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Better Familiar Bad than Unfamiliar Good. Re-evaluation of Common Values by Proverb Use

Abstract. The premise of this study is to expect that proverbs live by being reinterpreted or transformed to suit pluralistic and ambiguous commonplace situations. The proverbs are either transformed or framed in the situations in order to be interpreted according to the aims of their users. The content of proverbs, interpreted through metaphors or without, emphasis concrete, reasonable and predictable things as esteemed aims. A familiar proverb justifies a decision, which supports traditional procedures. But in ambiguous decision situations these normally agreed upon values do not always function. This study aims to clarify, how a familiar proverb pattern may serve as a triggering factor for the acceptance of otherwise doubtful opinions. The Matti Kuusi international typology of proverbs is used for measuring the emphasis of common values in traditional proverb lore. General patterns make impressive modifications possible. The author will demonstrate, how the modifications work in traditional and social media.

Key words: *typology of proverbs, proverb usage, patterns of proverbs, social media*

1. Background for the aim of this study

The so called “wisdom of many” is a concept undefinable enough to be promoted as national heritage. It is easy to say that this national heritage, which one can call ‘proverb lore’, strengthens, supports and maintains common values. But what does a common or shared value mean? In this study the starting point is to use the Matti Kuusi international type system of proverbs (Lauhakangas 2001). Proverbs typically remind next generations with the experienced voice of the previous generations of the unchangeable reality of inequality, permanency of pairs like ‘man and God’, ‘masters and hired men’, ‘the rich and the poor’, women’s place and right hi-

erarchy. If we look closer at the spectrum of proverb texts of each language or dialects of different people, we will soon find out that many proverb texts seem to carry ironic attitudes maintained by poor, especially rural people.

In an example from the Finnish tradition *Köyhä on aina väärässä* (lit. The poor man is always wrong) you can hear an ironic voice of experience. Same testimony comes from Estonian tradition: *Kel raha sel õigus*. (lit. He who has the money has the right). A proverb in German tradition takes this observation even further: *Wer gelt hat, der mag alles recht machen, was unrecht ist* (lit. The one with money can turn any unjust just).

Proverbs have preserved most of their familiar images and wordings. At least every dialect put their flavor to them or they have got local additions and humorous contexts like e.g. in an Irish wellerism "*There isn't any luck except where there's discipline*", as the son said while beating his father¹. Same kind of process is going on nowadays concerning new proverb like expressions, those, which find their ways to slang or jargon of special communities or those which spread quickly out by international contacts in social media.

The aim of this study is to find a representative way to follow the social strategies of proverb use. The focus is on re-evaluation of common values. What are the means of supporting your arguments in ambiguous situations? In the next chapters we will find a productive pattern of proverb to demonstrate how proverbial transformations develop.

2. How to strengthen less obvious reasoning?

Although dimensions of values are quite universal and not comparable with each other, they have an order in people's world view². Ambiguous decision situations may test the order of values of people involved. They raise a need to use an apt proverb. A discussion about artificial intelligence is a typical topic to arouse critical feelings about future. For an expert of future research there is a challenge to interpret the predictable situation. Re-evaluating a preconceived opinion may succeed by referring to an old and familiar proverb. A discussion in a Finnish radio program brought up

¹ This Irish wellerism is excerpted from Carson Williams (2002: 261).

² The ten basic values by Schwartz (1992): Self-Direction. Stimulation. Hedonism. Achievement. Power. Security. Conformity. Tradition. Benevolence. Universalism. Every value can be characterized by describing its central motivational goal.

an example of how a proverb can be referred to as a well-known concept. In the next fragment of the discussion one of the debaters refers to a universal proverb (type A1a 17 in Kuusi's typology), *Fire is a good servant but a bad master*, which she expects to be familiar to Finnish radio listeners.

This is the traditional '*Fire – hired man or the master*' question. We have got along with fire from ancient times, then why not with artificial intelligence? (Leena Romppainen, Electronic Frontier Finland, in a morning radio program 'Ykkösaamu' of Yle1, 24th of August, 2018.)

