

O LUGAR DAS MULHERES NOS PROVÉRBIOS FINLANDESES, DESDE A INFÂNCIA

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Resumo

Nesta comunicação focalizarei a parte das memórias proverbiais relacionada com o género. O género foi visto como tema do discurso proverbial finlandês principalmente em dois casos. Em primeiro lugar, todos os provérbios foram vistos como parte do discurso patriarcal e masculino. Em segundo lugar, as mulheres foram vistas como objecto do discurso proverbial negativo. As mulheres estão maioritariamente relacionadas com os provérbios finlandeses quando o objectivo principal era observar a subestimação da mulher e da feminilidade. Esta interpretação tem sido o substrato para os investigadores do século XX e mesmo no século XXI na Finlândia e também em outros países. Nesta comunicação tentarei dar visibilidade às mulheres nos provérbios finlandeses. Esta comunicação oferece alguns pensamentos sobre estes provérbios que são aqueles dos quais nos lembramos ainda na idade adulta.

Palavras- chave: género, provérbios finlandeses, infância, idade adulta.



WOMEN'S PLACE IN FINNISH PROVERBS FROM CHILDHOOD

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Abstract

The article deals with one type of diverse relationships between proverbs and women in the Finnish folklore tradition. Since 1950's in Finland as well as in various cultures the underestimation of women and womanhood has been in the center of discourse connecting women and proverbs. I try to make the women in Finnish proverbs visible. The focus in this article is on the proverbs in life stories written down in 1985 and heard during the 20th century.

Keywords: everyday life, childhood, proverb, woman.

1. Introduction

With this article I continue the discourse started in 2010 in the colloquium of Tavira (Granbom-Herranen 2011b). I explore the gender connection especially in Finnish proverbs

and deal with the existing assumptions trying to reformulate presumptions. The position of gender in Finnish proverbs might or might not differ from other cultures and traditions. Anyhow, the gender has been seen as a subject of the Finnish proverbial speech mostly in two cases.

Firstly the Finnish proverbs have widely been seen as a part of patriarchal and masculine speech. Secondly women have been seen as the object of the negative proverbial speech. Women are mostly connected with the Finnish proverbs when the main point has been to look the underestimation of women and womanhood. This interpretation has been the substratum for the researchers of the 20th century and even in the 21st century. I wonder if it really is like this. Both the life story material and the lists of proverbs from Finnish Literature Society give a different perspective for the idea of woman in proverbs and in the proverbial discourse. How could women in proverbs be considered merely as the stupid ones, when they themselves are active users of proverbs?

2. Theories on the background

The conventional meaning consists of the common knowledge as well as the tacit knowledge in the context of the time and place (Grice 1975: 44–46; Frege 1984: 42). Philosopher Gottlob Frege points out that the meaning of an expression a sentence can be given either with the principle of contextuality or the principle of compositionality (Rott 2000: 627). The Principle of Contextuality tells that the meaning of the expression is always bound to some whole and depends on the context it is used in. In the other words, never ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a sentence. The meaning of the words comes from the situational or wider context. The Principle of Compositionality says that the meaning of a sentence comes from the meanings of the words that make the sentence and is determined by the meanings of its constituent expressions. Even the researchers focusing of the theories of Frege have not been able to tell which one of these principles Frege himself preferred (Pelletier 2001). It is more than questionable to interpret meanings mixing these principles or changing the focus from one principle to another in one and same material or research.

The other ground theory I use consists of is philosopher Paul Grice's Cooperative principles. The use of proverbs is a part of communicative speech that is supposed to follow Paul Grice's (1975: 45–46) cooperative principles of quantity, quality, relation and manner. Each category includes maxims at various levels. The *category of quantity* states that your contribution should be as informative as required for the current purpose, but that it should not be more

informative than is required. It is related to how much information is provided. The *category of quality* tells us to not say anything we believe to be false and to not say anything for which we lack adequate evidence. The most important thing is to try to keep oneself true in speech. The *category of relation* requires the speech act to be relevant; however, the difficulty is that relevance is an invariable concept. The fourth, the *category of manner*, guides us to avoid the obscurity and ambiguity in an expression, as well as to be brief and orderly. The manner is related to the well-aimed speech. These principles can be violated either consciously or subconsciously. The use of a proverb violates one or more of above-mentioned categories. Recognizing a proverb in speech or text carries the same problems as recognising a metaphor. Their special meanings are based on the observation that they somehow differ from the ongoing discourse, and they conflict with one or more of the Gricean principles. (Granbom-Herranen 2011a: 49). The use of the proverb or the proverb itself lends some added value to the speech event.

