

Proverbs, Anti-Proverbs and Language Learning

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Abstract

Proverbs express public wisdom and reflect public attitudes. In the traditional definition they are untouchable when it comes to form. Like other idiomatic expressions, they are learnt as whole, indivisible chunks. As such, they should be included in language classes, if a native-like mastery is to be achieved since they constitute an indispensable component of one's linguistic repertoire.

Recent studies have shown that proverbial form is not as "holy" as tradition holds it. Speakers "commit" different kinds of transformations to popular proverbs, their sanctity notwithstanding. Examples of different types of mutations are discussed in this paper and categorized under the headings of: sound imitation, word play, stunting (or cropping), combining more than one proverb, and introducing a completely new "proverb". These different types are seen to produce proverb-like statements which could eventually turn into proverbs proper. This paper argues that all such transformations have a purpose not unlike the purpose of proverbs proper: they are often utilized by their users to "decorate" their texts with what sounds like traditionally accepted truths very similar to the truths expressed by proverbs.

Inclusion of this part of language in language classes becomes integral to the process of teaching since knowledge of these expressions, like that of other idiomatic expressions, is essential for perfecting a learner's mastery of a target language.

Keywords

foreign language learning, proverbs, anti-proverbs, proverb mutation, folklore wisdom, Jordanian Arabic

1. Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to look into a special kind of idiomatic expressions, namely, proverbs, for the purpose of utilizing the gained knowledge in foreign language teaching and learning. The rationale for investigating proverbs stems from their importance as a component of the native speaker's linguistic repertoire. A proper understanding of this phenomenon is indispensable for successful

teaching and effective learning of language since acquiring these proverbs is very much like acquiring any complex lexical item whose knowledge is essential to the process of learning.

1.1 Theoretical Background

Too much emphasis seems to have been given to the productivity of language in the sense stressed by generative grammar where speakers can produce completely novel utterances from their repertoire of lexical items and their knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language. Sinclair (1991) speaks of what has been called “a ‘slot-and-filler’ model [which envisages] texts as a series of slots which have to be filled from the lexicon” (p. 109). This is basically what he refers to as the open-choice principle (OP) of language use. The complementary principle of idiom (IP) (*ibid.*, pp. 109-111) is treated as though it were of less importance being, more or less, a lexical issue since idioms are seen as complex lexical items, multi-word units which are usually used together giving a special meaning which is not the sum of the meanings of their constituent parts. Like other lexical items, these complex items are acquired by speakers of the language as chunks and stored in the lexicon as such. Once part of the idiom occurs in a text, the speaker’s freedom of choice is restricted and the IP is in control dictating the use of the rest of the idiom.

1.2 Idioms and Language-Learning

For a language learner to claim mastering a language, his knowledge of the target language must involve both the IP and the OP lest she/he should get the false impression implied by concentrating on the OP alone. A more realistic picture of language and its use must take the idiomatic character of language into consideration.

1.2.1 Study Rationale

For this more realistic view of language to obtain, this paper aims to discuss the production and function of statements that make use of proverbs to produce novel utterances in a number of different ways including the production of what has been termed anti-proverbs. Strictly defined anti-proverbs are complete utterances making use of existing proverbs in one or more of the ways described in §2.1 below (Note 1). Other related phenomena will follow in §3. The original proverbs are definitely examples of the use of the IP and the novelty of these expressions, including strictly defined anti-proverbs, manifests the operation of the OP. It might seem paradoxical that these statements constitute evidence that such frozen entities as proverbs are subject to the OP when they are utilized to produce completely novel utterances. However, the use of these expressions only asserts the “frozen-ness” of the source proverbs since they produce their effect only by reference to their parent proverbs, a fact which is part of their definition. The cover term anti-proverbs will be adopted here to refer to statements that make use of proverbs in a fresh new utterance parodying, omitting, adding, playing on words, etc.

