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SYNTACTIC FEATURES OF ENGLISH PROVERBS: A STYLISTIC AND STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

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The study investigates the syntactic structures and stylistic features of English proverbs with a focus on their structural peculiarities and rhetorical functions. Proverbs, as a form of folkloric expression, incorporate collective wisdom and cultural values in concise linguistic forms. Despite their widespread use proverbs remain difficult to define precisely due to their multifunctional nature and structural diversity. From a linguistic perspective, a proverb constitutes a coherent unit at the phonological, syntactic, and semantic levels. The aim of the present research is to examine how syntactic patterns, as repetition, parallel construction, ellipsis, and non-canonical word order contribute to the stylistic identity and memorability of proverbs. Special attention is given to how these features function not only to increase aesthetic effect but also to reinforce meaning, making proverbs both structurally marked and pragmatically effective. Through syntactic analysis the paper highlights the intricate connection and interplay between form and function in proverbial expressions.

Keywords: *proverb, syntactic structure, stylistic device, repetition, parallelism, ellipsis, rhetorical syntax*

Introduction

The study of proverbs occupies a significant place within linguistic, folkloric, and cultural research. Etymologically, the term *proverb* derives from the Latin *pro-verbum*, where *pro* means "in front of" and *verbum* means "word", suggesting that a proverb functions as a verbal emblem or summary of commonly held wisdom. Proverbs are concise, metaphorical expressions that enclose collective human

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experiences, ethical principles, and social norms. Despite being among the most compact and orally transmitted forms of folklore, proverbs can be examined as full linguistic units exhibiting rich phonological, syntactic, and semantic properties.

The article seeks to analyze English proverbs from a syntactic and stylistic perspective, focusing on their structural diversity and rhetorical functions. Proverbs may occur in a variety of sentence structures, including simple, compound, and complex formations and are notable for their frequent deviation from standard syntactic norms. Their structure often includes marked forms such as ellipsis, repetition, parataxis, and various types of word order inversion. Such features not only contribute to their aesthetic and mnemonic qualities but also reinforce their communicative impact.

The research methods employed in the article are the descriptive method, the method of interpretational semantics and the method of analysis of syntactical structure.

A syntactic viewpoint

From a syntactic viewpoint, proverbs reveal irregularities that distinguish them from ordinary speech. They often employ condensed, archaic, or elliptical constructions that reflect a long-standing oral tradition. Moreover, the rhetorical force of proverbs lies in their formal structure; they exhibit linguistic economy while achieving stylistic density. The syntactic analysis enhances our understanding of the stylistic dimensions of utterances, and in the case of proverbs, this is particularly evident.

According to Mieder, the proverb appears to be a traditional propositional statement consisting of at least one descriptive element, consisting of a topic and a comment. This means that proverbs must have at least two words. Proverbs that contain a single descriptive element are non-oppositional. Proverbs with two or more descriptive elements may be either oppositional or non-oppositional. The phonological, semantic, and syntactic devices that occur in proverbs may be termed proverbial markers. Scholars have identified a range of devices which operate in ensemble to affect the concept of proverbial style, among which the most important are *repetition, parallelism, ellipsis, alliteration, rhyme, metaphor, personification, paradox and hyperbole* (Mieder, 2004, p.7).

Repetition is a phenomenon common in English. Repetition is a hallmark of many proverbs, it enhances rhythm, memorability, and rhetorical impact. Proverbs exhibit various patterns of repetition. It occurs at four linguistic levels – syntactical, lexical, phrasal and clausal. It is used in English proverbs to serve many functions and among them is coherence. As Norrick states, repetition in proverbs tends to

focus attention on key terms and emphasize contrasts between the repeated elements. (Norrick, 1985, p.213) Sometimes the syntactic frame of a proverb contains repetition as in

Where there's smoke there's fire.

Lexical repetition in *Enough is enough* emphasizes finality or limits, in *Boys will be boys* implies acceptance of behavior as typical or unchangeable, in *Business is business* stresses that practical or economic decisions should not be taken personally.

The syntactic repetition in *When the going gets tough, the tough gets going* plays on the repetition of *going* and the switch in the role of the subject/object. The syntactic structure in the proverb *Out of sight, out of mind* creates a balance of structure making it catchy and memorable.

As we see, repetition in proverbs aids memorability, highlights key themes, reinforces contrasts and paradoxes, creates coherence and engages listeners through rhythm and balance.

