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PROVERBS IN PRESENT-DAY MEDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF  
TELEVISION FICTIONS AND INTERNET MEMES AND  
THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE SPREAD OF PROVERBS

**Abstract:** The present paper explores two media of rather recent appearance, or at least recent popularization, in the public sphere and their importance and usefulness in the diffusion of proverbs, mostly from a cross-linguistic point of view. Thus, with English being the present-day lingua franca of not only academia, but also the entertainment industry, it contributes to the spread of different types of phrasemes that may eventually gain a considerable degree of acknowledgement among different linguistic communities, with the focus in this case being on proverbs. Television fictions and Internet memes are presented here as two rather efficient vehicles for the maintenance and transmission of proverbial knowledge among different languages, therefore proving that proverbs are of as current use as they have ever been.

**Keywords:** folklore, internet, media, memes, paremiology, proverbs, television fictions

**Introduction**

The evolution undergone by means of communication during the 20th century has no precedent in history and, furthermore, it seems unlikely that such a radical evolution in such a short period of time could ever take place again. The invention of the radio, television, computer, and motion pictures has had a major impact on people's habits regarding leisure. If, for centuries, books were the only vehicle for the spread of knowledge and one of the main forms of entertainment, then the appearance and rise in popularity of the radio, television, and the Internet as some of the most important and most commonly used sources of information have contributed to reshaping people's practices, creating new forms of entertainment that were not available in previous times, and democratizing the access to information and culture.

This is a complex phenomenon that must be tackled by specialists of various disciplines, who are qualified to draw appropriately complex conclusions. Here, some of the most relevant aspects of popular means of communication will be discussed as they relate to Paremiology, taking into account that they represent only a portion of the complexities that are present. The intent of this article is to illustrate a few key examples of where paremiology research should be headed in the era of technology and for this reason, only one example from television and another from the Internet will be presented in order to illustrate the analysis: television series and internet memes respectively.

### *Television Series*

The influence of television on present-day society is unquestionable. Whether one defends or condemns this fact is irrelevant, as a TV set will continue to be present in almost every home and play a major role in providing people with an almost infinite source of entertainment and information. Within the wide variety offered by television, there is one genre that seems particularly suitable for a paremiological analysis: television series.

It is surprising how little attention this genre has received from paremiologists, considering all the possibilities it offers. It is only recently that works on the matter are starting to appear more frequently, such as those by A. Konstantinova (2014), G. A. Rodríguez Martín (2015) or L. J. Tosina Fernández (2016a & 2016b). The reasons why TV series seem to be a particularly suitable expression to prove the richness of proverbs as communication tools, as explained by Tosina Fernández (2016a), are multiple and practically indisputable, and the value of television for a paremiological analysis is enormous.

Proverbs are constantly used on television, regardless of the kind of program being watched or the audience the program is targeted for. In this regard, proverbs may potentially be used in all television genres, and within television series they are indeed used in the most varied genera: sitcoms, dramas, soap operas, science fiction, police fictions, historical, cartoons, etc. The effect of this is that, because they deal with many different topics, they reach the most varied audiences, thus contributing to the spread of paremiological knowledge. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that the nature of television fictions is that they are put on for other

people to watch and enjoy, which makes the comparison with drama unavoidable.<sup>1</sup>

The nature of TV fictions makes them dependent on dialogical texts, which provide the perfect breeding ground for the use of proverbs, as they imitate everyday conversations - the situations in which proverbs most naturally take place. Thus, the frequent use of proverbs in TV series plays a major role in the propagation of proverbs not only among the speakers of a certain language, but also across languages, given the global viewing of some of present-day TV productions. In this regard, it is important to note that there are dozens of shows with a solid fan base across the world that accesses these shows on a regular basis through a variety of media.

A particularly interesting aspect of TV series is that the writers may consciously use proverbs to depict a character, making him or her more credible and easier to sympathize with, because he or she is speaking to the audience in their own language. Furthermore, characters in some series show different levels of paralinguistic competence depending on the intentions of the scriptwriters. They can be depicted as characteristically repeating the same proverb multiple times<sup>2</sup>, not acknowledging a proverb,<sup>3</sup> or manipulating or misusing one, as shall be discussed shortly. Another tactic that TV series often employ is to use proverbs by exploiting their comical side.

Thus, it is quite common to find characters, especially in comedies, who misuse a proverb, either by mistaking one of its components or by applying it to a situation in which the proverb would likely not be applied in real life. The occurrence of this phenomenon may be due to the fact that scriptwriters are aware of how common and well-known proverbs are among the audience, which allows them to use the comical side that might otherwise be found less frequently in everyday conversation. Therefore, the multiplicity of nuances that proverbs have and their versatility turns them into a very powerful tool to connect with the audience and to fulfill numerous purposes.

In a similar manner to the cases of other media in previous historical eras, TV shows contribute to the popularization of a stock of proverbs that is well-known across different languages, especially western languages. Thus, hit television series, mostly of American or British origin, are contributing to this phenomenon,

supporting the idea of English as the *lingua franca* of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, sustained by the new means of entertainment and the mass media.

The shows presented here to illustrate the analysis have not been watched with the sole purpose of gathering data for an analysis of their use of proverbs; very much to the contrary, all the examples come from a casual, unsystematic viewing of miscellaneous TV shows, which, at least to a certain extent, proves that they are in fact ubiquitous and do not belong in just one realm of human activity or communication.

