (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:139)

They explained people's willingness to make the processed assumption relevant, so that they pursue for a context to justify the relevance of this assumption. In the particular case of proverbs, this would explain why we reject the first context where literal meaning is processed and try to look for another context where this utterance would make sense and therefore become relevant. The search for relevance is one of the keys of understanding proverbs. This is defined by Sperber and Wilson as a *relevance to an individual*: "an assumption is relevant to an individual at a given time if and only if it is relevant in one or more of the context accessible to that individual at that time" (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 144).

Furthermore, the order of inclusion of these possible contexts is determined by the order of accessibility. That is how proverb recognition works by making the right interpretation more accessible by means of popular knowledge. Therefore, the speaker presents the proverb that

he or she hopes to be relevant enough for the hearer to process it and modify his or her cognitive environment which would provide him or her with more cognitive effects than a regular utterance. When uttering a proverb, the speaker tries to device your attention to create more assumptions about a specific theme. For instance, by uttering “La avaricia rompe el saco” (Junceda, 1995: 98), the speaker is making an *ostensive stimulus* against greed that the hearer would find relevant within the context. Consequently, proverbs are acts of ostensive communication automatically indicating a *presumption of relevance*.

4. Functions of Proverbs

4.1. Why do we use proverbs?

The use of proverbs has been defined as way of saying something implicitly rather than explicitly supporting your arguments in popular wisdom. In addition, proverbs are considered part of the figurative language, because they are an indirect way of conveying a set of assumptions about a shared thought between hearer and speaker rather than directly stating them. But why do speakers not choose a more explicit way of saying what they think and instead communicate their real thoughts in an implicit manner, by means of a proverb? We may take advantage of the implicit communication when we are not completely sure about the mutual information that both speaker and hearer share. In this way we create a “sensación tangible de mutualidad” (Yus, 2009: 311), which guarantees that the hearer share the same information at the same time with the speaker.

The “marca de intimidad” that Yus (2009: 311) claims as characteristic of irony can be applied to the ironic tone of proverbs from my point of view. The fact that we use a proverb to criticize, advise or warn someone is indeed because we recognise it as a piece of popular wisdom and by uttering it we are making manifest to the hearer we find it wise in a given context (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 239). Therefore, proverbs are a piece of wisdom that the speaker is making mutually manifest. Because of the nature of proverbs, we can relate them with traditional wisdom explained by Sperber and Wilson (1995: 239) as “attributable not to any specific source but to people in general”.

The piece of popular wisdom can be attributable to a wide range of topics; i.e., different kinds of proverbs aim to different purposes. As an illustration of these different kind of proverb’s purposes, we can find proverbs of threat: “Arrieritos somos y en el caminito no encontraremos” (Junceda, 1995: 92); consolation: “Lo que no va en lágrimas va en suspiros” (Junceda, 1995: 287) and “No hay bien ni mal que cien años dure” (Junceda, 1995: 358); solidarity or support: “Todos a una, como en Fuenteovejuna” (Junceda, 1995: 536) and revenge: “Revenge is a dish that can be eaten cold” (Fergusson, 2000: 230).

In addition, there are other instances of proverbs expressing popular wisdom without any intention against the hearer such as the proverbs related to weather or the months of the year:

“September blow soft, till the fruit’s in the loft” (Fergusson, 2000: 182) or, in Spanish “En Enero, el agua se huera en el puchero y la vieja en el lecho” (Junceda, 1995: 206). The same with proverbs about Nature or seasons: “Nature will have her course” (Fergusson, 2000:184) or “When the cuckoo comes, he eats up all the dirt” (Fergusson, 2000: 234) referring to the coming of spring. I provided some instances of proverbs with different functions, however they are not general categories, but a small set and some of them are used in very particular situations. Hence, we are going to analyze only the three main categories involved in proverbs intention: criticism, advice and warning.

1. Implicit criticism:

“The world is full of fools” (Fergusson, 200: 100).

“Dijo la sartén a la caldera: quítate allá, culinegra” (Junceda, 1995: 190).

