

12. The Proverb Genre

A Relic or Very Much Alive?

1.

The aim of this article is to analyse some changes both in the concept of the proverb and in the genre of proverbs. The perspective is from folkloristic paremiology. The need to analyse the proverb genre comes firstly from the existence of diverse terms used when discussing proverbs and proverbial expressions in folkloristic paremiology¹ and in paremiology in general; the second reason is that the modern proverb tradition has brought about changes in the proverb genre, whereas the earlier oral tradition has found a place in the colloquial written language.

This article is based on the observations in my research focusing on Finnish proverbs in life stories (Granbom-Herranen 2004; 2008) as well as on study of the contemporary use of proverbs (Granbom-Herranen 2010; 2011a; 2013a; 2013b). The examples of traditional proverbs are taken from the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki, the material consisting of life stories connected with everyday life in Finland before World War II (PE85). The examples of modern proverbs come from newspaper material from the beginning of the twenty-first century (HS, SSS). Although the focus is on Finnish proverbs, many of the observations can be generalized within paremiology. Proverbs are viewed as a part of colloquial language, which occurs both in oral and written form. The empirical material has raised the question of what is meant by the concept “proverb” and what is included in the proverb genre. As examples of proverbs in different contexts, this article includes both traditional and modern proverbs. The expression “traditional proverb” here means an utterance that is accepted as an old proverb³ and “modern proverb” refers to all kinds of forms and names that proverbs have in contemporary usage, including the “anti-proverb”.

In this article neither the emic nor the etic concept “proverb” is seen as a universal concept (see also the article discussing the proverb genre as a universal category by Pekka Hakamies, this volume). In addition to the differences between cultures with emic concepts⁴ there are quite big discrepancies between the academic disciplines with etic-concepts in the way they handle the concept of proverb. It is said that there are as many etic definitions for the proverb as there are scientific languages (Grzybek 1987: 44). Even if Peter Grzybek made this statement 25 years ago, it still holds good. On the one hand, there are the disciplines that handle proverbs as objects, like folkloristics (focus on effect), and linguistics and

philology (focus on formula and translations). There are fields that focus on the proverb itself and hold that proverbs can be attributed to a genre (paremiologic linguistics and folkloristics). Concerning proverb as object folkloristic paremiology can be said to concentrate on all the variants that can be found, whereas linguistic paremiology most often refers to codified versions in lexicographical sources (Grzybek 2012). On the other hand, there are disciplines that use proverbs as a method within their own specialities (as a tool). In Finnish studies proverbs are to be found as tools, for example, in economics, education, literary research, social sciences and theology.⁵ Using proverbs as universal statements or a method quite often means the existence of some assumptions about their commonly known and universal interpretations.

Various Conceptions of the Proverb

When defining the proverb possibilities are endless. For example in the abstracts of the 2010 Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs (ICP2010), the concept “proverb” comes up 106 times in about 50 forms:

a part of proverb, proverb proper, parody of proverb, didactic proverb, proverb parody, anti-proverb, proverb variation, existing proverb, new proverb, universal proverb, language of proverb, knowledge of proverb, Bible proverbs, Proverbs of King Solomon, European expressions or proverbs, proverbial expression, proverbial language, proverbial metaphors, proverbial rhetoric, proverbial instructions, proverbial wisdom, proverbial sign, proverbial meaning, proverbial, proverbial material, proverbial phrase, proverbially, saying, popular saying, phrase, idiom, expression, refrain, winged words, wellerism, popular quotations, traditional wisdom, relating to proverb/saying, distinct items of lexis describing a self-contained concept or idea, contemporary adaptation, conundrum, lexical unit, complex multi word unit, language of words, locution, short sentence.

In paremiology the only consensus focuses on the brevity of proverbs and some kind of traditionality⁶ in them. There is always something more to be added in order to make sure nothing is left out of the definition. Elias Lönnrot (1981: 8), the author of *Kalevala* – the Finnish national epic – and one of the first Finnish proverb collectors, wrote in 1842: “Kaiken sananlaskuin rajoittamisen sananparsihin, sananpolvihiin, sananmutkihiin, vertauksihiin j.n.e. luulemma soveliaaksi työksi silleen, jolla muuta työtä ei ole” (Lönnrot 1981: 8) [‘I will leave all that has to do with dividing proverbs into all kinds of subclasses like proverbs, sayings, phrases, comparisons, etc., to those who don’t have anything else to do’]. However, for researchers some etic definition of the concept “proverb” is necessary in order to recognize a proverb in speech or text, as Lauri Honko (1989: 18–19) has pointed out. For contemporary research into proverbs, it has to be decided if a part of a traditional proverb is enough to make a sentence a proverb also for etic use. If so, it has to be clarified if the beginning of the sentence is required or some key words are enough to make a sentence a proverb. Anyhow,

nowadays the concept “proverb” is most often used in the meaning “proverb and proverbial expression” both in emic and etic language. This follows the international tendency in paremiology. However, it may be considered “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” (Honko 1989: 14).

The concept “proverb” has never been defined to perfection; it has been seen as too difficult a task, as there are no particular features that could indicate to us that a sentence is a proverb (Dundes 1981: 44). The problem of the challenge of definition is not new or specific to either traditional or modern proverbs. As Wolfgang Mieder (1993: 18) notes, it is obvious that the problem of defining a proverb is not new; the need to define it is as old as interest in it. He suggests it may be best to agree with Archer Taylor (1981: 6), who stated that “an incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not”. Since the 1970s researchers have been addressing the need to revise the proverb classification and the definition of the proverb genre based on the structure or form of the expression. Nowadays attempts to create a definition are most often directed to a specific language or cultural area. (Reznikov 2009: 4–5, 177–179.) For example, Mieder, one of the leading contemporary folkloristic paremiologists, still defines the proverb as something “handed down from generation to generation” (Mieder 1993: 24; 2004: 3). At the beginning of the twenty-first century proverbs in Finnish (and the same goes for many other languages too) are not primarily transmitted either orally or from one generation to another, but rather in written form (in written colloquial texts or in literature) and they are quite often used within one generation only. In the handbook of proverbs Mieder writes: “The definition of proverb has caused scholars from many disciplines much chagrin over the centuries.” He goes on to refer to Archer Taylor’s statement: “a definitive definition of the genre is an impossibility”. (Mieder 2004: 2–3.) Time demands changes, and new concepts and phenomena arise. Nearly everybody knows and uses proverbs. Those who study them are familiar with the concept and phenomenon. However, all this is done without being able to briefly and clearly define what a proverb is. This can be called the paradox of the proverb. It seems that scholars focusing on proverbs around the world will continue to find their own working definitions (Mieder 1993: 18):