All the samples come from well-known mainstream TV series that can be watched either on television broadcasts or through on-demand streaming services. Most of the series quoted are known to many English and non-English speakers around the world, although some may be completely obscure and unknown to others. Although there are examples provided, this cannot be taken as a systematic analysis of the phenomenon - the s is intended to be a brief introduction to an occurrence that deserves a much more detailed and extensive analysis.

The following are some instances gathered from TV fictions watched over the last couple of years, either as premieres or reruns, containing uses of, or references to, proverbs or proverbial wisdom. The samples presented have been chosen for their propitiousness to highlight different features of proverb use.

1. RAYMOND TUSK Can I ask why you do that?  
FRANCIS UNDERWOOD Do what?  
RAYMOND TUSK Tap your ring like that. I've seen you do it on TV. Two taps every time you get up from a table or leave a lectern.  
FRANCIS UNDERWOOD Something my father taught me. It's meant to harden your knuckles so you don't break them if you get into a fight. It also has the added benefit of knocking on wood. My father believed that success is a mixture of preparation and luck. Tapping the table kills both birds with one stone.<sup>4</sup>

The first example, from the successful political drama *House of Cards*, refers to the proverb "To kill two birds with one stone" (ODEP: 426). This may possibly be one of the best-known prov-

erbs in the Western world. Additionally, it is interesting how the proverb has undergone different adaptations throughout history as hunting practices have developed.<sup>5</sup> Thus, one may come across the slightly different “To kill two birds with one shot”.<sup>6</sup>

2. LORD VARYS My little birds tell me that Stannis Baratheon has taken up with a Red Priestess from Asshai.  
 TYRION LANNISTER What of it?  
 LORD VARYS You don't believe in the old powers, My Lord?  
 TYRION LANNISTER Blood spells, curses, shape-shifting—what do you think?  
 LORD VARYS I think you believe in what you see and in what those you trust have seen.<sup>7</sup>

In excerpt number two, taken from the unparalleled success, *Game of Thrones*, Lord Varys alludes to the proverb “Seeing is believing” (ODEP: 710; ODP: 281) to reply to Tyrion Lannister. Even though it is usually found in dictionaries and collections of proverbs in the form indicated above, this does not make this use a manipulation, because a defining feature of folklore, of which proverbs are a manifestation, is that the same item of folklore may be found with prominent differences. The way S. J. Bronner (2007: 8) puts it “[t]here is no one right interpretation of an item of folklore any more than there is but one right version of a game or song.”

3. RAGNAR LOTHBROK Thorvard,  
 THORVARD My lord Ragnar.  
 RAGNAR LOTHBROK I hope you bring better news than the last.  
 THORVARD My lord, after you left, the Saxons treacherously attacked King Horik's camp at Wessex. There was a terrible slaughter. A great many warriors perished. The king and his son only just escaped with their lives.  
 RAGNAR LOTHBROK What about Athelstan? What happened to Athelstan?  
 THORVARD My lord, I don't know of whom you speak.

RAGNAR LOTHBROK Why has it taken so long for me to hear this news?  
 THORVARD My lord, bad news travels a great deal slower than good news.<sup>8</sup>

In this example, Thorvard, Ragnar Lothbok's legate, from the historical drama *Vikings*, misuses the proverb "Bad news travels fast" (ODP: 11) in order to justify himself in front of his boss. Thorvard's choice is not coincidental as he turns to proverbs, even if that means manipulating one of them to express an idea diametrically opposed to the original one, to justify his actions. The reason why Thorvard should expect this to prove effective is the perception of proverbs as absolute truths,<sup>9</sup> even if his manipulation of a proverb goes as far as conveying an idea that is the opposite of the actual proverb. Nevertheless, it may be expected that the manipulation still rings a bell that allows his message to be accepted by the addressee without questioning its validity.

4. JOFFREY LANNISTER What was your duty to this traitor as you saw it?  
 MARGAERY TYRELL The duty of any wife to any husband—to provide him with children.  
 JOFFREY LANNISTER You failed to do this. Why?  
 MARGAERY TYRELL I...I would not speak ill of the dead, Your Grace.<sup>10</sup>

Example number 4, also from *Game of Thrones*, refers to the proverbs "Speak well of the dead" (ODEP: 761) or "Never speak ill of the dead" (ODP: 296), which Margaery Tyrell resorts to in order to justify to her husband why she could not bear any child in her previous marriage. Similarly to the previous example presented, the generalized perception of proverbs as indisputable truths allows Margaery to employ them to come through her interrogation unscathed. Such is the status that proverbs enjoy.

5. JAY PRITCHETT These are good. What's in them?  
 LONGINES It's a margarita with a shot of absinthe.  
 PEPPER SALTZMAN Absinthe makes the heart grow fonder.  
 CRISPIN Ohh, are you making a bad pun or just lisp-ing?<sup>11</sup>

Quotation number 5 is an interesting and witty manipulation of the proverb “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” (ODP: 1), also found in different variants (ODEP: 1), by the character of Pepper Saltzman from *Modern Family*. The attainment of the humorous effect presumably pursued by Saltzman is questionable given the remark made by Crispin.