2. Advice:

“If you want a thing well done, do it yourself” (Fergusson, 2000: 236).

“Más vale ponerse una vez colorado que ciento amarillo” (Junceda, 1995: 314).

3. Warning:

“Better go away longing than loathing” (Fergusson, 2000: 178).

“Casa con dos puertas mala es de guardar” (Junceda, 1995: 126).

4.1.2. Criticism

As hypothesized beforehand, most of the times a speaker utters a proverb s/he has the aim of criticizing the hearer or making an accusation against him/her. As an illustration of criticism, we can see:

1. “Aunque la mona se vista de seda, mona se queda” (Junceda, 1995: 96)

2. “Fine words dress ill deeds” (Fergusson, 2000: 140).

By using these proverbs the speaker is criticising the hearer’s try to change who s/he really is by comparing him/her with a monkey or stating that nice words usually hide bad intentions. Other instances of proverbs with the aim of criticising are: “Mal de muchos, consuelo de tontos” (Junceda, 1995: 296) or “Who takes a lion when he is absent, fears a mouse present” (Fergusson, 2000: 45). In these cases, the speaker is accusing the hearer of being a fool or

being a coward. But s/he is doing so in an implicit way; he is criticizing or accusing the hearer by supporting his thought on a piece of popular wisdom. Hence, in spite of the fact that the hearer may take it as a criticism, the hearer does not take it as an explicit criticism or accusation, but as a common belief or idea. Consequently, by using a proverb the speaker is able to criticize the hearer, but the hearer cannot be annoyed with him. Since proverbs rely on implicit communication, the speaker expresses himself/herself in an implicit way rather than explicitly criticize the hearer; therefore s/he does not feel annoyed or upset. Actually, one of the aims of proverbs is veiling (Odebunmi, 2008: 7); the speaker veils it opinion, but expects the hearer to get his/her critical intention without offending him/her.

Consequently, the criticism aim of proverbs emphasizes the shared ideas and opinions rather than causing offense to the hearer. What is more, the use of proverbs and the ironic tone they usually carry out is seen minimized by their popular knowledge. The fact that proverbs belong to popular knowledge and most of the time they are recognized by the hearer makes their ironic and critical tone less “aggressive”. Therefore, the satirist, humoristic and joking character of proverbs, as well as in irony, helps us communicate commonly shared opinions containing strong criticism against the hearer without sounding very assertive (Yus, 2009: 311). Instances such as “He that is born a fool is never cured” (Fergusson, 2000: 98) or “El hábito no hace al monje” (Junceda, 1995: 241) contain strong criticism against the hearer, but s/he is never annoyed by them, in contrast, s/he may laugh or knock his or her head as a proof of agreement on the popular knowledge carried by these proverbs.

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4.1.2. Advice and warning

There are other kinds of proverbs whose aim is not to criticise, but to give an advice or enhance the hearer to do something. As an illustration of that, the proverb “A quién madruga, Dios le ayuda” (Junceda, 1995: 48) or “The early bird catches the worm” (Fergusson, 2000: 77) encourage the hearer to interpret the proverb meaning as the sooner you start, the more successful you will be and the sooner you will achieve your goal. Advice is a common function of proverbs: “Al mal tiempo, buena cara” (Cervantes) which encourages the reader to an optimistic point of view facing a less favourable situation. Another example may be “if you don’t make mistakes you don’t make anything” or another version of this proverb “he who makes no mistakes, makes nothing” (Fergusson, 2000: 144), which encourage the hearer to keep trying regardless of mistakes.

Moreover, apart from these proverbs of advice, there are proverbs of warning whose goal is to warn or to prevent the hearer from doing something. For instance, “Agua que no has de beber, déjala correr” (Junceda, 1995: 65), which prevents the hearer from getting involved in something out of his/her concerns or “Don’t count your chickens before they are hatched” (Fergusson, 2000: 9), warning the hearer against anticipation. These utterances will be interpreted not only as a mere piece of advice but also as folk and traditional sayings. Consequently, this utterance is not only a mental representation of one speaker, but becomes a public representation in a given speech community.

