

Proverbs, songs and singing

Abstract

This paper gives an overview of Finnish proverbs and singing. Finnish proverbs may be said to be quite strongly bound together with singing. The first proverbs with melody originate from the days the first traditional Finnish proverbs are known. From 20th century we have modern proverbs combined with music. The paper discusses where the dividing line between proverb, poem and song is – or is there any need for it from folkloristic and paremiologic point of view.

Key-words: proverb, singing, song, tradition.

Introduction

This article focuses on the combination of proverbs and music, especially in the contemporary Finnish context. At the 2015 colloquium, Patrícia Lopes Bastos from Portugal spoke about how to unite words and music. She used proverbs as examples. The idea was to give proverbs melodies to remember them better. This paper focuses on singing and proverbs from a different point of view. Most often, the song has come before the proverb. This article presents the connection between singing and proverbs. I will concentrate on four cases in which proverbs and melodies are tied together: 1) Kalevala-metre songs, 2) proverbs made into small songs, 3) modern songs that use proverbs and 4) songs which have given some couplets that have become a new proverb.

Proverb and proverb performance

The proverb is understood to be a short, independent statement, which is or has been relatively familiar to the general public within a time and a place. When a proverb is used, the authority of the earlier proverb speaker may also be present (see Briggs 1988). Nowadays, the concept ‘proverb’ is in the Finnish context also most often used to mean ‘proverb and proverbial expression’ both in emic and etic language. The concept *proverb* has never been defined in a perfect way. However, as the Finnish folkloristic scholar Lauri Honko (1989) says: “It is not always necessary, or even possible, in the dynamic research tradition to define the key concepts exhaustively, for there must always be room for new connections”.

The proverb is something that has been invented and used, and this is how it has become a part of the vernacular. Taylor does not take into account only the old and already existing proverbs but points out that a proverb can be either an old or a new comment; it is the

circumstances that make the proverb widespread and well known (Taylor 1981). The circumstance of historically anonymous expression has changed. In many cases today, it is possible to identify the “first” user of a proverb. This is the situation with politics and well-known people in the public eye. Quite often, the public is aware of the origin of an expression that becomes an anonymous sentence, after which it becomes a cliché or saying and then a proverb. Nowadays, this process is fast and sometimes traceable. (Granbom-Herranen 2016a.)

The ground form of the proverb is the proverb behind an utterance, often called proverb proper. Every proverb has *an expected ground meaning* (or SPI)¹ of the ground form as well as a hypothetical situation for the standardised use of the proverb. There is always this presumption when a proverb is used in songs. The performer and the audience have to share some common knowledge about the past in order to be able to relate the message to the activity.

The concept *performance* includes both the verbal expressions and the behaviour by which the message comes across (Bauman 1992). To use a proverb is a small performance which has a target linked with the situation and the words used (Briggs 1988). A performance is always an interaction between the sender of some message (speaker or writer using proverbs) and the audience (a real or assumed one). A proverb as or in a performance might be treated as what Badiou (2009) calls an event (or the proverb paves the way for an event); it might change the significance of the entire situation. As for the features of a proverb performance, Briggs (1988) mentions that the proverb is a fixed part of some totality in which the owner of the proverb legitimizes what has been said. When using a proverb, the speaker (or singer) relies on some authority from the past², linking a third party to the situation. This has been verified especially within pedagogical discourse. Every time a proverb is heard, it is related to its owner, which is actually a combination of the person and the situation in which it was heard for the first time. (Granbom-Herranen 2016b.) However, this is an unclear statement in the urban tradition, which is not pedagogically oriented (Granbom-Herranen 2016a).

A proverb is a suitable utterance that functions as an event in a performance or as a short performance: it puts ideas together by referring to something that is supposed to be well known or a fact. It is easily remembered because of its form (shortness, rhythm).

Kalevala-metre poetry and songs

In earlier times, when Kalevala-metre singing was a living part of everyday life, proverbs were also a part of Kalevala-metre poetry; the poems that were presented in the form of a song. *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic, uses archaic trochaic tetrameter and has given the rhythm its name. The word "tetrameter" means that the poem has four trochees. For the melody, see:

http://www.kalevalaseura.fi/kalevalankankahilla/media/kilpalaulanta_160_44_mo_txt.mp3

Proverbs are a fixed part of the whole, they are inside the lyric and are used to crystallise the content of a poem. The largest collection of lyrics or poems is *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* (Old Poems of Finnish People). The collection includes nearly all Kalevala-metre poems; the majority of the original sources of Kalevala-metre poetry: around 100,000 different poems.³

