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PROVERBIOGENESIS: THE PHASES OF PROVERBIAL BIRTH

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Abstract

Proverbial birth is an elusive phenomenon that has never been studied as a process. However, an approach based on corpus-linguistics makes it possible to divide this phenomenon into several compulsory and optional phases. As a result, this article aims at providing a theoretical framework for the stages of proverbial birth, hereafter named “proverbiogenesis”. To complete this task, challenges such as proverb definition and proverb origins have to be identified and overcome.

Key-words: proverbiogenesis, proverbial birth, proverbialisation, dissemination, proverb origins.

Studies on proverbial birth

Although there is an abundance of studies that deal with the sources or creators of specific proverbs, it is extremely difficult to find any that describes the general way proverbs are born.

Richard C. Trench was probably the first scholar to broach the subject. The Irish archbishop and poet published in 1861 a collection of lectures. In one of them, he notes that people are acquiring “new experiences of life”, forming “new moral convictions”, and that “some of the happiest of these will receive the stamp of general allowance” (Trench 1861: 30). Decades later, an ethnologist from New Zealand named Raymond Firth published an article on proverb creation among the Maori. In this pioneering study, Firth (1926: 263) mentions a “concrete formulation by one individual in response to some set of circumstances”, the “acceptance by the people at large as being appropriate to a more general situation”, and “possible modification of phraseology or meaning through the passing of time”. Although the last point does not concern proverbial birth, the first two seem to develop in a more precise way on Trench’s remarks.

In 1931, American folklorist Barlett Jere Whiting published an article entitled “The Origin of the Proverb”, but it only focused on whether people could consciously and collectively create proverbs and not on the phases of their birth. In the same year, American folklorist Archer Taylor published a pioneering work entitled “The Proverb”, in which he comments on the various sources for proverbs and declares that “the acceptance or rejection by tradition which follows immediately upon the creation of the proverb is a factor in its making quite as important as the first act of invention” (Taylor 1931: 35). A few years later, Taylor (1934: 10) added that “every proverb has been created by an individual and set in circulation by him, but a man’s aphorism or witty saying does not become a proverb until it has been accepted by popular tradition”.

More recently, cognitive linguists Honeck & Welge (1997) published an article entitled “The Creation of Proverbial Wisdom in the Laboratory”. However, this study does not deal with the birth of proverbs, but is a series of experiments in which subjects have to match formulae with given stories and models, in order to determine what motivates proverb creation. Similarly, Schapira (2000) published an article on “proverbialisation”, but despite what its title might suggest, it is not about the birth of proverbs. The author actually tackles their definition and only notes that proverbialisation involves two steps: « une première où la formule s’impose comme proverbe et une deuxième où elle se maintient en tant que tel dans l’usage » (*becoming* a proverb and *remaining* a proverb). As a consequence, these cannot be considered stages of proverbial birth, but merely synonyms for their creation and existence. The most precise description of this phenomenon is certainly that of world-leading paremiologist Wolfgang Mieder. In his 2004 handbook, as well as in his 2015 article on the origins of proverbs, he states that:

Proverbs, like riddles, jokes, or fairy tales, do not fall out of the sky and neither are they products of a mythical soul of the folk. Instead, they are always coined by an individual whether intentionally or unintentionally. If the statement contains an element of truth or wisdom, and if it exhibits one or more proverbial markers [...], it might 'catch on' and be used in a small family circle, and subsequently in a village, a city, a region, a country, a continent, and eventually the world (Mieder 2004: 9)

Despite various terms, all the afore-mentioned studies have two steps in common: a concrete and personal invention (called “creation”, “formulation”, “coinage”, etc.) followed by a general result (called “acceptance”, “allowance”, “catching on”, etc.). However, such a description is not accurate or complete, and none of these studies describes all the stages of this complex *process*.