3. What has been said about women and Finnish proverbs?

The best known gender bounded knowledge within Finnish proverbs can be found among those conclusions Matti Kuusi (1954: 91–92; 1971: 100) has made of women and the women's place in proverbs. In the course of Finnish history the use of the proverbs has been seen as gender related: the proverbs have been seen as parts of masculine talk. Proverbs have also been seen as cornerstones for the patriarchal society. Many of the conclusions made of proverbs in 20th century have not been questioned, especially the gender related findings. The new research leans on the existing conclusions and interpretations without going to original sources. This concerns also the relations between proverbs and woman ¹.

However, this is not only a Finnish phenomenon. According to Lois Kerschen (1998: 6-7) women in American proverbs have mostly been seen ironic and with negativity. She also points out that only a small part of American proverbs are talking about woman. I cannot be sure if Kerschen when saying that proverbs are talking about woman actually means that there exists a word 'woman' or the meaning is 'woman'. Anyhow, of the 50'000 Finnish proverbs there were about 1'500 proverbs with the concept 'woman', as you can see later on in this article. These 1'500 Finnish proverbs do not include the proverbs talking about work, objects, events or phenomena that often are connected with femininity. These kinds of references are bound with time and place both on the situational and more general levels.

Something very similar exists in these two gender connected ways to look at proverbs. Both Kerschen and Kuusi validates their arguments with proverbs they have chosen with their own criteria and given to them either positive or negative value. Kerschen (1998: 15) tells us she has left outside proverbs in which the words 'mother' and 'dotter' have been used metaphorically. As an example she gives proverbs "Necessity is the mother of invention" and "Admiration is the daughter of ignorance". Although in these kinds of proverbs we are to see the positive connections between femininity and the world, allusions to 'woman' as the beginning of the world knowledge.

We cannot know what Kuusi actually meant. We know only what he wrote (Kuusi 1971: 100):

"Into the following overview I try to include all the proverbs that judge Ovambo women in books 'Ovambo proverbs' and Finnish women in 'Vanhan kansan sananlaskuvuosis' as well as the ones in the file cards in Folklore Archives. Of the broad Finnish material I leave out the comical witty remarks as well as those proverbs that are mentioned only once." He goes on: "In principle these books contain everything [...] the weakness is in the run of choice and in the run of elimination that is based on the morals of Christianity [...] I leave out all the special categories with womanhood [...] as well as generic observations of the women's talkativeness, readiness for crying, overestimating of own children, showing favour to own relatives, to be hungry during the duration of pregnancy and suckling, being angry at the time of urgent work, being keen on glossy items etc. Likewise I ignore proverbs that are used also to something else than only to evaluate a woman [...] or where the valuation between positive or negative attitude is open to interpretations [...]"².

As an example of the three last proverb types he gives "Kertaus on opintojen äiti" [Revision is the mother of education], "Ei kauha varretta kelpaa" [A ladle is nothing without a shaft] and "Hauku minua mutta älä minun ämmääni" [Call me but not my wife].

Because most of the proverb material does not have information about the context, with this logic it is possible to read all kinds of things dealing with women. I am fascinated by the possibility to interpret the beauty and kindness to be the most important gifts of woman. They are gifts which the world can turn to be used against her. The whore might not be guilty of her life style but she is a victim of her fate, "No one can escape the destiny". The proverbs tell us for example that "Viisaimmat rosvoiksi, kauneimmat huoriksi" [The wisest ones to be thieves, the most beautiful ones whores], "Hyvä luonto huoraks tekköö, paha piikana pitää" [The good nature makes a whore, the bad nature makes a servant], "Hyvä syvä saattaa huoraks" [The good heart leads one to be a whore] and one more, "Surmakseen tyttölaps kaunis on" [To be beautiful is the death of a girl]. In the history as well in tradition the woman is often used to be seen as the other, her existence comes often via a man. In proverbs it might be seen on the

other way round. "Muijaton miäs on kuin hännätön koira" [A man without a woman is like a dog without a tail] or "Vaimo on miähen kunnia" [The wife does credit to the man]³.