[The proverb] is generally understood to epitomize simplicity and common sense, but it turns out to be both complex and hard to define. Although most people can list many examples of proverbs, few can accurately define what makes them proverbial. Scholars have discussed proverbs for hundreds of years, and hundreds of different definitions have been advanced, making it impossible to provide even a cursory summary of them. (Lau *et al.* 2004: 2.)

It may, however, be possible to find some commonly accepted attributes connected with the concept of “proverb”. Firstly, we need to accept the hypothesis that some linguistic features that are fundamental to proverbs must exist. The conditions that are needed for a sentence to be accepted

as a proverb in etic language must be itemized. Secondly, it should be known which of the features combined with the proverb are to be viewed as necessary premises, and which as sufficient ones, as well as which of them are enough to make a sentence a “proverb” (see also Hasan-Rokem 1982: 18–19). However, the features cannot be universal because even if paremiology focuses on proverbs, the facultative needs differ from each other. Aspects such as currency, tradition and familiarity have been taken as necessary ingredients for a proverb, yet the definition of the concept “proverb” has never focused only on these features. Nevertheless, they could seem attractive to use, as these are traits that can be quantitatively measured and used to verify the findings. Both Mieder (1994: 298) and Grzybek (1987: 73) consider frequency and general acceptance of the proverb necessary for it to be regarded as a part of folklore. The familiarity and frequency together form grounds for an expression to become traditional in the sense of typical and usual, either in the past or present. It is not entirely convincing that the demand for measured frequency does justice to modern proverbs, particularly in a small linguistic and cultural area like that of the Finnish language and culture. The familiarity of the proverb may be a more useful characteristic to focus on than mere frequency. Familiar items may or may not be frequent, but unfamiliar items cannot be frequently used.

Grzybek (1987: 40; 2012) views verified frequency at a particular time followed by frequency (= currency) over a given period as an indispensable premise for an utterance to be considered a linguistic cliché that may become a proverb. No doubt it is true that those forms of folklore as well as the forms of proverbs which do have utility value in contemporary lifestyle will remain. The difficulty is that when collecting contemporary proverbial expressions, we cannot know which of them will endure. It also means that there ought to exist a clear and ready-made understanding of the proverb, including old traditional, contemporary modern and future proverbs. The existing proverb definitions, when not allowing for the inclusion of “potentially-to-become-proverbs” (Grzybek 2011), do not support research that considers proverbs in present-day contexts. In vernacular language the Finnish proverb genre has expanded and found a new form when broadened from oral tradition to colloquial written language (as happened for example also with legends, on which see Kaarina Koski, this volume). Modern proverbs are to be accepted as potential ones even if the frequency is not definite nor the distribution verified. Otherwise the last acceptable and frequency-measured Finnish proverbs would be the traditional ones in the published collections including Finnish proverbs up to World War II.⁷

Modern proverbs have many names in paremiologic etic language, starting with quasiproverb, proverb parodies, anti-proverb, Antisprichwort, postproverb (Krikmann 1985; Kuusi 1989; Mieder 1993; Raji-Oyelade 2008). Other expressions for modern proverbs can also be found, such as alteration, fake proverb, hoax proverb, mock proverb, modification, mutation, occasional proverb, perverb, portmanteau proverb, pseudo-proverb, transformation, variant and variation (Grzybek 2012: 139), as well as fractured proverbs, proverb innovations and wisecracks (Litovkina 2011: 87). These are not what we are accustomed to consider as proverbs

in folkloristic paremiology. Even if Mieder's term *Antispruchwort* ['anti-proverb'] has widely been accepted, it may be worth being cautious with this and also with the other concepts presented above, for it is possible that the utterances labelled as anti-, quasi-, pseudo- or fake some decades ago are now more like modern proverbs with a hint of traditionality. We do not know what will happen to the proverbs in the future. In everyday use, a proverb survives as long as it is referenced. This means that when looking for proverbs in present-day contexts, we have to search both for traditional and shortened ones as well as references to known proverbs.

Some Features Connected with the Concept of the Proverb in Finnish

The "Finnish proverb" can be understood as a short, independent statement, which is or has been familiar within a frame of time and place. The traditional proverb has been and may still be used in vernacular language, and this applies too to its modern counterpart. To be a proverb, a statement must be relatively familiar among the general public. When a proverb is used, the authority of the earlier proverb speaker may be present too. The presence of the earlier authority has been verified within pedagogical discourse (Briggs 1988; Granbom-Herranen 2008). However, this is an unclear statement in the urban tradition, which is not pedagogically oriented. In any case, the earlier speaker does not have to come from the distant past. The earlier speaker is somebody who has used the proverb but this has nothing to do with the inventor of the proverb.

Proverbs have been viewed as anonymous units (Harris-Lopez 2003: 105); a proverb is not supposed to be invented by a person with a name. As Shirley Arora (1994: 5) puts it when talking about Yoruba proverbs, they belong "to the anonymous past, the anonymous folk". This does not mean that all proverbs arose anonymously. The proverb is something that has been invented and used, and this is how it has become a part of vernacular language. 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, but the circumstances make the proverb widespread and well known (Taylor 1981: 3–8). Nowadays this process is fast and sometimes possible to track.

Modern proverbs are not necessarily anonymous in origin and they do not always come from the unknown past. There are many proverbs whose origins were known at some point, but were then forgotten over time. The proverb is always invented by somebody, as he or she has the idea of putting it in a statement. The circumstances bound up with the concept of historically anonymous expression have changed; thanks to fast communication, in many cases it is possible today to identify the "first" user of the 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. For example, among Finnish traditional proverbs there are some

that originate in fairly recent poetry. *Kell' onni on, se onnen käteköön* ['He 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 often people do not know its origin.