The challenges of definition and time

The first difficulty emerges: before identifying the stages of proverbial birth, one must define proverbs. Many conflicting definitions exist, mainly because proverbs are at the crossroads of several disciplines: folklore, semantics, stylistics, sociolinguistics, narrative studies, etc. As a consequence, many scholars are tempted to put too much emphasis on a specific angle that corresponds to their area of expertise (cf. Villers 2015). Very few monographs based on a multi-criteria approach have been written: it is possible to cite Norrick (1985) and Schapira (1999). Despite their quality, neither is systemic: they do not explain the relations between all the categories and the reasons why some formulae can shift from one category to another. Such a systemic and multi-criteria approach was used in Villers (2014) to obtain a definition of the proverb and a classification of its satellites. As a result of this study, the following criteria will be considered obligatory and defining:

- Proverbs are closed communication units
- Proverbs have a generic meaning
- Proverbs are current among the folk and therefore have a stable form
- Proverbs deal with Human activities (H+)
- Proverbs are not associated with a specific author (reference loss)

Among these criteria, some are prerequisites. Firstly, the formulae must be complete communication units before starting their proverbogenesis. They must also have a generic meaning and deal with Human activities, but these two criteria may be acquired during proverbogenesis if not present from the beginning, for instance if a statement becomes figurative. As for currency and reference loss, they are not present at the beginning but are

acquired during proverbiogenesis. On the contrary, brevity, figurativeness, wisdom, truth, prescriptiveness, and prosodic features are optional, even if they are part of the proverbial “archetype” (or stereotype). Since they are proverbial markers and reinforce or influence the perception of proverbiality (cf. Arora 1995), they may boost the chances of proverbialisation. These criteria can therefore be considered “facilitators”.

The main challenge to proverbiogenesis is most certainly the passing of time, which makes it difficult to establish a proverb’s date of creation and to follow its evolution. This problem has been noted by several paremiologists: Trench (1863: 40) describes proverb origins as “obscure and unknown”, Hulme (1902: 18) comments that “their parentage is enveloped in mystery”, Taylor (1934: 10) states that finding a proverb’s inventor is often “an idle task”, and Mieder (2015: 29) notes that it remains “an especially vexing problem to ascertain the origin and age of proverbs”. Even when the creator seems to be identified, it is often revealed that he or she merely borrowed the formula. This “warping” phenomenon is common with very famous authors or works, as was the case with several proverbs whose paternity was attributed to Shakespeare or Benjamin Franklin. For instance, *All is well that ends well* is generally attributed to the former but was present in a much older collection of proverbs entitled *Proverbs of Hending* from 1300. Similarly, *Time is money* is attributed to one of Franklin’s works by the greatest paremiologists, but it was present decades before in the *Free Thinker* newspaper.

A possible solution to this problem is to focus on modern proverbs, for which more data is available on the Internet, through archives, search engines, and corpora. This reduces the problem, but it does not completely solve it, especially if the proverb has oral origins. Furthermore, the date of use of a proverb is often missing on online corpora such as GloWbE and is impossible to establish on many websites. Despite these disadvantages, studying modern proverbs remains the better option.

Induction and coinage

It may seem contradictory, but one may consider that the very first phase of proverbiogenesis is not the “creation” of the formula or “concrete formulation”, but what triggers it. This is probably what Firth (1926: 263) refers to as a “set of circumstances”. These circumstances are a stimulus in real life: an experience from which an observation is derived. It can be an experience of any type; for instance, the proverb *Garbage in, garbage out* was first recorded in a 1957 article about the use of computers for traffic and highway problems. Its author

claimed that the formula was an expression by his personnel to refer to invalid data. It is therefore safe to assume that the stimulus to such an observation was the bad results given by incorrect data input. When such observations are shared with others, they are no longer thoughts, but reach the verbal dimension of expression. This corresponds to the three steps described in Gustave Guillaume's psychomechanics theory: Experience (memory) → Representation (language) → Expression (speech).

