

**Liisa Granbom-Herranen**  
University of Jyväskylä  
Finland

## **Some Theoretical Aspects of Processes Behind the Meanings of Proverbs and Phrases**

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the process that makes proverbial utterances meaning-carrying units. The aim is to show why proverbial utterances are used and understood in everyday speech, focusing particularly on their context-connected aspects. Context is understood as a cultural matter, as a matter of an individual experience, and as offering a frame for interpreting an utterance. The examples of Finnish utterances included are taken from both the past and present.

The theoretical background of this study stands on the view that language structures reality. Grice's cooperative principles, Frege's deviation of lexical and implicated meaning, and Hintikka's and Sandu's manner of understanding possible world semantics create a framework for understanding the process by which utterances become meaning-carrying expressions. In everyday life, proverbs and phrases are relatively permanent expressions but the meaning of an utterance may change when moved from one context to another.

**KEY WORDS:** *proverb, phrase, proverbial utterance, meaning, interpretation*

### **1. Introduction**

This article examines the meanings of proverbs and phrases in everyday use from the perspective of folkloristic paremiology and of the philosophy of language. I aim to clarify the phenomena bound to everyday proverbs and to highlight the nature of proverbs and phrases as carriers of meaning. My focus is on meaning in particular. When considering proverbial utterances in the contexts in which those utterances have been used, it appears obvious that context adds to what is said and understood.

The examples given in this article concern proverbs in particular. The processes of interpretation and the acquirement of meaning become more visible with proverbs in context than equivalent processes with phrases do. Although proverbs are used in the examples, the process with regards to phrases remains the same. The interpretation process is the basis for understanding particular meanings linked to these types of expression. Most of the older and traditional proverbs in context are from the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki; the material consists of life stories concerning everyday life in Finland before World War II (PE85). The examples given of modern proverbs from the beginning of the twenty-first century consist of newspaper material (SSS) and of texts concerning the meaning of proverbs (Q-2000). As my focus is on meaning, the study is based on utterances in my mother tongue, Finnish. All the examples in this text are translations.

## 2. Proverbs and phrases

'Proverb' and 'phrase' are multiform, varying concepts; in principle, a proverb may be a fixed phrase in literature or a part of an oral tradition. A phrase also has two living contexts, a **literal** and an **oral** context. The term 'proverb' has never been defined to perfection because no particular features exist that indicate that a sentence is a proverb (Dundes 1994: 44). The only current consensus focuses on the relative brevity of proverbs and on the traditionality or familiarity of proverbs. I concur with Wolfgang Mieder in his agreement with Archer Taylor's statement that "[...] a definitive definition of the genre is an impossibility" (Mieder 2004: 2-3). The same is true of phrases that are part of figurative speech. This article understands a proverb as a short, independent statement that is or has been familiar within the frame of a particular time and place. A phrase is a construction of a minimum of two words. As phrases, proverbs have a basic form that appears most often in one or more variations. The possibility for variation is larger among proverbs and the most important feature for distinguishing a proverb from a phrase is that a proverb is a statement other than a phrase.

Both proverbs and phrases are signs that connect thinking to emotions and feelings (Bruner 1986: 65), and are a part of language and tightly bound to everyday culture. Inside their own cultural context, it is possible to use proverbs and phrases to handle topics hitherto unknown to

a listener. Traditional proverbs and phrases are still used in everyday language, as are their modern counterparts.

### 3. Contexts

The context remains for all types of situation in which it is possible to use a proverb or a phrase. Context has three dimensions: a situational context, a cultural context, and a research context. Situational context combines the meaning of an utterance with individual experience, while cultural context – such as historical era, geographical area, and language – combines meaning with time and place. Research context has a special feature: both the researcher and the phenomena in question are situated in the same frames of a world, sharing a common comprehension of that world (Kusch 1988: 102–103). It is important to examine how a proverbial utterance is interpreted, how that proverbial utterance receives meaning in the contexts described, and how to describe the process in question. This article understands context as both a cultural matter and as a matter of an individual experience brought into the context of research.

In everyday use, both proverbs and phrases occur orally and in a colloquial written form. Written colloquial language, as – for example – on the internet, in newspapers, and in opinion columns, is part of an everyday context. It is worth noting that in the examples given in this article, the episode of the proverb was just a short moment in the narrator's life or a part of a message to a newspaper editorial. All the contexts are quite small events from the perspective of a lifetime. The presumption is that the events in narrators' life stories are to be believed and the reasons stated for commenting in a newspaper are to be accepted.

The situation differs when utterances occur in literary texts; for example, in novels and speeches. In literature and formal use, proverbs resemble fixed phrases that are most often translated by giving an equivalent expression known in a certain language and cultural area; the same is true of phrases. Also, in this manner, meaning disappears and translation stands on the assumed 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.