Besides traditional proverbs, there are modern ones whose origins are known. Among contemporary modern proverbs we can mention, for example, former Finnish prime minister Harri Holkeri's *minä juon nyt kahvia* ['I'm drinking coffee'⁸] from 1990. Holkeri as prime minister participated in a big meeting where the press wanted to get an interview from him. He felt disturbed and did not want to talk, and to all the questions he answered only: *Minä juon nyt kahvia*. (MTV3 7.8.2011.)⁹ The response spread immediately via the media and afterwards the utterance came to denote superiority towards whoever dared to disturb someone above them.¹⁰ Another is former prime minister Paavo Lipponen's *karavaani kulkee* ['the caravan goes on'], which is from the proverb *Koirat haukkuvat, mutta karavaani kulkee* ['Dogs are barking, but the caravan goes on']. The newspaper text in example (1) refers to what former Prime Minister Holkeri had said about drinking coffee some ten years before. The journalist wants to point out that Lipponen did not and was not going to comment and thus was not going to cooperate with the press:¹¹

(1) Omien rivien repeämistä Lipponen ei juuri kommentoinut. "Karavaani kulkee", Lipponen sanoi ja lähti hakemaan kahvia. (HS 17.3.2001)

Lipponen did not say much about the division inside his own ranks. "The caravan goes on", said Lipponen and went to get coffee.

One of the best-known sources for modern proverbs is the former ski-jumper Matti Nykänen. 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. Long lists of them have been published on various internet sites,¹² and some of them have become commonly used proverbs, such as "fifty-sixty". In an interview, Nykänen estimated his chances in a competition and presumably meant to answer "fifty-fifty" – which Finns commonly use in English to denote the percentage of even chances – but ended up with "fifty-sixty" (Mattinykanen.net). "Fifty-sixty" is now frequently used among Finns as a reference to uncertain chances. People implicitly refer to Nykänen with these new proverbs by deliberately adopting his linguistic or logical errors, saying "fifty-sixty" instead of "fifty-fifty", and similarly "so not" instead of "so what", "up yours" instead of "up to you" and "bon voyage" instead of "deja-vu". Other popular Nykänen-based sayings include *Elämä on laiffii* ['Life is life'] (see Granbom-Herranen 2013b) and *Elämä on ihmisen parasta aikaa* ['Life is a person's best time'] (Mattinykanen.net).

When a proverb is seen as a short unit, some common features behind the proverb performance in the verbal form and colloquial written language

become quite obvious. Firstly, the performer and the audience have to share some common knowledge about the past in order to be able to connect the message to the activity.¹³ Secondly, when focusing on the features of the proverb in everyday communication, we can see that there are no fundamental differences between the oral use of proverbs and their use in colloquial written language. The presentational feature does not disappear when proverbs are moved to new surroundings, from speech to colloquial written language: the proverb is a fixed part of the event; it is intended to be associated with the situation; there is an expected foundational meaning behind the proverb;¹⁴ the use of the proverb is meaningful in a particular context and it is used in order to be assertive (Briggs 1985: 798–802).

Finnish Proverbs in Oral Tradition and Literary Use

Every folkloristic item has some special value and all the genres have their value-laden orientations (Hanks 1987: 671). In Finnish history the interest in folklore and language in the nineteenth century paved the way for the folkloristic research for quite a long period (Granbom-Herranen 2012). The ideas from that time can be anchored in seventeenth-century Finland as well as in the Reformation. These eras were significant for the beginning of folkloristic activities and have an impact even on contemporary folkloristics. All this gives a special status to traditional Finnish proverbs. Just like proverbs elsewhere, Finnish proverbs have an as it were sacrosanct label (e.g. Mieder 1993: 36). Very often proverbs are bound up with the history of a nation, as is clear also in Hakamies's article elsewhere in this volume. Finnish proverbs are linked to Finnishness as a national identity and the shared cultural frame of reference that such identity entails, which can thus be considered part of the value of proverbs in some contexts of use – i.e. as an expression which connects the user with the group that uses the folklore.

One of the definitions of the proverb used in contemporary Finnish folkloristics (Apo 2001: 338) relies on that of Charles Briggs (1988: 132–133), which states that a proverb is a short expression that is common among the folk. The meanings of “people” and “folk” have changed with time and the concept “folk” can refer to the total population of a country, or to a part of the population that is defined by their language or social status. As Alan Dundes (1980) has put it: “Who are the folk?” when going on with the discussion started in 1893 if not even earlier (Jacobs 1893). Nowadays in folkloristics as well as in paremiology the concept “folk” has the meaning “a group of people who share something in common” (Honko 1998: 56).

Differentiating between proverbs in oral tradition and in literature has been easy when looking at the pre-World War II era in Finland; prior to the twentieth century in Finland the main spoken language was Finnish although it was rarely the written language. The written standard Finnish language was developed for a particular use: in the beginning it was the language of the Bible (seventeenth century) and it was also used in order to teach the common people to read. In the nineteenth century, written Finnish was needed for official use in statutes, and later, chiefly in the

twentieth century, written Finnish was also used in newspapers. (Häkkinen 1994: 11–17; Laine 2002: 17; also Stark 2006: 22, 34.)

As mentioned above, one of the root differences between oral and written uses of proverbs is that the proverbs in Finnish in the nineteenth century were mostly used in speech, as being a part of the language of the underprivileged majority. Proverbs had an important role as informal knowledge compared to written information. (Granbom-Herranen 2008: 25–26, 36–39, 106–107; 2011b: 169.) The change from oral to literate society has not been just an “event” (Badiou 2009) but a longer process. This process, for proverbs, is different in oral use and in literate contexts. For literate and literary use, proverbs are taught and learned – the influence of school and teachers can be seen. Because they are a part of learning, there is also the matter of the right and wrong ways of using and understanding proverbs. Translations are needed in literature when using proverbs, which assumes some kind of universalism and using the ground meaning of the proverb. In ordinary life, the interpretation of a proverb is a matter of situational and individual experience. The meanings of proverbs in emic use rely on combinations of socio-cultural contexts, people, emotions and information in various situations. Nowadays the use of proverbs with an oral background and those from written sources has been merged, especially in colloquial written language. At the same time proverbs from literary sources have been in use in the vernacular language.