It is hoped that the paper will shed light on the linguistic phenomenon of using anti-proverbs and similar expressions to give more emphasis to the interaction between the OP and the IP, emphasis that should lead to a more balanced understanding of language. Such understanding is indispensable to a

near-native mastery of the target language, if the native speaker model is the ideal at which a language learner aims. We are here in agreement with Akbarian (2010, p. 223) who discusses the use of proverbs in EFL classes and asserts that “[w]ithout a knowledge of idiomatic expressions [of which proverbs are examples], language learners’ spoken and written English will remain stilted and foreign-sounding”; without this knowledge a learner’s linguistic competence is incomplete.

1.2.2 Study Design

The paper will start by considering what has been termed anti-proverbs and go on to discuss other uses of proverbs in changed or incomplete form. In this way, the main part of the paper will be a catalogue of these expressions with special emphasis on categorizing the different processes leading from proverbs to anti-proverbs. Other terms have been used to designate these processes including remodeling (Farghal & Al-Hamly, 2007) (Note 2), perversion, fracturing (cited in Mieder, 2008, p. 89), scrambling, manipulation and twisting (see Mieder, 2008, p. 110), but “anti-proverb” will be a cover term we use in this paper. Strictly-defined anti-proverbs serve, in our viewpoint, functions similar to those of proverbs and may even “become proverbial in their own right, showing that/such ‘anti-proverbs’ can indeed make the jump [...] to new folk proverb”, to use Mieder’s (2008, pp. 88-89) words. That is why we opt for the term “anti-proverb” rather than “twisting”, “fracturing” or “remodeling”, all three of which stress the giving up of the distinctive character of proverbs when, in fact, the end result of the process is a chunk intended to serve a function similar to that of proverbs proper.

2. Proverbs vs. Antiproverbs

A simple definition of proverbs will tell us that proverbs are brief, traditional sayings with, more or less, fixed form, commonly used by speakers of the language, usually taking advantage of the public acceptance of the wisdom of their content. Being instances of using figurative language, language that means more than what is said on the surface, they enrich the texts that contain them. Not one of the features assigned to proverbs in the above definition can go unchallenged across the board, except, perhaps, brevity. We should haste to say that fixidity of form could be said to be common to all proverbs were it not for the fact that very often a speaker comes up with his own version by adding, omitting or changing an element in a proverb producing what we have already agreed to call an anti-proverb or using only part of a proverb in a text where the rest of the proverb is recoverable. Shakespeare, Dickens, Brecht and other writers as well as people like Churchill, Lincoln and Mao Tse-tung and others “have not stuck religiously to standard proverb texts” (Mieder, 2008, p. 89). They manipulated the texts of proverbs to their own ends. Farghal and Al-Hamly (2007) discuss the use of proverbs and other fixed expressions in newspaper commentary titles, that use which more often than not involves only part of the expression (proverbs, etc.) leaving the rest for the reader to recover.

2.1 Types of Anti-Proverbs

Anti-proverbs are brief statements modeled after existing proverbs through one of a number of

processes discussed below. The outcome, in its own right, reflects the typical form of proverbs proper.

2.1.1 Word Replacement

The most common process of producing anti-proverbs is probably by changing one or more words in the source proverb keeping sufficient material to help recognize the original. The Arabic anti-proverb in (1.a) easily conjures up the proverb in (1.b):

1.a. man Hafara Hufратan Tammatha l-'amaanah (Note 3)
 who dug(HE) pit filled(SHE)-it the-municipality

“Whoever digs a pit, the municipality will fill it up”.

1.b. man Hafara Hufратan li-'axiihi wagaṣa fiiha
 to-brother-his fell(HE) in-it

“Whoever digs a pit (i.e., sets a trap) for his brother will fall in it”.

In addition to the humorous effect produced by the surprising new ending of the anti-proverb in (1.a), it reflects public grumblings about the big brother type of attitude and policies of government agencies like the municipality: whatever a citizen does, these agencies are there to cancel it and encroach on civil freedoms. In other words, the end effect of the anti-proverb (1.a) is not unlike the effect of typical proverbial wisdom. Certainly the form is proverbial.

2.1.2 Sound Change

The change effected on some element in a proverb might involve the change of only one sound in the original. The English Chaste makes waste is different from the proverb Haste makes waste in substituting the affricate /tʃ/ for the fricative /h/. The meaning is very different, though. The new meaning, however, represents the wisdom of a type of people very different from those for whom the original proverb is wisdom. Linguistically, both can be used by speakers to “decorate” their texts in ways typical of proverbs proper.