The concrete act of creation or *coinage*, to use a more precise term, occurs when the idea is formulated with words, which are in turn spoken. Although it is not the very first phase, coinage is seen as the official birth of a formula because of its more concrete nature. It may thus be compared to the birth of a child, which is considered to be the first day of its life. This is precisely why this phase is the most studied one: many specialists focus on it because it corresponds to a proverb's "origins". Although many studies tackle this issue, little is known about the identity of actual proverb coiners, because of the "warping" phenomenon mentioned above. Mieder (2015: 28) cites Shakespeare's *Brevity is the soul of wit* (1601), Alexander Pope's *Hope springs eternal in the human breast* (1733), and Roosevelt's *Speak softly and carry a big stick (you will go far)* (1900). Yet, the latter is said to be of African origin by Roosevelt himself, while there is a slight chance the first two may have been borrowed from an unknown source. The only certainty shared by paremiologists is that the main sources for proverbs are the Bible and Erasmus's compilation of Latin and Greek proverbs, by way of their translations into many "modern" languages. However, once again, the real coiners are unknown and long forgotten. Insofar as these translations introduce new formulae in new target languages, they can be considered "secondary origins" when the formulae gain proverbial currency (Mieder 2015: 34-35). Another source that is often cited is that of ancient fables, such as Aesop's, but it is impossible to establish whether such ancient texts have been influenced by even more ancient sources.

Another mystery has been a cause for debate among specialists: the *number* of coiners. Firth (1926: 263), Krappe (1930: 143), Taylor (1934: 10), Inyama (1980), and Mieder (2004: 9) believe that proverbs are created by one individual. This explains why the metasaying *The wisdom of many and the wit of one*, attributed to Lord Russell, is used by numerous paremiologists to describe proverbs. Whiting (1931: 55) is more adamant and claims it is "incomprehensible that a group, working from whatever impulse and under whatever circumstances, should join in the composition of a proverb". Although one must concede that such an impulse is uncommon, it must not be forgotten that this is the way slogans are created, some of which have become proverbs. For instance, it is now known that the slogan

What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas was created during a brainstorming session at the R&R Partners company, in 2002. Although it was based on an existing pattern, the formula thus obtained was not a variant but a new one, and gained proverbial currency very quickly. Similarly, the French proverb *Un train peut en cacher un autre* was created as a slogan for level crossings. Furthermore, a second argument may plead in favour of a possible “mutual” coinage. Mieder (1993, 2013) has written two articles in which he posits that *Let George do / Laissez faire à Georges* is “polygenetic”. In other words, it has several distinct origins and was created by a different person in each language. Dundes (2000: 296) defends this theory, but to this day, very few specialists have commented on the possibility of such a phenomenon. Although it is possible and plausible, let us conclude that polygenesis remains hard to prove and statistically unlikely.

The coinage of a formula brings about another question: is it a conscious act or not? Whiting (1931: 55) claims that “none of the sayings we call proverbs can be proved to be the work of a conscious literary artist”, but even if that remains true for many cases, it is still possible to cite artists who create formulae that imitate proverbial characteristics. Benjamin Franklin is one of the most famous proverb “imitators”, and one of his creations, *Three removes is as bad as a fire*, from *The Way to Wealth* (1758), gained proverbial currency before becoming obsolete. Such imitations are even more conscious in African communities, as Nwachukwu-Agbada (2012: 270-271) and Yankah (2012: 142) note that some speakers specialise in “proverb creation” in the Igbo and Akan communities (in Nigeria and Ivory Coast). Finally, one must distinguish between creating a proverb and creating a proverb-like formula: even if few “artists” consciously try to achieve the first goal in Western cultures, many try to achieve the second one.

Exposure

Although it has never been described in other studies, the third phase is vital. Indeed, a formula cannot gain proverbial currency by being passed on in the private sphere. Its successful dissemination can only begin if a sufficient number of speakers/hearers are exposed to the formula at the same time. This exposure takes place by means of what will be named a *propagating agent*, which can be a film, an advertisement, a book, a public speech, an article, and so on. For instance, the propagating agent of *What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas* was an advertisement on American television while that of *Un train peut en cacher un autre* was a series of signs near level crossings. It is important to bear in mind that many

proverbs may have several propagating agents, allowing us to distinguish between a primary propagating agent and secondary ones. It is the case with *One picture is worth a thousand words*, which was used in several advertising-related newspapers and articles (first in *Printers Ink* in 1911, then in *New Orleans Item* in 1915) before being used in advertisements in 1934 (Lakeside Press) and 1944 (DuMont Co TV sets). One can imagine that exposure was more efficient with television advertisements than with local or specialised press. Consequently, it is important to make careful use of the term “primary”, which will be used to refer to the *first* propagating agent, and not the *main* one. Furthermore, in the case of an advertisement, film, or book, one must note that some propagating agents offer prolonged exposure. Naturally, a speaker who would use the formula in a private conversation could not be considered a bona fide propagating agent, since the latter has been defined as an exposure source with a large scope.