The situation supplements words, and words supplement the ongoing action. As the references are events, actions and phenomena, a proverb always has a practical role in all environments (Krikmann 2010: 51; Granbom-Herranen 2008: 223). A speaker and listener participate in the situation with their life experiences, forming the 'micro context', which is a part of a cultural, social, and economical space in a particular era, or the 'macro context.' That space is entitled a 'world.' Around worlds exists a universe one step wider than the macro context. The most important factor, I contend, is **how** a proverb is anchored in those existing worlds. Section 5 – in which I focus on meaning in particular – will examine how the line of meaning is drawn and how a proverb is anchored to its reference.

The context for proverbs and phrases has changed over a period of one century. Everyday communication in Finnish no longer occur using spoken language only: a significant part of interaction between people now takes place in written form. In everyday language, proverbs and phrases now appear in colloquial written language as well as in the oral tradition. Nevertheless, despite many changes in living conditions and everyday practices, proverbs and phrases are still used in colloquial language; in particular, for argumentation in the case of proverbs, or to characterise a situation in the case of phrases (Granbom-Herranen 2008; Baran 2007: 99). Proverbs and phrases only occur alone in dictionaries and hardly ever occur alone in other circumstances. In everyday use, proverbs and phrases are utterances that are always combined with simultaneous action. When focusing on the features of such an utterance in everyday life use, it is easy to notice that no fundamental differences exist between oral use and use in colloquial written language. The presentational characteristic does not disappear when such utterances are moved to new surroundings; namely, from speech to colloquial writing.

#### 4. Interpretation

If proverbs and phrases are understood as fixed utterances, the interpretations of those proverbs and phrases are taught and learned for literature and translation. Moreover, the interpretations and meanings of proverbs and phrases are bound to the SPI. In everyday life however, con-



text offers a frame to an utterance and adds something to what is said. The identification of the SPI stands on an assumption of socio-cultural knowledge even if it is much easier to recognise a cultural connection in place than in time. If utterances are a part of learning, at issue are 'right' and 'wrong' ways of using and understanding proverbs. The influence of teachers, schools, and education is strongly present in the teaching and learning of proverbs. In the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, Finnish proverbs were – researchers report – learnt mostly at school and via literature, which may be one reason why the meanings of Finnish proverbs have been understood as universal phenomena. However, books have been the source for Finnish proverbs to a much smaller extent than has been assumed (Granbom-Herranen 2009b: 86). In everyday use, discussion of the capability to understand proverbs and to understand interpretative possibilities other than one's own is part of a response to the question, 'How do we accept truths besides our own?' The 'right way' to understand proverbs is tied to a demand to understand proverbs as 'civilized' people understand them. 'Civilized' in this case might mean individuals in one's circle, or adults, or the majority, or English speaking people, or Christian people, or whatever else the speaker may decide.

The implicated use of an utterance can be understood as a performance whose aims relate to the performance itself, to ongoing action, and to the words of the utterance. As proverbs and phrases are common knowledge in a society, innovativeness is also included with intention, functioning as a rhetorical tool. Both proverbs and phrases are knowledge anchored in a performance framed by time and place. To understand proverbs, phrases, and their meanings, one should understand the overall context (see Finnegan 1994: 19; Seitel 1994: 136–137). Proverbs and their meanings rely on combinations of socio-cultural contexts, people, emotions, and information in various situations. Nowadays, the use of proverbs with an oral background and proverbs from written sources has merged, particularly in colloquial written language; proverbs have also been utilised in everyday language.

Most often, when a person uses especially a traditional proverb, the authority of the earlier speaker of that proverb is also present. As a meaning-carrying utterance, an expression involves a link to the owner or speaker of the utterance, who is not necessarily the actual user of the utterance, but someone indicated in the beginning of the sentence. A sentence might very often begin, "As my granny says/used to say ..." The

owner in question may also be an abstraction; for example, 'folk' is quite often the declared owner of proverbs, as 'prevalent custom' is frequently the declared owner of phrases. The presence of an earlier authority has been verified in particular within pedagogical discourse (Briggs 1988, Granbom-Herranen 2008); however, the contention that an earlier authority is present is problematic in an urban tradition that is not pedagogically oriented. The user of a proverb is often nowadays an anonymous person. In colloquial written text, in comments on the internet, and in comments published in newspapers, the user of a proverb is typically unknown.

### 5. Various ways of identifying 'the meaning'

The significance of an utterance has three basic starting points. The first is that language is not understood only as an instrument of communication but as connected to thought (Vygotski 1967). The second starting point is Gottlob Frege's (2000) principle of context. Thirdly, in order to be understood and interpreted, an utterance should follow Paul Grice's (1975) 'cooperative principles.' Grice's cooperative principles, Frege's deviation in lexical and implicated meaning, and Jaakko Hintikka's and Gabriel Sandu's (1994) manner of understanding possible world semantics (PSW) create a framework to comprehend the process of how utterances become **meaning-carrying** expressions.

