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# ***Proverbs in English***

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(( وَفَوْقَ كُلِّ ذِي عِلْمٍ عَلِيمٌ ))

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## **Dedication**

**TO**

**Our Parents**

**Our Teachers**

**Our dearest Brothers and Sisters**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Firstly, We would like to express our gratitude to our supervisor, Assist. Prof. Ahmed Muhammed, for his patience, motivation and enthusiasm in guiding us to complete this paper. We have come to realize that success comes with hard work.

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## **Abstract**

This study deals with proverbs , definitions of proverbs and the structural aspects of proverbs .

The study consists of two chapters: The first chapter deals with the Structural Aspects of Proverbs , Structure and Style , Sentences and Phrases .

The second chapter highlights the world's funniest proverbs with their meanings .

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Structural Aspects of Proverbs

#### 1-1-Introduction

A proverb is a saying, usually short, that expresses a general truth about life. Proverbs give advice, make an observation, or present a teaching in a succinct and memorable way. This dictionary covers the main English-language proverbs that are widely recognized today.

We use proverbs or allude to them quite often in everyday speech: *Better safe than sorry; The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence; If at first you don't succeed, try, try again; Let sleeping dogs lie; A trouble shared is a trouble halved.* (Manser, Martin H. , 2002 , P : ix)

#### 1-2- Arrangement of proverbs

In this dictionary the proverbs are listed by strict letter-by-letter alphabetical order of the proverb, excluding only at the beginning of a proverb, A, An, and The:

*big fish eat little fish*

*the bigger they are, the harder they fall*

*a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*

*a bird never flew on one wing*

*too much of a good thing is worse than none at all*

*toot your own horn lest the same be never tooted*

*to the pure all things are pure*

Proverbs can also be found using the keyword index, which lists all the main nouns, adjectives, and verbs. (Manser, Martin H. , 2002 , P : ix)

### **1-3- Definitions**

After the proverb itself comes an explanation of the meaning of the proverb:

*pride goes before a fall*

Arrogance and overconfidence often lead to humiliation or disaster; often used

as a warning . . .

*uneasy lies the head that wears a crown*

Those in power are weighed down by responsibilities, feelings of insecurity, or fears of losing their position and can never rest easy . . .

(Manser, Martin H. , 2002 , P : ix)

### **1-4- Examples**

Examples have been chosen to demonstrate the use of a proverb. They come from English literature or have been specially compiled for this text:

*boys will be boys*

Boys must be forgiven for their bad or boisterous behavior; also used ironically when grown men behave in an irresponsible or childish manner: “Aunt Sally was a good deal uneasy; but Uncle Silas he said there warn’t no occasion to be—boys will be boys, he said, and you’ll

see this one turn up in the morning all sound and right” (Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 1884). (Manser, Martin H. , 2002 , P : x)

*a good name is sooner lost than won*

It takes a lot of time and effort to earn a good name for yourself, but you can lose it in an instant with a single foolish act: Think carefully before you get involved in anything that is not strictly legal—remember that a good name is sooner lost than won.

### **1-5- Structure and Style**

The challenge of defining the proverb is one that has defied the will, patience, and intellect of scholars for millenia— from Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and other classical scholars, to more recent pioneers in the field, such as Archer Taylor, Bartlett Jere Whiting, Lutz Rohrich, and Wolfgang Mieder. Attempts at providing a definition have yielded varied results, but Taylor’s (1962: 3) now infamous quotation still holds relatively true: “An incomunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial.”

This quotation is important, I believe, not for the acknowledgment that a finite definition isn’t possible – as a “proverb is not a species with its *genus proximum* and its *differentia specifica* as in a systemised science” (Guershoon, 1941: 15) – but because Taylor first raised the question of

“an incommunicable quality”. In recent years, scholars have begun to investigate this abstract concept by identifying certain poetic and structural features that appear frequently in proverbs and which constitute, in very broad terms, the concept of proverbial style or what Shirley Arora (1984) has termed *proverbiality*. 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. (Mac Coinnigh, M. (2015) , P : 113)

