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## PEDAGOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE USEFULNESS OF POPULAR PROVERBS IN A HERMENEUTIC EXPLORATION OF THE WORLD

### INTRODUCTION

Popular proverbs are a part of a much bigger whole, namely folk culture which is synonymous with folklore, i.e. knowledge of folk, vertically and horizontally touching all areas of human life and aspects of the functioning of an individual in society and in the world. Proverbs are commonly defined as a treasure trove of good reason, or the wisdom of nations, they are timeless, colloquially we can say that they never grow old (*an old proverb is always young*).

For quite a long time (particularly on the grounds of paremiology) there has been a continuous and, as it seems today, a futile dispute about what constitutes the phenomenon of proverbs, whether it is the fact that a proverb is a phenomenon located at the border of linguistic and literary phenomena, or it is implied by their didactic usefulness and educative and sententious character.

So far, scientific pedagogy, apart from some of its subdisciplines (in selective and rather narrow ranges, however), such as theory of education and general didactics, and in it Polish or foreign language teaching methodology in particular, has not devoted much attention to proverbs. On the other hand, in non-scientific pedagogy, in ethno-pedagogy and ethno-pedagogy, in popular knowledge about upbringing, which outdistance scientific knowledge, they were a method of educating and a result of interpreting not only human behaviour and its conditionings but also man's relationship with natural and supernatural world. They gave a number of answers to so-called primary questions, how to be, how to live, what man should be like, how he should behave, think, act and feel. It is exactly the circumstance in deliberations on proverbs which should be particularly highlighted and emphasised today, and in its light, it becomes justified to conduct research into the significance of proverbs in the exploration of the world by an individual on each stage of his life and on each level of his education.

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## MULTIFACETED NATURE OF PROVERB AS AN (UN)SOLVED MYSTERY

The first support in defining the essence of a proverb is often a linguistic, paremic intuition of language users which enables to call one structure and not another a proverb (Szpila, 2003). From the point of view of the study of proverbs, namely paremiology, a proverb is a linguistic phenomenon (Kłosińska, 2004). It is a short, simple sentence or a complex/compound sentence, sometimes a set of a few sentences (from two to four), often a rhymed saying in the form of a sentence, usually a metaphorical one, containing a truth or wisdom based on experiences of people (Szpila, 2003). It is a closed wholeness, distinctive and easy to remember, often taking a verse form (Krzyżanowski, 1969). It serves to describe a situation, instruct, it occurs in a given community, it is commonly known and rooted in tradition, has folk provenience, thus, it is passed on from generation to generation orally and directly (Szpila, 2003).

In proverbs one should understand something different than it is shown with words, it is an utterance saying something else and implying something else (Eder, 2008). It is only one of the fundamental characteristics of a proverb, as the remaining ones – alegoricity\*, imagery\*\*, didacticism\*\*\*, permanence\*\*\*\* and international universality\*\*\*\*\* place it at the border of linguistic and literary phenomena, treat it as a simple literary creation and cause that a proverb is not only a linguistic but also a literary phenomenon (Krzyżanowski, 1969). Significant characteristics of a proverb also include conciseness, brilliance, incisiveness, discussing important moral issues, ethical content, moralistic punch line (Eder, 2008) and the lack of time aspect (Olkusz, 2007):

Conciseness, brilliance and simplicity. An evocative style, a splinter of reality to which timeless sense, a universal dimension was assigned. Universal because the fate of this or that expression, often only an exclamation, expression of emotions or reason, was decided upon by those who were saving those true pearls for centuries, and which we now, faithful to this tradition, quote, not least to enrich our own world, strengthen our presence in it, understand more deeply not only our personal experience, our faith in order to help ourselves and others overcome vices and weaknesses. (Hydziuk-Żmuda, 2012, p. 5)

\* For example, the Polish proverb *Kruk krukowi oka nie wykole* (*Hawks will not pick hawks' eyes*) does not concern real relations among birds but among people, and concerns the phenomenon of cronyism.

\*\* Proverbs like *Jak Kuba Bogu, tak Bóg Kubie* (*Tit for tat*) or *Jak ty komu, tak on tobie* (*What goes around, comes around*) in a simple, imagery way to express interpersonal, religious or social relations.