Contacts to other cultures cause a pressure for a traditional or narrow point of view to check if the adopted personal procedure is working. The communication situation may sometimes be so tricky that normally agreed upon values are difficult to recognize from the comments. This is how an example taken from recent international politics can be read.

The participation of North Korea in the PyeongChang Olympic Winter Games in South Korea had not as much news value as the meeting of those countries itself, according to Reuters. The initiative for discussions came from the North. The chairman of North Korea's Committee for Peaceful Reunification, Ri Songwon said very metaphorically: "This winter there have been more snow storms than ever, and rivers and mountains are frozen. It is not exaggeration to say that the relations between Koreas have been even more frozen."

The South Korea unification chief Cho Myoung-gyon answered: "*The first step is half the journey, but the first spoon doesn't yet fill the stomach.*" (Reuters, 9th of January, 2017)

The purpose of the above communication may be just to say something assertive and metaphorical from one side and from the other side to answer similarly without giving any possibility that the comment would become exhaustively interpreted. Thus, the analyzers of both parties are left to evaluate the "opinions" in a way they want to do it.

At its best, new circumstances may transform attitudes, *Do at Rome as the Romans do*. Suitable proverbs are used to strengthen the less obvious reasoning. A good example of making an argument against the normal order how 'own and familiar' always goes before 'strange and foreign' is a south-west African proverb *Iitsikalya yi vule iikunwa*, which tells that "Transplanted grain is stronger than one grown from seed". It is explained: A member of a foreign tribe becomes a courtier. (Kuusi 1970: nb 1989.) Thus, foreigners are not automatically suspects. Besides, you should understand that you in turn will be a foreigner in another country.

Another southwest African proverb deals with the value of promises. The practice to give real help rather than only a promise is valued. *Okukondela ku vule oku hala* (lit. Gathering for someone is better than wishing, *ibid.* 370.) An interesting and seemingly differing from the European view is the proverb *Etimaumbwile li vule ekuta*. (lit. A promise of a meal is better than a full stomach, *ibid.* 153.) It represents a deviation of a common European proverb type (J1i 23 in Matti Kuusi international type system), which says that *Besser ist wenig besitzen als viel zu erwarten* (lit. Better to own a little than to wait for a lot). It also seems to deviate from other proverb types that warn about trusting on promises J1i³. European mind does not catch the possibility to get strength from a promise in hard circumstances. In African wisdom 'a promise of meal' means a request to orientate to the next meal. If we look closer at the proverb, it does not mean to rely on anybody's promise. Actually, southwestern African people would rely on continuous trying, *Onkambadhala yi vule mwena* (lit. Trying is better than nothing, *ibid.* 1801.) unlike an English proverb, which teaches: *Better never begun than never ended*. (In Kuusi's typology M6c 21)

Another interpretation of the aforementioned African 'promise of a meal' brings it nearer to a universal advice, in which proverbs serve to postpone concrete and immediate results. This is the main message in the previous mentioned group M6c⁴ E.g. *With patience all is done* (Greek). Direct, close at hand or easy satisfaction of one's needs are recommended to be delayed. That is how it is also taught in Marathi, India: *If you bear trouble, you will see happiness*.

We must ask, what a common or shared value might mean inside one culture or one and the same language area. Use of proverbs most often reinforces traditional or shared values inside one culture. Still in practice, in recurrent situations of proverb use a familiar proverb is often called for to explain or justify someone's personal opinion or decision. Proverbial speech is suitable when some outward support is needed in an ambiguous situation (Lauhakangas 2004). Those situations can be morally difficult or only in hindsight clear.

³ J1i = subgroup is 'promises and keeping one's promises'.

⁴ M6c subgroup is 'enterprise, perseverance and toughness are more valuable than shortsightedness, giving up easily, the easy way'.