The repeated transmission of these representations creates a chain of mental and public representations causally linked by a culture (Sperber, 1994: 54). In this sense, culture can be explained, as Sperber states (1994), as an “epidemiology of representations” which explains why representations like proverbs spread more quickly than others.

4.2. Irony in proverbs

Besides being critical, warning or advising, proverbs often convey an ironic tone. There are many examples of proverb carrying an ironical tone such as “perro ladrador poco mordedor” (Junceda, 1995: 408), which is a very clear example of a critical proverb whose implicit ironical tone allows the speaker to call the hearer boaster in an implicit rather than explicit

way (as explained in section 4). Therefore, as Sperber and Wilson (1995) claim, ironic statements allow the speaker to express his/her own attitude in terms of the thought echoed or communicated through an ironic utterance.

Because of the ironic tone underlying most proverbs, we can apply this feature of irony to the study of proverbs. We can say that the echoed attitude makes the recognition of the speaker's intention easier for the hearer by helping him/her to reach the right interpretation of the proverb. For instance, echoing another idea or situation such as "más vale pájaro en mano que cientos volando" (Junceda, 1995: 312) would make the hearer identify the literal utterance as inappropriate in the actual context because in the exchange there is no previous utterance about birds or catching a bird and so it does not add any explicit information to the context. Therefore, the hearer would interpret this new information as not fitting in the mutual cognitive environment speaker and hearer are sharing at this given context. However, the speaker is expressing his/her own attitude through a thought echoed in terms of traditional wisdom. Consequently, the hearer would have to look for an alternative context where the interpretation of this utterance would make sense and be meaningful within the context (Yus, 2009: 311). Consequently, from Sperber and Wilson's point of view, the aim of irony is to "dissociate the speaker from an attributed thought or utterance which she wants to suggest is more or less obviously false, irrelevant or under-informative" (Wilson, 2006: 10). It is my belief that we can apply this to proverbs whose aim is detaching the hearer from their literal meaning by offering him/her a second meaning identifiable by the familiarity they carry out.

However, the communication of shared thoughts between speaker and hearer will be attributed to more factors such as: the implicit attitude of the speaker, the tone of voice, contexts or other linguistics parameters (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 239). As Cestero (2009) argues, verbal irony is achieved through the correct use and interpretation of linguistic, nonverbal and contextual signs; in other words, paralinguistic elements. Actually, proverbs' intention is made through the tone of voice i.e. making some sound longer or emphasising some specific parts of the proverb: facial gestures such as smiling or moving the eyes or body language as pointing to someone or knocking your head. For instance, it is commonly attached to the proverb: "Por un perro que maté, mataperros me llamaron" (Cervantes, 2015) an emphasis on the word "mataperros" and a gesture of pointing to yourself since this proverb is commonly used to protest about some unfair situation that happens to you. It also happens with the proverb: "You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs" (Fergusson, 2000:

233), we tend to make longer the sound of the first part with a knocking of head to make the hearer recognise of our ironical intention.

Besides, the hyperbole is a further common feature of proverbs which implies an awareness of the ironical intention they carry out in cases such as “lo que no mata engorda” (Junceda, 1995: 287). The same happens with paradoxical elements in proverbs such as “He who accuses himself, accuses himself” (Fergusson, 2000:229) or “The noblest vengeance is to forgive” (Fergusson, 2000: 229). In addition, repetitions or puns also produce an emphasis on the words and make reference to the importance of these non-verbal signs in the recovery of the ironical intention of proverbs. This is the case of “Al pan, pan y al vino, vino” (Junceda 1995: 395). Thus, linguistic phenomena such as irony are determined in their reproduction, recognition and interpretation by implicit non-verbal signs (Cestero, 2009: 168). Hence, irony entangles an implicit expression of attitude that heavily depends on the information intended by the speaker’s attitude to the opinion echoed. Consequently, the recovery of the implicit meaning of these proverbs will rely on the following aspects:

1. The recognition of the echoic situation
2. The identification of the communicated opinion
3. The acknowledgment of the speaker’s attitude. In the case of proverbs, we can identify different speaker’s intentions of criticism, advice or warning.