The only reasonable conclusion made of proverbs should be that the interpretations of proverbs are bounded with the interpreter and his/her social group and they might be target orientated. Without any knowledge of the context it is not easy to conclude what has been meant and by which proverb. With the proverbs mentioned above, the only reasonable conclusion is that in the year 1985 in Finland lived people who knew and wrote down these proverbs. It is and will be unsolved what they meant with them or what they expected the others have meant by using them.

4. The material and the method

The Finnish Literature Society organized the competition for folklore collectors in order to celebrate the 150 anniversary of the Old Kalevala. This competition was called "Perinne Elämässäni – Kalevalan juhlavuoden kilpikirjoitus 1985" [Tradition in my life – the writing competition to celebrate the jubilee year of Kalevala 1985]. The competition included eight themes: (1.) Home and family, (2.) Two homes, (3.) Celebrations, (4.) Leisure time, (5.) Gender roles and bringing up for marriage, (6.) I and the others, (7.) Songs and (8.) Proverbs. I scanned through all the materials in the collection "Tradition in my life"⁴.

When looking for proverbs I came to see that most of them are in addition to the theme for proverbs (number 8) in the themes focusing on the raising children and young people at homes (numbers 1 and 5). The narrative material altogether makes about 19'300 pages and is delivered by 487 persons of which 239 persons had answered to the theme "Proverbs" by sending near to 3'000 pages various kinds of lists of proverbs, sayings and so on. The gender division in the competition was what we in Finland count as normal, 2/3 were sent by women and 1/3 by men. In the life-stories, the proverbs are rather a part of the story than something the narrator concentrated on. They are a part of both written memories and oral tradition.

The amount of proverbs in the themes 1, 8 and 5 is all together about 50'000. Of these proverbs I picked up all the proverbs with concept 'women', the amount of them is about 1'500 proverbs. I got words signifying a woman like harridan (423), PROPER NAME (142), maid (142), lady of a peasant house (139), girl, lassie (128), mother (127), girl (117), woman (98), bag, daughter, boiler, bride, whore, old woman, wife, daughter-in-law, grandmother, missus, spinster, Mrs, mother-in-law, stepmother, widow as well the references to professions, as midwife, cupper, telephonist, saleswoman, deaconess, knitter, housewife, net-

girl and even some more ⁵. There are also other concepts we can assume to refer to the concept woman as female animals and some objects like 'oven'. However, as Frege (1984) says: "The concept horse is not the horse". With the proverbs without any context I could not make any sensible conclusions about Finnish women in Finnish proverbs.

I took a step backward. My choice to turn to one of the collections from the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki had based on the fact that the publications of Finnish proverbs include mostly proverbs without any information of the context. They are organized following various classification systems arising from the author, publishing time or some other reasons. It is worth of remembering that the collector's (or publisher's) choice what is incorporated into the publication is present in every published on unpublished collection. The summary of the later user of the collection might include the information about what is left out. It is very often these definitions are brushed aside when drawing conclusions. So the future researchers do not know anything about the limitations in existing definitions. As Elias Lönnrot (1981: 8), one of the first Finnish collectors of proverbs and the creator of the Finnish national epos Kalevala, wrote in 1842 that he had included everything "apart from those ones that were absurd comparisons or used obscene language were indecent or that actually did not find their place" ⁶. This seemed not to have been a problem for him.

So I turned to the life-stories. Narratives have been collected during the year 1985 and the age range of the narrators is from 55 to 85 years. The memories include episodes which tell about the proverbs heard in childhood and recalled in adulthood. I see the information of contexts to be essential in order to make any interpretations of proverbial meanings. I made the decision to look at the proverbs and the interpretations of them in the context the proverbs have been used. The starting point is in the narrators' own experiences, their interpretations of proverbs and I also found women.

