

BEYOND UNDERSTANDING: HOW PROVERBS VIOLATE GRICE'S COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

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Abstract

The article concentrates on Paul Grice's cooperative principle, with a focus on how it applies to proverbs. Proverbs are seen as a part of vernacular language used in oral and written form. Talk exchange situations are always meaningful as language is to be understood as a tool for cultural expression. The Finnish proverbs in the examples presented here are on one hand from the beginning of the 20th century (collected in the 1990s) and on the other hand proverbs in contemporary use: SMS messages intended as short letters to the editor and readers of a Finnish daily newspaper at the beginning of the 21st century.

Grice's cooperative principle is seen as the basic requirement for understandable and meaningful talk exchange. The principle includes the categories quantity, quality, relevance and manner. These demands can stay unfulfilled in speech or the speaker can act against them. Even if Grice's cooperative principle does not help define the most interesting aspect of talk exchange situations, the speaker's intention in proverbial speech and in other kinds of talk exchanges, the cooperative principle and the acts against it might help to recognize proverbs in vernacular language, although this does not solve the problem of reference.

Keywords: Grice's cooperative principle, proverb, proverbial speech, talk exchange, vernacular language

In this article the focus is on how Paul Grice's cooperative principle can be applied to proverbs. Grice created the cooperative principle as an ideal model to explain speech situations, or "talk exchanges" as he calls them. In folklore research, Grice's principle and its maxims have been used in studies of humour especially. Stories and speech using humour, above all jokes, have been seen to act against Grice's rules for ideal talk exchange situations. Arvo Krikmann (2004) has proposed Grice's cooperative principle and its violations as a means for folklore have especially been used in studies of humour. Among other users, Piret Voolaid (2005) has looked at catch riddles as violations of Grice's principle.

I look at proverbs as a part of the vernacular language (i.e. everyday language) used in oral and written forms. In Finnish, proverbs still belong to everyday use and communication, although the context their use changed over the last century. Until World War II, Finnish proverbs were primarily in oral use, whereas in many Central European language areas proverbs, first and foremost, were have been connected with literature (e.g. Hauser 2012; Schmale 2012). Basic proverb material comes from two sources. Episodes with traditional proverbs are collected in two books found in the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki: *Perinne elämässäni* (Tradition in My Life), from 1985, and *Karjalaiset elämäkerrat* (Karelian Biographies), from 1983–1984. A narration can be written or oral; it tells your story to somebody, a real or an imaginary listener. To narrate one's life story is to share memories with somebody, the sharing allows the listener to participate in another's memories. This research looks at proverbs as they are used in two contexts. The first is written memories, that is, storytelling in written form. The second context is a contemporary one: SMS messages intended as short letters to the editor and readers of a Finnish daily newspaper, *Salon Seudun Sanomat*, for publication in the opinion column. With SMS messages, the point is to be concise: one message is a unit including normally at the most 160 characters. However, some of the SMS messages sent to the editor are made of two or even three messages. Most of the messages used here were sent between 2006 and 2010. In SMS messages the language used is the vernacular in written form. As messages are written to start or to continue a discourse they can be handled as part of a talk exchange.

LANGUAGE AS A TOOL

The importance of language in all the fields of life is obvious. Even learning a language and using it might be understood as trying to solve problems that are reflected in language use itself (Goodman 1985: 201). When focusing on language, some special challenges arise, one of which is that language is always defined in a language using language; therefore, all ideas must receive meaning in language before we can use language to define the phenomenon in question (Ricoeur 2005: 149; Frege 2000: 84). Language transforms thoughts into spoken or written words. On the other hand, it is quite impossible to consider things, phenomena or acts that are not already conceptualized. It is important to understand the mechanism behind interpretation because language with proverbial utterances is a part of how an individual constructs his or her social reality. Language is a tool of cultural expression

that controls all of life through its concepts (Devitt & Sterelny 1987: 116–117, 172). To adopt utterances or a system of symbols is to adopt a way of understanding reality. The competence to use language and produce utterances is not only a matter of knowledge. It is combined with various skills that are not possibilities or restrictions only at the individual level, but that are also stated by the social environment (Devitt & Sterelny 1987: 148). The need for communication is based on the need for interaction in a group. An individual is always somehow tied to a society. To be able to participate in activities in society, the individual has to be able to communicate with the other members of that society.