Parallelism is a rhetorical or stylistic device where similar grammatical structures, phrases, or clauses are used to create a sense of balance, rhythm, and clarity. It's a way of aligning parts of a sentence so they "run parallel" in structure.

Parallelism in proverbs is very common in languages around the world. The necessary condition in parallel construction is identical, or similar, syntactical structure in two or more sentences or parts of a sentence in close succession: parallel constructions are often backed up by repetitions and conjunctions.

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. (Lao Tsu)

It is more worthwhile to teach someone to do something (for themselves) than to do it for them.

The truth has legs and ran away; the lie has no legs and must stay. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Syntactic Parallelism - Linguistic studies on the stylistic markers that feature in proverbs have shown that structural and semantic parallelism are frequently occurring internal devices in proverbs. According to Rothstein, structural or syntactic parallelism is a rhetorical device used for emphasis. "It involves the contiguous juxtaposition of syntactic parallel elements of the proverb text, such as individual lexical items, phrases, clauses, for the purpose of suggesting analogical relationships or comparisons" (Rothstein, 1968, p. 251).

The dead to the tomb and the living to the rumba.

The example's first half is directly parallel to the second half. So when one is dead the tomb is where one should be, and when one is alive, one should be at the rumba.

Other related structural features that increase the level of the analogy or comparison often buttress syntactic parallelism. The first is grammatical parallelism, which is a more rigid form of syntactic repetition. This is common in short phrases, where the grammatical structure is basic, often relating to a simple noun phrase involving structures like noun+verb (adj).

God has given, God has taken.

Extended forms of grammatical parallelism are also possible.

Young folks think old folks to be fools, but old folks know young folks to be fools.

It is important to mention the lexical repetition; young folks, old folks, fools are used for comparative purposes.

Another feature associated with syntactic parallelism is *ellipsis*, which is the omission of a lexical element, usually a verb.

The last will be first, and the first last. (Substantive verb *will be* is omitted but implicitly suggested)

When in Rome, do as the Romans (do). The final verb *do* is often dropped in casual usage. Even when *do* is omitted, the listener understands the full comparison.

Ellipsis is a saving cost strategy in proverbs based on proverb familiarity. It helps to say more with less, to sound sharper and stick better.

Emphatic word order, which is a device for rearranging the structure of a sentence so that particular constituent elements can be foregrounded for the purposes of emphasis. There are a number of different methods through which syntax may be rearranged and among them are clefting, left dislocation, topicalization, and sub-clausal fronting.

Clefting involves re-arranging the basic word order of an unmarked sentence, and fronting constituents, such as nouns, adverbs, and adjectives to sentence initial position. The clefting of basic sentences is one of the main ways to achieve emphasis or foregrounding of a particular constituent. This type of alteration may be invoked in the proverb for emphatic, exclamatory, or contrastive purposes. When it occurs with other optional stylistic and poetic markers, it has the effect of increasing the level of proverbiality of an expression (Silverman-Weinreich 1981, p.75). In English, the fronted element follows an introductory structure such as *It is/was*

It's a good horse that never stumbles. (clefted sentence)

A good horse never stumbles. (canonical sentence) The proverb says we all make mistakes from time to time.

Left-dislocation is a feature of spontaneous or narrative style and is used for purposes of emphasis or to clarify ambiguity in cases where the topic contains a lengthy relative clause. It involves placing the constituent element in sentence-initial position and an anaphoric pronominal co-referent placed in its canonical position in the following main clause. In the following example the subject of the sentence contains a sub-clause *who lies with dogs*, so the entire subject is foregrounded in sentence initial position, and then the prepositional pronoun *he* is used as a co-referent in the following clause. Repetition of the topic through left dislocation is one of the most significant structural alterations found in proverbs.

He who lies with the dogs, he will rise with the fleas.

The proverb implies that if you hang out or associate with the wrong kind of people, their ways may rub off on you, lead you astray, influence your beliefs, and cloud your judgment, and you may get a bad reputation because people will judge you by the company you keep.