\*\*\* Proverbs warn against misconduct, e.g. *Kto pod kim dołki kopie, sam w nie wpada* (*He who digs a pit for others, falls in himself*).

\*\*\*\* *Pal go sześć* or *Pal go diabli* (*Never mind*) is a proverb which originates from the language of medieval torture chambers (the Polish proverb says *scorch him six times* – that was an instruction given to the torturer. As the convict could not survive more than two, three times this could mean that we should not worry about him any more).

\*\*\*\*\* The Polish proverb *Pańskie oko konia tuczy* (*The master's eye makes the horse fat*) was introduced by Plutarch in *Moralia* more than two thousand years ago.

The subject area and the scope of the form of proverb contains expressiveness and explicitness, it is characterised by verbal images and metaphors (Krzyżanowski, 1969). More complex varieties of proverbs include artistic syntax, thus not only metaphors but also personifications or hyperboles or paradox\* (Rozumko, 2010), they may also include a dialogue, an epigram or an anecdotal wellerism (Krzyżanowski, 1969). Moreover, longer proverbs include specific stylistic devices – alliterations, syntactic parallelisms or ellipsis (omission of a part of a sentence). They are often rhymed (Rozumko, 2010), they use humour, their aesthetic quality is proven by realism, reproduction of the phenomena of life in realistic images and boiling down abstractions and notions to concrete reality (Krzyżanowski, 1969).

Apart from proper proverbs, we come across so-called improper proverbs, deprived of alegoricity and imagery but possessing a didactic character, little changeability and commonness. We can mention here gnomes, aphorisms, apophthegms, anonymous utterances or those attributed to some personages (Krzyżanowski, 1969). Relative forms include anecdotes, maxims and so-called winged words (Rozumko, 2010), as well as proverbial expressions or phrases which are allusions to matters and situations which used to be commonly known a long time ago but do not exist anymore. They do not have a form of a sentence like a proverb but they are used in metaphorical and secondary meaning as their original meaning has been forgotten (Krzyżanowski, 1969)\*\*. It is a very broad family of utterances circulating anonymously.

To end the deliberations undertaken in this part of the paper, it is worth adding that the phenomenon of proverbs is defined more precisely by common opinions on them, e.g. the Poles regard proverbs the philosophy and wisdom of nations (Krzyżanowski, 1969), the French say that they are an echo of experience, and for the Germans there is truth in a proverb (Kłosińska, 2004). They prove that so far proverbs have basically functioned as a treasure throve of *good reason* rather than a literary text read *in continuo* (Eder, 2008). Therefore, to date they are treated as an (un)solved mystery (?) in which a question arises whether they should be perceived as ethical and timeless wisdom or as a linguistic and literary phenomenon, which by the way is contained in the Polish proverb *Insza mówić, insza bajać* (*It is one thing to say and another to fable*) (Eder, 2008).

## THE SOURCES OF CONTENTS INCLUDED IN PROVERBS

It is said that a speech without a proverb is like food without salt, that it comes from reason and reason comes from a proverb, or that it is a short sentence with

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\* For example, Polish *Głową muru nie przebijesz* (*What can't be cured, must be endured*), *Spiesz się powoli* (*More haste, less speed*).

\*\* E.g. Polish *Uszło mu to płazem* (*He got away with it*) or *Puścił mu to płazem* (*He let him get away with it*).

long experience. Proverbs are a kaleidoscope or even a magical ball in which not only beautiful words move, scattered in time and space (Hydziuk-Żmuda, 2012), but, in parallel or rather above all, contents concerning almost the whole human existence. Therefore, it seems that the thesis about the usefulness of proverbs in a hermeneutic exploration (explanation, clarification, interpreting, understanding) of the world can be primarily supported by contents, subjects and issues raised in proverbs.

Proverbs are the essence and the conclusion of a long chain of thoughts and reflections, they originate from rich but individual experiences and observations of various life situations which as a result of repetitions have been generalised (Bień, 1987). They are an example of different human practices collected and passed on from generation to generation, they describe what often occurs and equally often repeats in individual and communal life (Rozumko, 2010).

