

Vernacular proverbs in an everyday context

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Abstract

The article is based on research conducted in 2004–2007. The investigation focused on Finnish vernacular proverbs used in the early twentieth century. Proverbs are small performances in spoken form. Every proverb always occurs within some social occasion. The language of proverbs outside institutions, in everyday use, is not standard language but vernacular. Moreover, people do not live in a standardized world and so the interpretation cannot rely on any assumed standard interpretation. Culture, society, historical time, people around – these all add something to the function and interpretation of the proverb used. The focus is on proverbs used by ordinary Finnish-speaking people in everyday communication. The aim of the research was to find out how the pedagogical message of a proverb was understood when heard in childhood. Vernacular pedagogical speech is a part of normal everyday life outside institutions.

Keywords

proverb, vernacular, everyday life, childhood, interpretation

1. Introduction

This article concentrates on vernacular proverbs which were used in everyday life before the Second World War. As the context of proverb performances has not been the main focus of either Finnish paremiography or paremiology, the information about the contexts, the situations the proverbs were used in, what meaning they bore and how they were understood, have not in general been documented. There are many reasons for this; one obstacle, for example, has been the collection and archiving practices of the Finnish research tradition, with its emphasis on the collection and recording of reproduction according to the historical-geographical method (also known as the Finnish method). In Finland, there is no systematic record of the performers or the presentation context of the tradition (Frog 2013, see Granbom-Herranen 2021).¹ Proverbs have been and still are difficult to pin down, record and interpret in their natural context of use (see Jason 1971, Granbom-Herranen 2015). However,

¹ On the other hand, using the Finnish method, a quite extensive collection of proverbs was compiled.

without the context it is not possible to know the meaning of what is said, the speaker's intention or the listener's way of understanding what was said.

I looked at the memories of childhood to uncover vernacular proverbs in the contexts in which they were used in Finland before the Second World War. Although Finnish writing skills (as well as paremiography and paremiology) began with humanism and the Reformation (Heininen 2007), for the majority of Finnish speakers, the era up to the Second World War was a time of unwritten information, and hence proverbs were a part of oral communication.² The current study concentrates on proverbs heard in early twentieth-century Finland, and the focus has been on determining the listener's viewpoint and understanding of the proverbs used in everyday speech as heard in his or her childhood.

The main objective of this study has been to clarify whether proverbs used in pedagogical speech (on this term see just below) reflect, in their precepts, upbringing, what is pedagogically the desirable goal, or whether, conversely, the use of proverbs in this context points to indoctrination (see Granbom-Herranen 2008a, 2014). The significance of proverbs heard in pedagogical speech relies on some theoretical foundations: first, language understood as an instrument of communication and as connected to thought (see Vygotski 1967, Devitt & Sterelny 1987), second, Gottlob Frege's (2000) principle of context, which states that the meaning of an expression is always bound to the context in which it is used, and third, in order to be understood and interpreted, an utterance should follow Paul Grice's (1975) *cooperative principles*. Hintikka and Sandu's (1994) understanding of possible worlds semantics (PWS) creates a framework to comprehend the process of how proverbs are relatively permanent expressions while the meaning of an utterance may change from one context to another. The situational interpretation relies on information about the given context.

2. Some definitions of terms

The **vernacular** nature of speech expression is a reflection of its spontaneity and the self-sufficiency of the language employed, and its everyday use (Koski & Turtiainen 2020). As Robert Howard (2019) puts it, “‘vernacular’ refers to discourse that is non-institutional”. He also places particular emphasis on the importance of proverbs as a manifestation of vernacular authority. This is akin to the concept of Charles Briggs's authority when proverbs are used in pedagogical speech (Briggs 1985, 1988). Differentiating between Finnish proverbs in the vernacular (oral tradition) and in literature was still quite easy in the early twentieth

² The first proverbs in written Finnish are to be found in the Bible. The first Bible in Finnish, *Biblia, Se on: Coko Pyhä Raamattu Suomexi*. The following revised Finnish editions appeared in 1776 and 1859, but it was not until 1933 and 1938 that the Bible was translated into the then standard Finnish language. The Book of Proverbs in the Finnish Bible can be seen as the first published collection of Finnish proverbs. Some of these have settled into the vernacular, some have been modified into Finnish proverbs detached from their origin. (Granbom-Herranen 2021.)