Nevertheless, today the proverb is used in spoken Finnish in much the same way as in the colloquial written language of the media, everyday political rhetoric, mass media or the internet. These days, the native Finnish-speaking population in Finland can read and write Finnish. This has changed the position of proverbs in Finnish and may be the explanation for the similarities between the use of proverbs both in the spoken language and in written colloquial form. In its entirety, oral and written communication has become more and more similar in many ways. (Granbom-Herranen 2011a: 289.) When defining the concept of proverb, significant changes between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries have occurred in the daily lives of Finnish people, as well as in the environment in which Finnish proverbs are used.

Finnish Proverbs in the Frame of the Emic–Etic Discussion

The concept of “proverb” in emic language differs from that used in academic studies – the etic language. One of the most amusing descriptions of emic and etic concepts can be found in J. R. R. Tolkien’s novel *The Lord of the Rings*, when two hobbits meet a living tree, an Ent. Both the Ent and the hobbits give two names for themselves. The first is what they call themselves and the other is how outsiders have named them. (Tolkien 1967: 84–85.) This is what happens with the concept of “proverb”. The group has a name for the utterance that is more like a phenomenon. The group uses these expressions, names them proverbs and is somehow aware what using and hearing a proverb means. The outsider who needs expressions not for use

but for study as concepts or phenomena gives different names to them, classifies and categorizes them.

Kenneth Pike (1954: 8) was the first to elaborate the distinction between “emic” and “etic” in the 1950s. The dichotomy of the emic and etic in language use can be handled in various ways, as we can see in the discussion between Marvin Harris and Pike. The biggest difference becomes evident in etic interpretations and their justification. According to Pike (1990a: 71–72), the etic approach offers an opportunity for a global perspective and minimizes practical difficulties with research resources, while Harris (1990b: 214) points out the observers’ inability to connect all that is significant to an activity. The discussion derives from Harris’s and Pike’s worldviews. Top put it briefly, Pike relies on theism and brings in the insight into the given and the right, whereas Harris as a naturalist relies more on cultural materialism and evolutionistic theory (Harris 1990b: 206; Headland 1990: 14; Pike 1990b: 186). As a matter of fact, they are very much of the same opinion regarding the emic. After the conversation between Harris and Pike, emic and etic have from time to time become a topical issue (see also Hakamies, this volume). In terms of paremiology, we can glean from this discussion that both the name of the proverb genre and the concept of proverb can be, have been and still are defined in emic as well as in etic language.

Research ought to obtain both emic and etic knowledge, which in the proverb genre means both emic and etic concepts of the proverb (Lett 1990: 132; Jardine 2004: 270). The presupposition is that researchers both understand the languages and are aware of the meanings that the users of tradition give to the utterances, actions, phenomena and so on. It is possible to understand the language but the tacit knowledge involved therein may remain unattainable (Jardine 2004: 263). This applies to one’s own culture in another era as well as foreign cultures, both in the past and present. The identification of a “proverb” is based on the assumption of socio-cultural knowledge but it is much easier to recognize the cultural connection in place than in time. When talking about Finnish proverbs, the question of emic versus etic concepts and interpretations cannot be passed over, as the foundations of the contemporary emic concept of the Finnish proverb lie in the etic concept of proverb from earlier times that also had connections as a concept with older emic terms. Most of the etic definitions are used in order to find out what the research subject actually is. The classification of Finnish proverbs and the proverb genre was mostly grounded in the existing folklore forms in the first half of the twentieth century and derives from the 1950s (Kuusi 1954: 7). It consolidates proverbs proper (*sananlasku*) – whole sentences with an independent thought – and sayings (*puheenparsi*) – smaller units conforming to the context in which they appear – into a larger category (*sananparsi*), which is also translated as “proverb” in English. This is confusing, especially when this categorization of proverbs is familiar only to Finnish paremiologists. For them it is complicated but somehow understandable, but difficulties are bound to be encountered when attempting to go from this system to address the Finnish concept of “proverb” in other languages when two of these terms are translated with the same English word.

If the language and proverbs are not understood as a part of culture, it is possible to conclude that some nations or ethnic groups do not have proverbs, as for example in the 1960s it was assumed that proverbs exist everywhere except among Inuits, most of the American Indians, and Pacific and Siberian peoples (Kuusi 1985: 82). Proverbs may exist in every language, even if they are called something else or they do not follow the same format as those defined in Western Europe and North America during the last 200–400 years. This leads to the question “what kind of oral tradition are we seeking when we speak about the existence of the proverb?” (Hakamies, this volume, p. 313).

For the everyday use of the concept “proverb” it does not help that Harris (1990a: 77) and Pike (1990b: 193) agree in one point: emic can become etic and etic can become emic. As Nick Jardine (2004: 275) formulates it: “Etics without emics is empty, emics without etics blind.” Dan Ben-Amos (1976a) talks about ethnic and analytic genres that are much the same as the genres with emic and etic definitions. He argues that the definition of ethnic genres (emic) is directed toward communication and the analytic ones (etic) toward text organization. The point is that the ethnic genres are real and the analytic genres abstract. They are both needed, but to model different things.