The conventional meaning of what is said consists of common knowledge as well as tacit knowledge in the context of the time and place (Grice 1989: 44–46; Frege 1984: 42). Gottlob Frege contends that the meaning of an utterance is definable either by the principle of contextuality or by the principle of compositionality (Rott 2000: 627). The principle of contextuality states that the meaning of an expression is always bound to the context in which it is used; the situational or wider context of a sentence gives the meaning of the words. The principle of compositionality requires that the meaning of a sentence must arise from the meanings of words and be determined by the meanings of its constituent expressions; the focus is therefore on words and on the interpretations of words (Harman 1975). Even scholars who consider the theories of Frege have not been able to tell which principle – contextuality or compositionality – Frege himself preferred (Pelletier 2001).

This article has three starting points to explain the significance of utterances as well as utterances including proverbs. The first is that language is understood as an instrument of communication and as connected to thought (Vygotski 1967). The second starting point is Frege's (2000) principle of context. The third is that in order to be understood and interpreted, an utterance should follow Grice's (1989) cooperative principle. The third point is my focus.

THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE AND PROVERBIAL UTTERANCES

The main message with Grice's cooperative principle is the demand to make a "conversational contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice 1989: 26). This is the basic requirement for understandable and meaningful talk exchange. Grice

names three features connected to successful communication. First, the participants have some common target with the communication. Second, the contributions of the participants ought to be compatible. Third, the discussion follows an appropriate style (Grice 1989: 29). These are expectations that proverbial speech also fulfils. The use of the proverb or the proverb itself lends added value to the speech event.

The cooperative principle is the major concept in understandable talk exchange situations. It is a coherent whole. Cooperative implicatures are subcategories of the four main categories that create the cooperative principle. Grice refers to maxims and supermaxims as implicatures. In general, speakers try to express their ideas in the way prescribed by the implicatures. The way to use communication is learned in childhood (Grice 1989: 26–29), and so it is also the way the use and interpretation of proverbs in speech has often been learnt. However, interpretations in childhood are first and foremost combined with current activities. At this point, the interpretations of proverbs are often at a concrete level (Granbom-Herranen 2008).

The cooperative principle includes the categories quantity, quality, relevance and manner. The first three categories could be called what-is-said categories while the fourth, the category of manner, is related not to “what is said but how what is said is to be said” (Grice 1989: 27). The category of quantity is related to the amount of information provided. This category includes two maxims. The first states that the contribution should be as informative as required for the current purpose, while the second states that the information should not be more informative than required. Among his categories, Grice gives quality special importance. The most important aspect of speech, he argues, is to try to keep oneself truthful. Grice calls this the *supermaxim* (ibid.). This category includes two further maxims. The first tells the speaker not to say anything they believe to be false and the second one directs the speaker not to say anything that lacks adequate evidence. Relevance, sometimes called the category of relation, requires the speech act to be relevant. This is the only maxim in this category. However, the difficulty is that relevance is an invariable, comprehensive concept. The fourth category, manner, relates to well-aimed speech. This category includes four maxims and tells the speaker to avoid obscurity and ambiguity of expression, as well as to be brief and orderly. Even though this category has the most maxims, Grice (ibid.) states that this category could have, and even needs, more maxims.

In general, Grice (1989: 28) stresses that these conversational maxims are not the only existing ones present in talk exchange situations. Other maxims include aesthetic, social, and moral ones. One of the social maxims with proverbs could be combined with authority, such as proverbs in pedagogical discourse. An utterance that is authorized

with a proverb is not easy to overrule (Briggs 1988: 22–23). The social maxim with proverbs could state something like: proverbs are to be used in speech either between peers or when speaking to people of a lower status from a social and authoritative point of view. Grice's modification of Occam's razor might be understood not as a maxim of the cooperative principle, but as an accessory to it. The modified Occam's razor (Grice 1989: 47–48) handles both the use and the understanding of words and utterances. For Grice, this combination works on the supposition that if a choice is possible, a word is to be understood in a less, rather than more, restrictive way. With utterances such as proverbs, Grice's supposition makes sense if we accept that proverbs can be interpreted on both the literal, as well as the figurative, level. This idea is supported by the notion that proverbs are often understood as instructions for some practical activity (Granbom-Herranen 2008; 2009).