When focusing on language, some special challenges arise, one of which is that language is always defined in a language using language; therefore, all ideas must receive meaning in language before we can use language to define the phenomenon in question (Ricoeur 2005: 149). Language transforms thoughts into spoken or written words. On the other hand, it is impossible to consider things, phenomena, or acts that are not already conceptualised. The importance of understanding the mechanism behind interpretation lies in the fact that the language with proverbial utterances is a part of constructing an individual's social reality. Language is a tool of cultural expression, which controls all the life through its concepts (Devitt & Sterelny 1987: 116–117, 172). To adopt utterances or a system of symbols is to adopt a way of understanding reality.

Frege contends that the meaning of an utterance is definable either by the principle of **contextuality** or by the principle of **compositionality** (Rott 2000: 627). The principle of contextuality states that the meaning of an expression is always bound to the context in which it is used; the

situational or wider context of a sentence gives the meaning of the words. The principle of compositionality requires that the meaning of a sentence arise from the meanings of words and be determined by the meanings of its constituent expressions; the focus is therefore on words and on the interpretations of words (Harman 1975). Even scholars considering the theories of Frege have not been able to tell which principle – contextuality or compositionality – Frege himself preferred (Pelletier 2001). In any case, it is more than questionable to interpret meanings by mixing these principles or changing the focus from one principle to another in one study (Granbom-Herranen 2012).

The use of proverbial expressions is a part of communicative speech that follows Grice's cooperative principles of 'quantity', 'quality', 'relation', and 'manner' (Granbom-Herranen 2008: 174–175). Each category includes maxims at various levels. The 'quantity' category states that a contribution should be as informative as required for the current purpose, but should not be more informative than is required; quantity is related to how much information is provided. The 'quality' category tells us not to say anything we believe to be false or for which we lack adequate evidence: most important is to attempt to keep oneself true when speaking. The category of 'relation' requires that a speech act be relevant; however, the difficulty in this requirement is that relevance is a variable concept. The fourth, the category of 'manner', guides us to avoid obscurity and ambiguity in an expression, and to be brief and orderly; 'manner' is related to well-aimed speech. (Grice 1975: 45–46.) These principles may be violated consciously or subconsciously. When making a pause in the discourse the use of the proverb violates one or more of the above-mentioned categories and as a violating element brings in some new aspects<sup>1</sup>. To say too much or too little constitutes violence against the category of quantity.

Grandpa-41. Cars cannot be paid with the study grant. So those who have a car get money from parents. Everybody does not have the possibility to get the generous support from parents – *pappa betala* ['dad pays']<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Grice's maxims and their violations have also been seen as a possibility in folkloristic research focusing on humour (Krikmann 2004, 88–95).

<sup>2</sup> SSS, sent 2.9.2006. The proverb is *pappa betalar* ['dad pays (for everything)', 'isä maksaa' in Finnish]. Also in Finnish speech the proverb always occurs in Swedish, the Finnish translation is never used. This SMS-message refers to the discourse considering study grant that the state gives in Finland. The proverb refers to Finland-Swedish population and to its possession for example in economic life which status is based on the his-

The category of quality is violated – for example – when a speaker lies or tells something that cannot be true.

Man! That is just red-blooded desire of a normal man. Keep an eye on your wife. She plays away, *ehkä kaipaa "vihreää ruohoa" aidan toisella puolella* [‘might hunger for “greener grass” on the other side of the fence’]. – betrayed woman<sup>3</sup>.

Violence against the category of relevance is linked to events and utterances like in the next example.

*Moni kakku päältä kaunis.* [‘Many cakes look good’]. Cars rust away under the plastic cover. How is it possible to know the conditions of body in modern plastic cars? – Sepi<sup>4</sup>.

Speech behaves ‘against’ the category of manner when a speaker does not voice his or her own opinion but offers one hint after another.

The victims ought to be demanded to be present at a court session on pain of the penalty payment. The victims are nothing less than escaping. – *Silmä silmästä* [‘An eye for an eye’]<sup>5</sup>.

---

tory of Finland. Among Swedish-speaking Finns the standard of living has been, and in many cases still is, higher than among Finnish-speaking Finns. Swedish was the official language until the independence. However, in 1863 it became possible to use also Finnish in official matters focusing on Finland. Only every tenth of ordinary people were Swedish speaker before the World War II (f. ex. Granbom-Herranen 2010a: 105).