4.3. Metaphors in proverbs

Furthermore, as a piece of figurative language, proverbs may also have a metaphorical intention sometimes. Richards described metaphors as a combination of two parts: topic – “usually the subject of the metaphorical sentence” and the vehicle – “the term used metaphorically” (Bock and Brewer, 1978: 60 quoted from Richards, 1965). The relationship of similarity between the topic and the vehicle is the key to understand a metaphor (Bock and Brewer, 1978: 60). In this sense, I think we can consider proverbs as metaphors in which only the vehicle –the term used metaphorically- is explicitly stated, but the topic –the subject of the metaphor- is left implicit (Bock and Brewer, 1978: 60 quoted from Perrine, 1971).

As an illustration of that, the vehicle would be the concepts used metaphorically to state the proverb such as: “No se hizo la miel para la boca del asno” (Junceda, 1995: 370). In this case, the word “asno” is used to refer to someone fool and the “miel” to something very precious. However, the topic would be the omitted subject we are dealing with: the mistake of offering worthy things to people who would appreciate them. However, as happens with irony, the hearer is aware of the metaphorical intention of the speaker because of the familiarity of the proverb. In other words, he is able to recognise the topic of the proverb, the subject of it, by its vehicle, the concepts explicitly stated.

Finally, from my point of view there is a metaphorical and ironic nature in some proverbs following from the “very general mechanisms of verbal communication rather than from some extra level of competence” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 242). Furthermore, there is not a dividing line between the literal and the metaphorical meanings or between the ironical utterances and their echoic situations, but a continuum of cases ranging from what the subject of the proverb is to how it is expressed. Thus, we can state that whereas “metaphor plays on the relationship between the propositional form of an utterance and the speaker thought; irony plays on the relationship between the speaker thought and a thought of someone other than the speaker” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 243).

In proverbs, we may have both kinds of relationships in one proverb such as in the case of: “Más sabe el diablo por viejo que por diablo” (Junceda 1995: 310), for instance. On the one side, we can identify the ironical tone of the proverb— calling someone “diablo” is implying an ironical criticism-by the emphasis on the tone and the non-verbal gestures such as arching your eyebrows, for instance. Besides, its metaphorical nature is also very clear since we are taking the metaphorical concepts such as “diablo” to echo another situation by a relationship of similarity: el “diablo” is presumably very old and due to his evilness seems to be very wise as well. Consequently, we can consider some proverbs as phenomena involving a metaphorical and ironical relationship between the thoughts of the speaker, the propositional form uttered and the thought of the receiver.

4.4. Ellipsis in proverbs

Sometimes, it is not necessary to fully utter the proverb for it to be understood. In fact, there are many examples in which just the former part of the proverb is uttered, omitting the last part since the speaker considers the hearer would recognize the beginning of the proverb, making thus the stimulus the most relevant one s/he could have chosen. This is the case of “Cuando el río suena...”, that as soon as the hearer processes the first part, s/he can anticipate the following: “...agua lleva” (Junceda, 1995: 153). This fact might be attributed to the fact that many proverbs are so frequently used and so highly familiar that just with uttering part of it, the hearer will be able to interpret the piece of popular wisdom intended by the speaker, being thus an efficient way of communicating a set of shared assumptions in the form of cultural knowledge (Yus, 2009: 317). Due to its frequent use, the given information and the contextual knowledge lead the hearer to recover the rest of the proverb implicitly. In other words, it is not indispensable to utter the proverb in a full form to be able to reach the right interpretation. Actually, as Yus (2009) says about ironical statements which can also be applied to proverbs: when the speaker provides the hearer with a scheme (a logical form) the hearer must inferentially develop into a full propositional form to achieve the interpretation intended by the speaker.