Parataxis is another most frequently occurring syntactic feature in proverbs. This term refers to the linking of constructions of the same grammatical and semantic level through juxtaposition or punctuation, instead of using formal conjunctions, either coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) or subordinating conjunctions (although, because, since, unless). When constructions are linked together close, a semantic relationship between them is inferred through other methods such as logical, temporal, or causal connections, or through manner (Coinnigh, 2015, p.8). The coordination challenges the listener to interpret the grammatical and semantic relationships to infer a meaning. Ordinary naturally occurring speech is peppered by paratactic constructions and it is no coincidence that it is also found in proverbs.

Parataxis can occur at the level of the individual lexical item, the phrase, or the clause, but there is a clear preference for simple phrases. In speech, of course, there would be a caesura between the binary elements to clearly delineate the introduction of a second structure. In printed collections of proverbs, this caesura is indicated by the use of punctuation marks to indicate a fulcrum separating the elements. Phrases are the most commonly found structure located in parataxis, but sentences are also found as can be seen in the examples below

Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.

After being tricked once, one should learn from one's mistakes and avoid being tricked in the same way again.

After dinner rest a while, after supper walk a mile.

The structure is syntactically identical and follows the pattern preposition—noun – verb [imperative] – indefinite noun, on both sides of the structure. This

symmetric framework indicates a semantic correlation. Not only are the grammatical categories identical but also the mood of the verb, i.e. imperative, is the same. From a lexical perspective, there is lexical repetition in the initial position with the preposition *after*; the verbs *rest* and *walk* are semantically opposed which creates a distinct binary contrast, and the nouns *dinner* and *supper* are semantically linked by being members of the same lexical-semantic category, daily meals.

This intricate balance of similarity and contrast in the parallel elements is like a mathematical puzzle. The rhythmic quality, which adds to the memorability of the proverb, is also significant in this example as *while* and *mile* display perfect rhyme. These phonemic markers occur in conjunction with varying degrees of lexical repetition and syntactic parallelism and identify the proverbs as salient utterances that are quite distinct from naturally occurring speech patterns.

Relationship Between Juxtaposed Phrases- Phrases joined by asyndetic juxtaposition have a relationship that is implied rather than explicitly stated. The semantic connections are not always clear, especially in decontextualized printed collections, yet cultural literacy and experience of proverb performance enable us to identify some common relationships. These relationships may be classified by three main types:

1. Equality or Identification - Paratactic structures indicate a relationship of equality or similarity between the two phrases, the first is equal, or similar, to the second.

The greater the sinner, the greater the saint.

2. Cause and Effect- A causal relationship is also found between the constituents, of the cause and effect or “cause-consequence” sequence (Boyle, 1996, p.118). In this framework, the realization of the first phrase renders the second phrase a natural consequence.

No pain, no gain

3. Antonymy or Contrast- Phrases are set against each other for contrast and antonymy. The effect is to enhance the overall meaning of the two separate noun phrases by placing them in parallel to one another, so that meaning of the entire proverb is more important than the sum of the overall equal noun phrase constituents. These contrastive proverbs are the most stylized and lyrical and are based on syntactical repetition:

A sad day for one's marriage; a tearful day for one's burial.

So, we have described some of the traditional and modern patterns of proverbs and also various optional syntactic devices (or markers), particularly parallelism, inverted word order, and parataxis. Explaining the perception of proverbiality the distinguished paremiologist Shirley Arora noted that these devices are a veritable

checklist for proverbial status: the more of these stylistic features a sentence possesses, the higher the level of proverbiality, and the greater the probability that the sentence is, or will be identified as a proverb. Semantic features of individual proverbs are interesting in themselves and they may suggest an approach to proverbiality. Furthermore, standard semantic features of proverbs can serve as a model of basic types of meaning relations. Multiple meanings of proverbs are self-evidently a matter of polysemy.

A rolling stone gathers no moss.

A person on the move remains young and a person on the move remains poor has often been noted. Historically the separate interpretations may have originated as dialect variants. Although tests have shown that both readings for this proverb co-exist, hearers, interpret it interactionally to mean either that they should or should not roll, depending on their belief.

Special syntactic features

Proverbs often represent structures that would be ungrammatical by normal standards. Like other idiomatic structures, proverbs represent an anomaly in any generative linguistic paradigm. (Chafe, 1968, p.110) Proverbs often contain archaic and dialect words and structures.

Them as has, gits.

Proverbs are also often constructed around formulas which fail to conform to normal sentence grammar, as in

Like father, like son.

Once bitten, twice shy.