5. Context – the time and space

Folklorists Charles Briggs (1985, 1988) gives two main contextual functions to proverbs: the pedagogical and rhetorical use of proverbs. I prefer to use 'pedagogical speech' when talking about common people and everyday life. The pedagogical speech has to do with authority and occurs between unequal people when the listener is the one with lower status. When thinking about speech and proverbs in one's childhood, it is mostly a situation where an adult speaks to a child. In life stories the rhetorical use of proverbs, the metaspeech, can be either the speech between peers using proverbs or it constructs the frame for the events. (Granbom-Herranen

2008: 263, 272.) Also the proverbs used when discussing among peers and that have a rhetorical function are to be understood as a part of a context bounded event (Prahlad 1996: 193).

I confined myself to the narrators born before 1930, because they lived their childhood in Finland before the World War II (1939 – 1945 in Finland). The war was a turning point in many ways: people from Eastern Finland (Karelia) were evacuated and the whole Finnish society had to be reorganized; compulsory public education became comprehensive and this way the children were connected to the social system more tightly than before; urbanisation was going on and the surroundings changing; economic life and the trades were changing. Oral tradition was not anymore as meaningful and powerful as it had been during the time of stability. In the era I focus on the majority of Finnish speaking children in Finland lived in rural areas. Their upbringing and training normally took place at home or under comparable circumstances in households. Agriculture was the main source of living. In everyday life children usually participated in work with grown-ups or older children. Speaking and setting an example were the most important methods of raising children. The parents and grandparents (who brought up children) at the beginning of the 20th century were children in the 19th century and that is when they adopted the proverbs as a part of their own speech. The slowness of the changes both in society and everyday life strengthen the effect of traditional upbringing and the oral information used in it (Granbom-Herranen 2010: 96).

On the basis of life stories it becomes quite obvious that Finnish proverbs would not mainly be the expressions meant to protect or prop up the patriarchal society, as has been suggested. However, as a part of pedagogical speech the proverbs are mainly connected to women's talk: the majority of the used proverbs were heard from women. These women have been the most important authorities in children's everyday lives: mothers and grandmothers (Granbom-Herranen 2010: 98).

6. Where do we find women in Finnish proverbs?

In the everyday life of children – raising and educating them – mothers and grandmothers have been those who's wise words and proverbs have got the place in the children's minds. The everyday life is full of opportunities to learn the manners, norms and attitudes among the society. These are subjects that are easily included in proverbs. To be brought up with proverbs is not purely a question of information and knowledge. When a child meets a proverb it is always in context: cultural, social and situational context (Ricouer 1980: 156-

157; Granbom-Herranen 2008: 204, 273). Although proverbs are combinations of sociocultural context, people, emotions and information in different situations, the speaker has a powerful position. As the proverb is owned by the user, it is mostly associated with some special person – in one's childhood most of them are women. When the proverb is heard it is connected to the owner of the proverb and the situation in which it was heard in for the first time. That is what we people remember and what we seem to go back to when using and/or meeting the proverb later in our lives.

The life-stories show us that proverbs used by parents (mothers) and grandparents (grandmothers) are seen to be significant even in one's adulthood ⁷. Mothers and grandmothers are mentioned to be the users of proverbs in every other case where the speaker is mentioned, fathers and grandfathers are mentioned only in every fifth case (Granbom-Herranen 2010: 99). The proverbs and the interpretations made of them follow people all through their lives. I wonder if it were reasonable to think that when raising children and transmitting cultural behaving to the next generation women had used proverbs if they were understood as a part of gender domineering speech as Kerschen (1998: 123–124) says. The Finnish proverbs do not tell much about the value of women. Most of the interpretations made of proverbs tell more about the interpreter and his/her appreciations than about values in the past or present.

Some situations uniting proverbs and women:

My mother impressed on us that it may go badly in the life, but you should not give up – her favorite phrase was “a man or a woman goes even through the grey stone” [Ihminen menee vaikka läpi harmaan kiven] (Woman, born 1921).

Mother pointed out the meaning of religion, and the honesty, and the kindness, and the politeness in upbringing [–] honesty “a little fraud and a little theft, they are not worthwhile” [Pien koiruus ja pien varkaus ei kannata] (Woman, born 1926).

Grandmother could also rear up and said “God allows us to be angry, but not go on hating all the week [Suop Jumala Suuttuu, mut ei viikoks vihhaa pittää] or The sun is not to go down on the enmity [Aurinko ei saa laskea vihan yli]” (Woman, born 1919).