6. HOLMES Grey fondant, when properly shaped, is almost identical to several forms of plastique. Hmm? You woke up in a madman's lair with the guts of an alarm clock wired to that, you'd deliver any message he told you to.  
[*Knocking at the door*]  
WATSON You expecting anyone?  
HOLMES No.  
WATSON Sherlock!  
LUCAS DIXON Hi. Lucas. I didn't catch your name earlier.  
HOLMES Speak of the devil.<sup>12</sup>

In fragment number 6, from the series *Elementary*, a present-day portrait of Sherlock Holmes, Holmes makes another frequent use of proverbs. Quite often, proverbs are shortened for economy purposes. Even though not all proverbs allow this for different reasons (e.g. shortness or obscurity to the receiver), it is rather frequent to find that just uttering half of it suffices to convey the meaning of the whole phraseme. This is precisely what happens in the extract above, in which Holmes mentions the first half of the proverb “Talk of the Devil and he is sure/bound to appear” (ODEP: 804; ODP: 313). In the following piece this contract between the sender and the receiver can also be seen in another use of the proverb “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” (ODP: 1):

7. HANK SCHRADER Look, look.  
But this situation between you and, uh-- uh-- I'm not asking, by the way.  
Okay? It's none of my business. I do not want to get in the middle of you two.  
I'm just saying-- Listen, listen-- Okay? You beat a little tactical retreat. Yeah? And regroup. And then-- bong. You know, absence makes the-- I'm pulling for you, you know? I'm pulling-- Whoa, whoa.<sup>13</sup>

In this sentence, DEA Agent Schrader puts the receiver's paremiological competence to the test by leaving the proverb unfinished. Yet, it is not made clear what effect this has on the conversation or whether the interlocutor actually acknowledges the reference.

8. GILLIAN DARMODY The whole encounter will be balanced on a razor. Take your father's lead, but be your own man as well.  
 JIMMY DARMODY So I shouldn't let him cut my meat for me?  
 GILLIAN DARMODY I'm glad you're so cavalier.  
 JIMMY DARMODY It's just a dinner, ma.  
 GILLIAN DARMODY With the governor, dear.  
 Your father's worked very hard to solidify this relationship. And you know what they say about first impressions.<sup>14</sup>

Number 8, taken from *Boardwalk Empire*, shows yet another way in which proverbs may be used. As in the previous example, not the whole proverb is repeated, although, here it is not shortened and it is not manipulated to adapt it to any special necessities. In this case, an allusion is made to a rather well-known proverb: "First impressions last longest" (ODEP: 262; ODP: 116). The ability to make this allusion relies on the breadth of diffusion that a proverb has. That is, in order to produce an effective act of communication, both parties must be familiar with the proverb and the receiver must be able to recognize the allusion to a proverb as such, in order to interpret the meaning that the proverb is originally intended to have. If this premise is not fulfilled, communication will fail as the receiver cannot interpret the message.<sup>15</sup>

9. [Squidward is sleeping until SpongeBob knocks on the door causing him to wake up]  
 SPONGEBOB Oh, Squidward!  
 SQUIDWARD [*opens his window*] What do you want, SpongeBob?  
 SPONGEBOB Time for work, Squidward. Another day, another dollar. [*Laughs*]  
 SQUIDWARD More like another nickel.  
 SPONGEBOB [*Laughs*] Good one, Squidward! [*scene cuts to Squidward and SpongeBob*]



walking down the street and SpongeBob is laughing] Another day, another nickel. [Laughs]  
 SQUIDWARD It's not that funny.  
 SPONGEBOB It's funny, because it's true!<sup>16</sup>

The preceding excerpt is a conversation taken from *SpongeBob Squarepants*. SpongeBob attempts to motivate Squidward to get ready for work by the employment of the proverb “Another day, another dollar” (ODP: 6), which is then responded to with a rather discouraging manipulation of the same proverb.

10. BLONDE HOOKER Have you ever been published?  
 LUCAS GOODWIN Many times.  
 BLONDE HOOKER I guess that's a stupid question.  
 You don't seem like a starving artist.  
 LUCAS GOODWIN Don't judge a book by its cover.<sup>17</sup>

The last example, also from *House of Cards*, shows a slight manipulation of the proverb “never judge a book by its cover” (ODP: 32) in which the negative time adverbial “never” is exchanged for the negative auxiliary to form a different negative imperative from what would be considered the canonical form in most cases. However, as has been pointed out above, the same proverb may be found in different places, even within the same linguistic context, with slight variations, which is what this may be an example of.

After close inspection of these fragments, several different uses can be observed. Accordingly, the examples of proverb use shown above can be classified as follows:

- Canonical saying: samples 4 and 10.
- Partial saying: sample 6 and 7
- Allusion: samples 2 and 8.
- Manipulation: samples 1, 4, 5, and 9.
- Misuse: sample 3.

These five uses are the main ways in which proverbs are employed both in actual conversations and in the media, including television productions, as well as other ones. As for the purposes with which proverbs are generally used, the following may be listed:

- Teaching: sample 8.
- Assessing reality: samples 2, 5, 6, and 7.
- Justification for one's behavior: samples 1, 3, and 4.
- Commanding: sample 10.
- Humorous use: sample 5 and 9.

It must be mentioned that no example shows a moral use of proverbs, as this is a rather particular use that may only be found in certain contexts, none of which correspond with the examples presented. Nevertheless, it must be taken into account that proverbs may also be used with this purpose, despite its infrequency or unsuitability for certain channels. Additionally, the same proverb may be used with different purposes; here they have been associated with the use they represent in the context within which they take place, while portraying different situations and different conversational needs.

### ***The Internet***

The importance that the Internet has gained in the last couple of decades, the status it has acquired, and the predominant position it enjoys today in many aspects of our lives are incontrovertible. From a phraseological or paremiological point of view, A. Dundes (1999), J. H. Brunwald (2004), G. Corpas Pastor and K. Morvay (2002), S. J. Bronner (2007), W. Mieder (2010), A. Pamies-Bertrán (2010), J. Szerszunotic (2010), or E. Piirainen (2012), among others, have highlighted, in different ways and from different perspectives, not only the importance that the Internet has on the spread of proverbs and other types of phraseologisms, but also its convenience and helpfulness for the study of phrasemes.