In etic language and in dictionaries numerous synonyms and parallel names given to the concept of the proverb can be found: aphorism, axiom, citation, dictum, doctrine, figure of speech, idiom, maxim, metaphor, phrase, quotation, saying, simile and so on (Granbom-Herranen 2010; 2011a). Paremiologists and other researchers use etic-based definitions when the study is connected with structures and typologies. From that point of view the emic-based definitions can be understood more as undefined concepts. The most important ways to refer to proverbs in emic language used in oral and colloquial written languages in both narratives and the media are:

Emic term

1. “is like something” (*on kuin jokin*)
2. “proverb” (*sananalasku*)
3. “phrase” (*fraasi*)
4. “general guide” (*ohje*)
5. “somebody said” (*joku on sanonut*)

Etic meaning

- = figure of speech, metaphor, simile
- = dictum, proverb, quotation, saying
- = idiom, phrase
- = axiom, maxim, doctrine
- = aphorism, citation

Although what is meant with the “proverb” (*sananalasku*) is, to a certain extent, clear to the Finnish proverb users, it is not as clear as Mieder and Arora have noted in their proverb materials among the English speakers (Mieder 1993: 36; Arora 1994: 4). Even if it is true that people have a clear idea of what proverbs (*sananalasku*) in emic use are when using the Finnish language, proverb users speculate on the name of the concept, wondering if it is right to say *sananalasku* or *sananparsi* (both mean “proverb” in English), concepts for etic use. In any case, there prevails some uncertainty regarding all the etic concepts of short folklore forms. Both František Čermák (2005) and Risto Järv (2009) have pointed out that it is obvious that users of proverbs cannot always identify proverbs or distinguish between proverbs

and other proverbial expressions. The question is whether they should be able to do that.

For example, during the Europhras 2008 congress in Finland, the biggest Finnish daily newspaper published an article under the heading *Krokotiilin kyynelitä itketään ympäri maailmaa* [‘Crocodile tears are wept all over the world’] (HS 17.8.2008), for which a journalist had interviewed professors Jarmo Korhonen, Mieder and Gyula Paczolay about proverbs and phrases. At the end of the article, readers were invited to send in phrases and proverbs they used in their everyday speech. The quality and quantity of the material that the newspaper received implied an emic concept of proverb, as it consisted of all kinds of comments, sayings, poems, citations, traditional proverbs, phrases, short stories and modern proverbs. (HS material; Granbom-Herranen 2011a: 286.) The same phenomenon has occurred in the internet conversations when Finnish proverbs were collected on a website called *Suomalaisia sananlaskuja* [‘Finnish proverbs’]. The site administrator explained that:

the [...] endeavour resulted in a random, mixed collection of all kinds of contemporary texts, such as short stories and humorous comments about the former Finnish ski-jumper Matti Nykänen, international citations as well as utterances belonging to old Finnish folk tradition beginning from the citations of *Kalevala*. (*Suomalaisia sananlaskuja*, translated by the author)

According to the site administrator, the biggest problem seemed to be the concept itself, the “Finnish proverb” (*Suomalaisia sananlaskuja*). Both the readers of the newspaper and writers on the internet certainly have a reason to call the expressions they use “proverbs” but the reason cannot be elicited from the texts.

In the Finnish life stories from the early twentieth century (PE85), over 60 different concepts were given as synonyms for the *sananlasku* [‘proverb’], for example *arvo* [‘value’], *neuvo* [‘advice’], *periaate* [‘principle’], *sanonta* [‘saying’], *varoitus* [‘warning’] and *viisaus* [‘wisdom’], as can be seen in example (2). (Granbom-Herranen 2004, appendix 6.) There existed plenty of expressions that from the narrators’ emic point of view were called proverbs (*sananlasku*) and which actually from the etic point of view were something else. This also comes up in contemporary SMS-messages (examples 3 and 4). As synonyms, the narrators used terms such as *sananlasku* [‘proverb’], *puheenparsi* [‘saying’], *Raamatun lause* [‘Bible quotation’], and so on. Likewise, in the life stories there were many utterances that in etic language were proverbs but that the narrators had not labelled as such.

(2) Jos käytti toista hyväkseen, kuului arvostelu: “Hyvä se on vieraal kankul tullee istuija.” – Jos suri juorukellojen puheita, kuului lohdutus: “Kuiva rikka helmast karisoo” sekä “Siel (kuolleina) ovat koht kaik, ampujat sekä kolistajat!” (Moittijat ja pahansuovat). Arvokas elämänohje kätkeytyy sanontaan: “Minkä taakseis paat, sen iestäis löyvät.” (PE85, woman, born 1912.)

If you took advantage of others, you could hear the criticism (*arvostelu*): "It is easy to sit on the fire with someone else's buttock." – If you were sad about somebody spreading gossip, you heard the solace (*lohdutus*): "Dry litter drops from the hem", or "Soon everybody will be there (dead), the shooters and the noise makers!" (The faultfinders and the spiteful). A very valuable guideline for life is given in the saying (*sanonta*): "Whatever you put behind you, you'll find in front of you."

(3) Sananlasku: Kyllä Georgiaan nopeasti pääsee mutta sieltä pois tulo on vaikeaa ja vie aikaa. (Jan) (SSS, sent 22.8.2008.)

Proverb: You can get to Georgia fast but coming back from there is difficult and takes time.

(4) Vaikka tuhat ihmistä uskoisi hölynpölyyn, se on silti hölynpölyä. (Kiinalainen sananlasku) (SSS, sent 25.7.2009.)

Even if one thousand people believe in nonsense, it is still nonsense. (Chinese proverb)

Arora (1994: 22–23) does not deny the need to know the criteria by which people in emic language classify proverbs in their own groups, yet she does not consider these sayings to be proverbs in etic use even if the users accept them as such. Mieder stressed in the 1980s that proverb scholars should pay more attention to the present use of proverbs while continuing to tackle the frustrating question of whether a universal etic definition of the proverb can be found. If some genre definitions have lost their relevance over time, it is not only the question of the genre but also of the users of genre systems (Ben-Amos 1976b: 215). The proverb genre is a tool, not an end in itself, but the genre frames the research and the discipline. If we try to rely on etic definitions in normal everyday communication, speech becomes quite irrelevant and the use of proverbial expressions sounds artificial. However, if we study proverbs in context, the emic view has to be reckoned with. (Mieder 1993: 36; Granbom-Herranen 2004; 2008; 2009.) In everyday life to have an idea of the proverb is in most cases enough for the proverb user. This may be what Taylor (1981: 6) calls an incommunicable quality, which differentiates between a sentence and a proverb. The bedrock for the concept of proverb and the proverb genre should lie in everyday life (emic), not in academic research (etic). As Ben-Amos (1992: 25) has stressed, the basis for the concept of the proverb lies in everyday life in the context where the proverb is used.