7. Summary

Finnish proverbs can be seen as a part of gender related folklore. In the Finnish tradition proverbs have been seen as the folklore genre used mostly by men and which underpins the patriarchal system. One of the reasons might be that both the collectors of folklore material and the informants were men still in the beginning of the 20th century. The collectors met the everyday life of men. On the other hand, the most self-evident part of women's everyday life

has been taking care of children and bringing them up. When dealing with gendered culture and tradition there is always the possibility that phenomena is connected to subcultures emerge. It is just as well possible that tacit knowledge manifests itself as the culture of contestation. It also may occur that during the Swedish or Russian time most of the proverbial speech in Finnish had been this kind of speech used by ordinary people in class society. Some part of proverbs might also have been meant to be women's talk in the patriarchal society. Finnish women are present in proverbs. In any case, the assumptions of proverbs mainly as a part of masculine talk and as a cornerstone for the patriarchal society, do not work with proverbs in context. In Finland in the beginning of 20th century the woman is par excellence to be found behind the proverbs. Proverbs of women are the ones to be remembered in one's adulthood. "Grandmother gave us the guidelines of life" (woman, born 1919).

Notes

1. Nenola 1986: 100–101; Saamivaara 1989: 91; Apo 1995: 56; Stark 2005: 67.
2. "Teokset sisältävät periaatteessa kaiken [...]niiden yhdensuuntaisena heikkoutena on kerääjien kristillissiveellisten *valinta- ja karsintatendenssien vaikutus* eri sananparsien frekvenssiin [...]. *Jätän sivuun* naiselliset erityiskategoriat [...], *samoin* yleispätevät havainnot naisen puheliaisuudesta, itkunherkyydestä, omien lasten yliarvioinnista, omien sukulaisten suosinnasta, nälkäisyydestä odotus- ja imetyksaikana, äreyydestä kiireisten töiden aikana, kiiltävien esineiden harrastamisesta jne. *Niin ikään sivuutan* sananparret, joita yleisesti käytetään muuhunkin kuin naisen arviointiin [...] *tai* joiden positiivinen tai negatiivinen arvovaraus on täysin tulkinnanvarainen [...]."
This as all Finnish citations and proverbs are literally translation by L G-H.
3. (man, born 1914); (woman, born 1923); (woman, born 1919); (woman, born 1924); (woman, born 1922); (woman, born 1922).
4. In Finnish: (1.) Koti ja suku, (2.) Kaksi kotiseutua, (3.) Juhlat, (4.) Vapaa-aika, (5.) Sukupuoliroolit ja kasvatus avioliittoon, (6.) Minä ja muut, (7.) Laulut, (8.) Sananparret.
5. In Finnish: akka, ERISNIMI, piika, emäntä, likka, äiti, tyttö, nainen, ämmä, tytär, muija, morsian, huora, muori, vaimo, miniä, mummo, eukko, vanhapiika, rouva, anoppi, äitipuoli, leski, kätilö, kuppari, sentraali, puotineihty, diakonissa, neulojatar, kotirouva, nuottatyttö.
6. "paitsi mitkä olivat itsestään mielettämiä vertauksia, eli muuten rietassanaisia, rivoja, joillen ei ole taittu sias antaa"
7. About the influence of grandmother's proverbs, e.g. Alexander & Hasan-Rokem 1988: 8; Newall 1994: 193.

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Curriculum vitae

Liisa Granbom-Herranen is postdoctoral researcher at University of Jyväskylä. She got her PhD (education) at University of Jyväskylä in Finland. Her first MA (education) is at University of Helsinki and her second MA (folklore) from the same university. She is also Kindergarten Teacher (BA's degree) from the College of Kindergarten Teachers in Helsinki. Moreover she has done the advanced special studies in theoretical philosophy at University of Helsinki specializing in problems of the metaphor and the proverb. The studies have been multidisciplinary. The main interest of her research has been related to the questions of power, authority, and autonomy in pedagogy, the proverbs and the given meanings in folklore, as well as the concept of metaphor in philosophy. Her current research project (Finnish Academy) is titled "Educational Target orientation in Proverbs". In another ongoing research the focus is on the proverbs in SMS-messages.

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