3. The aims of comparing in proverbs

3.1. 'Better' as an opening of a proverb pattern

It seems a universal pattern of proverbs to begin with a comparative adjective 'better'. In any alphabetically arranged European proverb collection you find a long list of proverbs beginning with 'Better'. A quick check to a collection of Chinese proverbs compiled by John S. Rohsenow (2002) proves that this holds true for Chinese tradition, too. 'Nìng' (Better) is repeated e.g. in proverbs like the following

N49. *Nìng chī guòtóu fān; mò shuō guòtóu huà.* (lit. It is better to overeat than to overstate.)

N50. *Nìng chī xiān táo yīkǒu; bù chī làn xìng yī kuāng.* (lit. It is better to have only one mouthful of the celestial peach than to eat a basket of rotten apricots.)
Figurative meaning: It is better to have fewer and better than to have more but worse; quality is more important than quantity.

In Matti Kuusi's *Ovambo proverbs* (1970) collection this opening formula is missing, but from the word index you can check that there are proverbs with the same idea including the word 'vula' (lit. 'to be better' or 'to surpass'). Thus the 'Better x than y' pattern is universal enough to reveal the ways people deal with general and expected values in their society.

Browsing *The Matti Kuusi international type system of proverbs* (Lauhakangas 2001) you get an overview of what values or aims are positive and esteemed practically in every human community. In the first place, you are reminded of the value of concrete, reasonable and predictable things contrasted to uncertain and imaginary things. E.g. *Better an egg today than a hen tomorrow* or *Besser ist wenig besitzen als viel zu erwarten* (lit. Better to own a little than to wait for a lot). This idea is in its clearest in Kuusi's subclass C3c "Concrete, close at hand and certain is better than distant, uncertain or something only in the future". You should be satisfied, if you have resources like 'near', 'sure', 'today', 'concretely in hand', 'already caught' and 'own', although resources would be much fewer than those 'far', 'intangible', 'strange', 'not yet caught', 'promised' and 'wished'.

Proverbs having the idea of Kuusi's subclass C3c:

C3c 11 *Better an egg today than a hen tomorrow / Besser heute ein Ei als morgen ihrer drei / Ad praesens ova cras pullis sunt meliora (Latin) / È meglio oggi l'uovo che domani la gallina*

C3c 12 *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush / A sparrow in hand is better than a pigeon on the roof / Besser ein kleiner Fisch, als gar nicht auf dem Tisch*

C3c 15 *Stretch your legs according to your coverlet / Make not your tail broader than your wings / Cut your coat according to your cloth / Strecke dich nach der Decke / Selon le drap la robe*

C3c 20 *Catch the bear before you sell the skin / First catch your hare, then cook it / Vender l'ucello sulla frasca / A supposed antelope is not cooking in the pot (Ovambo/Afr.)*

C3c 22 *Catch not a shadow and lose the substance / Ein Gewiss ist besser als zehn Ungewiss / Mal si lascia il certo per l'incerto*

The social strategy⁵ of proverbial speech is to increase our readiness to accept hardships and value things not obviously satisfying. Another subclass of the Matti Kuusi typology E1d “minor, inferior, late etc. is better than nothing” deals with a question of conforming to deprivation, misfortune or minimal resources. Proverbs convince that ‘a little’, ‘one small fish’, ‘half an egg’, ‘bad bread’, ‘wishy-washy broth’, ‘dirty water’, ‘some of pudding’, ‘a little stream’, ‘patched cloth’, ‘bare-foot’, ‘one-eyed’, ‘a bad bush’ (as a shelter) or ‘late’ is good enough if it is compared to ‘none’, ‘empty’, ‘never’, ‘being without’, ‘loosing much’, ‘being empty-handed’, ‘stone (totally) blind’, ‘empty shell’, ‘a hole out’, ‘naked’, ‘legless’ or ‘in the grave’.