An example of this helpfulness is the existence of online dictionaries and search engines, which can be used to find out how many uses of a certain phrase are to be found on the entire World Wide Web, not just in literary corpora but in the actual use of language by common people. Being able to find a phrase in any language, as well as the lack of it, just by typing a few letters and hitting enter, is an invaluable tool. If older paremiologists and paremiographers, as well as scholars from any other fields of study, had had these resources, present-day scholars might be out of work. Maybe that is a reason why Paremiology has had such a late

and slow development when compared with other branches of linguistic or folkloristic study. As a justification for this late development, one can look at the enormous amount of data necessary, how scattered the data is, how time-consuming it is to gather it, and how hard and costly it is to access authoritative works on the subject.

The importance of the mass media in the distribution of proverbs (see Kostantinova, 2014) and the typical processes they follow to successfully achieve a remarkable level of diffusion is summarized by W. Mieder (2010: 49-50), who explains the process with one example:

Brandt (...) travelled various German cities supporting this move, he closed his speeches with references to Lincoln, quoting the proverb *A house divided against itself cannot stand* together with his German translation *Ein in sich gespaltenes Haus hat keinen Bestand*. His repeated use of this successful translation of Lincoln's Bible proverb caught on. After all, thousands of people saw and heard Brandt on television or the radio, while newspapers printed parts of his speeches. The mass media carried the message to the population, and in this wording the Bible text has now become a German proverb by way of Abraham Lincoln and Willy Brandt. Many references can be found in the mass media and the internet attesting to this fact, proving that the proverb is solidly established in the German language.

As shown by Mieder, the use of proverbs by well-known personalities seems to be one of the most plausible processes for the popularization of phraseological units of any kind, not only proverbs.

Studies such as those by Järv (1999), Guerra Salas (1997), Pedicone de Parellada (2013), Mieder and Mieder (1994), among others, support the idea that proverbs are an important tool in the media and advertising, with printed press traditionally being considered the most commonly accessed source and one of the furthest-reaching means of communication. However, with the general use of the Internet, people's habits are changing as they get easier access to information. One of the changes in today's society is the continuous consumption of audio-visual materials to which they are exposed. Whether this exposure is voluntary or not, there

are always slogans or catchphrases that become popular and “widespread”, in the words of Piirainen (2012). For this precise reason, proverbs are an instrument of incalculable value, thanks to their memorability and the multiplicity of possibilities they offer.

A pioneer in many fields, particularly in folklore studies, A. Dundes soon noted the possibilities that certain technological gadgets could have in the transmission of folklore when he (Dundes, 1999: 7) stated that “[p]erhaps the most striking example of written folklore is what has been termed photocopier or xerographic. This form of folklore is also to be found transmitted by fax, E-mail, and the Internet. There are hundreds of examples of this type of folklore”. Related to this, S. J. Bronner (2007:4), in his edition of the collection of Dundes’ essays, explains that “‘folklore continues to be alive and well in the modern world, due in part to increased transmission via e-mail and the Internet’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996, 249; Dundes 2005c, 406).”

As mentioned before, numerous scholars have noted the possibilities that the Internet offers for phraseological and paremiological diffusion. One scholar who notes a relationship between Internet means of communication and Paremiology is A. Pamies-Bertrán (2010, p. 34), who claims that:

Internet forums, blogs and chats are also symptomatic samples of youth's slang tendencies. It has become become (sic) a norm, e. g. recent research by Wolfgang Mieder and Anna Litovkina (2006) on English anti-proverbs was based to a considerable extent, on the Internet.

Here, Pamies-Bertrán highlights some elements that have been gaining importance in the communication habits of the youth for some time. These new habits determine the ways in which people communicate and this influence may sometimes be noticed in everyday face-to-face communication. These new methods of communication are not that new to anyone anymore, as they have already been around for decades. However, the evolution is continuous, as the on-going fad of text-messaging, which has also been around for a long time, shows. Similarly, a relatively new phenomenon that also deserves attention is that of social networking, which enables people to share their thoughts and opinions with the world in real time.

As supported by the aforementioned scholars, the Internet provides a whole new world of research opportunities and enables the researcher to contact people or access information from the four corners of the world in real-time, enabling him or her to gather data and carry out fieldwork in a more thorough, further-reaching, and faster fashion. In order to get an idea of a minimal part of the possibilities that the Internet offers for paremiological analysis, one particular Internet phenomenon that has so far gone unnoticed by paremiologists and which has a number of aspects in common with Paremiology and folklore will be presented, that of Internet memes.

The lack of studies in this respect is remarkable when compared to other manifestations that may have indeed been analyzed. A particularly interesting subject of analysis is the one chosen by the late Alan Dundes for his study on *latrinalia* (Dundes, 1966), a term coined by himself, also referred to as “bathroom stall graffiti”. Were Dundes still alive, he would unquestionably find Internet memes a fascinating source of 21<sup>st</sup> century folklore. Furthermore, it can be stated that thanks to the Internet and with the help of memes, there is a large portion of present-day folklore that has become almost universal, which would probably require a reinterpretation of the concept from the terms that have been previously explained as something belonging to a certain culture.