Changes in Contexts and Proverbs

Traditional and modern proverbs relate to contemporary lifestyle and everyday communication. The meaning of the concept "proverb" has changed because of all the changes that have occurred both in the use of proverbs and in the context of everyday life. Firstly, traditional proverbs seek out new forms, as in example (5), and they appear in combinations, as seen

in example (6). They are found in all kinds of contexts, in which they may gain extraordinary connections when compared with the assumed standard proverbial interpretation and from the etic point of view, as in example (7). Moreover, new proverbs are created by using existing ones and traditional proverbs are transformed into new ones, sometimes as parodies of the old tradition, as in example (8). The most common terms are “antiproverb” and “proverb parody” (Grzybek 2012: 140). When looking for proverbs in speech and in colloquial written texts, we seek for proverbs, shortened proverbs, and references and allusions to proverbs. This is related to the fact that traditional proverbs seek out new forms, proverbs are combined with other existing proverbs and modern proverbs are created by using the traditional ones. They have been called “proverb blendings” or “spliced proverbs” (Grzybek 2012: 141). Traditional proverbs are also found in new connections, and old proverbs are transformed into parodies of the old tradition, as in the example (9). This does not always gain the acceptance of the audience, as is seen in the example (10), which is feedback for the previous example. The genre of proverb may be in need of reassessment.

(5) Traditional proverbs seek out new forms.

Oli se vaan aika takero poliisi kun uukkarii tehdes ojaan ajo. Tosin inhimillistä tämäkin. – kaikille sattuu, jotka jotain viel yrittävät tehdä. (SSS, sent 5.9.2006.)

What a clumsy policeman, who tried to make a turn in his car and ended up in a ditch. This is really human. – Accidents will happen to all who still try to do something.

The expression *kaikille sattuu* [‘accidents will happen’] refers to the proverb *Tekeväälle sattuu* [‘Accidents will happen to one who does something’] especially as the sentence goes on with *yrittävät tehdä* [‘try to do something’]. Anyhow, the one used in the text is not a fixed form but a situation-related application.

(6) Traditional and/or new expressions /proverbs are combined, or proverb blending.

Suhteellisuudentaju hukassa, viikkotolkulla kohkataan tekstiviesteistä ja kivien heittäjiä piisaa! Nimimerkki: Heittäjätkö pulmusia? (SSS, sent 28.3.2008.)

The sense of proportion is lost. Week after week people fuss about SMS-messages and stones are thrown! – Pseudonym: The throwers are snow buntings?

The proverb in this SMS-message is from the Bible: *Se, joka on synnitön, heittäköön ensimmäisen kiven* [‘Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone’] and it is combined with a well-known phrase in Finnish, *Puhdas kuin pulmunen* [‘Clean as a snow bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*)’]. The phrase in itself refers to the image of the bird (white and clean), not to its real colour (black and white).

(7) Traditional proverbs are to be found in new connections.

Miksi lähettää suomalaisjoukkoja muihin maihin, jos ministeri itse katsoo paremmaksi pysyä hotellissa vain poltettavien renkaiden takia – oma koti kullakin kallis. (SSS, sent 23.1.2007.)

Why send Finnish troops to other countries, if a minister finds it better to stay in a hotel just because of burning tyres – one's own home is worth gold.

This message is a comment on a situation when a Finnish minister was in a war zone and stayed in a hotel. It is unclear here what the "home" is – Finland or the hotel.

(8) New proverbs are created by using traditional ones.

Salossa on kiitettävästi keräyspisteitä jätetpaperille, joten ei pitäisi eikä saisi heittää taloyhtiön roskikseen. – Jotakin tolkkua. (SSS, sent 30.1.2008.)

In [the town] Salo, we have many recycling points for collecting paper, so that it should not and must not be thrown in the housing association rubbish bins – Some moderation.

Jotakin tolkkua points to the traditional proverb, *Kohtuus kaikessa* ['Moderation in all things']. The modern version would be *Kohtuus kaikessa, pullo päivässä* ['Moderation in all things, just a bottle a day'].

(9) Traditional proverbs are transformed, sometimes as parodies of the old tradition.

Kiittämätön, tiesitkö, että kissa kiittämättä elää, viisas koirakin oppii kiittämään. Ottakaamme siis oppia koirasta! Lahjan antajalle jää kiitoksesta hyvä mieli. Jep (SSS, sent 15.1.2008.)

Ungrateful, did you know that a cat lives without thanks, a wise dog learns to thank. Let us learn from the dog! The one who gives a present gets a good feeling. – Yeah.

He or she got an answer immediately:

(10) Kiittämätön. Kissa elää kiitoksella, koira pään silityksellä! JEPJEP (SSS, sent 24.1.2008.)

Ungrateful. A cat lives on thanks, a dog by someone stroking its head! – Yeah, yeah.

Secondly, everyday Finnish communication is no longer the same as it was when the study of proverbs began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵ Everyday communication no longer uses only the spoken language. A significant part of the interaction between people takes place in written form. Since the seventeenth century in sermons in Finnish, and since the late nineteenth century also in political speeches, proverbs have been primarily been part of spoken rather than written discourse, even when sermons and political speeches were first written for oral delivery.

Proverbs occur individually only in dictionaries and in proverb lists. In other circumstances a proverb hardly appears alone. A proverb is always combined with something that is happening at the same time.¹⁶ This involves both oral use and written texts in colloquial style. It is difficult to imagine a pure proverb performance, either in an oral or in colloquial written form. Proverbs are as a rule used in discussion and are not isolated from the rest of the speech context except by some introductory comment or verb, a proverb marker. In Honko's (1989: 26) diagram of the distribution of narrative genres along axes of factual–fabulated and profane–sacred, proverbs can easily appear in any part of the table. Following the folkloristic genre division based on action (Abrahams 1976), it is obvious that proverbs are situated in the conversational genre. Nowadays proverbs also appear in an urban context using modern media (such as legends: see Koski, this volume). In contemporary proverbs, context discussion can substitute for storytelling, fantasy literature for making the invisible believable, popular songs for folk songs, aphorisms for folk poems (*kansanruno*) and cartoons for anecdotes and jokes. Proverbs can be found in all of these connections. They can also occur in public communicative functions, for example in street art and advertisements. We can think of situations in which a legend, song or ritual is presented as an independent performance programme, or as a chapter in a book. With proverbs this is not possible; the vernacular use of a proverb needs some sort of framework.