In terms of chronology, exposure can either be simultaneous or subsequent to coinage, and it can also be triggered either by an internal or external source, meaning by the very author of the formula or by a more famous “borrower”. As mentioned above with the *warping* effect, the borrower is often mistaken for the actual coiner of the formula, especially if he is very famous and renowned for his writing skills, like Benjamin Franklin or William Shakespeare. Consequently, the “origins” of proverbs listed in many specialised dictionaries are actually propagating agents, for they are often the first written source. Regarding the first two examples cited above, which were born as slogans, it is safe to say that exposure was subsequent to coinage and that it was triggered by an external source (and not by the authors themselves, even if the advert and signs were made by people who potentially worked with them). A case of exposure that is simultaneous to coinage and with an internal source is still possible, if a famous person invents a formula during a public speech, but this remains statistically improbable. However, exposure cannot be simultaneous to coinage and be triggered by an external source, except in a very improbable situation where someone would dictate something he/she has just coined to a public speaker. To sum up, subsequent exposure is the more probable type of exposure, be it external or internal.

The dissemination phase

The next phase has never been studied thoroughly before, but has only been mentioned by specialists who only refer to its *result*: “acceptance”, “allowance”, etc. This phase is actually a long *process* that generally takes years and is probably the longest phase in proverbiogenesis.

As a consequence, one can only disagree with Taylor (1931: 35) when he claims that “acceptance by tradition” follows “immediately upon creation”. It *begins* shortly after the exposure phase, when the hearers/speakers who have been “exposed” start using the formula with other people, who in turn become micro-propagating agents. Although individual users in the private sphere cannot be considered bona fide propagating agents, it is not impossible for one of them to become a secondary propagating agent by giving the formula an extra public boost. This means that the dissemination phase may contain secondary exposures. Several ingredients may account for a successful dissemination. First of all, the formula must contain a useful message that people will need or choose to pass on. Secondly, the formula must be easy to use in order to survive, which implies that it must neither be too long nor too hard to understand. Finally, some speakers may be attracted to some optional features (or “facilitating agents”), such as humorous traits or prosodic features. The more the formula is used, the more currency it gains, building up its “commonness”.

The dissemination mode of proverbs has never been studied, with the exception of Wolfgang Mieder (2004: 9). He noted that when a proverb catches on, it “might be used first in a small family circle, and subsequently in a village, a city, a region, a country, a continent, and eventually the world”. This seems to suggest that the dissemination starts in only one place and expands progressively like a fire or a tumour, as opposed to a remote strike or dispatch. However, these types of dissemination are not the most common and above all not the most probable types, since the formula needs a boost (or “propagating agent”) to catch on. Many potential users must be exposed at the same time, so I will posit that proverbs spread in a way named “mixed diffusion” in viral epidemics. This implies a multilateral dissemination which starts in different places at the same time, and not necessarily in the same region.

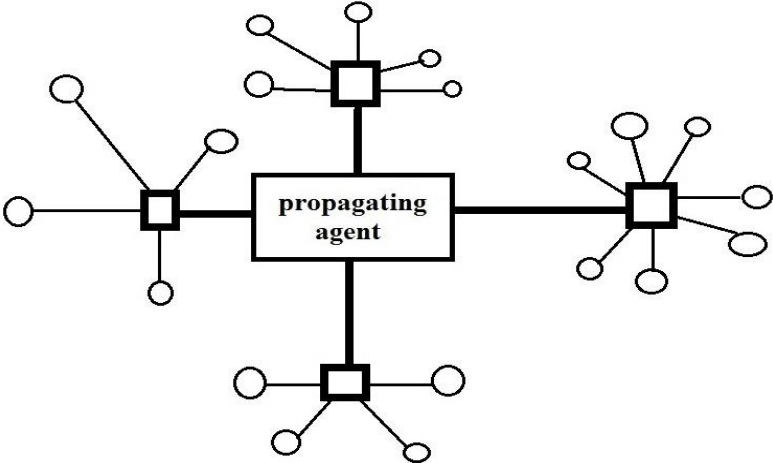


Table 1: simplified representation of the “mixed diffusion” at work in proverbial dissemination

Thus, the primary propagating agent exposes many hearers (the square nodes) to the formula, who then expose more hearers (the round nodes) to the formula by using it, and so on. As the process goes on, millions of nodes and links are created, which could not be represented in the table for obvious quantitative reasons.