Similarly, it is generally believed that folklore is transmitted orally, although this is not necessarily so, as there are manifestations of folklore that cannot be transmitted orally, such as folk dances or costumes. Nevertheless, one has to put everything in perspective, and thus, the myriad of means of communications available today may have provoked the relegation of oral, face-to-face communication to a secondary position in the transmission of folklore or popular culture. Thus, in the same way that languages, societies, means of communication, and many other aspects dealing with people’s behaviors and practices evolve, so does the way in which knowledge is transmitted. In this regard, it becomes evident that the main way in which most folklore could be transmitted up to fairly recent times was through oral communication. However, no one would hesitate to label a folktale, lullaby, dance, picture, or any other manifestation of folklore as such simply because it was found on the Internet, in a magazine, or the like.

In order to determine what folklore is, D. Ben-Amos' (1971: 5) stated that "art puts the accent on the forms and the media of transmission" whereas "knowledge and thought implies a stress on the contents of the materials and their perception." This aspect, together with A. Dundes' (1968: 1) claim that "folklore is said to be or to be *in* 'oral tradition'" makes one automatically question the correctness of defining Internet memes as folklore. However, both Ben-Amos' and Dundes' works may be a little dated in this regard (both were published over 40 years ago) due to, in part, the rapid development of new technological means of communication that allow for the relinquishment of dependence on face-to-face oral communication. For this reason, the inclusion of Internet memes within the sphere of folklore seems reasonable for the following reasons:

- Their origin is unknown.
- They circulate among individuals.
- They have reached a considerable diffusion.
- They show some of the tendencies of today's society.
- They could be used to carry out a socio-cultural analysis of a considerable segment of today's people.

These reasons, together with the vast amounts of topics and themes they deal with, make them valuable items for analysis, particularly those fairly frequent cases in which memes actually contain proverbs, represent proverbs, or make some allusion to proverbs or proverbial wisdom.

To begin with, despite their extensive reach and popularity as a rather recent practice, there are people who are not familiar with it. For this reason, a valid definition of *meme* is necessary. This becomes an arduous task, as resorting to any traditional reference work may prove useless since most of them do not include a definition of the word *meme*, let alone a definition of the current fad of Internet memes. As in the cases of the concepts of proverb and folklore, anyone who is familiar with memes and publishes them or looks at them online might have a hard time coming up with a good definition that includes all the aspects necessary for a person unfamiliar with the concept to grasp its complexity.

The concept, and the name chosen to label it, originated in R. Dawkins' 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, although it took well over 30 years for it to be widely spread and used in the manner it is

used today. In his chapter “Memes: The New Replicators”<sup>18</sup> Dawkins explains that

The new soup is the soup of human culture. We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to *meme*\* If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory', or to the French word *meme*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream'.

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. (p. 192)

As already mentioned, although forty years have passed since the publication of the book, it is only in recent times that the term *meme* has become mainstream and has found its way into a dictionary. For the composition of this paper several dictionaries of prestige have been consulted in order to find a valid, academically accepted definition of *meme*, to no avail. Save the edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* accessed, the rest are posterior to the publication of Dawkins' work, and yet, only the definitions found in the online versions of *Merriam-Webster's* dictionary and two dictionaries compiled by Oxford University Press, the online version of the *OED* and the website of *Oxford Dictionaries Online*, have been found.

The online version of *Merriam-Webster's* dictionary defines *meme* as “an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture”<sup>19</sup> and confirms the first use of the word as Dawkins' 1976 publication. Then, the online version of

the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides the following definition of *meme*:

A cultural element or behavioural trait whose transmission and consequent persistence in a population, although occurring by non-genetic means (esp. imitation), is considered as analogous to the inheritance of a gene.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, the *Oxford Dictionaries Online* site states that a *meme* is

1. An element of a culture or system of behaviour passed from one individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means.
2. An image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations.<sup>21</sup>

Accordingly, a non-academic definition of *Internet meme* might define it as an image macro, often a stock image, with superimposed text. The image generally represents a feeling, idea, concept, well-known character, piece of popular culture or general knowledge, with popular culture being “the most powerful source of memes” (Heimo & Koski, 2014: 11). The text may be frozen or manipulated in order to produce a humorous effect. The success of *Internet memes* lies in the fact that they represent situations to which the receiver easily relates. Furthermore, some of the frozen formulae employed in the texts are heavily influenced by text-message writing and the way in which people communicate in writing on Internet forums and social networks. Sometimes, striking phenomena take place, as for instance when the misspelling of a word catches on and remains unmodified, being consciously used by the sender.

Attempting an academically acceptable analysis of such hard to track items turns out to be quite a challenging task. Some may even argue against the convenience of such a practice since it may not lie within the boundaries of academia. But as Dundes (1966: 92, original stress) put it, “The study of man must include all aspects of human activity”. Therefore, there should not be any kind of human production unworthy of study by Folkloristics, Paremiology, Linguistics, Sociology, or any other discipline. To support this idea, it should be taken into consideration that memes are similar to comics and as W. Mieder (2004: 236-43) explains that



the use of proverbs as satirical caricatures or humorous cartoons goes back at least to the seventeenth century, and certainly by the beginning of the nineteenth century sequences of framed images based on proverbs foreshadow the comic strips of today.

This tradition of illustrating proverbs for the purpose of humorous, ironical, or satirical commentaries on the sociopolitical life has been maintained by modern artists (see Mieder 1989: 277–292). They too delight in depicting common proverbs like “Strike while the iron is hot,” “The early bird gets the worm,” or “Too many cooks spoil the broth.” For some proverbs there exists an iconographic history from medieval to modern times that comprises dozens of woodcuts, misericords, emblems, paintings, caricatures, cartoons, and comic strips, including also various types of illustrated greeting cards. Usually the modern illustrations have captions to assure meaningful communication, but there are also proverb depictions that merely allude to the proverb or that exclude any caption whatsoever. In the latter case the cartoonist expects viewers to understand the proverbial message from the picture alone, something that is perfectly possible if the proverb is in fact well known.