An Arabic example is the anti-proverb and the proverb in (2.a, 2.b) which differ only in one phonological feature, namely, the emphasis of the /s/ sound versus its absence:

2.a. kulman bookil nasiibuh (Note 4)
 everyone eat(HE) in-law-his

“Everyone eats his in-law”.

2.b. kulman bookil naSiibuh
 portion-his

“Everyone gets his portion” (i.e., one gets only what Fate has ordained).

The eating in (2.a) above is not cannibalism! It has to be figuratively interpreted, and this is not farfetched. Even in (2.b) the eating is not literal; the action is one of gaining. The satirical way of looking at in-laws relationships certainly expresses a very popular attitude, or at least lip service, towards one’s relation to one’s in-laws. There is some degree of negative feelings attributed to these relations. The proverb in (2.b) reflects the public acceptance of the workings of Fate stating that one

gets only what Fate has ordained; the anti-proverb in (2.a) has the proverbial quality of sounding like public wisdom reflecting a general attitude towards in-laws relations.

2.1.3 Combining

Combining two proverbs produces a third type of anti-proverb. The anti-proverb A penny saved makes Jack a dull boy combines A penny saved is a penny earned and All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. The end result of the anti-proverb is NOT far from the second of the source proverbs: both “saving a penny” and “all work and no play” are serious activities criticized in the proverb and the anti-proverb as being too serious exactly in the same way.

The Arabic anti-proverb in (3.a) based on the proverbial lines of poetry in (3.b.i) and (3.b.ii) adds humor to the proverbial wisdom of the line in (3.b.ii):

3.a. ‘iða š-šaʕbu yawman ‘araada l-Hayaah tajri r-riyaaHu
 If the-people one-day willed(HE) the-life blow(SHE) the-wind
 bimaa laa taštahi s-sufunu
 with-what NEG wish(SHE) the-ships

“If the people decides one day to live, the wind blows against what ships wish”.

3.b.i. ‘iða š-šaʕbu yawman araada l-Hayaah falaabudda ‘an yastajiiba
 necessarily that respond(HE)
 l-qadar
 the-fate

“If the people decides one day to live, Destiny will necessarily respond (favorably)”.

3.b.ii. maa kullu maa yatamanna l-mar’u yudrikuhu, tajri r-riyaaHu bima laa
 not all that wish(HE) the-man get(HE)-it
 taštahi s-sufunu

“Not all that one wishes, one gets; the wind blows against what ships wish”.

The pessimism expressed in the proverb in (3.b.ii) is very close to the proverbial import in the anti-proverb in (3.a). Again we see that what sounds like a joke formed by combining two proverbs in one anti-proverb produces what can eventually become a proverb in its own right.

2.1.4 Word Play

Time wounds all heels from Time heals all wounds represents a very interesting type of word play. It takes advantage of wounds as a verb and wounds as a noun being homophonous and heels and heals also being homophonous and reverses the order of the words to produce a more or less contrary statement whose pragmatic import is no less proverbial than the source proverb, only more pessimistic though not less wise in one meaning of “wise”. The Arabic anti-proverb in (4.a) based on the proverb in (4.b) displays a similar type of word play:

4.a. ʕagadd ijreek jiiib lak lHaaf
 on-size legs-your get to-you bed-cover

“Get yourself a bed cover the size of your legs”.

4.b. ʕagadd IHaafak mudd ijreek
on-size bed-cover-your stretch legs-your

“Stretch your legs to the size of your bed cover”.

In spite of the similarity of the sounds in (4.a) and (4.b) to the extent that the hearer may not see the difference right away, the meaning is very different: (4.a) recommends conditioning one’s surroundings to one’s needs and desires; (4.b) recommends acclimatizing to one’s available resources. Both pieces of advice are proverbial though they suit different situations or dispositions and inclinations.