Reference loss

Once the formula has gained currency or “commonness”, proverbiogenesis is not necessarily complete yet. Indeed, it is important to distinguish between *Where there’s a will, there’s a way* and apothegms like *To be or not to be, that is the question*. Even if both are very common, the former is not associated with any specific author by the folk, while the latter is commonly associated with Shakespeare. Consequently, reference loss must occur to complete the process. This loss may be prior, simultaneous, or subsequent to the dissemination phase, and may even be the longest phase of all. Its speed mostly depends on the fame of its creator and the scope of its propagating agent(s): if the creator is too famous and the propagating agent does not erase his/her identity, as with Shakespeare’s quote, proverbiogenesis cannot be complete.

Similarly, many scholars consider that *Life is like a box of chocolates (you never know what you’re gonna get)* is a modern proverb. It is known that this formula originated in *Forrest Gump*, as a joke based on *Life is no bowl of cherries*, as explained in Winick (2013). Knowing the origins of a proverb with certainty is extremely rare, but it has no impact on its status. However, the online corpus GloWbE reveals that the majority of the people who use it are aware of its origins and use it as a film quote. The corpus contains 42 entries for this formula, 27 of which contain a direct reference to the film (“as Forrest Gump would say” etc.). Of the remaining 14 entries, only 2 introduce the formula as a saying, one of which even calls it an “old saying” (the user turns out to be a Frenchman living in Singapore). Even though the remaining examples do not use introductory formulae, it is likely that most of the users know its origins and use it as a film quote as well. Therefore, it seems unwise to put this film quote in the same proverbial basket as *Garbage in, garbage out* or *It takes two to tango*, which are not associated with any particular person. Very few specialists may know their precise origins (or may be convinced that they do despite the difficulty), but this does not undermine their general anonymity.