Thus, the hearer is able to access to the right interpretation of a proverb just after identifying some of its words. For instance, as soon as the hearer identifies the initial words of the proverb: “Sow with the hand...” (Fergusson, 2000: 178), s/he would be able to anticipate the second part of the proverb: “...and not with the whole sack” (Fergusson, 2000: 178). But, above all, the attitude of the speaker, the non-verbal signs coming with the utterance and the discrepancy between the context and the literal meaning of the proverb will lead the hearer to a valid interpretation of the implicit meaning of the proverb by hearing just part of its explicature. Hence, when the speaker utters “Tanto va el cántaro a la fuente...” (Junceda, 1995: 529), the hearer will be able to enrich this logical form to achieve the full propositional form: “...que por fin se rompe” (Junceda, 1995: 529) and recognize the ironic intention underlying this proverb: “who takes too many risks will eventually suffer negative consequences”.

The aim of the ellipsis in proverbs is to economize the process involved in proverb recognition. The fact that we always omit the second part of the proverb is because in familiar

proverbs, just the first part is enough to recognize proverb's intention and therefore it is more economical for the hearer to process just a part of it instead of the whole proverb. This is the case of "a palabras necias...", whose last part "...oídos sordos" (Junceda, 1995: 44) is usually omitted, but the hearer is still able to identify the warning tone of this proverb. The same happens in English with the proverb "every cloud has a silver lining" (Fergusson, 2000: 195). In fact, the first part of some proverbs is so familiar that people sometimes forget or even do not know the last part of this proverb. This is the case of the very well-known proverb as "tanto monta, monta tanto" (Junceda, 1995: 529). However, some people may not know that this is only the first part of the proverb and there is a second part that nearly no one utters "tanto monta, monta tanto, Isabel como Fernando" (Junceda, 1995: 529). Also the case of a very famous poem: "The grass is always greener...." (Fergusson, 2000: 39). Most time people do not finish this proverb saying: "...in the other side of the fence", but just uttering the first part is enough for the proverb's recognition and interpretation. Therefore, we can say that if a syntactic constituent of the proverb is missing does not affect the interpretation of a proverb's meaning. Brabanter considers the ellipsis as if "nothing is missing" (2007: 11). Even though part of a sentence is omitted, you have a full syntactic structure usually retrievable because of the non-verbal communicative acts that form part of the ostensive stimulus of uttering that sentence (Brabanter, 2007: 11).

For instance in the case of "Arrieritos somos..." (Junceda, 1995: 92) we expose to the hearer the first part which is the best well-known and the most salient in terms of hearer's recognition, but we omit the second and less salient part: "...y en el caminito nos encontraremos" (Junceda, 1995: 92). Consequently, from the point of view of language economy, the fact that we can omit the first part of a proverb is desirable and worthy since it reduces the processing effort involved. On the contrary, if we utter the full proverb, instead of only using part of it, the processing effort carried out by the hearer would increase and therefore, uttering the whole proverb would be less desirable. Then, once we utter the first part of "Eramos pocos y parió la abuela" (Junceda, 1995: 220), the hearer will be able to process it and recognize the set of assumptions carried out by this proverb, and therefore it would not be necessary to utter the second part.

However, if uttering only the first part of a proverb contributes to the language economy, why does it not work with all proverbs, but just with some of them? If we claim that proverbs belong to popular wisdom and cultural tradition, why can some of them be elided such as

“Agua pasada...” and left omitted “...no mueve molino” (Junceda, 1995: 65) or “If you wish to know a man...” and avoid saying “give him authority” (Fergusson, 2000: 13) and not some others?, However, Therefore, we will consider in section 5 why we cannot omit constituents in other proverbs such as “La ocasión, asírla por el guedejón” (Junceda, 1995: 383) or with the equal success as, for instance, “a palabras necias...” (Junceda, 1995: 44) or “every cloud...” (Fergusson, 2000: 195).

