

## PROVÉRBIOS USADOS CONTEMPORANEAMENTE EM MENSAGENS SMS ENVIADAS PARA UM JORNAL DIÁRIO FINLANDÊS

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### Resumo

Dentro da paremiologia folclorística, os provérbios têm sido considerados principalmente como parte da fala das pessoas mais idosas. No entanto, na nova tradição urbana finlandesa, os provérbios não estão a passar de geração em geração de forma autónoma e já não estão a ser ensinados na escola como parte do currículo da língua nativa. Em vez disso, a sua transmissão ocorre de forma escrita e geralmente dentro de uma geração apenas. De qualquer forma, a tradição oral anterior encontrou um lugar na linguagem escrita coloquial. Nas mensagens SMS, os provérbios são usados em um novo contexto, com os provérbios tradicionais ocorrendo ao lado dos modernos. Os provérbios antigos são reconhecíveis de forma muito mais confiável do que os modernos ou os futuros. Os provérbios continuam a fazer parte da comunicação finlandesa contemporânea e da linguagem quotidiana, embora o contexto de uso tenha mudado ao longo do período em que os provérbios finlandeses foram colectados (ou seja, mais de dois séculos).

**Palavras-chave:** linguagem escrita coloquial, vida cotidiana, interpretação, significado, jornais, paremiografia, paremiologia, semântica dos mundos possíveis, provérbio, discurso proverbial, enunciado proverbial, mensagem SMS, mensagem de texto, vernáculo.



## CONTEMPORARILY USED PROVERBS IN SMS MESSAGES SENT TO A FINNISH DAILY PAPER

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### Abstract

Within folkloristic paremiology, proverbs have been regarded mainly as a part of the speech of older people. However, in the new Finnish urban tradition proverbs are not self-evidently passing from generation to generation and they are not anymore taught at school as a part of the curriculum of the native language. Instead, transmission takes place in written form and often within one generation only. Anyhow, the earlier oral tradition has found a place in the colloquial written language. In SMS messages, proverbs are used in a new context, with traditional proverbs occurring alongside the modern ones. Old proverbs are recognisable much more reliably than modern or future ones. Proverbs remain a part of contemporary Finnish communication and everyday language although the context of use has changed over the period which Finnish proverbs have been collected (i.e. over two centuries).

My studies are multidisciplinary as the main interest in folkloristic studies is related to the proverbs and the given meanings in folklore, the concept of metaphor in philosophy as well as the questions of power, authority, and autonomy in use of proverbs.

**Key-words:** colloquial written language, everyday life, interpretation, meaning, newspapers, paremiography, paremiology, possible worlds semantics, proverb, proverbial speech, proverbial utterance, SMS message, text message, vernacular.

## **Introduction**

This article is based on my doctoral dissertation on folkloristics, “Proverbs in SMS messages: Archaic and modern communication”, defended in 2018. The dissertation is based on questions and occurrences encountered in everyday life. After defending my doctoral dissertation in education in 2008, which focused on the use of proverbs in pedagogical speech, I was repeatedly asked the question of why I study proverbs that nobody uses anymore. I became curious and, as is well known, curiosity combined with wondering is a good start for research. My journey into the world of paremiology started with the idea of stable proverbs with changing meanings. Regardless of the questions (or maybe because of the questions), most of my study has combined the use and interpretation of proverbs and everyday life. I suppose that in my research I have come across more questions than I have been able to answer. However, one thing was certain: Finnish proverbs make use of everyday colloquial language in the vernacular. The proverbs may not always appear with the same form and meaning as they did in the past, but they are used. I feel fortunate that, at various phases of this study, I have been able to use the knowledge I have gained during my wide-ranging academic studies as well as to take advantage of the life experience I have acquired outside academic life.

The dissertation focuses on proverbs in contemporary use. The aim was to highlight one of the ways proverbs are used and interpreted in everyday communication using colloquial written language. The empirical material and the argumentation are linked to theoretical models, thereby forming a basis for the conclusions. By using and illustrating the model based on possible worlds semantics, the study also addresses the challenge of why proverbs receive various interpretations. On the one hand, this research produces basic information, and the possibility to observe proverbs and proverbial expressions in everyday use. On the other, it contributes to the discourse among paremiologists dealing with the substance of proverbs in everyday life and within the frames of folkloristics. Moreover, the dissertation offers some methodological and theoretical solutions for paremiological research.