<sup>3</sup> SSS, sent 8.9.2006. Actually not a person hungers for grass as cows, horses and other animals do. The sentence is referring to the proverb *Ruoho on vihreämpää aidan toisella puolen* [‘The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence’] and the writer says something that is not true to awake the reader to see the main point of her message. She knows because her husband (if we trust that the pseudonym is telling the truth) has betrayed her with somebody who wanted a new or better company.

<sup>4</sup> SSS, sent 23.12.2006. The cited proverb refers to the traditional Finnish proverb *Moni kakku päältä kaunis, vaan on sillkoa sisältä* [‘Many a cake looks good but the inside is just rubbish’]. When starting the message with a sentence like this, the reader might ask what cakes actually have to do with cars. The proverb in the message is sent when the quality of used cars was topical. The context clarifies the connection. The meaning of the sentence still remains unclear if the reader does not know that the proverb continues with “but”, which stresses the opposite quality of the object.

<sup>5</sup> SSS, sent 2.9.2006. Proverb *Silmä silmästä ja hammas hampaasta* [‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’] in Finnish it is known as the Code of Hammurabi and it is also to be found in Bible, both in The Old and New Testaments in various texts. Actually it does not become clear if the threat in proverb is directed towards the accused person or the victim.

The use of a proverb or phrase violates one or more of the above-mentioned categories and makes an utterance to differ from the ongoing discourse; proverbs and phrases per se also conflict with one or more of Grice's cooperative principles (Granbom-Herranen 2011: 49.) However, the use of a proverb or the proverb itself adds value to a speech event. A conventional meaning consists of common knowledge and of tacit knowledge in the context of a particular time and place (Grice 1975: 44–46; Frege 1984: 42). Interpretations of proverbial expressions most commonly stand on similarity or on continuity that is real, assumed, or associated; meaning is constructed by linking interpretation with context. Discrepancies in meaning between paremiological schools might be made concrete in terms of how two entities find each other. The metaphoric feature of utterances such as proverbs and phrases complicates that link even further. The best known and most important models for connecting abstract and concrete are the metaphor theories: comparison theory (see for example Fogelin 1988), interaction theory (Black 1981), intention theory (Searle 1981), and the model of literal interpretation (Davidson 1981)<sup>6</sup>.

However, when similarity or comparison between two entities is insufficient to link those entities (as in Fogelin 1988 and Black 1981), when a speaker's intention is generally unclear (as in Searle 1981), and when a literal interpretation is insufficient to understand a proverb (as in Davidson 1981), Hintikka's and Sandu's (1994) handling of possible world semantics offers an additional alternative for understanding the process of meaning (Granbom-Herranen 2011: 50–52). Focus is in this case on the **world line** and on the **meaning line**. The world line is seen as connected to reality; it restates that two individuals are in two different worlds counted as identical. One finds the lexical meaning of an utterance by drawing the world line and the reference point is the lexical meaning. The meaning line simply indicates what is meant; it connects an expression to a reference that exists in another world or is a point inside the same world. A reference point is anchored in different ways in different eras; the same is true of place. An important aspect of drawing a meaning line is the anchoring or mooring of that line; the line begins and ends somewhere. The expression operates in such a way that both the speaker and listener recognise the worlds used. (Hintikka & Sandu 1994: 155–156.) Novels and films are a part of contemporary fairy-tale reality and often function as an anchoring point. Nowadays, the lexical meaning of a proverb no longer

<sup>6</sup> Contrasting different theories of metaphor, see Granbom-Herranen 2011, 50–52.

functions as the most important reference point: even the terms used in traditional proverbs and phrases are from the contemporary world. When a proverb is interpreted, that proverb becomes an artefact of a particular space, a particular time and place. The interpretation of an utterance is linked to at least two possible worlds, the first of which is the world in which that utterance is used, and the second of which is the world of the interpretation itself. In the background may exist both the world of the recording and the world of the birth of the utterance in question. Interpretations made in the new space do not always meet previous meanings in other worlds, either past or parallel to the present time.

Proverbs as utterances have been relevant for hundreds of years. The constellation of Finnish proverbs is quite permanent. According to Matti Kuusi, only one third of proverbs change over one hundred years (Kuusi 1994: 117–118), meaning that the proverbs used in the twenty-first century are much the same as those used in the beginning of the twentieth century and quite the same as those used in the mid nineteenth century. It is possible for example to trace some Finnish proverbs to when those proverbs were used in speech only. For instance, the proverb *Sitä kuusta kuuleminen, jonka juurella asunto* [lit. You must listen to advice given by the spruce you live next to]<sup>7</sup> dates to a time approximately one thousand years ago when inhabitants of Finland earned some of their living through agriculture but to a greater extent by hunting and fishing. I refer to that time in this study as world number one or W1. The proverb in question is still in use but instead of referring to spirits of nature, now often refers to secular events.