Maxims have their analogues in situations that are not talk exchange situations (Grice 1989: 28). These situations are requests or demands that are only one-way speech. Proverbial speech could be considered part of this group. Proverbs are actually incontestable speech, including allegations that can be overruled only by other proverbs. Example 1 features conversational implicature in which a proverb occupies a central position, but where acting against the maxims is actually not important. This situation is possible when a proverb receives a literal interpretation. The examples are also in the original language, Finnish. English translations in all examples are literally translated and proverb parallels are not used. Because the examples are translated, the message cannot be precisely the same as in the original because translation always includes some interpretation (Kusch 1988: 106).

Example 1. *Woman, born in 1919.*

Jumalan kymmenestä käskystä puhuttiin paljon. Kuusivuotiaana olen ollut kylänluvulla ja osannut ne selityksineen ulkoa. Repaleisessa todistuksessa näkyi, että olen saanut kristinopista 4 ja suorassa luvussa 2. Usein vedottiin, koeta muistaa, mitä käskyissä sanotaan. Kun nyt ajattelen, olen kokenut uskon turvallisiksi. Tietysti joskus pelotti, kun tuli kirottua ja valehdeltua, jos Jumala pudottaa suuren kiven päälle. Iltarukous oli suuri turva. Lapsia kuoli niihin aikoihin paljon, aina puhuttiin, miten kiltti tämä pois nukkunut oli ja lisättiin "Hyvät ja kuuliaiset lapset varhain kuolevat". Se poisti omalta kohdaltani kuoleman pelon, en ollut hyvä enkä kuuliainen.

There was a lot of talk about God's Ten Commandments. When I was six years old I have been with when the priest gave us a grilling about them and I could recite all the Ten Commandments and their explanations. My old school report says I got a 4 for the Christian doctrines and 2 for reading fluently. We were often reminded: "Try to remember what is said in

the Ten Commandments.” When I thought about it afterwards, I felt that the faith gives safety. Of course I was sometimes afraid, when I swore and told lies. I would think that God might drop a big stone on me. The evening prayer was the protection. A lot of children died at that time. I was always told how good this peaceful death was, and something was added: *Hyvät ja kuuliaiset lapset varhain kuolevat* (‘Good children die young’). This took away my fear of death, because I was neither good nor obedient.

This episode describes Finland in the early 20th century. In the 19th century and even at the beginning of the 20th century, the death of small children was not unusual, and children often heard about and witnessed death during childhood. Adults tried to comfort themselves by saying that death was for the best, *Hyvät ja kuuliaiset lapset varhain kuolevat* (‘Good children die young’) or, according to their religious faith, they actually regarded death as the best thing for the child’s still sinless soul. The narrator, on the other hand, puts her thoughts into words of relief: she knew she was not a good child and so there was no need to be afraid of death. She was not going to die in her early years, because only good children were in danger. The child understood and connected the messages heard in two separate situations and drew a conclusion.

PROVERBS ACT AGAINST THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

The way we recognize proverbs in speech or text has the same problems as when we talk about recognizing metaphors. The special meaning of these figures of speech is based on how they differ from the current discourse and how they conflict with one or more categories in Grice’s cooperative principle (Granbom-Herranen 2011: 49). One difficulty is that Grice’s categories are not exclusionary. Grice makes a distinction between different actions that work against maxims. He talks about violating maxims, opting out of cooperation, being faced with conflict, flouting a maxim and infringement of maxims (Grice 1989: 30, 33). All these actions have some specific features. To simplify the matter, I prefer to use ‘acts against’ or ‘does not follow’ instead of the terms above.

As mentioned before, all these principles can stay unfulfilled in speech, or the speaker can act against them consciously or subconsciously. In these situations, the listener’s capability to work out the message emerges. It is also the speaker who can fail to fulfil one or more maxims. The use of proverbs is, on the one hand, a part of communicative speech that is, as with all understandable speech, supposed

to follow Grice's cooperative principles. However, on the other, the use of a proverb acts against one or more of Grice's categories by creating a pause in the discourse and, unexpectedly, introduces new aspects.

Acts against the maxims in the category of quality (Grice 1989: 34) can be connected with proverbs as metaphors. Hyperbole is typical in traditional proverbs, as is meiosis (in which case one proverb is divided into two or more proverbs) in newer ones, but irony cannot be considered as a feature of proverbs. Irony can be a function when a proverb is used but it is conditional on context and, for example, speech stress. Examples of acts against the maxim of quantity include tautology (ibid.: 33), which can be seen in proverbial expressions like *pojat ovat poikia* ('Boys are boys').