### **Finnish proverb tradition**

Within folklore, proverbs have been regarded as a part of the speech of older people. However, in the new urban tradition proverbs are neither passing from generation to generation nor are they taught at school. Instead, transmission takes place in written form and often within one generation only. Anyhow, the earlier oral tradition has found a place in the colloquial written language. In SMS messages, proverbs are used in a new context, with traditional proverbs occurring alongside the modern ones. Old proverbs are recognisable much more reliably than modern or future ones.

Proverbs are understood as significant units and parts of communication in the vernacular while language is understood to structure reality. Proverbs as such might be quite unchanged expressions and most traditional Finnish proverbs as well as Bible quotations still use agrarian language, although nowadays they are often used in a new non-agrarian context with a new meaning. Today, written vernacular Finnish is quite similar with spoken language.

### **Material and method**

The research material consists of about 70,000 original SMS messages (i.e. text messages sent using Short Message Service) sent between 2006 and 2010 to be published as short letters to the editor and aimed at the readers of the daily Finnish regional newspaper *Salon Seudun Sanomat*. These messages include more than 7,000 expressions that are proverbs, potential proverbs, Bible quotations or references to them.

The central research method is contemporary content analysis, which is understood to be a cluster of methods connected with conclusions based on theoretical analyses<sup>1</sup>. The central research method is contemporary content analysis. Context creates the frame for the use and interpretation of proverbs. Even if both given meanings and interpretations of proverbs are situational from a person's point of view, the use of them is a communal occasion.

### **Theories on the background**

The articles included in the dissertation use or refer to some theories on proverbs, language, context, interpretation and performance. When focusing on language, some specific challenges arise, one of which is that language is always defined through language; therefore, all ideas must receive meaning in language before we can use language to define the

phenomenon in question (Ricoeur 2005, 149; Frege 2000, 84). In the introductory article of the dissertation (Granbom-Herranen 2018b) I present in brief the significant theories included in the articles. Here is a shortened version of it. The theories focusing on language (Vygotski, Frege, Grice and emic-etic viewpoints) are presented first, theories connected with proverbs interpretation (metaphor theories and reference point) are second and the one related to performance (Briggs and Badiou) are last. I have address an own chapter for the life cycle of proverbs in line with how Lauri Honko (2013b) and Gerard Rooijackers (1998) have treated the issue.

**Language** The essential points in Lev Vygotsky's (1967) thoughts are the fact that language is not understood only as an instrument of communication but as linked to thought. The connection between language and the conception of the world is reflected in language use. To learn a language is to learn to think the way the language does and to think in a language (Devitt & Sterelny 1987, 116–117). To learn a language is to learn to think.

Drawing on Gottlob Frege (1984, 2000), I emphasise the connection to context, where a proverb is seen as gaining its significance from its context. The use of a proverb or the proverb itself adds value to a speech event. The conventional meaning of what is said consists of common knowledge and tacit knowledge in the context of that time and place (Grice 1989, 44–46; Frege 1984, 42). 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 to the words. The use of a proverb is a violating element, marking a pause in the discourse and introducing new aspects (Grice 1975). Taking a critical look at Paul H. Grice's approach, it can be argued that the way he sees the importance of the speaker is separate from any information on the circumstances of the event as such (Devitt & Sterelny 1987, 123–124). The difficulty of communication is that the speaker and listeners do not always understand the meaning of what is said in the same way. We could even say that it would be impossible theoretically since both have an individual lifeworld with their own experiences and meanings assigned them. Moreover, the speaker may, for one reason or another, deliberately act against Grice's cooperative principle for example if they do not want to be explicit (see Honko 2013a, 112).

The dichotomy of *emic* and *etic* in language can be approached in different ways (see Headland 1990). In short, etic-based definitions are used by the paremiologists and other researchers, whereas emic-based definitions do not actually exist (Granbom-Herranen 2010b, 217, 2016a)<sup>2</sup>. By using a broad definition of proverb, this analysis relies primarily on the emic concept. However, the etic concept also comes into play because the other types of

utterances that represent different short-form genres<sup>3</sup> which might, in the reader's eyes, also be proverbs (in folkloristics) are not treated here (see Granbom-Herranen 2016b).