The first couplets of *Kalevala* (translated by Eino Friberg)⁴

<u>M</u> ieleni <u>m</u> inun tekevi,	I am wanting,
<u>a</u> ivoni <u>a</u> jattelevi	I am thinking
<u>l</u> ähteäni <u>l</u> aulamahan,	To arise and go forth singing,
<u>s</u> aa'ani <u>s</u> anelemahan	Sing my songs and say my sayings,
<u>s</u> ukuvirttä <u>s</u> uoltamahan,	Hymns ancestral harmonizing
<u>l</u> ajivirttä <u>l</u> aulamahan.	Lore of kindred lyricizing.
Sanat suussani sulavat,	In my mouth the words are melting;
puhe'et putoelevat,	Utterances overflowing
kielelleni kerkiävät,	To my tongue are hurrying,
hampahilleni hajoovat.	Even against my teeth they burst.

Proverbs as utterances can be relevant for hundreds of years. It is, for example, possible to trace some Finnish proverbs back to the time when they were used only in speech. The proverb *Sitä kuusta kuuleminen, jonka juurella asunto* ['You have to listen to the advice given by the spruce you live next to'] is one of the oldest known Finnish proverbs (Haavio 1947). The proverb is still in use and it has remained unchanged but the meaning has altered. In the vernacular, most proverbs using Kalevala-metre are most easily recognised as proverbs. They

might have become a standard of proverb proper, which makes it difficult to recognise other kinds of proverbs, such as modern proverbs.

Some traditional Finnish proverbs. All these proverbs can be sung using Kalevala-metre. However, all utterances in Kalevala-metre (or in *Kalevala* or *Kanteletar*) are not proverbs.⁵

Kissa kiitoksella elää, koira pään silityksellä

[A cat lives on thanks, a dog by someone stroking its head]

Ei työ tekemällä lopu

[The work will not run out by doing]

Tasan ei käy onnen lahjat

[The gifts of luck are not equally divided]

2. Proverbs made into small songs

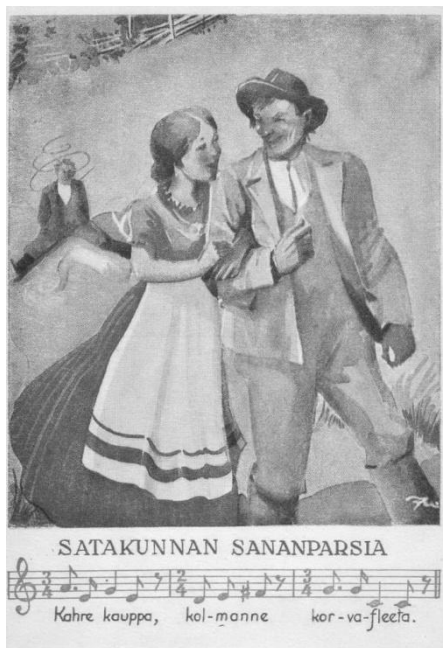
Nationalism is a movement that, for one reason or another, makes the existence and visibility of a nation important. Its background is connected with global circumstances or changes in neighbouring areas (see Granbom-Herranen 2016c). While the comparative approach stresses the similarities and common themes of proverbs in many places, the nationalistic approach concentrates on the distinctive qualities of proverbs found within a country. Small nations, such as Finland and Ireland, have asserted their cultural independence through their languages and by collecting proverbs, for example, which have been part of the spoken vernacular (Dorson 1963). Actually, it is not possible to think that paremiography could be free of the values of a society or group inside a society. The question is whether the collectors have been aware of the assessments of values they have made (Pöysä 1997). Depending on what is valued, people see or do not see certain aspects of the context.

Folklore studies as well as paremiography have always been connected with the nationalistic ideas as a part of cultural and political independence (Wilson 1978). The motivation for proverb collecting has not arisen only from national or romantic dreams. Nor was the reason to collect proverbs merely based on the admiration of the peasant way of life or the inherent beauty of

folk poetry. In Finland, paremiography has also played an important role in the process of nation-building (Honko 1979).

Proverbs again became a subject of interest in the 1930s. The situation in Finland was still quite dynamic, as the Fennoman political movement continued (Lassila 2003). University students collected proverbs across the country and the Sanakirjasäätiö (Dictionary Society) organized these collections and published proverbs for individual counties⁶ (Posti 1936). Also in the 1930s, the Finnish Literature Society organised the collections and invitations to participate were published in newspapers. (Granbom-Herranen 2016c.)

A collection of proverbs from Satakunta was published in 1939, collected in the 1930s. The postcards (illustrated by Eeli Jaatinen, 1905–1970, composer unknown) with proverbs from Satakunta, were printed in the beginning of the 1950s. They never became particularly popular.