Acts against Grice's category of quantity relate to how much information is given. This category states that your contribution should be as informative as is required for the current purpose, but that it should not be more so. When you say too much or too little, a violation occurs.

Example 2. Quantity in an SMS.

Isoisä-41. Opintotuella ei osteta autoa, joten ne joilla on, ajavat vanhempien rahoilla. Kaikilla ei mahdollista vanhempien avokätiseen tukeen – pappa betala.

Grandpa-41. You can't pay for a car with the student stipend. So those who have a car are getting money from their parents. Not everyone has the possibility to get generous support from their parents – *pappa betala* ('daddy pays') (SSS, sent 2 September, 2006).

The category of quantity states how much is to be said in order for an utterance to be seen as informative. The expression *pappa betala* hardly gives any information at all and can be understood as a meaningless short sentence. However, when it is used with a pause the utterance emphasizes something and thus acts against the maxim demanding quantitatively enough information. The Finnish proverb is *pappa betalar*, although the language here is Finnish Swedish (it would be *isä maksaa* in Finnish). In Finnish speech the proverb always occurs in Finnish Swedish, the Finnish translation is never used. This SMS message refers to the discourse that deals with the student stipend provided by the state in Finland. The proverb refers to the Finland Swedish population and to their prominent position in, for example, Finland's economic and cultural life throughout the country's history. Among Swedish-speaking Finns the standard of living has long been higher – and in many cases still is – than among Finnish-speaking Finns.¹

¹ Swedish was the official language of Finland until the country's independence. However, in 1863 it became possible to use Finnish in official matters focusing on Finland. By World War II, only one in every ten ordinary Finns were Swedish speakers (Niemi 1969: 55; Talve 1990: 323).

The category of quality is not fulfilled, for example, when a speaker lies or says something that cannot be true. To lie or use irony means to act against this category.

Example 3. *Quality in an SMS.*

Mies! Normaalin miehen viriliä seksuaalista halua. Tarkkaile vaimoasi. Käy vieraisa, ehkä kaipaa "vihreää ruohoa" aidan toisella puolella. – petetty nainen

Man! That is just the red-blooded desire of a normal man. Keep an eye on your wife. She is playing away, *ehkä kaipaa "vihreää ruohoa" aidan toisella puolella* ('maybe she hungers for "greener grass" on the other side of the fence'). – betrayed woman (SSS, sent 9 August, 2006).

People, of course, do not hunger for grass as cows, horses and other animals do. The writer says something that is untrue in order to awaken the reader to the main point of the message. The sentence refers to the proverb *Ruoho on vihreämpää aidan toisella puolen* ('The grass is greener on the other side of the fence'). The writer knows this because her husband (if we trust that the pseudonym is telling the truth) has betrayed her with somebody who wanted new or better company.

Acting against the category of relevance is linked to activities and utterances used in a speech context. This category might be the one that includes the most vernacular speech with proverbial expressions.

Example 4. *Relevance in life-story. Woman, born in 1923.*

Hän osasi esimerkiksi loputtoman määrän sananparsia ja sanomuksia. Joka tilanteeseen hänellä oli monta sananpartta. Kun rahat eivät tahtoneet riittää, äiti valitteli: "Kaikkia siton kun on köyhiäkin" tai "Milläs täi rykii kun ei oo rintoja".

She [the narrator's mother] knew an endless amount of proverbs and sayings. For every occasion she had many proverbs... When money was tight, mother complained: *Kaikkia siton kun on köyhiäkin* ('Everything is – there are even poor people') or *Milläs täi rykii kun ei oo rintoja?* ('How will the louse clear its throat when it doesn't have a chest?').

The narrator writes about her childhood and speaks about the occasions and things that come to her mind. At the beginning of the 20th century, poverty and hunger were not unknown in Finland. The above expressions are proverbs which by their basic meaning do not tell us anything about being poor or lacking money. However, the proverbs have a function in the situation and they stress something without saying it directly.

Example 5. Relevance in an SMS.

Miksi Suomalaiset menevät sammuttamaan tulipaloja Venäjälle, vieläpä ilmaiseksi vaikka kotimaassa palaa täysillä. Oma maa mansikka.