Next the focus is on the model based on possible world semantic, combining it with one Finnish proverb, *Sitä kuusta kuuleminen, jonka juurella asunto*. In the older material from the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society (a collection entitled *Perinne elämässäni* [Tradition in my life] from the year 1985) the proverb was found in two contexts. I refer to the era when life stories telling about the narrators' childhoods were written, the 1980s, as world number two or W2.

- (1) In the 1930s, elderly people remembered their childhood and, in particular, how children were brought up. At that time, parents' words were law and a child brave enough to try to disprove them heard *Sitä kuusta kuuleminen, jonka juurella asunto*<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> This proverb is expected to be the oldest Finnish proverb.

<sup>8</sup> PE85, woman, born 1922.

- (2) 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 *Sitä kuusta kuuleminen, jonka juurella asunto*<sup>9</sup>.

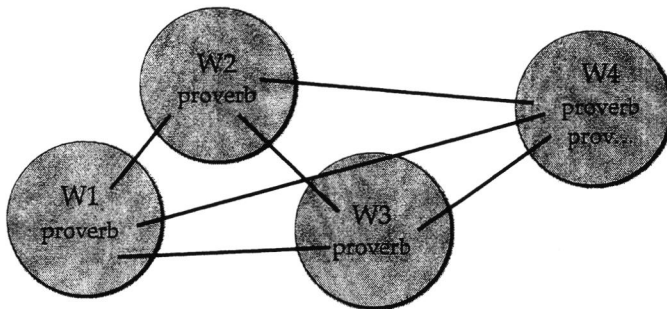
In 2000, I became familiar with an element of the use of this proverb in contemporary life (Granbom-Herranen 2001). I refer to the very beginning of the twenty-first century as world three or 'W3.' Three persons offered three different interpretations of the proverb.

- (3) If you're a worker, you are to side with your employer<sup>10</sup>.  
 (4) It's a reminder. We all have roots somewhere and they shouldn't be forgotten<sup>11</sup>.  
 (5) If you want to keep a job and income, it's better when speaking to have the same opinion as one's employer: '*Kenen leipää syöt, sen lauluja laulat*' [lit. Whose bread you eat, his or her songs you sing]<sup>12</sup>.

The proverb occurs once in the contemporary material consisting of the SMS messages sent as short letters to a newspaper editorial. The era in question, the fourth world or W4, is approximately ten years later than that of the previous example.

- (6) It is wrong to support political parties, perhaps not in a juridical sense but in a moral sense, as similarly, all bribery is wrong – '*Sitä kuusta kuuleminen...*'<sup>13</sup>

Figure 1. The world lines connect the proverbs



<sup>9</sup> PE85, man, born 1937.

<sup>10</sup> Q-2000, man, born 1938.

<sup>11</sup> Q-2000, woman, born 1952.

<sup>12</sup> Q-2000, woman, born 1955.

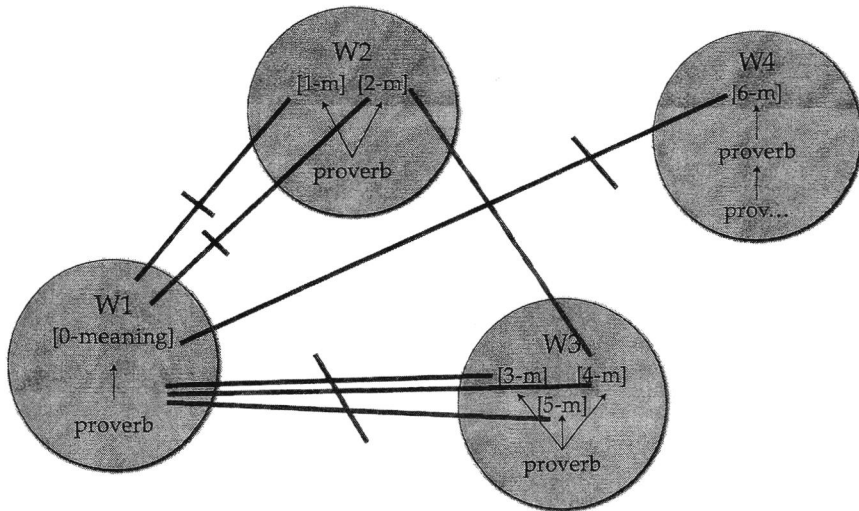
<sup>13</sup> ...



As Figure 1 shows, the world lines connect the sentences – that is, the proverb ‘*Sitä kuusta kuuleminen, jonka juurella asunto*’ – between worlds W1, W2, W3, and W4. This is reasonable even if in W4 is seen only at the beginning of the proverb. Strictly speaking, the meaning line in W4 links ‘*Sitä kuusta kuuleminen...*’ to the entire proverb, ‘*Sitä kuusta kuuleminen, jonka juurella asunto*’, and the reference point becomes a starting point for the meaning line anchored with the intended meaning. The utterance as a phenomenon is the same in all of these worlds and it is possible therefore to connect the world lines in the diagram to any of the other worlds. These worlds are a part of a common space, a common universe. The outer line is the universe, in this case Finland, and the worlds are connected through time and space, which presumes a shared common comprehension of the world.