5. Uses: Familiarity and unfamiliarity in proverbs.

More specific assumptions

Set of stereotypical assumptions



Unfamiliar Proverbs

Familiar Proverbs

The fact that we can only omit part of some proverbs may have to do, in my opinion, with their degree of familiarity. Familiarity and frequency of use influence on their recognition and interpretation by the hearer. The more we use a proverb or the more familiar it is in a speech community, the most likely is to be uttered. Some proverbs are familiar enough for the hearer to recover its meaning by just listening to part of it. For instance, when uttering a proverb as famous as “A buen entendedor, pocas palabras”⁴ (Junceda, 1995: 20), people do not need to process all of it to automatically recover the speaker’s intended meaning. The same happens with the well-known proverb “the used key is always bright”⁵(Fergusson, 2000: 272), meaning that mental as well as physical activity keeps you fit. This is explained by the fact that some proverbs are widely distributed and repeatedly transmitted and propagated through the speech community, so that all of its members recognize it and recover its meaning only by hearing the first few words.

However, in the case of unfamiliar proverbs we cannot omit part of them because uttering part of it would not be enough for the hearer to recognize and interpret it. This could be the case of proverbs used in the past, but no longer in use such as “Cuando duela, salga la muela” (Junceda, 1995: 95). This kind of proverb is hardly ever used nowadays and therefore uttering only “cuando duela...” would not be relevant enough for a young person who would not recognize its second part. Therefore, if the hearer is not able to recover the speaker’s intended meaning by uttering the proverb, the stimulus would not be the most relevant stimulus the speaker could have chosen.

Furthermore, familiar proverbs convey a set of stereotypical assumptions, i.e., well-known ideas or beliefs that influence on the hearer’s thoughts. Actually, due to repetition, they

⁴ This proverb was included in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and the play *The Celestina* by Fernando de Rojas, two of the most important literary works in Spanish writing.

⁵ This proverb comes from the quote of Benjamin Franklin “Sloth, like rust, consumes faster than labor wears, while the used key is always bright” from the 18th century.

become pragmatics routines - in other words, a set of few stereotypical assumptions automatically retrieved for no processing effort. Therefore, they acquire a fixed meaning in a specific speech community to define, criticize or advise on some linguistic behavior expected from the interlocutors (Cervantes, 2015). Furthermore, proverbs may become patterns that contribute to social norms established in certain situations. For instance, when someone is complaining about someone being short, it is a common response used by short people: “The best things come in small packages”, followed by the common retort “And poison comes in small bottles” (Fergusson: 2000:244). However, unfamiliar proverbs convey less stereotypical ideas and would not have the same effect on the modification of the hearer’s cognitive environment as familiar proverbs do. Unfamiliar proverbs imply more processing effort offset by the greater cognitive benefits achieved from its processing.

6. Conclusion

Proverbs are pieces of language that best represent the folk culture from a speech community. Thus, the uses and main purposes of proverbs are an important subject to know how these popular wisdom tools work in everyday language. To achieve a good explanation for proverbs function and uses, we approached different aspects of this phenomenon:

1. We foregrounded the uses of proverbs by distinguishing between familiar and unfamiliar proverbs. Hence, we stated that the familiarity in proverb comprehension played an important role so that the less familiar a proverb is, the less likely it is used. Furthermore, we pointed out the decisive role played by familiarity and unfamiliarity in the ellipsis of proverbs, since only the best well-known and the most familiar proverbs are the ones that can be elided.
2. Moreover, we explored the metaphorical and ironical nature of proverbs by applying different theories to the study of proverbs. By doing so, we found out that the metaphorical intention of many proverbs and the ironical tone help the hearer to recognize the proverb's interpretation. Besides, we suggested how non-verbal language –tone and pitch of voice, gestures, etc.- underlying ironically-intended proverbs help the hearer to recognize the speaker's intended meaning.
3. Finally, we asserted that criticism was the main function of proverbs and that people took advantage of the implicit criticism they usually express to avoid the annoyance of the hearer. In addition, we can highlight other minor functions of proverbs such as advice and warning which are also worth considering.

Some further research would be needed to explore the differences and similarities between proverbs cross-culturally, since proverbs conveying a similar set of stereotypical assumptions can be found across different cultures.

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