As Mieder points out, the relationship between proverbs and graphic media is quite old, which demonstrates that proverbs are a versatile communication tool that proves useful in many different manners of communication. Accordingly, as proverbs find their way into new media, new opportunities for paremiologists to explore spring up.

Given the difficulties caused by the nature of the items presented, as well as their origin and the manner in which they are produced, their originality can only be assessed by the inclusion of the URL under which they are hosted, with both the author and the date of upload remaining unknown. Nevertheless, all the examples are submitted by anonymous contributors from around the world and “[t]he audience has grown from information seekers and consumers into producers and participators, who share their own thoughts, video clips, images and personal memories” (Heimo & Koski, 2014: 4).

In order to deal with the phenomenon of Internet memes, a more folkloristic approach is advisable, as it may not be considered a strictly linguistic phenomenon and its characteristics seem more adaptable to that kind of analysis; even though “at first glance this folklore genre may seem trivial, in reality memes are one of the most popular ways of making statements and taking a stance in today’s world” (Heimo & Koski, 2014: 11).

Additionally, the importance that Internet memes have from a phraseological or paremiological point of view, depending on the item analyzed, is that they are frequently used out of context (one of the most determining elements in the use of proverbs as shall be explained), illustrating the idea that the proverb represents and therefore eliminating the figurativeness that is generally attributed to the use of proverbs and other types of phraseological units. However, this figurativeness remains patent when the image that makes up the meme represents an idea or concept that does not necessarily have to do with the image itself, as shown in some of the examples brought forward.

One of the strong points this phenomenon presents, and which is capital in an analysis of proverbs as a cross-linguistic phenomenon, is that people from different countries who communicate through these platforms do so in English, which is another example of the use of English as the *lingua franca* of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Furthermore, the fact that proverbs are used by people in remote places of the world, and that they are appreciated by thousands of people from different countries who speak different languages, demonstrates that said proverbs are meaningful to both sides and that there is a stock of proverbs that is well-known across languages. At the same time, it must be noted that this phenomenon contributes to preserving the good health of proverbs and the claim supported by some that they are falling into disuse is “absurd” (Mieder, 2014: 13).

One last feature worth mentioning is the frequent use of alliteration for the naming of the characters or ideas shown in the images making up an Internet meme, which is paralleled by the use of alliteration or other similar devices in proverbs.<sup>22</sup> The amount of internet memes is enormous and it only continues to grow. For this reason, only a handful of examples in which proverbs are used will be mentioned here. However, despite the large amount of memes existing, regardless of how ephemeral the popularity of

some may be, it is often the same meme with different proverbs, which may seem repetitive to some. The reasons for this might be that, on the one hand, different memes may reach different levels of popularity in different places and, on the other, certain memes seem to be more inclined towards the use of proverbs, generally challenging their validity or questioning it. The list of well-know memes includes titles such as Good Guy Greg, Scumbag Steve, Bad Luck Brian, Socially Awkward and Socially Successful Penguin, Conspiracy Keanu, Lazy College Senior, or Unhelpful High-school Teacher.<sup>23</sup>

Some examples of actual memes, as found online, created by anonymous people and including proverbs or references to proverbs, together with their URL and an explanation are the following:

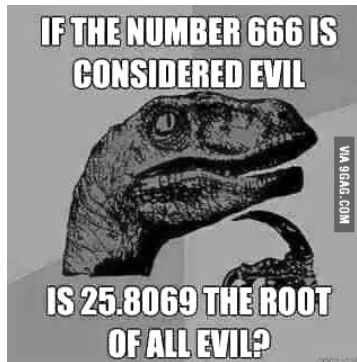


Figure 1: <http://9gag.com/gag/a75NvNz>

“Philosoraptor” is made up of a velociraptor immersed in deep reflection about philosophical and metaphysical matters, which are supposed to make the reader wonder about the same issues. This example is a mathematical pun alluding to the proverbs “Idleness is the root of all evil” (ODEP: 396; ODP: 262) or “Money is the root of all evil” (ODP:214), and other variations. [Figure 1]

The following “Philosoraptor” meme seeks justification for such reprehensible conduct as procrastination in the proverb “Everything/all things come to those who wait” (ODEP: 231; ODP: 5). [Figure 2] Philosoraptor seems to be a meme frequently used in connection with proverbs.<sup>24</sup>

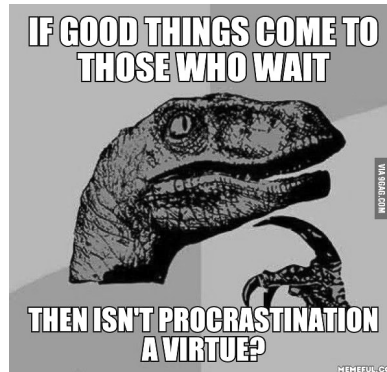


Figure 2: <http://9gag.com/gag/aLKnRnV>

This next meme is not one of the well-known, relatable ideas. In this case, someone has taken a picture of a seemingly-angry bird and has used it to question the validity of the well-known proverb “the early bird catches the worm” (ODEP: 211). [Figure 3] In this case, the meme works slightly different than the usual. Generally, what the reader gets first is the picture, which he or she identifies as the meme and then proceeds to read the statement that accompanies it. In this case, however, the picture is not identifiable as a meme and it is the proverb the element that provides the cultural element for the meme.