Thirdly, people who use the proverbs are rather approached as a group than a folk. The mysterious Finnish folk, a notion that arose in the time of Finnish Romanticism and national romantic ideas in the nineteenth century, does not exist any more – it may never have existed. Nowadays a folkloristic group can be defined by social status, profession, ethnic background, language, domicile or whatever connects people, so it is possible to talk about some kind of membership. (Honko 1998: 1; Harris-Lopez 2003: 105.) Today we have to decide how to adapt to the issue of internet communities and if these communities can be counted as “folk”. We have to consider if people communicating via reading newspapers and writing letters meant to be published constitute a group. Forms of communication have changed and are still changing.

Fourthly, it is not clear what can be expected to survive when the environment changes, but the content of speech stays unchanged. The environment and the technology used to transmit folkloristic traditions, such as proverbs, have been changing. Radio and television have had their impact on the folklore genre, and the photocopier is an example of technology that made the beginning of Xerox-lore possible. Personal computers and e-mail as well as the internet have recreated the proverb genre. Modern cameras, mobile phone cameras and video equipment have inspired recordings of folkloristic items such as proverbs in graffiti. Virtual reality is a possible world for folklore. (Harris-Lopez 2003: 109–114.) This has also awakened doubts about the origin of tradition, and already by the early 1980s the idea of computer-generated proverbs had arisen (Grzybek 1987: 73). However, folklorists themselves have adapted many of these technological advances such as the tape recorder and photographs as the first wave of technological

applications and videos and computers as the second one. These are used in order to collect material more easily, quickly and effectively than before (Harris-Lopez 2003: 112). This is something that has been easy to accept. The change of the forms of tradition and the way it is transmitted has not been as easy to notice and to adapt to.

Finally, genres as well as typological systems and classifications have been and in many cases still are dominant within paremiologic studies. They have provided frameworks for both the study of folkloristic paremiology and for organizing proverb collections in various archives, and they have been built in order to take into account all that may be of interest to paremiologists. The typologies and classification systems focusing on proverbs and proverbial expressions have mostly been considered as givens, even in the twentieth century. (Bauman 1992: 53–56.) In most folkloristic sectors this is no longer topical. However, in paremiology the proverb genre with its sub-genres has been taken as a classificatory category or, alternatively, it has been brought into discourse as a permanent phenomenon (Kapalo 2011: 80). The classifications cannot be bypassed without any attention if the focus is on proverbs. In etic use, genres serve a dual purpose: to provide a system of classification and to give a conceptual framework for articulating the characteristics of components within a classification.

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 the proverb has remained unchanged but the meaning has become different. Two examples of interpretations of this proverb in narratives are presented in examples 11.i–ii (PE85, archive material). The proverb received new interpretations and meanings, of which three examples from 2000 are presented in examples (11.iii–v) (Granbom-Herranen 2013a: 381–382), and in 2009, the proverb was found in the contemporary material (SSS):

(11) (i) [...] monia vanhoja ihmisiä -30 luvulla jotka, kun yhteen sattuivat, muistelivat omaa lapsuuttaan ja nuoruuttaan ja ennenkaikkea sitä, kuinka kasvatus oli kovaa enimmäkseen. Vanhempien sana oli laki eikä sitä pyritty kumoamaan ja kuka siihen rohkeni ruveta, sai kuulla, sitä kuusta kuuleminen, jonka juurella asunto. (PE85, woman, born 1922.)

In the 1930s, many elderly people, when they got together, would recall their childhood and youth and, in particular, how hard was the upbringing for most. The parents' word was law and wasn't argued against, and whoever was brave enough to start doing so would hear, you have to listen to the advice given by the spruce you live next to.

(ii) Kun työtä tehtiin se täytyi silloin tehdä hyvin että. Sitä sitten Sai vastakin tehtäväksi. Ja sehän se oli Että työtä kun teki niin eli. [...] Raamattuun Kirjojen kirjaan vetoamalla siinä ohje-nuoraa kaikissa elämän vaiheissa Vetoamalla Vanhoihin sanontoihin. Sitä Kuusta Kuuleminen jonka Juurella asunto. (PE85, man, born 1937.)

Work had to be done so well that you'd get more later. You'd only earn your living when working. [...] The Bible, the book of books, offers that advice; so do old sayings such as You have to listen to the advice given by the spruce you live next to.

(iii) Jos on töissä, niin täytyy pitää työnantajan puolta. (Q-2000, man, born 1938.)

If you're a worker, you are to side with your employer.

(iv) Tämä on muistutus siitä, että meillä kaikilla on juuremme jossakin, eikä niitä tulisi unohtaa. (Q-2000, woman, born 1952.)

It's a reminder. We all have roots somewhere and they shouldn't be forgotten.

(v) Jos aikoo säilyttää työnsä ja tulonsa, on parasta olla ääneen puhuessaan samaa mieltä: Kenen leipää syöt, sen lauluja laulat. (Q-2000, woman, born 1955.)

If you want to keep a job and income, it's better when speaking to have the same opinion as one's employer: Whose bread you eat, his or her songs you sing.

(vi) Puolueiden tukeminen on väärin. Ehkä ei juridisesti, mutta moraalisesti, samalla tavalla kuin muukin lahjonta. – Sitä kuusta kuuleminen [...] (SSS sent 16.6.2009.)

It is wrong to support political parties, perhaps not in a juridical sense but in a moral sense, as similarly, all bribery is wrong. – You have to listen to the advice given by the spruce [...]