Kahre kauppa, kolmanne korvafleeta (dialectal)

Kahden kauppa, kolmannen korvapuusti (literary)

The deal of two persons means clip round the ear to the third one



Ehtoolla etana virkoo, jupilaiska lauaintaina

The snail revives at the twilight, bone idle on Saturday

3. Modern songs that use proverbs

In Finnish, we also have modern songs that use proverbs to crystallise the idea of the entire song.

Jukka Kuoppamäki

Ken elää, hän näkee // [Who lives, he'll see]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4Aiun7E8Fk> (the proverb: 0:38)

Album: Trubaduurilauluja (Finland 1971)

Ken elää, hän näkee

Who lives, he'll see

The proverb is a traditional proverb.

In the form:

Joka kauan elää, se paljon näkee. (in Kuusi 1990 from collections of Porthan and Asp V)

Ken elää, se näkee. (in Laukkanen-Hakamies 1997, from Viipuri parish)

Jukka Orma: SUPERSIHKOO (in *Orman oppivuodet* [Orma's years of apprenticeship]) (Finland 2016)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbGdHCS0MM0&list=PLkhRAWcV8a-r80ITUP2J52HGYknitYc3V&index=16> (the proverb: 0:22)

“*Joka toiselle kuoppaa kaivaa näkee turhan paljon vaivaa*” refers to the traditional proverb *Joka toiselle kuoppaa kaivaa se itse siihen lankeaa*.

The Bible quotation in its entirety says: *Joka toiselle kuoppaa kaivaa, se itse siihen lankeaa, joka kiveä vierittää, jää itse sen alle*. (Sananlaskut 26:27) [Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him. (Proverbs 26:27)]

4. From song to proverb

In Finnish, couplets from some songs have become new proverbs. Sometimes, there has first been a poem that has become a song and after that a line of it has lived on as a proverb. For example, among Finnish traditional proverbs, there are some that originate in fairly recent poetry.

Early 20th century

Kell' onni on, se onnen kätkeköön [‘He/she who has much happiness does well to hide it’] is the beginning of a poem by the Finnish author Eino Leino, *Laulu onnesta* [‘Song of happiness’], which was published for the first time in 1900 in a collection entitled *Hiihtäjän virsiä* [‘Hymns of a skier’] (Leino 1978). Nowadays, it is a proverb and people often do not know its origin.

Laulu onnesta [‘Song of happiness’]

Composer Ahti Sonninen; Lyrics Eino Leino; Vocalist Sauli Tiilikainen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtimLZHleiY> (the proverb: 0:00)

Kell' onni on, se onnen kätkeköön.

[He who has much happiness does well to hide it]

As a modern proverb, it is even to be found in literature in the following form:

Kellä onni on, hän onnen kätkeköön. (Kuusi 1988, from Kivijärvi parish)

1950s

Kulkuri ja joutsen [The swan and the wanderer] (first version in the 1950s)

Composer Lasse Dahlquist; Lyrics Reino Helismaa; Singer Tapio Rautavaara

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PDy8v8z2g> (the proverb: 2:54)

Elämä on ihanaa kun sen oikein oivaltaa

[Life is wonderful if you understand it right]

1966

Antti Hammarberg (14 September 1943 – 14 January 1991), professionally known as Irwin Goodman, was a popular Finnish rock and folk singer. In the late 1960s, he was widely known as a protest singer.

Ei tippa tapa [A drop doesn't kill] Album 1966

Composer Irwin Goodman; Lyrics Vexi Salmi; Singer Irwin Goodman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leSS06OhXDI> (the proverb: 0:28)

Ei tippa tapa ja ämpäriin ei huku

[A drop doesn't kill and you don't drown in a pail]

1969

Kenen joukoissa seisot, kenen lippua kannat [Who are you standing with? Whose flag are you carrying?] the title of the song has become the proverb *Kenen joukoissa seisot, sen lippua kannat* [Who are you standing with, his/her flag are you carrying] and *Kenen leipää syöt, sen lauluja laulat*

[Whose bread you eat, his/her songs you sing]

Kenen joukoissa seisot, kenen lippua kannat [Who are you standing with? Whose flag are you carrying?]

Composer Kaj Chydenius; Lyrics Aulikki Oksanen; presenter Agit Prop

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvrLV2Glvwo> (the proverb: 1:11)

Kenen joukoissa seisot, sen lippua kannat

[Whose group you stay in, its flag you carry]

Often used to explain the traditional proverb:

Sitä kuusta kuuleminen, jonka juurella asunto

[You must listen to advice given by the spruce you live next to (lit.)]