Figure 3: [http://img-9gag-fun.9cache.com/photo/aQpP7AW\\_700b.jpg](http://img-9gag-fun.9cache.com/photo/aQpP7AW_700b.jpg)



Figure 3: <http://9gag.com/gag/aBKZBzx>

In this example, “Sudden Clarity Clarence” realizes a rather well-known fact: the existence of contradicting proverbs, in this case “the pen is mightier than the sword” (ODEP: 618; ODP: 247) and “actions speak louder than words” (ODEP: 3; ODP: 2). [Figure 4] The existence of proverbs with apparently opposite meanings, and the contradiction this poses to the defining feature of proverbs as absolute truth, has not passed unnoticed by paremiologists.<sup>25</sup> The explanation for this is that there is an infinite number of possible situations to which these proverbs can be applied and, thus, in the right context, each one may be perfectly valid.

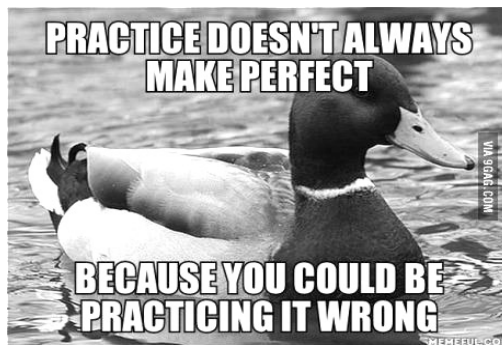


Figure 5: <http://9gag.com/gag/aXbjez9>

“Actual Advice Mallard,” as opposed to “Malicious Advice Mallard” (which can be told apart from the red color of its head) is employed to provide some valuable piece of advice. In this case, it challenges the validity of the proverb “practice makes perfect” (ODEP: 856; ODP: 255). [Figure 5]

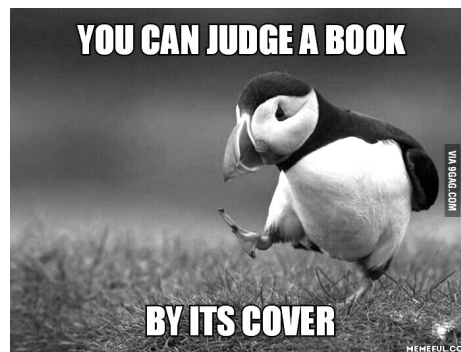


Figure 6: <http://9gag.com/gag/aGVvoA5>

This “Unpopular Opinion Puffin” meme is also used to challenge a proverb, this time “you can’t tell/judge a book by its cover” (ODP: 32), concluding that you actually can. [Figure 6]



Figure 7: <http://9gag.com/gag/aNeqyX4>

“Terrible Twist Tiger” [Figure 7] is another meme with an alliterative name. In this case, the top text is usually a witty or harmless remark that steers towards black humor in the text at the bottom of the picture. In this case, it includes the proverb “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure”, similar to “one man’s meat is another man’s poison” (ODEP: 522; ODP: 208). [Figure 7]

All the examples presented have been posted on a website by anonymous people. They can be accessed on the URL’s provided and they have been used here in order to illustrate an emerging phenomenon that may prove worthy for paremiological studies, as it is a current trend in which proverbs are frequently employed for the propitiousness of their features for the purpose. After close observation of the examples presented, as well as of any others found on the Web, a couple of quite obvious conclusions can be drawn. On the one hand, proverbs seem to be a fruitful and propitious source for the creation of memes; on the other hand, memes often exploit the humorous inclination of proverbs, rather than the other possible intentions with which proverbs may be used.

### ***Conclusions***

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis is that proverbs enjoy good health and are still a current and frequent speech device among different groups of people speaking different languages, which supports the idea that there is a collection of proverbs and other types of phrasemes that are well-known to speakers of different languages.<sup>26</sup> New technologies and trends have not contributed to their disappearance or abandonment. On the contrary, with the appearance of new ways of communication and expression, proverbs have found their way into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and are as present in people’s lives now as they ever have been.

Another factor that needs to be pointed out, and which is central to this study, is the establishment of English as the present-day *lingua franca*. This is a current that has been going for quite a long time now. Furthermore, the explosion of the Internet as a mass phenomenon has definitely contributed to its shaping, spreading and acceptance by non-native speakers as such. A distinction that must be noted, though, is that if in the Middle Ages and the modern period, Latin was the language of culture, knowledge, and learning, in present-day society English is not only important in those fields, it has also become the language of entertainment.

This can be proven by the success of many means of entertainment in English that are enjoyed by audiences and users all around the world. Some examples of this have been explained but the global success of other industries of mostly English-speaking origin, such as the film or the video-game industries, which may be just as fruitful for a paremiological analysis.

As has been hinted, similar to the vast number of monographic studies on the use of proverbs by certain literary authors,<sup>27</sup> there are new forms of entertainment that will prove valuable for paremiological analyses, and which must be encouraged in order to have a broader scope and a more accurate view of how proverbs are used in different situations and through the employment of different means.

In the present paper two different media, each with its peculiarities, have been discussed in their relation to the use of proverbs, showing that they may both be good sources for paremiological research and that they are already invaluable vehicles for the transmission of proverbial knowledge across languages.

*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> For scholarship on the use of proverbs in Drama see Marsh (1863), Falk (1967), Dent (1981), Wilson (1994), Oncins Martínez (1996; 2005; 2012), Castillo Blanco (1998), Sánchez García (1999; 2008), Bryan & Mieder (2004), Breiteneder (2007), or Doyle (2007).