The same is not true when the focus is on the meaning lines. The meaning lines cannot be drawn equally, as the anchor points of meaning lines are not equivalents.

Figure 2. The meaning lines anchor to meanings



In Figure 2, the reference point in W1 is the spirit of the forest, religion [0-m]. The meaning lines in W2 and W3 have more than one anchor point. In W2 the meaning in example (2) [2-m] and in W3 the meaning in example (5) [5-m] are more or less the same. In both examples, the meaning focuses on work and on an oppressed position. In W2 [1-m] the other



meaning of the proverb anchors to the relationship between parents and children. In W3, in addition to the declared [5-m] meaning, one meaning anchors to the idea of solidarity towards an employer [3-m] and the other to the need for roots, for something everlasting [4-m]. In the W4, the meaning is bound to corruption [6-m]. In Finland, all political parties receive party subsidies, which in this short letter to a newspaper editorial, is equated with bribes. A commonality can be seen in the reference points of the meaning lines. In all the given meanings, a phenomenon exists 'above' life, a something that offers a frame for what to do or not to do. In these examples, that something is a sacred spirit, parents, employer, homeland, or money.

As seen above, although proverbs are relatively unchanging, their meanings do change in both everyday speech and colloquial written language. Proverbs and their meanings are not everlasting elements for ordinary people and in everyday life. The meaning of a proverb alters with changes occurring in the use of proverbs and the everyday context. Nowadays proverbs are found in all types of context in which they might receive quite extraordinary connections when compared to an assumed standard proverbial interpretation.

Context is the space or universe surrounding an individual, including the life experience of a person and an entire society with its culture. The life experience linking an individual and utterance creates the meaning of an expression. Meaning, it should be noted, is not necessarily identical for speaker and listener. To understand the meaning of a term, one should understand the extension of that term under the concurrent circumstances and other types of circumstance (Hintikka & Sandu 1994: 152): a contention linked to the idea that no person can know the meaning of a term if all one can know is the actual extension of that term. Interpretation – in short – is possible only if one knows the contexts involved; however, as with terms, that is hardly ever possible. Knowing all contexts is really only a theoretical possibility, even if one presumes the existence of micro-universal or macro-universal and common knowledge. The narrative material of this study demonstrates that common knowledge is not standardised. Common knowledge resides instead inside a socio-cultural frame. It (common knowledge) is connected to an individual level of maturation and growth, relating to how a person uses and can use language and thereby conceptualise abstract and concrete phenomena and acts. (Granbom-Herranen 2008: 172–173, 201).

## 6. Conclusions

Language structures reality with ideas (concepts) that are possible to use in language. In the use of proverbial utterances, it is important – I contend – not only to understand the words involved, but to examine the situational circumstances. A basis for the idea of a proverb is constructed when a proverb is heard for the first time, giving that proverb a basic meaning when met again later. In ordinary life and in everyday use, the interpretation of a proverb is a matter of a situational and individual experience. Besides everyday words and meanings, proverbs are combinations of socio-cultural context, people, emotion, and all types of information over various situations. In connecting individual interpretations, one can construct a picture of the shared experienced reality. For that reason, oral proverbs differ to literary proverbs, which are taught and learnt and towards which an expectation of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ use – and a need for translation and universalism – exist. However, the manner in which an individual gives meanings to phenomena is seldom entirely random; it is directed by the opinions accepted in a society.

That intended meaning of a proverbial utterance differs from the understood meaning of that proverbial utterance remains true even if the speaker or writer and listener or reader share a common language and socio-cultural background. The intention of the speaker and the interpretation of the listener are not the only valid effects; some ‘supplementary’ content from the context enters into an utterance in use. Examined from an outside perspective, as in the study of proverbs and phrases in archives, interpretations of meaningful utterances often stand on a basic ground meaning. In that manner, the situational effect of the meaning in question is left out without any specific notions. The meaning approaches that in literature when an utterance is not used in any defined context. However, that basic literary meaning may include much more than words only: some communal, time-and-place-based elements may be combined with the expression.

This article shows that the meaning given to an utterance cannot be interpreted entirely outside the context of its use, and that the meaning of an utterance changes when moved from one space – from one time and place – to another. I contend that the time for assuming that a proverb has a common, universal, and multipurpose meaning has passed. However, scholars have a key role as interpreters, whatever a study might focus on. The requirement to avoid one’s own prejudices to manifest themselves

becomes emphasised in studies dealing with interpretations and with meanings.