E1d 10 *A little is better than none / Etwas ist besser als gar nichts / È meglio qualche cosa che niente*

E1d 12 *Better one small fish than an empty dish / A louse is better than no meat / È meglio tale che senza nulla stare*

E1d 14 *Better half an egg than an empty shell / In der Not frisst der Teufel Fliegen*

E1d 15 *Better some of pudding than none of a pie / Besser Laus im Kohl als gar kein Fleisch*

E1d 17 *A little stream will quench a great thirst / An kleinem Brunnen löscht man auch den Durst*

E1d 19 *Better a clout than a hole out*

E1d 20b *There is no hair so small but has its shadow / es ist kein Busch so klein, daß er nicht Schatten gäbe / il n'est si petit buisson qui ne porte son ombre*

E1d 22 *Better one-eyed than stone-blind / Besser schein als blind*

E1d 23 *A bad bush is better than no shelter*

E1d 27 *Better lose much than lose more / Better lose the saddle than the horse / Besser ein Arm als den Hals gebrochen / Meglio perdere un dito che la mano*

E1d 28 *Better late than never / It is never too late to mend / Zur Bässerung ist es nie zu spät / Mai troppo tardi per far bene / Potius sero quam nunquam (Latin)*

⁵ Proverbs in communication can be seen as ‘social strategy’ as K. Burke (1957) already did.

The sub-classes H2b and H4b underline the importance of ownership, self-sufficiency and home district compared to dependence on others and strange places.

H2b 21 *Dry bread at home is better than roast meat abroad / Unser Kohl schmeckt wohl / Et proprius panis magis extat in ore suavis*

H4b 24 *Smoke of a man's own house is better than the fire of another's / Fremdes Feuer ist nicht so hell wie der Rauch daheim / Patriae fumus igne alieno luculentior* (Latin)

Interestingly, proverbs with the better-opening do not always follow just predictable pairs of comparison. Although better-proverbs mostly promote ethic and pedagogical rules of the community, they can serve as justifications for deviations. This may base on the use of proverbs most often in tense situations. Although proverbs ground on tradition and familiarity, the use of proverbs may aim at reasoning nonconformist argumentation.

In the same way use of proverb patterns can justify nonconformist claims dressed in familiar clothes. The strict rules and social order are a good breeding ground for creating exceptions and comparisons that change habitual ways of thinking.

3.2. 'Better x than y' proverb pattern and nonconformist argumentation

Many proverbs beginning with 'Better' seem to represent a not self-evident comparison. They rather pursue and peddle us to satisfy with the given conditions and recommend us to appreciate a value that is not obvious.

Better a good name than riches

Better go to bed supperless than rise in debt

Better be first in a village than second at Rome

Better alone than in bad company.

If you consider the social contexts of proverb use, the value supported by the proverb text can be either accepted or questioned. In studying of proverb use you can apply analysis of rhetoric studies. In situations, where some tension is present, use of a proverb is most often aimed to settle the ambiguity (Lauhakangas 2004). The basic idea of rhetoric from the point of view of a speaker (analyzed by Perelman, 1996: 28) is to relocate the listener's approval of the opponent's previous suggestion to the speaker's opinion. It requires a linkage between these different opinions. The speaker has to persuade the listener(s) to take a new way to regard the difference. The speaker may underline that she/he accepts the opposite point of view, but (s)he converts it as a part of her/his way of understanding while enhancing her/his own opinion. Using a proverb is a signal of the speaker's need

to position the main point of the discussion in an acceptable way and often it is a signal of the speaker's effort to get the last word.

There are also grammatical ways to prepare the ground for acceptance of your new idea. Anneli Kauppinen (2006) writes about consonance or compatibility between opinions reached in negotiations. The Finnish way to use conjunction 'vaikka' ('although' or 'despite') is a practical tool for that. You can find this way to position the message with 'vaikka' conjunction in Finnish proverbs, too. A Finnish-Karelian proverb expresses an ostensibly contradictory request *Ilo pintaa vaik syvään määrätköö*. (lit. Show your joy, although your heart will rot.)