2.1.5 Stunting

An anti-proverb is sometimes its source proverb stunted. Omitting pelt stones from the English proverb People living in glass houses should not pelt stones changes the meaning completely producing a new piece of advice for people not to live in glass houses altogether. Familiarity breeds! is very different from its parent proverb Familiarity breeds contempt!

The Arabic anti-proverb in (5.a) is the title of a cartoon by the Jordanian cartoonist Hajjaj based on the proverb in (5.b):

5.a. ‘in kibr ibnak
if grew-older(HE) son-your

“When your son is a grown-up ...”.

5.b. ‘in kibr ibnak xaawiih
... .. be-brother-him

“When your son is a grown-up, treat him as a brother”.

The proverb in (5.b) gives a father advice to befriend his son when the son is old enough to act on his own and NOT to expect him to continue to take instructions from the father all the time. The cartoon, however, depicts a father who is handing his hulk son a money bill under the threat of force. The proverb recommends the father being friends with his grown-up son, while the cartoon sounds like saying to fathers, “Pay or else!” (Cf. §3 below where the deletion does NOT change the meaning).

Other cases of stunting can involve the use of part of a proverb simply to prompt the whole proverb without necessarily changing the meaning as is the case in the above example. Notice the use of (6.a) to prompt in the hearer the proverb in (6.b):

6.a. ʕiiš yaa kdiiš
live O nag

“Keep alive, you nag!”

6.b. ʕiiš yaa kdiiš ta yijjiik ilHašiiš
... .. till come(HE)-you the-grass

“Keep alive, you nag, till grass comes to you!” (i.e., Wait for Godot!).

2.1.6 Negation

Some of the changes effected on proverbs are negation processes. The anti-proverb in (7.a) is a direct negation of its source (7.b):

7.a. If you want something well done don't do it yourself, hire a specialist.

7.b. If you want something well done, do it yourself (Note 5).

It is interesting about the examples in (7.a, 7.b) that, although they contradict each other, both can qualify as popular wisdom. The English proverb (7.b) has an Arabic equivalent (8) and the anti-proverb (6.a) has the proverbial import of the Arabic proverb in (9):

8. ma Hakka jilduka mithlu Dufrika
NEG scratched(HE) skin-your like nail-your

“Nothing scratches your skin like your (finger) nail”.

9. ‘aṣTi l-xubiz la-xabbaazuh w-law ‘akal nuSSuh
give the-bread to-baker-his and-even ate(HE) half-its

“Give the bread to its baker even if he eats half of it”.

The two Arabic proverbs above are an example of a pair of seemingly contrary proverbs, which should not be surprising since human experience shows that different situations can necessitate different wisdom; both proverbs can be wise in different situations. And so can the English proverb and anti-proverb in (7.a, 7.b) which can be considered as reflecting wisdom, their seeming contradiction notwithstanding. Here we see how an anti-proverb can be used in the same way as proverbs are used even where it contradicts its source proverb.

3. Other Proverb-Like Expression

In addition to the anti-proverbs described so far, a variety of proverbs or proverb-like statements parodying traditional proverbs do exist. It is hardly surprising that many of these come from the digital world. Hence, the term “silicon proverbs”.

3.1 “Silicone Proverbs”

There is ample evidence that new proverbs are coming into being all the time. One of the sources of new proverbs or proverb-like expressions is the computer world. These “silicon proverbs” are statements which imitate the form of typical proverbs using computer related terms and expressing experience that is related to the digital world. In Gates we trust (Cf. In God we trust!) gives Bill Gates the stature of a god. Is there anybody more worthy of such importance in the digital world than Gates!? In There is no place like home. com! the addition of .com changes the traditional concept of home and replaces it with the default site one has on one's PC; Modulation in all things (cf. the Christian ideal of moderation in all things) reflects the continuing search for better technologies and techniques; Windows will never cease (based on Wonders will never cease) reflects the permeation of the computer in modern life; Virtual reality is its own reward parodies Virtue is its own reward in both form and meaning but shifting the focus to the virtual world, a modern age virtue; A user and his leisure are soon parted does not necessarily describe users as fools, but it certainly reflects the crazy obsession of some users with their computers so much so that they know no leisure time. And so on!