Man is the primary subject matter of proverbs (Jurand, 1982). They describe almost all areas of human life, they offer wisdom concerning its fundamental aspects, among which there is friendship, love, marriage, family, children, upbringing, education, work, honesty, faithfulness, bad habits, crimes, etc. (Mazurkiewicz, 2004). A considerable part of them are proverbs about health, disease and death (Dzierżanowski, 1972), about wealth and poverty (Strukowska, 2001), or about eating, dining and drinking (Tauber, 2001). Plenty of proverbs concern doctors, teachers, priests, lawyers, and other professional and social groups, they emphasise the value of hard and honest work, entrepreneurship, responsibility for one's own faith (Rozumko, 2010).

As a broader example, the subject of work in proverbs concerns not only a job, activity, occupation, human activities, but also the goal which is the production of material or cultural goods. Proverbs paint a picture of man in the production process, depict his attitude to work, effects he achieves thanks to it, and changes he undergoes while performing it (Reichhart, 1988). As befits folk culture, they talk not only about *homo faber*, but also about *homo ludens*, thus, about work and recreation, as well as leisure, fun, about laziness and idleness (Reichhart, 1988). Moreover, they refer to practical matters, they pertain to farming, trade, or hunting (Kłosińska, 2004), and even beekeeping (Gnerowicz, 2009). They concern savings, income and economy (Bieniok, 1990). They include topographical and geographical issues, they concern weather, animals and plants. They say a lot about social relations, class and estate of the realm conflicts, they are a mine of social details, they depict various aspects of past life. Numerous events which are unknown to history are also recorded in their contents (Krzyżanowski, 1969).

Therefore, the abundance of contents included in proverbs is surprisingly great. However, praising their value would be not only the manifestation of scientific subjectivism, a great faux pas, but also an undeniable mistake, since in addition to overwhelming truths proverbs also contain obvious nonsense (Wojciszke, 2009), good and bad advice, flatteries and aspersions, deep thoughts and platitudes

(Dzierżanowski, 1972). Some proverbs contradict each other\*. Anyway, they give important guidelines, warnings and advice (Olkusz, 2007). Yet their significance for pedagogy and educational sciences should be established based on scientific knowledge and research, both mono and interdisciplinary.

## BETWEEN THE HERMENEUTIC SENSE AND THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF PROVERBS

To introduce the last part of the deliberations in this paper, quite difficult due to the fact that the possibility to apply a hermeneutic perspective in the studies of proverbs is only being recognised, it is worth emphasising that not only proverbs but their educational, practical, social function is as old as the hills\*\*. Proverbs were known and repeated already in ancient Greece and Italy, in Poland they appeared with the first print and Biernat of Lublin was a leader, there is a multitude of proverbs in the literary works by Mikołaj Rej and Jan Kochanowski. In the 16th century, the king, senators and members of parliament used them off the cuff, at that time knowing them was a proof of deep erudition, therefore, they were memorised purposefully, although they spread very fast orally (Krzyżanowski, 1969).

In the light of the contemporary knowledge about folklore, proverbs, which are an integral part of folk culture, should be attributed a polyfunctional influence (Krawczyk-Wasilewska, 1986). The thesis situating the didactic function of a proverb at the first position (Krzyżanowski, 1969) has lost its validity, or from the very beginning of research into proverbs it was wrongly formulated and not supported by pedagogical scientific knowledge, which, with the remaining part of its justification, indeed proves that it is not that function but the educational one which really matters.

The thesis that proverbs have polyfunctional meaning can be supported by the following statements. Firstly, proverbs very clearly manifest the ethical system, they teach loyalty to the loved ones, consistency of action, obedience to parents, they warn against the effects of unethical conduct, favour perseverance, criticise hypocrisy. They serve as arguments in a discussion, they describe the world, they are life signposts, they allow to tame reality. It is owing to them that in past communities it was possible to pass on moral principles, the philosophy of life or even religion (Kłosińska, 2004). A great number of proverbs has the character of statements about what it is like in life, they are critical statements imposing a conclusion which requires verification, warning against something or indicating what it should be like, they are positive or negative recommendations (Krzyżanowski, 1980).

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\* E.g. Polish *Im więcej, tym lepiej* (*The more the merrier*) and *Co za dużo, to niezdrowo* (*Enough is as good as a feast*).