<sup>2</sup> A clear example is the repeated use of the proverb “Blood is thicker than water” (ODEP: 69) by Nucky Thompson in *Boardwalk Empire* (see A Return to Normalcy and Under God's Power She Flourishes).

<sup>3</sup> As can be seen in the following excerpt:

CHARLENE Well, we should've guessed that was gonna happen.

ARCHER Uh We should've?

CHARLENE Well, or at least could've.

ARCHER I mean Yeah, I guess a leopard can't change his spots.

CHARLENE Uh I don't know that much about leopards. ARCHER That was actually a proverb.

CHARLENE That was actually a tiger.

Reed, A. (Writer), & (Director). (14 Apr. 2014). Archer Vice: Filibuster. In Reed, A., & Thompson, M. Producers) *Archer*. Irving, TX: FX.

<sup>4</sup> Gionfriddo, G., Willimon, B. (Writers), & Coulter, A. (Director). (1 Feb. 2013). Chapter 12 (Television series episode). In D. Fincher et al. (Producers) *House of Cards*. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix.



<sup>5</sup> J. P. Heming Yong (2007; p. 189) explains that the Chinese version of this proverb has arrow as the default projectile and that “[w]hen the English idiom *kill two birds with one stone* is translate into Chinese, *stone* will have to be translated to *arrow*.”

<sup>6</sup> See García, Cieślicka, & Heredia (2015: p. 124)

<sup>7</sup> Martin, G. R. R. (Writer), & Marshall, N. (Director). (27 May 2012). *Blackwater*. In Benioff, D. et al. (Producers) *Game of Thrones*. New York, NY: HBO.

<sup>8</sup> Hirst, M (Writer), & Woolnough, J. (Director). (27 Mar. 2014). *Answers in Blood*. In Hirst, M. et al. (Producers) *Vikings*. New York, NY: History Channel.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Whiting (1932: p. 302), Gallacher (1949: p. 47), Arnaud (1991: p. 22), Corpas Pastor (1996: p. 137), Mieder (1996: p. 507), or Dobrovolskij & Piirainen (2005: p. 51).

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, V. (Writer), & Minahan, D. (Director). (7 Apr. 2013). *Dark Wings, Dark Words*. In Benioff, D. et al. (Producers) *Game of Thrones*. New York, NY: HBO.

<sup>11</sup> Levitan, R., Richman, J. (Writers), & Koch, C. (Director). (23 Mar. 2011). *Boys’ Night*. In (Producers) *Modern Family*. New York, NY: ABC.

<sup>12</sup> Tracey, J. (Writer), & Ferland, G. (Director). (21 Nov. 2013). *On the Line*. In Doherty, R. et al. (Producers) *Elementary*. New York, NY: CBS.

<sup>13</sup> Gilligan, V. (Writer), & Cranston, B. (Director). (21 Mar. 2010). *No más*. In Gilligan, V., Johnson, M., & MacLaren, M. (Producers) *Breaking Bad*. New York, NY: AMC.

<sup>14</sup> Moses, I. (Writer), & White, S. (Director). (9 Oct. 2011). *A Dangerous Maid*. In Winter, T. et al. (Producers) *Boardwalk Empire*. New York, NY: HBO.

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 3.

<sup>16</sup> King, T., Brookshier, L., Banks, S. (Writers), & Yasumi, T. (Director). (30 Sep. 2005). *Funny Pants*. In Hillenburg, S., & Tibbitt, P. (Producers) *SpongeBob Squarepants*. New York, NY: Nickelodeon.

<sup>17</sup> Willimon, B. (Writer), & Coulter, A. (Director). (1 Feb. 2013). Chapter 13 (Television series episode). In D. Fincher et al. (Producers) *House of Cards*. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix.

<sup>18</sup> Dawkins, 1976, pp. 189-201.

<sup>19</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Thesaurus*. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meme?show=0&t=1394126478>> March 6, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/239909?redirectedFrom=meme&>> 6 Mar. 2015

<sup>21</sup> “Meme.” *Oxford Dictionaries*. Oxford University Press, n.d. Web. 06 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/meme>>

<sup>22</sup> See Barsanti Vigo (2006).

<sup>23</sup> See <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/popular and successive>.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the following links:

<http://9gag.com/gag/am855Qd>

<http://9gag.com/gag/aLQDyKg>

<http://9gag.com/gag/ag00pXx>

<http://9gag.com/gag/amXAze2>

<http://9gag.com/gag/abbvYGp>

<http://9gag.com/gag/1268903>

<http://9gag.com/gag/4481727>

<sup>25</sup> See Yankah (1994), Mieder (2004, p. 1; 2007a, p. 39; 2007b, p. 394), Dundes (2007, p. 268), Norrick (2007, p. 381), among others.

<sup>26</sup> See Strauss (1994; 1998), Morvay (1996), Paczolay (1997), Flonta (2002), BABUŠYTĚ (2004), Piirainen (2005; 2010; 2012), Zolobova (2005), Mieder (2010), or Oncins Martínez (2010) among others.

<sup>27</sup> See footnote 1 and also Whiting (1973); Ross (1987); Castillo de Lucas (1996); Abrahams & Babcock (1997); Estévez Molinero (1999), Sevilla Muñoz, Cantera Ortiz de Urbina, & Sevilla Muñoz (2005); Barsanti Vigo (2006); Baranov & Dobrovol'skij (2007); Mieder (2007a); García Romero (2008); Mason Bradbury (2008); Rodríguez Valle (2008); or Rodríguez Martín (2011) among many others.

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