Phase variations and duration

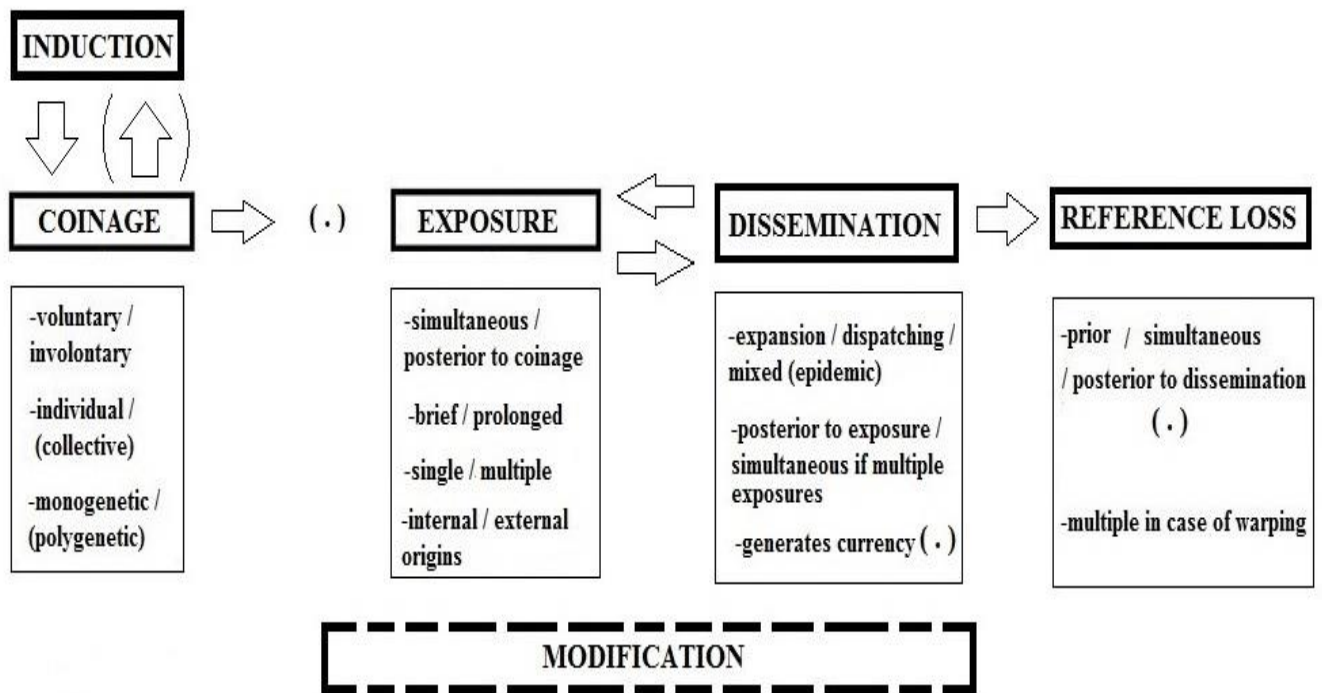
It is now clear that some phases may include variations: a second induction in case of a formula that becomes metaphorical, several kinds of coinage, numerous types of propagating agents, the possibility of several exposures, a reference loss that may occur at various moments, and of course possible formal “modifications”, which were mentioned by Firth (1926: 263). These modifications normally occur during the dissemination phase, but might occur as soon as the primary exposure, if the first propagating agent modifies the coiner’s formula. Regarding their nature, the modifications may be syntactical, lexical, both, or more rarely semantic. They may occur for several reasons. First of all, some of the formula’s elements may be outdated. For example, *First come to the mill first grinde*, found in the 17th century, became obsolete culturally and spelling-wise, so it evolved into *First come, first served*. Secondly, the formula may be modified by a person or medium in order to be more efficient or striking (as with a slogan). This medium may become in turn a very strong propagating agent, causing the modified version to supersede the original one, or to create a variant. Such a thing happened to the old proverb *It never rains but it pours*, which was superseded by Morton Salt’s slogan *When it rains, it pours* (1911).

Another element that may vary greatly is without a doubt the duration of proverbogenesis. In Villers (2015), I estimated that the process commonly takes from 10 to 30 years. For instance, *Garbage in, garbage out* was coined during the early days of computing, in the fifties. Thanks to archives (NYT), corpora (GloWbE), and the *Dictionary of Modern Proverbs*, we know that its first written references are two computer-related articles from 1957 (the primary source of exposure) and 1959, in which both writers credit the formula to a staff member, meaning that the coiner was already unknown at the time (reference loss). In 1964 and 1966, the formula was present in a computer manual and a glossary of computer terms, which suggests that the formula was already common in the computing world. The *New York Times* archives reveal that the newspaper used it in 1965 (acting as a very strong secondary propagating agent), and that it was already commonly used in 1972 in articles. Finally, it was used in a 1983 *Time* article (11/07/1983 by S. Kanfer), in which it is called a “folk saying”. Thus, it is safe to estimate that its proverbogenesis took 30 years at most (from the early days of computing to being called a “folk saying”), and at least 15 years (from when it was thought to be a personal formula to its common use in the press). Sometimes, proverbogenesis may be even faster, as with *What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas*. The slogan was coined in 2002 by R&R Partners (from a similar pattern) and used in a series of advertisements from 2003 (the primary source

of exposure), and immediately appeared in numerous press articles, speeches, films, books and so on (secondary propagating agents). The *New York Times* archives reveal that until 2005, the formula was almost always introduced as a slogan, while the entries subsequent to 2005, the formula was almost always introduced as a slogan, while the entries subsequent to 2007 introduce it as a “general rule”, “commonplace”, “code”, or in a proverbial manner: “You know what they say”, “they say” etc. This seems to suggest that the formula has been used as a proverb since at least 2008, after an unusually short proverbiogenesis that lasted 6 years.

Conclusion

Concrete applications need to be found for this theoretical framework, but for now, it seems that *A Picture is worth a thousand words*:



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Curriculum Vitæ

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