Why are Finns leaving Finland to extinguish fires in Russia, and they are doing it for nothing, even though at the same time there are fires burning in our homeland. *Oma maa mansikka* ('One's own land is a strawberry'). (SSS, sent 25 August, 2006)

The message refers to the fact that by 2006 many Finns were of the opinion that the state could not afford all the welfare services needed. Citizens therefore had to pay for some services. During the summer of 2006 there were forest fires in Finland and expensive rescue operations were needed. At the same time Finland helped Russia with forest fires even though Russia is not part of Finland – the writer seems to think that the money could have been needed at home. The proverb cited refers to the traditional Finnish proverb *Oma maa mansikka, muu maa mustikka* ('One's own land is a strawberry, the other's land a blueberry'). The listener or the reader might ask what "fires burning in our homeland" has to do with strawberries. The proverb in this message to a newspaper participates in a discourse and the context clarifies the connection. A large wildfire occurred near the Finnish boarder in Russia and Finland aided the fire-fighting. The meaning of the sentence remains unclear if the reader does not know the traditional basic meaning of this proverb. Briefly, forests in Finland were originally jointly owned. When the land was slash-burned it became the property of whichever farmer had slash-burned it. The land was under the control of that farmer as long as wild strawberries (*Fragaria vesca*) grew on it. These strawberry patches were typically located near the farmer's home, that is, on his land. Blueberries grew in the forests, which were jointly owned land. Today, Finns might not know the origin of the proverb despite understanding the idea.

To give hints one after another and talk without saying anything directly acts against the category of manner. This occurs when a speaker does not voice his or her own opinion but offers only hints. For example, shortened proverbs can act as hints. To get the message you must recognize and know the full original version of the proverb.

Example 6. Manner in an SMS.

Ei ole ihme, jos on homeasuntoja, kun lämpöä ei laiteta päälle. Huoneen lämpötila on 16 astetta, ulkona sataa vettä ja ikkunat sisällä huurussa. Mikäs se ahneen palkka oli? – Kohta asumiskelvoton kämppä.

It is no wonder that we have mould in flats when the heating isn't turned on. The temperature inside is 16 degrees, outside it is raining and the windows have condensation on the inside. *Mikä se ahneen palkka oli?* ('What was

it that the greedy always come to?) – Soon the place will be unsuitable for living (SSS, published 10 September, 2011).

The proverb referred to is *Ahneella on paskanen loppu* ('The greedy always come to a shitty end'). In the SMS message it becomes a question the reader is supposed to answer. The proverb is, on one level, a part of a discussion about the temperature in houses during the autumn. On another level the proverb is used to point out the supposed greediness of landlords who try to keep their own costs as low as possible by not turning on the heat for renters.

THE QUIET PARTY: THE LISTENER

In all talk exchange situations there is one who talks and one who listens. Even though the roles change during a discussion, they exist throughout. The speaker has an intention and hopefully the listener recognizes even incomplete expressions by recognizing the main reference and thus understanding the meaning of the utterance. As Ruth Finnegan (1981: 35) points out, the listener also has an active role in the situation. It is not only a question about the content of the proverb or the intention of speaker. Krikmann (1987: 122) names three aspects of proverb use. The first aspect is the meaning potential for a proverb. By the word potential, Krikmann means that to understand the meaning of a term we should understand the extension of the term under the present circumstances and also its extension under other circumstances (Hintikka & Sandu 1994: 152). The second and the third aspects deal with the people involved in the situation. In spite of the proverb, there is the speaker's intention and the listener's point of view. Talking about proverbial speech, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (1981: 112) emphasizes the listener as a part of the process. She suggests that because a proverb can have more than one interpretation, it is not certain that the speaker and listener stress the same aspects or interpret them in the same way. When listeners and speakers interpret utterances, intercultural, intracultural and individual differences are challenges for the cooperative principle and any possible acts against it. As Grice says, we need "knowledge of the circumstances of the utterance" before we can even begin to move beyond the *understand-something* level to what he calls "full understanding" (Grice 1989: 161).