As a modern proverb, it is even to be found in literature:

Kenen leipää syöt, sen lauluja laulat (Heikura 2004)

[Whose bread you eat, his/her songs you sing]

However, in literature, it also has the following forms:

Kenen leipää syöt, sen lintuja haukut. (Kuusi 1988, in Mäntyharju parish)

[Whose bread you eat, his/her birds you are barking at] (like a hound)

Kenen viinoja juot, sen lauluja laulat. (Kuusi 1988, in Kauhajoki parish)

[Whose booze you drink, his/her songs you sing]

1988

Lasse Mårtenson (1934–2016) was a Finnish-Swedish singer, composer, actor, and theatre conductor. The sea was always important for him.

Kaikki paitsi purjehdus on turhaa [Everything except sailing is useless] Album 1988

Composer Lasse Mårtenson; Lyrics Juha Vainio; Singer Lasse Mårtenson

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W11QLJ_Ienc (the proverb 0:00)

Kaikki paitsi purjehdus on turhaa

[Everything except sailing is useless]

In the beginning of the 21st century

The former ski-jumper Matti Nykänen is maybe the best-known sources for modern Finnish proverbs. Since the end of his career as one of the most famous sportsmen in the world, Nykänen has become famous for the expressions he has used in interviews.

Live is life. Album 1984

Composer: Ewald Pflöge; Lyrics: Ewald Pflöge; Artist: Opus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23quXzxsPaM> (the proverb 0:45)

Elämä on laiffii

Live is life / Life is life

This proverb was made famous by the ex-ski jumper Matti Nykänen. It might be based on the well-known song by Opus 'Live is life' (1985) that is still played as background music in ice-hockey matches. In the lyrics, it says "Life is life", so no wonder the message translated to Finnish in an adaptable way.

Conclusions

In Finnish, many proverbs have been connected with music in various ways. The oldest known proverbs follow the melody of Kalevala-metre; in the area of eastern Sweden, nowadays Finland, the archaic song tradition was a living tradition approximately until the 15th century. These proverbs are still in use but not with melody. However, these proverbs are all traditional proverbs and, for Finnish speakers, they are easily identified as proverbs among other utterances. Songs might also use proverbs; that is to say the lyrics either use or refer to some well-known proverb. As mentioned earlier, proverbs with Kalevala-metre are the easiest to recognise in songs; and proverbs originating from the Bible are well known among the general public in Finland. What happens most commonly when music and proverbs are bound together is that the name or a part of a song becomes a modern proverb. It might refer to some traditional proverb or proverbs but has begun to live a new independent life. All these ways can be taken as a normal part of the life cycle of proverbs.

Proverbs turned into songs in order to be remembered or learnt from are a completely different thing. In Finland, they have been used, for example, in postcards that actually were a part of a nationalistic process. The motivation for composing proverbs is unclear, even among postcard experts – who know especially about old Finnish postcards – this is seen as a special phenomenon. So much is known that these cards were not used as much as was expected. These kinds of activities are connected with the times of national movements and this way given to general public. However, proverbs are owned and used by the general public, the folk. The proverbs live if they are a part of the folk tradition or the manner in which people speak. They do not live only by teaching and guiding. As the Finnish traditional proverb says: *Ei kannettu vesi kaivossa pysy* [Water you bring to a well does not stay there (lit.)].

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Endnotes

1. Ground meaning is a culture-bound *standard proverbial interpretation* (SPI) that is understood as the universal, so called correct interpretation (Norrick 1985: 109–117). The SPI presupposes universality and is often seen as a correct interpretation when cultural prejudices are involved. According to Hilary Putnam (1975), the universality of features among languages means universal structures, not universal meanings. Furthermore, a similarity in intention, at the micro level, does not mean similarity in extension, i.e. at the macro level.
2. The past does not always mean some ancient times or “elders of the bygone days” as Briggs (1988: 100) has said.
3. The collection is digitised and available online with free access; <http://dbgw.finlit.fi/skvr/>. However, it is only in Finnish.
4. https://books.google.fi/books?id=KXW9I3kmQp0C&pg=PA41&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false
5. See Tarkka 2016.
6. Varsinais-Suomi published 1936 (collected 1931); Etelä-Pohjanmaa published 1938; Satakunta published 1939 (collected 1933); Etelä-Karjala published 1941; Häme published 1941; Uusimaa published 1945 (collected 1932).

Curriculum vitae

Liisa Granbom-Herranen's current research focuses on folkloristic paremiology at University of Turku, Department of Folkloristic. She is Adjunct Professor 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 studies) from the same university. Her studies are multidisciplinary as the main interest in folkloristic studies is related to the proverbs and the given meanings in folklore, the concept of metaphor in philosophy as well as the questions of power, authority, and autonomy in use of proverbs. She is a member of the Associação Internacional de Paremiologia / International Association of Paremiology (AIP-IAP).

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