The phonological, semantic, and syntactic devices that occur frequently in proverbs across languages may be termed *proverbial markers*. These internal and external makers are warning signs that indicate that a particular sentence is deviant from the surrounding discourse, in that it exhibits stylistic and structural adornments that are not typically found in naturally-occurring language. Furthermore, from a pragmatic perspective, it alerts the listener that the expression is important in some regard, be that in terms of its use, function, or meaning. Scholars have identified a range of devices which operate in ensemble to effect the concept of proverbial style, amongst which the most important are parallelism, ellipsis, alliteration, rhyme, metaphor, personification, paradox, and hyperbole (Mieder, 2004: 7). Structural elements are amongst the most universal and easily identifiable proverbial markers, and feature with high frequencies across world

languages, both in terms of (i) the traditional fixed formulae, and (ii) the set of optional syntactic devices that occur in proverbs, particularly synactic parallelism, parataxis, and inverted word order in its various manifestations. (Mac Coinnigh, M. (2015) , P : 114)

Language-specific analyses of the use of proverbial markers have focused on these structural elements in a wide number of languages, including Ancient Greek, Ancient Egyptian, (Cairene) Arabic, English, Esperanto, French, Hebrew, Hausa, Hungarian, Igbo, Irish, Italian, Latin, Russian, Spanish, Tamil, Welsh, Yoruba, and numerous other African languages.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a general overview of the unique architecture of proverbs across a range of languages. The first section will deal with the role of different sentence types in proverbs, both in terms of their linguistic structure and also their associated functions; the second section will outline the most common proverbial formulae, including some of the traditional and modern patterns; and finally, the various optional syntactic devices (or markers) will be described, particularly parallelism, inverted word order, and parataxis. As a means of showing the universality of proverb architecture, examples will be taken from a range of languages (together with an English translation), although the majority will be from the major English sources. (Mac Coinnigh, M. (2015) , P : 114)

## 1 - 6 - Sentences and Phrases

### 1-6-1- Sentence Type

Proverbs appear in a variety of different sentence types; from a syntactic perspective, these sentences may be classified into four distinct types according to the number of clauses and sub-clauses they contain. These sentence types are: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. (i) The most basic sentence is the *simple sentence*, which contains one main clause (subject and predicate) and no subclauses. They are typically simple, declarative, non-oppositional, and stylistically unmarked i.e. they do not contain many stylistic markers.<sup>41</sup> They appear in both affirmative and negative form as can be seen in the examples (1-2) below:

(1) *Acqua cheta rovina i ponti.* (Italian) Affirmative (+)

[*Silent waters run deep.*]

(2) *Comparaison n'est pas raison.* (French) Negative (–)

[*Comparison is no reason.*]

(ii) *Complex sentences* contain one clause and one or more subclauses; the subclauses may be adjectival, nominal, or adverbial. The structural balance in these proverbs is asymmetrical, with the subclause being dependant on the main clause as can be seen in No. 3 below, i.e. the subclause *that will take no colour* cannot stand alone grammatically, and is tied to the main clause in which the subject *bad cloth* is contained. (Mac Coinnigh, M. (2015) , P : 115)

The subordinate clause often features a WH-subclause, which in English begins with one of the following: *what, where, who, why, or when* (see No. 4-5). A stylistic feature of these proverbs is the repositioning of the subclause into sentence-initial position, usually for the purposes of emphasis as also can be seen in No. 4-5.

(3) [*It is a bad cloth*] [that will take no colour].

[Clause] + [Subclause]

(4) [*Quand le vin est tire*], [*il faut le boire*]. (French)

*When the wine is drawn, one must drink it.*

[Subclause] + [Clause]

(5) [*Wer anderen eine Grube grabt*], [*fallt selbst hinein*]. (German)

*Who digs a pit for other falls into it himself.*

[Subclause] + [Clause]

(iii) *Compound sentences* possess multiple independant clauses which are separated by a coordinator (in English these are *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*). There is a grammatical equality in these sentences, which balances the two clauses against one another through a central fulcrum in the shape of the coordinator. These examples often display a type of semantic equality or contrast, which is created through the replication of the syntactic pattern. In No. 6 below we can see the two independent clauses *Falseness lasts an hour and truth lasts till the end of time* located contiguously with the conjunction *and* acting as the central pivot. (Mac Coinnigh, M. (2015) , P : 116)

(6) جولة الباطل ساعة، وجولة الحق إلى قيام الساعة (Arabic)

[Falseness lasts an hour and truth lasts till the end of time.]