3.1.1 “Silicone Proverbs” in Arabic

This digital world fad gave Arabic examples like (10.a) modeled after the proverb in (10.b) (Note 6).

10. a. ‘issu’aal laYeer guugil maðallih
 asking to-not Google humiliation

“Asking (anyone) other than Google is humiliating”.

10.b. ‘issu’aal laYeer illaah maðallih
 Allah ...

“Begging (anyone) other than Allah is humiliating”.

It is worth noticing here that su’aal in (10.a, 10.b) above allows the two interpretations “asking (a question, etc.)” as in (10.a) and “begging (i.e., asking for a favor)” as in (10.b). The change from the source proverb to the anti-proverb makes clever use of the ambiguity of this word.

3.2 *Impromptu Proverb-Like Expressions*

When in a situation to use a proverb or when asked to give a proverb that suits a given situation, some speakers come up with what sounds like a standard proverb which, nevertheless, is not a proverb. In a field study which we conducted to gauge the number of proverbs a group of Jordanian university students know in their mother tongue, the subjects were asked to give the proverb they would use in a given situation. In a few cases, the subjects did not know the target proverb. Still they gave an utterance which sounded very much like a proverb when it actually was not a standard proverb. (11.a) was given in response to the question, What proverb would you use to stress the importance of life in the face of death? The target proverb was (11.b):

11.a. huwwa lwaahHad kam marrah ŶaayiŶ
 indeed the-one how-many time living

“How many times is one going to live?” (So why bother?)

11.b. ‘alHayyu ‘abqaa mina lmayyit
 the-living more-staying than the-dead

“The living (one) is more alive (i.e., more important) than the dead (one)”.

4. Conclusion

We conclude from the discussion above that speakers display creativity in their use of language by applying the open principle where the idiom principle is expected. That is, they use their own utterances while keeping close, but not completely sticking, to fossilized texts, namely those of proverbs. Using a proverb to anchor their utterance, they change a word or more, change a single sound, combine elements from different proverbs, play on words, omit parts of the proverb, or even negate the proverb to create what can eventually be a proverb in its own right or at least be proverb-like. In other words, we argue that the fossilization of the idiomatic expressions called proverbs is not absolute: speakers display a considerable amount of freedom with these expressions.

Questions relevant to the idiomatic aspect of language include the question whether the open principle of language use is completely open or it shows a degree of fossilization in the sense of the presence of pre-determined patterns and combinations of speech within which speakers make their moves (Cf. Stubbs, 2005; Sinclair, 1991, p. 110; Mieder, 2008, p. 99). Not only grammar and diction but also sociolinguistic codes of propriety and shared thought patterns limit speakers' choices (Sinclair, *ibid.*, p. 110). However important they may be, these phenomena are beyond the scope of the present paper. But it is worth mentioning that an understanding of language necessitates proper understanding and integration of the phenomena discussed above. The significance of these features to language teaching should have become clear and, therefore, a good syllabus has to take them into consideration.

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Notes

Note 1. The English anti-proverbs used in our discussion come from the website (<http://www.cogweb.ucla.edu/Discourse/Proverbs/English.html>), whereas our Arabic data come from our repertoire as native speakers of Jordanian Arabic which necessarily means that some are in Standard Arabic since many of the proverbs used by Jordanian speakers are in Standard Arabic.

Note 2. Farghal and Al-Hamly (2007) discuss remodeling as affecting all multi-word units including idioms, proverbs and formulaic expressions among others. Their data illustrate the use of the OP to manipulate what has always been seen as the product of the IP.

Note 3. A pronoun in the gloss translation of an Arabic text in capital letters and in parentheses indicates agreement. So, *xaan-* is glossed “betrayed(HE)-” to indicate that the past form *xaan* agrees with a third person, masculine, singular agent.

Note 4. This anti-proverb is cited in Mieder and Litovkina (2002, p. 110).

Note 5. Mieder (2008) entitles a section Anti-proverbs in the Internet.

Note 6. One can Google entries like “amthal kumbyutariyyah” “computer proverbs: or “amthal twitariyyah” “Twitter proverbs”, etc. to find Arabic (anti-)proverbs related to the digital world.