**Interpretation:** In everyday life, the interpretation of a proverb is a matter of situational and individual experience. However, Jaakko Hintikka and Gabriel Sandu's model<sup>4</sup> (Hintikka & Sandu 1994) supports the idea that there is actually no conflict between the individual and unique experiential world and the possibility to generalise research findings since individual worlds have been shaped in the society. Interpreting proverbial expressions is commonly based on similarity or continuity that is real, assumed, or associated; meaning is constructed by linking interpretation with context. Discrepancies between paremiological schools in discussing meaning might become tangible in how two entities find each other. The metaphoric feature of utterances such as proverbs and phrases complicates that link further. The best-known and most important models for connecting the abstract and the concrete are metaphor theories: comparison theory (e.g. Fogelin 1988), interaction theory (Black 1981), intention theory (Searle 1981) and the model of literal interpretation (Davidson 1981). The similarity or comparison between two things is not a sufficient basis (Fogelin 1988, Black 1981), the speaker's intention is generally not clear (Searle 1981) and the literal interpretation is not enough (Davidson 1981) to understand a proverb. (See Granbom-Herranen 2016a).

I have arrived at applying the model by Hintikka and Sandu (1994) in which the interpretation of a proverb is based on possible-world semantics (PWS). The PWS model illustrates and clarifies why these cannot always be identical. The model also shows why Neal R. Norrick's assumed SPI (1985, 109–117) might stand only for a suggestive interpretation in folkloristic research. Hintikka and Sandu's (1994) understanding of possible worlds semantics (PWS) creates a framework to comprehend the process of how utterances are relatively permanent expressions while the meaning of an utterance may change from one context to another. We can reach the intended (or situational) meaning with the PWS-based model developed in my previous research (Granbom-Herranen 2008, 2010a), which is based on the use of metaphor in possible worlds semantics. (See more Granbom-Herranen 2018b, 50–58).

**Performance** The dissertation is based on the folklorist Charles Briggs's (1988) concept of *proverb performance* combined with Alain Badiou's concept of *event* (Badiou 2009). Guiding (advising and counselling)<sup>5</sup> speech is speech between unequal people where the listener has (or is expected to have) a lower status. The proverb user tries to convince the audience by employing the authority that a proverb could lend to the message. In a rhetorical sense, the proverb serves more like decoration in the SMS message. The concept of performance includes both the verbal expressions and the behaviour by which a message is conveyed

(Bauman 1992, 125). To use a proverb is a small performance, which has an aim linked to the situation and words used (Briggs 1988). (See more Granbom-Herranen 2018b, 48–59).

### Contemporarily used proverbs

The concept of *contemporarily used proverb* includes proverbs used nowadays and they might be ancient or quite young; i.e. traditional proverbs, modern proverbs and Bible quotations as well as references to them. The *traditional proverb* in this article is an utterance that in Finland is commonly accepted to be an old proverb. Their ground forms are to be found in publications based on collections before the 1950s in Finland <sup>6</sup>.

**Example 1.** *Äiti! Se koira älähtää jne. Missä olit itse dokaamassa kun poliisi joutui P:n talolla paimentamaan lastasi. Hoida jälkikasvusi, älä hoidata valtion varoin. -X- (SSS, sent 16.2.2007)* <sup>7</sup>

[Mum! *Se koira älähtää jne.* (That dog yelps etc.) Where were you yourself drinking when police had to be in P's house to herd your child. Take care of your descendant, don't do it with means of the state. -X-]

Modern proverbs are proverbs collected after 1950s or they are so new that they could be called potential proverbs, i.e. expressions that might become settled in Finnish language some day in future and so get the status of proverb. Many of proverbs transmitted from other cultural areas and languages are in Finnish modern proverbs even if they in the original language represents traditional proverbs.

**Example 2.** *Kel omni on se onnen käteköön sillä se on hyvää itsetuntoa. Toki ollaan kaikki onnesta sykkyrällä puolestane. -hengessä mukana olevat. (SSS, sent 18.7.2008)* <sup>8</sup>

[*Kel omni on se onnen käteköön* (He/she who has much happiness does well to hide it) because it means having good self-awareness. Certainly we all are thrilled to bits on behalf for you. - we are there in spirit.]

Some of the modern proverbs has first been in literal for like is the beginning of a poem by the Finnish author Eino Leino. Nowadays, it is a proverb and people often do not know its origin.