The infinity and inexhaustibility of the proverb is, on the one hand, connected with its meaning. In a new place and time the proverb can gain new interpretations. On the one hand, the proverb genre is very constricted, while on the other hand, it is boundless, as the boundlessness of proverbs is linked with the capability to transform. Nevertheless, despite many changes in culture, proverbs are still used; they have rhetorical power and they can be used in argumentation. The use of the proverb is linked up to worldview and the present situation.

Conclusions

In Finnish paremiology, the etic concept "proverb" has been a stable and unchangeable element, unlike the proverb genre itself, which has never been untouchable. When considering the genre, paremiologists have for a couple of centuries created classifications, typologies and groupings, which break apart the proverb genre and then piece it back together in a new order. All this has been done in order to clarify the etic concept of proverb and the proverb genre. Proverb definitions are built into the classifications, as the need to organize proverbs sets requirements on proverb definitions. Some classification systems are needed to study proverbs as well as to organize proverb corpuses into databases and to manage materials in archives. The etic classifications are relevant to specifying the genre that, for its part, is necessary for two reasons. The research has to be able to identify the focus of the work and classifications are essential for managing archives. However, proverbs are used in emic surroundings for communication and in spite of

the genre definitions in etic format, people live, use and are allowed to use proverbs as they see fit. In the emic context the proverb genre of the twenty-first century cannot be the same as it was in the nineteenth century.

It does not matter whether definition is necessary; the conclusion is the same: it is difficult to do it perfectly. It has not been possible to create one common and universal definition for the concept of "proverb" or for the genre of the proverb to be applied to both oral and written usages as well as to all other disciplines. The contemporary proverb genre should not be simply a matter of introducing some new parts into an old system, but rather changing the limits of the genre and perhaps compiling some new features to look for when approaching the phenomenon from a novel point of view. Neither genres nor concepts need to cover everything everywhere. To conclude, in paremiology there exists a need for two kinds of etic definitions of the proverb: folkloristic and linguistic. If genre is a restricted phenomenon, it can also be controlled. As circumstances and lifestyles are changing more and more rapidly, the emic concepts such as proverbs, including their meanings, cannot be the everlasting elements either for academic use or for ordinary people in everyday life. Genres are cultural products in a time-and-space society and as time wears on, new concepts as well as genres and subgenres may be needed.

If the changes in etic definitions of both the proverb and the proverb genre are seen as developmental steps towards emic definitions, it is possible to state without any hesitation that the proverb genre is very much alive. It can be concluded that modern proverbs are a part of living tradition and proverbs are alive as long as they are used or referred to in everyday communication. Proverbs, both traditional and modern ones, still have their place in urban surroundings and new technology. Traditional proverbs are changing, they are being reconstructed and revaluated. At the same time, modern proverbs are constructed or some of them just spring up. Many of the modern proverbs will become traditional after some decades, but we do not know which ones. The modern proverb is often created by somebody, by an unknown or a well-known person. If we have regimented demands for frequency, distribution and anonymity of origin, it may be noticed that only traditional proverbs exist and the part of the proverb genre that deals with modern proverbs is more like an empty folder.

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NOTES

- 1 Paremiology is the study of proverbs and proverbial expressions, which focuses on the definition, form, structure, style, content, function, meaning and value of proverbs. Paremiography focuses on the collecting and classifying of proverbs. (Mieder 2004: xii.)
- 2 In this article “concept” is understood to express an idea or abstract principle which is the conjunction of all the characteristic features of something. Here the “idea” is an opinion or belief about something is or should be. The “term” is a more restricted designation, meaning a word or an expression. As a concept “proverb” is an artefact, including the end product and the process behind it.
- 3 Otherwise in the text the concept “traditional” is to be understood in the meaning of typical and usual either in the past or present. (“Finnish traditional proverbs” in end note 9).
- 4 The discussion of culture specifies concepts of proverbs; see Hakamies, this volume.
- 5 Examples of the most recent Finnish academic writings using proverbs can be found in Granbom-Herranen 2010b: 216. The Finnish folkloristic dissertations focusing on paremiology up to 2012 are in Granbom-Herranen 2012: 180.
- 6 Traditionality is still seen as a notary fact; it is a well-known fact that both academics and the public are supposed to know.
- 7 Up to World War II, Finnish proverbs were collected and their distribution was mapped within the framework of the Historical-Geographic Method (also known as the Finnish Method). Most of the traditional Finnish proverb types are included in published collections edited by R. E. Nirvi and Lauri Hakulinen (1948), Matti Kuusi (1953) and Kari Laukkanen and Pekka Hakamies (1978). The concept of the proverb in Finland has primarily been advanced to coincide with the types and structures presented in the aforementioned publications.
- 8 Literally, “I drink now coffee”.
- 9 The history of Finland has left coffee with a special status in Finnish everyday life. Coffee breaks are mentioned even in the Law for Occupational Safety (law 23.8.2002/738), and in field-specific instructions (*Työturvallisuuslaki* 31§); see also Nieminen & Puustinen 2014.
- 10 This is especially associated with journalists. It was only some years before (1984) when President Mauno Koivisto clashed with the media and called journalists lemmings (*Lemmus Lemmus*) (Kansallisbibliografia).
- 11 Texts in examples are translated literally by the author. The proverb parallels are not used.
- 12 E.g. Mattinykanen.net; Wikisitaatit (fi.wikiquote.org); Kuuluisa.fi; Angelfire.com.
- 13 However, there are always listeners and readers who are incapable of understanding and/or interpreting proverbs (Ferretti *et al.* 2007; Granbom-Herranen 2008: 184).
- 14 A foundational meaning is a culturally bound standard proverbial interpretation (SPI) that is understood as the universal, “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), universality of features among languages means universal structures, not universal meanings. Also, similarity in intention, at a micro level, does not mean similarity in extension, at a macro level.
- 15 Proverbs have been collected from much earlier times. In Finnish the first collections date from the time when written Finnish was recorded in the sixteenth century (Granbom-Herranen 2012).
- 16 Galit Hasan-Rockem (1982) uses the term “behavioral context”.

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