century. Before this period, the main spoken language of Finland was Finnish, but it was rarely the written language.³

The Finnish vernacular **proverb** displays the most commonly named characteristics of the proverb. It is a relatively short and fairly independent statement in a more or less stable form. In addition, the expression is or has been familiar among the general public within a certain temporal and geographical framework and, in this case, was most often in Finnish. A proverb can be understood as a generalizing expression. Proverbs are signs that connect thinking to emotions and feelings (Bruner 1986), and are a part of language and tightly bound to everyday culture. Inside the relevant cultural context, it is possible to use proverbs to handle topics hitherto unknown to a listener. Proverbs are expressions produced by the community's history. Proverbs do not explain any phenomenon or justify its existence; they merely indicate that some phenomenon has existed and been known during the period in question. The specificity of Finnish proverbs has been first and foremost their Finnish language,⁴ which reflects the fact that they were a part of oral communication. In the early stages of the Finnish standard language, proverbs were recorded as written notes and subsequently published.

A **life-story** is a story without an end. It might be told at any point in a life. It is not a narration of a complete life and it is not the whole story. However, a narration can be written or oral. The narrators do not tell the truth about the past, but neither do they lie; they describe the past as they remember it and as they have experienced it. Temporally, the narrators' childhoods are set in an era before the Second World War, a time when the majority of Finns spent their childhood in rural areas. Their upbringing and training normally took place at home or under comparable circumstances in households, and was still not institutionalized, at least for the majority. In everyday life children usually participated in work with grown-ups or older children. The subject of my research was the time when oral information was central to life. As the context gives an idea of how the proverb is understood and interpreted when used, the first challenge was to access proverbs in their contexts.

Pedagogical speech is based on Briggs's term "pedagogical discourse" (1985, 1988). It relates to speech that takes place in a pedagogical framework, and is included in the process of upbringing. Pedagogical speech concerns authority; it differs from speech between peers, even in the use of proverbs. Pedagogical speech is speech between unequal people, the listener being the one with lower status. Mostly it is a form of everyday language used between adults and children.⁵

³ The languages of the elite were Swedish and Russian, or in some cases German and French. The Finnish language and proverbs were mostly used orally, and they were a part of the language of the underprivileged majority and most of the farmers. Proverbs were a form of speech used by what was the minority from the point of view of social power. (Granbom-Herranen 2008a, 2016.)

⁴ Finnish proverbs exist, and have existed, not only in the Finnish language: they exist also in Swedish (nowadays Finland Swedish), Sámi (nowadays Northern Sámi, Skólt Sámi and Inari Sámi) and Romany. In contemporary use, English and mixed-English proverbs exist that are original Finnish proverbs (Granbom-Herranen 2018). In 2016, according to the **population registration**, 157 different native languages (actually several hundred) were spoken in Finland (Räsänen 2017).

⁵ Over the course of Finnish history, there has also been some form of public pedagogical discourse. For example, Finnish society reflected the reality of a unified Lutheran culture, where the church and the state were

3. Material and methods

The study was devoted to context-bound vernacular proverbs and listeners' interpretations of the intended meaning of the proverbs. I used folkloristic material to uncover vernacular proverbs used in ordinary people's everyday life. The narrative materials come from the archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki. I used two folkloristic collections, "Perinne elämässäni" (PE85) [Tradition in my life] and "Karjalaiset elämäkerrat" (KE84) [Karelian life-stories]. The narratives were collected between 1983 and 1985, the age range of the narrators being from 55 to 85 years. The data for the study was formed of the entirety of KE84 collection and two thematic areas of PE85 (*Koti ja suku* [Home and family] and *Sukupuoliroolit ja kasvatus avioliittoon* [Gender roles and upbringing for marriage]). As seen in Table 1, the memories of childhood covered some 300 episodes, including over 500 vernacular proverbs in pedagogical speech heard in childhood and recalled in adulthood. As the focus was on proverbs and their interpretation in the context where they were used, the narrators' own experiences and their interpretations of proverbs play a central role. The number of life-stories and vernacular proverbs in them is presented in Table 1.