The theoretically most unsafe part of these are potential proverbs, expressions that are used but nobody knows if they will survive, like the former ski-jumper Matti Nykänen's *Elämä on laiffii* [Life is life] or [Live is life] <sup>9</sup>. This was not used in SMS messages but it is widely known and used in Finland.

Some of Bible quotations and proverbs included in the Bible have become traditional Finnish proverbs. They are often easy to recognize because most of the Finnish Lutheran population

still learns their Bible and Catechism in confirmation classes organized by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. (Granbom-Herranen 2008, 69–70, 230–235; 2018b, 46).

**Example 3.** *Salossa 200 äänellä ei tullut lautakuntaaikkaa. – sitä niittää, mitä kylvää.*  
SSS, sent 16.12.2008

[The place in a municipal board in Salo was not achieved with 200 votes – one reaps what one sows] <sup>10</sup>

**Example 4.** *Salossa paljon mukavia ihmisiä. Jyväskylässä paljon mukavia ihmisiä. Vaasassa paljon mukavia ihmisiä jne. - sitä saa mitä tilaa* (SSS, sent 20.9.2006)

[In Salo exist a lot of nice people. In Jyväskylä a lot of nice people. In Vaasa a lot of nice people etc. - one gets what he or she orders] <sup>11</sup>

Today, the same meaning is communicated in the proverb *Sitä saa, mitä tilaa* [lit. One gets what one orders]. The modern proverb might be a new way to use a proverb with updated concepts: *niittää* (reap) has become *tilata* (order).

In everyday use, a proverb is alive as long as it is referred to. This means that when we look for proverbs in speech and speech-like text, we have to look at the proverbs, shortened proverbs, or references and allusions to them (Granbom-Herranen 2014: 378).

### Life cycle of proverbs

As mentioned above, at the centre of this dissertation are proverbs in everyday life as used by the general public. In a way, this dissertation also discusses the changes to the ways in which proverbs are interpreted in the 21st century. However, it also focused on the life cycle of proverbs. (Granbom-Herranen 2018b, 59–60). Even if we know something about the background of a proverb, its origin is not known in most cases. Modern proverbs, however, are different. Their origin is not necessarily unknown and they are not always from the distant past. Traditional proverbs might also have origins that were known at some point but have been forgotten in time. Any proverb has been invented by someone who first has the idea of putting it in a statement (Taylor 1931). Today's circumstances have altered the idea of historically anonymous expression: due to fast communication, it is possible to identify the first user of a proverb in many cases. The public is often aware of the origin of an expression that becomes an anonymous sentence, then a cliché or a saying and then a proverb. As the examples above, Finnish traditional proverbs include some that originate for example in fairly recent poetry.

However, this is not where the life cycle of a proverb begins. In order to live, a proverb has to be used. For Honko and Roojakkars, the start of the life cycle of a folklore product is in the

natural, almost imperceptible past (Honko 2013b, 39). It is a stage characterised by authenticity (Rooijakkers 1998, 183). This stage could be called normal everyday life. When thinking about proverbs as artefacts, they do not actually differ from other folklore products as immaterial artefacts. Today, this stage could include contemporary daily routines connected with proverbs in the vernacular and everyday use.

A new life phase began after these immaterial artefacts, proverbs, had been noticed outside their normal living context. They were noticed since their existence might be endangered or might be considered to be endangered. Artefacts such as proverbs might be threatened with extinction (Rooijakkers 1998, 202). They are collected and documented; they have a status as heritage. Proverb collections were published, giving the impression of a living tradition. However, in this phase, a part of the tradition was committed to archives and museums to await use. This is not an everyday practice but conserving something for the future (see Honko 2013b, 45; Rooijakkers 1998, 181).

In archives and publications, proverbs obtain a new life. Proverbs are taken from books and archives by two types of users: people who want to use them and people who want to study them. Their use has many purposes, from political speeches and advertisements to folklore performances (Honko 2013b, 46–51; Rooijakkers 1998, 181). This refers to their past use but, at the same time, gives new meaning to them. This is the phase where ideologies might step in, the past being a good basis to build national heritage upon. Proverbs are looked up when needed.

This might initiate a new life cycle in which proverbs are seen, heard and used. However, it is not what it was in the beginning. If nothing else has changed, the context has – and context provides a proverb with meaning. Thus, even if the form of a proverb is unchanged, its meaning or interpretation change. And this could be considered a new life cycle.