Since proverbs are typically conversational, it makes more sense to think of them as potentially complete contributions to conversation to sidestep the issue of grammaticality. Nevertheless, the syntactic structures of proverbs are interesting in themselves, those without verbs like:

No rose without a thorn.

Soon ripe, soon rotten.

Many men, many minds.

When proverbs lack verbs, and when they are otherwise elliptical, hearers must mobilize rhetorical principles to work out discourse inferences. (Norricks, 1985, p.214) This holds as well for proverbs without nouns like:

The more, the merrier.

Easy come, easy go.

Slow and steady wins the race.

At the same time, proverbs represent all the major types of syntactic structures. (Bhuvanewar, 2015, p.2) Many of the best-known proverbs instantiate standard types of sentences, Subject-Verb-Direct Object, as

A rolling stone gathers no moss

Subject-Verb-Indirect Object-Direct Object, as in

You can't teach an old dog new tricks;

Subject-Copula-Predicate Nominal, as in *Time is money* and so on.

Nevertheless, proverbs remain recognizable to native speakers, due, first, to their cultural salience and value as folk wisdom and bearers of traditional lore. Second, proverbs occur in prominent discourse positions like speech summaries and story closings with evaluation functions. Third, proverbial utterances are often foregrounded with special voice shifts and intonation speech and marked with framing devices like “we always say” and “as the saying goes”. As little recurrent texts in themselves, proverbs represent highly marked, “strongly coded” structures.

Conclusion

This research confirms that proverbs possess unique and often unconventional syntactic characteristics that set them apart from standard language use. In English, they frequently appear as imperative constructions, both affirmative and negative, as well as rhetorical statements, parallelisms, and rhetorical questions. These forms highlight how proverbs often deviate from normative grammatical structures, using marked or irregular syntax not commonly found in everyday speech. Such syntactic deviations are not arbitrary; they serve important stylistic and mnemonic functions, such as strengthening rhythm, rhyme or memorability. Consequently, proverbs occupy a distinct syntactic place in the language. From a structural perspective, they can be systematically categorized into four primary types, based on the number and configuration of main and subordinate clauses. This classification underscores the considerable syntactic diversity inherent in proverbial expressions and their rich potential for further linguistic analysis.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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**ԱՆԳԼԵՐԵՆ ԱՍԱՑՎԱԾՔՆԵՐԻ ՇԱՐԱՀՅՈՒՍԱԿԱՆ
ԱՌԱՆՁՆԱՀԱՏՎՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԸ
(ՈՃԱԲԱՆԱԿԱՆ ԵՎ ԿԱՌՈՒՑՎԱԾՔԱՅԻՆ ՎԵՂԸՈՒԾՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ)**

**Կարինե Քոչունց
Լիանա Խաչիկյան**

Սույն ուսումնասիրությունը նվիրված է անգլերեն ասացվածքների շարահյուսական ու ոճային առանձնահատկությունների քննությանը կենտրոնանալով դրանց կառուցվածքային յուրահատկությունների և հռետորական գործառույթի վրա: Ասացվածքները, որպես ժողովրդական խոսակցական բանավարկային ասույթներ, ամփոփում են կոլեկտիվ իմաստությունն ու մշակութային արժեքները: Չնայած ասացվածքները լայն տարածում ունեն, բայցևայնպես դրանց հստակ սահմանումը հեշտ չէ կառուցվածքային բազմազանության պատճառով: Լեզվաբանական տեսանկյունից ասացվածքը համակուռ միավոր է՝ հնչյունական, շարահյուսական և իմաստաբանական մակարդակներում: Հետազոտությունը նպատակ ունի ուսումնասիրել, թե ինչպես են որոշակի շարահյուսական հնարներ՝ կրկնությունը, զուգահեռ կառուցվածքը, գեղչումը և այլն, նպաստում ասացվածքների ոճային ինքնության ձևավորմանը և հիշելիությանը: Հատուկ ուշադրության է արժանանում այն հանգամանքը, թե ինչպես են այս հատկանիշները նպաստում գեղարվեստական ազդեցության ուժեղացմանը: Շարահյուսական վերլուծության միջոցով հողվածում վեր է հանվում է ձևի և գործառույթի բարդ փոխազդեցությունը ասացվածքներում:

Բանալի բառեր՝ *ասացվածք, շարահյուսական կառուցվածք, ոճական միջոց, կրկնություն, զուգահեռություն, գեղչում, հռետորական շարահյուսություն:*