COLLECTION	PE85	KE84	TOTAL	
Collections included	64	108	172	bindings
Bindings included	19300	22784	42084	pages ⁶
The number of life stories under review	438	722	1160	narratives ⁷
Of which proverbs were included in	160	192	325	life-stories
Life-stories with proverbs when the narrator was born before the year 1930	80	61	141	life-stories
The number of proverbs used in pedagogical speech and the narrator was born before the year 1930	367	141	508	proverbs

Table 1. Summary of the narrative material and proverbs

Along with proverbs in the narratives, I looked at the statutes concerning children and their upbringing, as well as parenting and, in particular, children's lives and standards of living in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸ The statutes gave society and local authorities

the main authorities. The church used pedagogical speech with proverbs in the sermons. However, this side of life did not come up in the life-stories.

⁶ In addition to life stories, the collections included photographs (total 1 370 photos) and recordings (341 hours). These were not included in the study.

⁷ Some respondents had provided answers to both questions in PE85 (Home and family, Gender roles and upbringing for marriage), which actually leaves the total number of respondents somewhat lower than the total sum shows.

⁸ I looked at all the rules and regulations (the laws, codes, rules, regulations, the orders of the king and the tsar) which considered children and could be expected to have an influence or to be valid in the Finnish autonomous grand duchy within Russia. The scan covered the laws from 1442 up to the independence of Finland in 1917. One statute could include orders for more than one theme. As late as the 1980s there were some laws based on these earlier statutes still in force.

the ability to control everyday life. The proverbs in the narrative material, together with the statutes, allowed the meaning of vernacular proverbs to be considered in relation to the institutions' regulations.

The adults who brought up children at the beginning of the twentieth century had themselves been children in the nineteenth century, at which period they used the proverbs within their own speech. The slowness of the changes that took place both in society and everyday life strengthened the effect of traditional upbringing and the oral information used in it. Speaking and setting an example were the most important ways to raise children. In the era under consideration, the majority of children lived in rural areas and their upbringing and training normally took place at home or under comparable circumstances in other households. Agriculture was the main means of making a living, so in everyday life children usually participated in work alongside adults or older children. (Granbom-Herranen 2008a.)

In applying contemporary content-analysis, I have linked quantitative and qualitative research traditions. I have used a mixture of methods, though the emphasis has been on qualitative research. In order to differentiate between earlier ways of understanding content analysis as a quantitative method and the current use of the method with qualitative materials, Philipp Mayring (2000) uses the term *classical quantitative content analysis* for the former and Klaus Krippendorff (2004, xvii–xx) uses *contemporary content analysis* for the latter. Compared with classical analysis, the contemporary approach offers added value since content analysis is understood as a complete process (Granbom-Herranen 2018, Figure 7). Content analysis as a process of research is a cluster of methods with conclusions based on theoretical analyses. The method in processing life-stories was reading and sorting out narrative texts: text including proverbs vs. text without proverbs; proverbs used in pedagogical speech vs. proverbs in rhetorical use. This involves using the so-called empathetic method of reading narratives. Number of proverbs in life-stories when the narrator was born before the year 1930 was 508. Of proverbs I formed 97 “subject areas” and of them 36 “groups”. The final result consisted of five (5) themes. Proverbs with context in pedagogical speech are included in four (4) themes. The same kind of text sorting was carried out with the official materials. The overview of proverb material is presented in Table 2 and of the official texts in Table 3.

THEMES	FREQUENCY
The total number of proverbs	508
No context information	94
Proverbs in given context including keywords for interpretation	414
“Control of one’s own life and living with others”	143
“Work, to work, worker”	119
“Livelihood, support and care, home and upbringing”	95
“Christian way of living and ability to read”	57

Table 2. The aims of proverbs in pedagogical speech

OFFICIAL MATERIALS, ORDER OF THE FREQUENCY OF THEMES	VOLUME
The statutes from the year 1442 to 1917	thousands of statutes
Statutes including the key words	about 800 statutes
“Support: livelihood, care, upbringing”	
“Work: training to work so that everybody can support themselves”	
“Christian doctrine: membership of the congregation, Christian way of living and ability to read”	
“Citizen: to be a good Christian and a useful and honest citizen who has obligations to his/her parents, grandparents and masters”	

Table 3. The themes in statutes concerning the upbringing of children
Presented in order of the frequency of mentions in statutes.