[Clause] + [coordinator – and] + [Clause]

Often verbs are omitted from these proverbs and instead phrases are simply structurally juxtaposed with the implicit suggestion that there is an underlying semantic relationship (I will discuss this in more detail later in the paper when dealing with asyndetic coordination and parataxis).

(iv) The compound–complex sentence is the most syntactically complicated type as it often features a multiplicity of clauses and subclauses. The minimum syntactic requirement is for at least two clauses and one subclause. The complex, extended structure is prohibitive to proverb composition, presumably because they are more difficult to memorise and recall in speech situations:

(7) When the oak is before the ash, then you will only get a splash; when the ash is before the oak, then you may expect an oak.

[Adverbial subclause] + [Clause] ; [Adverbial subclause] + [Clause]

Closely related to the aforementioned sentence types is the nominal sentence. This

refers to a type of sentence with a predicate lacking a finite verb. Words and phrases are juxtaposed for the purposes of emphasis and intensity, but either there is no explicit grammatical connection between these phrases or the verbal construct has become redundant over time and is

omitted. An oft-cited example of a nominal sentence is the proverb in No. 8 in which the substantive verb to be is omitted:

(8) The more – the merrier. (Mac Coinnigh, M. (2015) , P : 118)

### **1-6-2 Sentence Function**

Sentences typically have four different functions: declarative (or indicative); interrogative; imperative; and exclamatory, which can be drawn together into two larger main groups: Affirmative and Communicative. Proverbs exhibit all these different functions, although some may be more frequently used than others. The first function is declarative (or indicative) which is a favoured one in proverbs – as it is in natural speech – as it conveys information or ideas in the form of a statement (No.9). Interrogative sentences, on the other hand, take the form of a question. The two most common types in proverbs are (i) the Yes/No Interrogative, which can either elicit a yes or no response (No. 10), and (ii) the WH-Interrogative, which elicits an open-ended response. These may, of course, be used rhetorically in proverbs, so that a response is not required as in example (No. 11). (Mac Coinnigh, M. (2015) , P : 119)

## Chapter TWO

### The world's funniest proverbs

#### *Proverb*

a short sentence

based on long experience

#### 2-1 School days proverbs

A secondary school teacher made a list of some well-known proverbs and gave the class the first half of the proverbs, so that they could complete the sayings. Here's what they came up with:

*As you make your bed so shall you . . . mess it up.*

*Better to be safe than . . . hit a teacher.*

*You can lead a horse to water but . . . how?*

*Don't bite the hand that . . . looks dirty.*

*A miss is as good as a . . . mr.*

*You can't teach an old dog . . . maths.*

*The pen is mightier than the . . . pigs.*

*An idle mind is . . . the best way to relax.*

*There's no smoke without . . . pollution.* (Crombie Jardine , 2004 , P : 1 )

## **2-2 LIFE PROVERBS**

*42% of all statistics are made up.*

(Anon)

*Ability is what you are able to do,  
motivation determines what you do, attitude decides how well you do it.*

(Anon)

*The absent are always wrong.*

(English)

*Act as if you cannot fail.*

(South Africa)

*All good things come to whoever gets there first.*

(Anon)

*Always remember: you're unique. Just like everyone else.*

(Anon)

*An anecdote in time saves boredom.*

(Anon)

*A day without sunshine is like . . . night.*

(Anon)

*A clean house is the sign of a misspent life.*

(Anon)

(Crombie Jardine , 2004 , P : 11)

### **2-3 PROVERBS ON WOMEN**

*A bad labour, and a daughter after all.*

(Spanish)

*A blind man's wife needs no paint.*

(Spanish)

*A house without a woman is the devil's own lodging.*

(Indian)

*As the best wine makes the sharpest vinegar, so can the truest lover turn into the worst enemy.*

(Anon)

*A beautiful woman belongs to everyone but an ugly woman is all yours.*

(Indian) (Crombie Jardine , 2004 , P : 17 )

### **2-4 PROVERBS ON MARRIAGE**

*A deaf husband and a blind wife are the perfect happy couple.*

(Anon)

*A jealous lover will become an indifferent spouse.*

(Mexican)

*A poor beauty finds more lovers than husbands.*

(English)

*A good husband is healthy and absent.*

(Japanese)

## **2-5 WORK PROVERBS**

*A desk without paperwork is a sign of one born to delegate.*

(Anon)

*A tidy desk is the sign of a disturbed mind.*

(Anon)