Nowadays, proverbs are not primarily transmitted orally or from one generation to another; rather, transmission occurs primarily in written form and quite often within a single generation only; those outside a generation are also outsiders to the utterances. A proverb is created by somebody, by an unknown or a well-known person. The proverb has been invented and used, by which means it has become a part of everyday language and in that manner has become meaningful. In summary, proverbial utterances are not mere tradition without message, passed on by the elderly; rather, proverbs and phrases are sentences with meanings. Those meanings might be hidden as readily as they may be intended by the speaker. They may also be utterances without hidden meaning when used in particular as literary phrases.

## References

### SOURCES

PE85 = Perinne elämässäni -kilpikirjoitus 1985. [Tradition in my life] in The Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki.

Q-2000 = Questionary in 2000. Research material, in the possession of the author.

SSS = SMS-messages sent as letters to editors in *Salon Seudun Sanomat*, 2004–2010 (a Finnish daily newspaper). Research material, in the possession of the author.

### LITERATURE

Baran, Anneli. 2007. How long are Sayings?. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*. Vol. 35. 99–110. [www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol35](http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol35) [7.7.2012]

Black, Max. 1981. More About Metaphor. In: Ortony, Andrew (ed.). 19–43.

Briggs, Charles L. 1988. *Competence in performance. The Creativity of Tradition in Mexican Verbal Art*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bruner, Jerome. 1986. *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Davidson, Donald. 1981. What Metaphors Mean. In: *On Metaphor*. Sacks, Sheldon (ed.), Chicago (IL): The University of Chicago Press. 29–45.

Devitt, Michael; Sterelny, Kim. 1987. *Language & Reality. An introduction to the Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Dundes, Alan. 1994. On the Structure of the Proverb. In: Mieder, Wolfgang; Dundes Alan (eds). 43–64.

Finnegan, Ruth. 1994. Proverbs in Africa. In: Mieder, Wolfgang; Dundes Alan (eds). 10–42.

Fogelin, Robert J. 1988. *Figuratively Speaking*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Frege, Gottlob. 1984. On Concept and Object. In: *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic and Philosophy*. McGuinness, Brian (ed.). Oxford: Blackwell. 182–194.

- Frege, Gottlob. 2000. On the scientific justification of a conceptual notation. In: *Conceptual notation and related articles*, Frege, Gottlob (ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press. 83–89.
- Granbom-Herranen, Liisa. 2001. Essee sananlaskututkimuksesta [Essay on paremiology]. Unpublished. University of Helsinki.
- Granbom-Herranen, Liisa. 2008. Sananlaskut kasvatuspuheessa – perinnettä, kasvatusta, indoktrinaatiota? [Proverbs in pedagogical discourse – tradition, upbringing, indoctrination?] *Jyväskylä Studies in Education, Psychology and Social Research* 329. University of Jyväskylä. (includes a summary in English, 278–285). <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-3111-7> [27.07.2012].
- Granbom-Herranen, Liisa. 2009a. Proverbs from Childhood. In: *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*, Vol. 26. 151–170.
- Granbom-Herranen, Liisa. 2009b. Mihin sananlasku lasta johdattaa? – elämäntarinoiden avulla lapsen tulkintaan sananlaskujen kasvatustavoitteista. [Proverbs in pedagogical speech]. In: *Kasvatus & Aika* 3–4/2009. 79–93. [http://www.kasvatus-ja-aika.fi/dokumentit/artikkeli\\_granbom-herranen\\_2210092250.pdf](http://www.kasvatus-ja-aika.fi/dokumentit/artikkeli_granbom-herranen_2210092250.pdf) [27.07.2012]
- Granbom-Herranen, Liisa. 2011. How Do Proverbs Get Their Meanings? The Model of Interpretation Based on a Metaphor Theory. In: *Białostockie Archiwum Językowe*. 10: 47–67.
- Granbom-Herranen, Liisa. 2012. Women's Place in Finnish Proverbs from Childhood. In: *5<sup>th</sup> Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs – 5<sup>o</sup> Colóquio Interdisciplinar sobre Provérbios, Proceedings*. Soares, Rui; Lauhakangas, Outi (eds). Tavira: Tipografia Tavirense, Lda. 284–294.
- Grice, H. Paul. 1975. Logic and Conversation. In: *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. Cole, Peter; Morgan, Jerry L. (eds). New York: Academic Press. 41–58.
- Harman, Gilbert. 1975. Language, Thought and Communication. In: *Language, Mind and Knowledge*. Gunderson, Keith (ed.). Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Vol. VII. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hintikka, Jaakko; Sandu, Gabriel. 1994. Metaphor and Other Kinds of Nonliteral Meaning. In: *Aspects of Metaphor*. Hintikka, Jaakko (ed.). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic. 151–187.
- Krikmann, Arvo. 2004. *Koestler, Raskin, Attardo ja teised: Lingvistiliste huumoriteooriate uue- maist arenguist*. Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum.
- Krikmann, Arvo. 2010. Some Additional Aspects of Semantic Indefiniteness of Proverbs: Remarks on Proverb Semantics 2. In: *Proverb Semantics. Studies in Structure, Logic, and Metaphor*. Arvo Krikmann, Mieder, Wolfgang (ed.), Burlington: University of Vermont. 51–77.
- Kusch, Martin. 1988. Merkki vai kuva – Husserl, Heidegger ja Gadamer kielen ja maailman suhteesta. In: *Kieli ja maailma*. Kusch, Martin; Hintikka, Jaakko (eds). Oulu: Pohjoinen. 9–122.
- Kuusi, Matti. 1994. Fatalistic Traits in Finnish Proverbs. In: Mieder, Wolfgang; Dundes Alan (eds). 275–283.
- Mieder, Wolfgang; Dundes Alan (eds). 1994. *The Wisdom of many. Essays on the Proverb*. New York & London: Garland Publishing.
- Mieder, Wolfgang. 2004. *Proverbs. A Handbook*. Westport, Connecticut & London: Greenwood Press.
- Norrick, Neal R. 1985. *How proverbs mean: semantic studies in English proverbs*. New York: Mouton.
- Ortony, Andrew (ed.). 1981. *Metaphor and thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Pelletier, Francis Jeffry. 2001. Did Frege Believe Frege's Principle?. In: *Journal of logic, language and information*. 10. 87-114.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1975. Meaning of meaning. In: *Language, Mind and Knowledge*. Gunderson, Keith (ed.). Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Vol. VII. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2005. Eksistenssi ja hermeneutiikka. In: *Tulkinnasta toiseen. Esseitä hermeneutiikasta*. Tontti, Jarmo (ed.). Tampere: Vastapaino. 140-163.
- Rott, Hans. 2000. Words in context: Fregean elucidations. *Linguistics and Philosophy*. Vol. 23. 621-641.
- Searle, John R. 1981. Metaphor. In: Ortony, Andrew (ed.). 92-123.
- Seitel, Peter. 1994. Proverbs: A Social Use of Metaphor. In: Mieder, Wolfgang; Dundes Alan (eds). 122-139.
- Vygotski, Lev. 1967. *Thought and language*. Cambridge (Mass.): M. I. T. Pr.