4. Results

In late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century everyday life, proverbs were transmitted by two generations, parents and grandparents, to youngsters and children. As a part of pedagogical speech, proverbs seem to be connected with women’s speech; women were the most important authorities in children’s everyday lives as mothers and grandmothers. This may not be unexpected in the context of children’s upbringing, even though proverbs have widely been seen as a part of patriarchal, masculine speech (Granbom-Herranen 2008b). The life-stories, with a few exceptions, do not contain references to the school or to books. Of books, only the Bible is mentioned. Books are, according to this childhood research, lesser sources of proverbs used in everyday life than has previously been postulated.⁹ From the private and the public spheres a picture emerges of the relationship between the interpretation of vernacular proverbs in pedagogical speech and the public expectations written in regulations (Granbom-Herranen 2008a).

5. Conclusion

Vernacular proverbs accompany a person throughout his or her life. The vernacular proverbs were a part of both written memories (life-stories) and oral tradition. Proverbs were interpreted and used according to how they were understood in childhood. The proverbs adopted from parents and grandparents are those that come to one’s mind even in adulthood.

Even though the contents of proverbs are seen to be the same as the contents of the pedagogical goals of the statutes, narrators’ interpretations reflected the *mores* of their social class and the acceptance of responsibility for one’s own life. Neither of these aspects of interpretation is included in the public pedagogical goals expressed in rules and regulations. If the connection between the public pedagogical goals and the interpreted content of the proverbs

⁹ For example, Satu Apo (1995) and Anna-Leena Siikala (1996).

is seen as the most important starting point for examining proverbial speech, we could say that the purport of proverbs in pedagogical speech repeated that of public speech. As a part of pedagogical speech, proverbs are incontestable. They include beliefs that are transmitted in uncontested form to children. Such partially unverified beliefs reflect the upbringing and training the speaker received in his or her childhood.

Although the three themes of work (work, training for work), support (livelihood, support and care, upbringing) and Christian doctrine (the Christian way of living, the ability to read) were very similar to each other, as seen in the themes in Table 2 and Table 3, yet, from the pedagogical point of view, the objectives are not coherent as a whole and cannot be considered congruent. The official laws and statutes as a whole emphasized citizenship, which was described as **submissiveness, allegiance and even humility towards** the spiritual and the temporal powers, **that is, the state and the church**. This differs from the interpretations given by narrators to the proverbs. In pedagogical speech, the main theme included a strong idea of taking responsibility for one's own life and the ability to relate to other people. The vernacular proverbs were not congruent with the laws and instructions drawn up by the state and church as reflected in institutionally accepted proverbs (for example, the "Judge's guideline" in the code of civil law, the Bible).

The use of vernacular proverbs by ordinary people opens up the possibilities of looking at proverbs as a tradition of the so-called culture of denial, a part of communication that was not understood by groups wielding power within the society. It is also possible that this is the way tacit knowledge manifests itself. The use of proverbs could also be an expression of critical attitudes towards the exercise of power in society.

What makes vernacular proverbs significant in pedagogical speech is the fact that they express the language of authority, in that they represent the very first authority in children's lives: parents, grandparents, neighbours use proverbs – unarguable expressions – as a rhetorical method. In the early twentieth century, vernacular proverbs were heard above all from mothers and grandmothers. Proverbs from childhood are mirrors of socio-cultural context, people, emotions and information in different situations. Even in adulthood, the feelings evoked by proverbs echo those felt when hearing them as a child. Although proverbs evoke a person's memories, the link with whatever was going on when the proverb was heard is more important. The most important facet of proverbs in everyday use and vernacular language is most often how the speaker experiences the proverb, not so much what the proverb in its assumed standard proverbial interpretation (SPI) means (see Norrick 1985). The use of proverbs in everyday activities and in pedagogical speech has been, and still is, more like a trip of the tongue than consciously transmitted wisdom. This is the way a child understands them.

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