## **Summary**

The study confirms that proverbs remain a part of contemporary Finnish communication and everyday language, although the context of use has changed over the period which Finnish proverbs have been collected (i.e. over two centuries). What more, it shows that the life cycle of proverbs is the normal life cycle of tradition. Most traditional proverbs still contain agrarian terms and are relatively permanent expressions, but nowadays they are often used in a new context and with a new meaning. Although the dissertation examines Finnish proverbs and uses Finnish examples, the processes and challenges are the same, no matter which

language or culture is being examined. Many of the observations can be generalised to the field of paremiology as a whole.

### Endnotes

1. The whole research process and the implementation of the method, see Granbom-Herranen 2018b: 69–81. Content analysis as a process of research (Granbom-Herranen 2018b: 72, Figure 7) presents the whole process in table form.
2. Shortly said, etic-based definitions are researcher-centred definitions and emic-based ones user-centred definitions.
3. Also called small-scale folklore (Honko 2013a, 118).
4. The interpretations and the use of the PWS model and reference point are based on the lectures and seminars Professor Sandu gave at the University of Helsinki (2001–2004), Hintikka and Sandu's joint article (1994) and Anders Engström's dissertation at the University of Copenhagen (1999).
5. Proverbs have many functions. They can be used in various situations and for various reasons. For more about the possible functions of proverbs, see publications by Outi Lauhakangas (2004) and Anders Widbäck (2015). They represent the latest research on proverb functions.
6. Due to the historic-geographic method (also known as the Finnish method), Finnish proverbs have been collected and they are well mapped. Most of the ground forms of traditional Finnish proverbs before the 1950s are included in the published collections edited by Matti Kuusi (1990/1953; the oldest collections made before the great fire of Turku in 1828), Ruben Erik Nirvi and Lauri Hakulinen (1953/1948; collected in the 1930s) and Kari Laukkanen and Pekka Hakamies (1997/1978; collected prior to the end of 1950s). There is also an online corpus including proverbs collected in the 1930s owned by the Institute for the Languages of Finland (*KOTUS / Kotimaisten kielten keskus*).
7. *Se koira älähtää, johon kalikka kalahtaa* [That dog yelps, which is hit by a stick].
8. *Kell' omni on, se ommen käteköön* [He/she who has much happiness does well to hide it] is the beginning of the poem *Laulu onnesta* [Song of happiness], which was published for the first time in 1900, in a collection entitled *Hiiltäjän virsiä* [Hymns of a skier] (Leino 1978). Nowadays, it is a proverb and people often do not know its origin.
9. 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 (see Granbom-Herranen 2013, 2016a).
10. In Galatians 6:7 [*Kirje galatalaisille*]:  
"Alkää pettääkö itseänne! Jumala ei salli itseään pilkattavan. Mitä ihminen kylvää, sitä hän myös niittää."  
(*Raamattu*).  
[“Be not tricked; God is not made sport of: for whatever seed a man puts in, that will he get back as grain.” (*The Bible*)].
11. The ground form is *Mitä ihminen kylvää, sitä hän niittää* [What a person sows, he will reap] but nowadays more often in form *Sitä saa, mitä tilaa* [One gets what he or she orders]. As a proverb in English “You get what you order”. Finnish-language proverbs often use passive.

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Abbreviations:

*KOTUS* = *Sananparsikokoelma* [Proverb corpus] *Kotimaisten kieltenkeskus* [Institute for the languages of Finland]. [http://kaino.kotus.fi/korpus/sp/meta/sp\\_coll\\_rdf.xml](http://kaino.kotus.fi/korpus/sp/meta/sp_coll_rdf.xml), January 28, 2019.

*SKS* = *Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura*. [Finnish Literature Society].

*SSS* = *Salon Seudun Sanomat* [Salo District Newspaper], a regional Finnish daily newspaper.

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### Curriculum Vitæ

**Liisa Granbom-Herranen's** current research focuses on folkloristic paremiology at University of Turku, Department of Folkloristic. She got her newest PhD in folkloristics and earlier she had got PhD (education). She is Adjunct Professor (Title of docent) in education at University of Jyväskylä in Finland. Her studies are multidisciplinary as the main interest in folkloristic studies is related to the proverbs, the concept of metaphor in philosophy as well as the questions of power, authority, and autonomy in education. She is a member of the Associação Internacional de Paremiologia / International Association of Paremiology (AIP-IAP).

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