\*\* How old proverbs are is proven by the works by King Solomon of 10th century BC and The Book of Proverbs, a part of the Bible, whose authorship is attributed to him.

Secondly, their role consists in strengthening bonds among the members of a given community, thus, we can attribute an integrative function to them (Krzyżanowski, 1969). Proverbs act as a comment, they are believed to be a means of risk reduction in social interactions, since they introduce an external authority guaranteeing the compliance of conduct or an utterance of the object with a cultural norm (Olkusz, 2007).

Thirdly, proverbs served and should still serve as a means of evoking the mood of homeliness and familiarity. In addition, the history of proverb shows gradual disappearance of obscene elements and vulgarisms from them (Krzyżanowski, 1969), owing to which they also gain a new aesthetic value. Finally, as for the didactic function, proverbs are useful in fulfilling it and the function is definitely fulfilled in practice, however, we do not know to what extent, we do not have any descriptions of its essence and conditionings, thus, they should be studied.

New functions of proverbs are waiting to be discovered because they do occur. And this task is not easy, either, as traditional proverbs are playing a smaller and smaller role in the contemporary world, and folk wisdom is more and more superseded from everyday human experiences. So far, biblical proverbs and those which are useful in raising children have maintained the biggest authority. Generally, the status of proverbs has decreased, but they continue to be a vital element of language, particularly of colloquial language (Rozumko, 2010). Therefore, a chance can be seen in the hermeneutic perspective of studying them, as social experience included in a proverb and the attitude to the surrounding world is a handy tool in re-analysing something experienced, which may be examined in relation to the experience analysed a long time ago.

Proverbs by definition are perceived as passing on the truth, their function consists in explaining, clarifying the situation, and not obscuring the picture of reality or misleading. Moreover, they are not in a vacuum, centuries of common feeling, experiencing, coping with situations experienced by man stand behind them. They are based on experiences of many people, yet they are a sum of individual experiences, which only at some point became a general experience. They include conclusions drawn from observations of selected situations by a given community over many years (Szpila, 2003), in majority they answer so-called primary questions about the nature and essence of man and humanity. It is also important that they do not change with transformations in the experiences of social groups. Transformations in experienced situations and ways of assessing them lead to their elimination. Proverbs which can survive are those which describe universal experiences, which still refer to the present time and the ways of experiencing it. On the other hand, new experiences, evolving view on the experienced reality are reflected in parodies of proverbs and the creation of *anti-proverbs* (Eder, 2008), which are defined as humorous versions of well-known proverbs, and which result from the willingness to adjust to a current situation\* (Kłasińska, 2004).

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\* Polish anti-proverbs include *Kto pod kim dolki kopie, sam awansuje* (Those who dig a pit for others shall be promoted), *Kto rano wstaje, ten cały dzień ziewa* (The early bird yawns all day), *Mądry Polak po errorze* (A Pole is wise after an error message), *Nie wszystko IBM, co się świeci* (All that glitters is not IBM), *Kto daje i odbiera, ten coś ma* (Give a thing and take a thing and you will have something).

The use of proverbs to describe any, usually unique in its details situation enables to place it among other, already known ones and to refer it to the established system of values and ways of thinking. The paremic description of a situation aims at seeing a new experience and an individual reaction to it in the light of axiomes characteristic for a given community. It is also to tame something unknown, give it a familiar but at the same desubjectivised dimension (Szpila, 2003).

Nowadays, we can observe a trend of the shrinkage of the set of proverbs most commonly used, which is a reflection of the process of eliminating a proverb as a category from the resource of linguistic devices, which takes place before our very eyes. The number of known proverbs is decreasing but because a proverb finds its place in a variety of spheres of human communication, for example in texts written on walls (such as graffiti or murals) or in texts like text messages, we may expect that they will be described also in those types of communication. Undoubtedly, the press, advertising and literature will remain an inexhaustible source of information about the phenomenon of proverb for researchers, the analysis of which will result in new observations concerning the ways of applying proverbs and their role in the contemporary world (Szpila, 2003).