Many traditional proverbs live even nowadays by being framed or transformed to suit pluralistic and ambiguous commonplace situations. Framing can be the way how the proverb user interprets the situation and maybe marks it. You might introduce a proverb by mentioning that "there is a worn-out saying", which is still true or remind what your "grandmother used to say". A proverb can also be reframed, for example, in a comic mode like a joke, which can be adapted to the everyday issues of its user. That is a way to redefine, understand and organize daily matters (Laineste 2008: 31).

If framing or even reframing is not enough, a common proverb must be transformed according to the aims of their users. For this we have a kind of build-in ability to recognize proverb formulae. Instead of an original proverb the familiar proverb pattern serves as a triggering factor for the acceptance of our opinion.

3.3. Transformation of familiar better-than comparisons

A proverb transformation is efficient, if you turn the familiar claim around. The new point of view to a common proverb *Action speaks louder than words* (J1h 17) or in Finnish *Tee enemmän, puhu vähemmän* (lit. Do more, speak less) can be reached by a proverb-like expression *Parempi puhe kuin teot* (lit. Better speech than acts). The host in the Radio Speech (The Finnish Broadcasting canal Yle-Radio Puhe) applied this slogan explaining it with another more familiar claim "You change the world by speech" (2018). Turning around the comparison between action and words forces the listener to define the general value of action anew. Speech can be action.

In the next example Oleg Vishnepolsky has created a proverb like expression as a title for his short story (almost a tweet): "*Better to have a good boss in a bad company, rather than a bad boss in a good company!*" Vishnepolsky tells a story that ends well and in the end he mentions a crucial criterion for recognizing a good boss: "You can tell a good boss very quickly by how they

treat other people". The habitual way of thinking would presumably be getting a job in a good company – but Vishnepolsky wants to make a divergent assertion. He changes the agenda: Try to get a good boss. He hurries to tell that the company of that good boss was actually also good, but he would have been ready to work with him even in worse conditions, because he(or she) will stand up for you, will trust you, will listen to you, will make yours a good job even in a weak company."⁶

What is a normative way to say something contrary to norms? E.g. the rational norm is according to the universal proverb 'The shoe should fit the foot and not the foot the shoe'. But you can target to somebody a Karelian proverb *Paremb rakko jallas kun ruppi kengäs* (lit. Better a bristle in your foot than a crinkle in your shoe). Using this proverb you do not exactly reveal your opinion. It can be taken as a parody of the reasonable norm 'Better a crinkle in your shoe than a bristle in your foot'. You have also learned the suitable tone and context to use it: "Said mocking" or "an opinion of a snob" (Miettinen; Leino 1971: nb 7721.). But (contrary to those explanations) there might be situations, where it would be just a right moment to defend your opinion that it is better to endure a little pain than stop smiling, at least in societies where attracting positive attention is more valued than revealing loser's looks.

In order to say something from a new point of view and even contrary to common norms often requires a trick like an anti-proverb. Anti-proverbs or twisted proverbs are most often based on linguistic structures that remain the same even as slight verbal changes introduce dramatically new images and ideas (Litovkina 2014: 333). Some of them are easily translatable like an ancient wisdom with a modern addition: *To err is human – to totally muck things up needs a computer* (Mieder, Litovkina 2006: 9–10).

3.4. Better good –x than bad +x

If you browse the Matti Kuusi typology in order to find material of proverbs with the better-comparison structure, you will notice how often a thing of seemingly little worth combined to something esteemed is compared to a desirable thing combined to something bad. In the Table 1, there are at first three Karelian proverb examples (1)–(3), which are equal in their structure: Better good –x than bad +x. The first (–)loaded part combined with a (+)qualifier and the second (+)loaded part with a (–)qualifier.

⁶ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/better-have-good-boss-bad-company-rather-than-agree-oleg-vishnepolsky/> November 21, 2017, Global CTO at DailyMail Online and Metro.Co.Uk (visited 17.12.2018).