Example 7. *Woman, born in 1919.*

Mummoni s. 1872, antoi meille poikansa lapsille elämänohjeet ja kasvatti meidät. Tärkein oli Jumalan pelko: "Hän näkee kaikki, ei Hänen tietämättään hiuskarvasi putoa." Raamatun lauseita ei puuttunut, mutta se teki

elämän turvalliseksi, kun oli sanat jokaiseen tilanteeseen. Tietoa oli hyvin paljon vähemmän kuin nykyajan lapsella, oli helppo uskoa kaikki, mitä sanottiin. "Jokainen, joka vitsaa säästää, se vihaa lastaan, ja kuka kuritta kasvaa se kunnialta kuolee," sanottiin. Eivät ne vitsat ja tukkapöllyt ihan mukavalta tuntuneet, mutta hyvin pienenä oppi tajuamaan, että se oli minulle parhaaksi, vaikka ei kunnialla kuolemista ymmärtänytkään.

My grandmother (born 1872) brought us up and gave us the guidelines of life. The most important was the fear of God: "He sees everything. Not a single hair falls out without His knowing it." There was no lack of Bible quotations. Anyhow, it made life safe when you always had a saying for every situation. We had much less knowledge and information than children have nowadays. It was easy to believe all that was said. We were told: "*Jokainen joka vitsaa säästää se lastaan vihaa ja joka kuritta kasvaa se kunnialta kuolee*" ('Everybody who spares the rod hates his child and one who lives without discipline, will die without honour').² It wasn't nice to get the rod or have your hair tugged at, but as a little child I learned that it was for my best; even if I didn't understand anything about 'dying without honour'.

When a proverb is heard it is connected to the owner of the proverb and the situation in which it was heard for the first time. Typically the use of proverbs in everyday activities has been more like a slip of the tongue than wisdom transmitted consciously (Louis 2000: 183; Granbom-Herranen 2008: 218). In talk exchange situations a speaker expresses him or herself on two levels: what he or she implies, and what he or she says. These two elements create the speaker's conventional meaning.

SUMMARY

As Grice suggests, talk exchange situations are always meaningful. By extension, every speech reference and utterance is meaningful. The speaker knows the aim and can in this way see how the reference is directly or indirectly connected with the utterance used. The listener can only think he or she knows the aim, and so must work out the reference independently. All of us have our own ideas of what a word or a proverb means. Moreover, the reference to a proverb is something tied to time and place. Or, the reference might be to an idea of what could

² Of Biblical origin. Proverbs 13:24: English: "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him."

Finnish translation from a 1776 Bible: "*Joka vitsaansa säästää, hän vihaa lastansa; vaan joka häntä rakastaa, hän aikanaan sitä kurittaa.*"

Finnish translation from 1933/38 Bible: "*Joka vitsaa säästää, se vihaa lastaan; mutta joka häntä rakastaa, se häntä ajoissa kurittaa.*"

have been the reference in some special time and place. To understand the essential meaning as the reference in an utterance moves from one meaning to another is a challenge. The mystery grows as we try to determine the references that are linked from a particular socio-cultural context (combined with time and place) to another one. In addition, the literal meanings, that is, the references words make, also change. How could the references made within a complete utterance stay unchanged? How sensible is it to count on assumed and standardized references? Grice's cooperative principle does not help define the most interesting aspect of talk exchange situations: the speaker's intention in proverbial speech and in other kinds of talk exchange. He does not consider what happens when the speaker, for one reason or another, ends up acting against the cooperative principle. The importance of the maxims varies and there is actually no order in their importance. The only maxim Grice emphasizes is the demand to "try to make the contribution one that is true" (Grice 1989: 27).

Grice highlights the fact that, in saying something people imply much more than is said, as the most important feature of language or speech (Devitt & Sterelny 1987: 21). However, he does not provide any keys for interpretation, he just states the situation. I would like to stress the importance of context. By context I mean the social context and the contextual information available that is connected to interpretation – in this case using proverbial speech.

In everyday life and vernacular use, the meaning of a proverb is a matter of individual experience: for a speaker it might be included in the aim of speech while for the listener the references present within the proverb are what he or she feels the proverb is transmitting. Proverbs are combinations of socio-cultural context, people, emotions and information in different situations. In the use of proverbs, it is not only the words that matter but also the feelings and emotions that are read into proverbs in each situation. Grice's cooperative principle and acts against it might help us to recognize proverbs in vernacular language (oral and written), although it does not solve the problem of reference. Meaningful speech understood as a wholeness of meaningful utterances, for example proverbs, surely points to meaningful references that make interpretation possible; although the interpretation or the understood meaning is hardly the same for everybody – not even for the parties in the talk exchange.

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