## Teoretyczne aspekty procesów kształtujących znaczenia przysłów i połączeń wyrazowych

### STRESZCZENIE

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest znaczeniom powszechnie używanych przysłów i połączeń wyrazowych w ujęciu wielodyscyplinarnym. Objaśnione są zjawiska związane z przysłowiami dotyczącymi codziennego życia. Jednostki te ukazane są jako rodzaj nośników znaczenia. Przysłowia i wyrażenia są znakami, które łączą myślenie z emocjami i uczuciami. Konteksty są rozumiane jako trójwymiarowe zjawiska: kontekst sytuacyjny łączy znaczenie wypowiedzenia z doświadczeniem indywidualnym, podczas gdy kontekst kulturalny łączy znaczenie z czasem i miejscem; trzeci kontekst to kontekst badawczy. W artykule przyjęto następującą definicję przysłowia: krótkie, samodzielne stwierdzenie, które jest lub było znane w ramach danego czasu i miejsca. Połączenie wyrazowe rozumiane jest jako kombinacja co najmniej dwóch wyrazów. Przysłowia i połączenia wyrazowe to jednostki mające znaczenie, które może być oczywiste lub ukryte; mogą to też być wypowiedzenia z ukrytym znaczeniem lub pozbawione go. Założenia teoretyczne oparte są na poglądzie, że język porządkuje rzeczywistość. Zasady kooperacji Paula Grice'a, dewiacja leksykalnego i implikowanego znaczenia Gottloba Frege, sposobu rozumienia światowej semantyki (PSW) Jaako Hintikkasa i Gabriela Sandu tworzą podstawy rozumienia procesu, w wyniku którego wypowiedzenie staje się wyrażeniem będącym nośnikiem znaczenia. Nawet jeżeli przysłowia są ustabilizowane w języku, zakładanie, że powszechne lub uniwersalne wielofunkcyjne znaczenie jest przypisane do przysłowia, jest nieadekwatne. Znaczenie wypowiedzenia zmienia się, kiedy przeniesione jest ono z jednej przestrzeni – z jednego czasu i miejsca – do innego, podobnie jak zakładana standardowa interpretacja przysłowia. W codziennym użyciu znaczenie wypowiedzenia zawsze jest związane z kompetencją w zakresie rozumienia.