Deriving from paremic wisdom makes functioning in the world easier for proverb users. The wisdom of proverbs is proved in their everyday application, as well as their everyday verification and real effects which their use brings. It is wisdom accessible to everyone, non-hermetic, easy to understand, appealing to an average person more strongly than elite philosophical thought (Szpila, 2003), yet requiring constant interpretation due to the realities of the present, changing like in a kaleidoscope. What is more, it is about experiencing an indissoluble link between the content of a proverb and its interpretation, a link which consists in mutual influence. On the one hand, the content gains sense owing to interpretation, and on the other hand the interpreted content transforms the interpretation, and even an interpreter (Januszkiewicz 2012).

## **CONCLUSION – VIA PROVERB BACK TO THE THINGS THEMSELVES (?)**

Passing on proverbs should take place by two simultaneous paths – direct or indirect. The first way is a purposeful and systematised activity consisting in making others aware of the existence of proverbs, explaining their meanings and illustrating their functions, which in the past happened while learning Greek, Latin, studying the Bible, didactic literature proverbs are a permanent component of. The other way of passing on proverbs is to use them in a context with the intention of passing a communication act to other participants. This method of passing on proverbs from generation to generation depends on the familiarity of an older generation with them. Frequent use of proverbs by them, in connection with the authority of age and

experience may contribute to preserving the tradition of passing on knowledge about proverbs and familiarity with them to next generations (Szpila, 2003), but at present also this method is more and more often failing (Przygoda, 2015), and today's young generation acquires proverbs in the way known to itself.

Marcus Quintilian wrote that there are such short maxims or proverbs which have been accepted and are used by everybody. However, they would not pass from century to century if they were not significant to people (Reichhart, 1988). Yet today, to make it possible for a proverb to come into being, it must fall on culturally fertile ground (Eder, 2008). It is not easy because contemporary man is more enchanted with habits, civilisational novelties than with questions about how to be, how to think, how to feel, there is not time for reflection, and as a rule, the individual starts thinking, only when the faith stands in his way. And proverbs are like coins, they have value only when they are in circulation (Jurand, 1982). Therefore, pedagogical research into proverbs with the application of a hermeneutic perspective is a real challenge.

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## PEDAGOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE USEFULNESS OF POPULAR PROVERBS IN A HERMENEUTIC EXPLORATION OF THE WORLD

**Keywords:** folklore, proverbs, pedagogy, art of interpreting

**Abstract:** The interest in proverbs has been growing recently, new books of proverbs spring up on the publishing market like mushrooms. However, something is disappearing in their abundance, namely scientific deliberations about proverbs, conducted mainly in the context of paremiology, but also anthropology, ethnology, psychology, psychiatry, folklore studies, literary studies, linguistics, religious studies, as well as pedagogy, which still attempt to unravel the nature of proverbs, as it is still thought to be an unsolved mystery. In this context, pedagogical reflection on the significance of popular proverbs in a hermeneutic exploration (clarification, explanation, interpretation) of the world and the sense of human existence seems justified and may encourage further, both mono- and multidisciplinary studies.

## PEDAGOGICZNE ZAMYŚLENIE NAD PRZYDATNOŚCIĄ PRZYSŁÓW LUDOWYCH W HERMENEUTYCZNYM POZNAWANIU ŚWIATA

**Słowa kluczowe:** kultura ludowa, przysłowia, pedagogika, sztuka interpretowania

**Streszczenie:** W ostatnim czasie wzrasta zainteresowanie przysłowiami. Na rynku wydawniczym pojawiają się *jak grzyby po deszczu* nowe księgi przysłów. W ich natłoku giną jednak naukowe rozważania o przysłowiach, które są czynione głównie na gruncie paremiologii, ale i antropologii, etnologii, psychologii, psychiatrii, folklorystyki, literaturoznawstwa, językoznawstwa, religioznawstwa, a także pedagogiki, w których to podejmowane są nadal próby rozwikłania ich natury, bowiem stanowi ona wciąż – uważa się – nierozwiązaną zagadkę. W tym kontekście pedagogiczne zamyślenie się nad znaczeniem przysłów ludowych w hermeneutycznym poznawaniu (objaśnianiu, wyjaśnianiu, interpretowaniu) świata i sensu życia człowieka wydaje się uzasadnione i może stanowić zachętę do dalszych, tak mono-, jak i wiedzodyscyplinarnych badań.