*Hard work never hurt anyone. But then why risk it?*

(Anon)

*Make sure you are not irreplaceable: if you can't be replaced, you can't be promoted.*

(Anon) (Crombie Jardine , 2004 , P : 44 )

## **2-6 GETTING OLD PROVERBS**

*Age is a high price to pay for maturity.*

(Anon)

*Age is just mind over matter: if you don't mind, it doesn't matter.*

(Anon)

*A wolf might lose his teeth but not his character.*

(Anon)

*Being young is a fault that diminishes daily.*

(Swedish)

*Be nice to your children; they'll be choosing the old folks' home.*

(Anon)

*By the time you are old enough to appreciate your parents you will have children of your own who take you for granted.*

(Anon)

*If the young only knew... If the old only could.*

(French)

*Inside every older person is a younger person ... wondering what the hell happened.*

(Cora Harvey Armstrong)

*The difference between adults and children is that adults don't ask questions.*

(American)

*The man who views the world at 50 the same as he did at 20 has wasted 30 years of his life.*

(Muhammad Ali)

*It's never too late to learn. But then if you've made it this far . . . why bother?*

(Anon)

*The secret of immortality is living a life worth remembering.*

(Anon)

*We do not stop playing because we grow old, we grow old because we stop playing!*

(Benjamin Franklin) (Crombie Jardine , 2004 , P : 61 )

## **2-7 PROVERBS ON DEATH**

*Death is hereditary.*

(Anon)

*Death always comes too early or too late.*

(English)

*Death is just nature telling you to slow down.*

(Anon)

*If you want to die young, make your doctor your heir.*

(Romanian)

*It is better to die living than to live dying.*

(Anon) (Crombie Jardine , 2004 , P : 69 )

## **2-8 WISE MEN PROVERBS**

*A bad excuse is better than none.*

(Spanish)

*A believable lie is better than a stupid fact.*

(Italian)

*A closed mouth catches no flies.*

(Italian)

*After all is said and done, more is said than done.*

(Anon)

*A closed mouth gathers no foot. (Chinese)*

*Anger is the outcome of the tongue working faster than the brain.*

(Anon)

*Before you criticize someone, walk a mile in their shoes. (Then when you do criticize them, you're a mile away and you have their shoes.)*

(Anon)

*Good advice is often annoying, bad advice never.*

(French)

*He who gossips to you will gossip about you.*

(Turkish)

*When you open a door, don't forget to close it.*

*Treat your mouth accordingly.*

(Jewish)

*The tongue weighs relatively nothing, but so few people can hold it.*

(Anon) (Crombie Jardine , 2004 , P : 73 )

## **2-9 FOOLS PROVERBS**

*Artificial intelligence is no match for natural stupidity.*

(Anon)

*Crafty advice is often got from a fool.*

(Irish)

*Each fool is different.*

(German)

*Every ass loves to hear himself bray.*

(Anon)

*Everybody is ignorant, Only on different subjects.*

(Will Rogers)

*He who laughs last laughs longest. And has probably only just got the joke.*

(Anon)

*If there were no fools, there would be no wise men.*

(German)

*Your own Stupid actions should not be confused with fate.*

(Anon) (Crombie Jardine , 2004 , P : 81 )

## **2-10 BRAVERY & COWARDICE PROVERBS**

*A coward will always think with his legs.*

(Anon)

*An old rat is a brave rat.*

(French)

*It is easy to be brave from a distance.*

(Native American)

*It's not the size of the dog in the fight that matters, it's the size of the fight in the dog!*

(Anon) (Crombie Jardine , 2004 , P : 87 )

## **2-11 PROVERBS ON TOMORROW**

*Manana is often the busiest day of the week.*

(Spanish)

*Never put off till tomorrow what may be done today. Don't you know that tomorrow never comes?*

(Anon)

*'One of these days' means 'none of these days'.*

(English)

*Procrastination is the thief of time.*

(Anon)

*Don't put off till tomorrow what could be done today. Why not give yourself another week?*

(Anon) (Crombie Jardine , 2004 , P : 93 )

## **Conclusion**

In this study , we conclude that proverbs are a sayings, usually short, express a general truth about life. Proverbs give advice, make an observation, or present a teaching in a succinct and memorable way. This dictionary covers the main English-language proverbs that are widely recognized today.

We use proverbs or allude to them quite often in everyday speech .

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