Table 1. Karelian proverbs

The Karelian proverb ⁷	The first member of comparison (-)	+ qualifier	The second member of comparison (+)	- qualifier
1. Better a copper at home than a rouble in the village.	copper ~penny	c. at home	rouble ~pound	r. in the village
2. Better be a good man's whore than a bad man's wife.	whore	good man's wh.	wife	bad man's old wife.
3. Better a wise bad (man) than a stupid good (man).	bad man	wise b. m.	good man	stupid g. m.
4. Better to escape than to die as young. (Karelian)	escape (-/+?)		die (-)	die as young (+/-?)

Source: own research.

The last Karelian proverb type (4) *Parmeibi on pagenemiini kun nuorena kuolemiini*. (Ibid. 7702.) does not fit to the common pattern of the three first proverbs. According to Kuusi's type system the positive idea of escaping (4) occurs at least in German, Greek and Persian proverb lore (M4d 23). An African proverb also tells that 'The wise person runs away and saves him/herself'. (4) seems to disclaim the common value of man's honor to die in the battle as a young hero, which bases both on the European⁸ and Oriental tradition: 'Better die in honor than live in disgrace' (Vietnamese, F1a 23 in Kuusi's typology). Its masculinity and virility are connected to fighting as in a Japanese proverb: 'Life seems insignificant compared to honor for a warrior'. Escaping gets its positive load from the comparison to the second part of the proverb.

This difference of proverb contents does not prove from straight hand anything about the cultural differences, because the popularity of proverbs differ and those expressions always get their tone from the actual situations of their usage. It is still important to study different emphasis of same means (in this case proverbs) in various cultures and value systems.

⁷ Karelian proverbs in the original language

(1) Parembi on kodihine kopeikka kun kylähine rupla. (Miettinen & Leino 1971: 7673.)

(2) Parempi hyvän miehen huora kuin pahan miehen akka. (Ibid. 7657.)

(3) Parembi on viizas paha ku tuhmu hyvä. (Ibid. 7754.)

⁸ For example, Tyrtaeus of Sparta (7th century BC) was a Greek elegiac poet on military themes.

An experiment done by the Google search machine using a text string “is better than bad” offered the following proverb-like expressions.

It is better to be alone than in bad company. – George Washington

War is better than bad peace

Good war is better than bad peace

Divorce is better than bad marriage

No company is better than bad company

Loneliness is better than bad company अकेलापन बुरा कंपनी से बेहतर है Hindi

*No news is better than bad news*⁹

No advice is better than bad advice

Good silence is better than bad argument

No policy is better than bad policy

The productivity of a special structure in the above listed examples with comparison of ‘No x is better than bad x’ leads us to study further this way of supporting an argument.

3.5. ‘No x is better than bad x’ as a proverb-like pattern

We just learned in the chapter 3.1. that “minor, inferior, late etc. is better than nothing” (E1d in Kuusi’s typology) is a commonly supported proverb idea. Same kind of proverbial thinking is in Kuusi’s proverb types elsewhere, too: *A bad compromise is better than a good lawsuit* (H7k 15). Same idea is in a German proverb *Ein schlechter Friede ist besser als ein gerechter Krieg* (lit. A bad peace is better than a righteous war) and in Livius’ maxim *Melior tutiorque est certa pax, quam sperata victoria* (lit. sure peace is better and safer than a hope for victory). The proverb *Even a bad decision is better than no decision* also belongs to this way of thinking. We can take an example of Finnish use of this proverb in context.

During July 2018 the world news agencies followed efforts of rescuers in Thailand, where a football team of youths had got into isolation in the Tham Luang cave. The rescuers (one of them a Finnish diver) were in a situation where they were expected to bring twelve boys and their football coach out of the cave before monsoon rains on the weekend or the boys may be trapped for the monsoon season.

⁹ This may have originated with King James I of England, who allegedly said *No news is better than evil news* (1616). *The American Heritage® Idioms Dictionary*. But nowadays more common is the one ending with a positive load: *No news is good news*, a slogan, which became internationally common during the World Wars.

A Finnish diving trainer Jouni Piispanen commented for the newscast: “When rescuers soon will have only a limited time, they see that *even a bad decision is better than no decision*. Having back to the wall they are obliged to make some decision.”¹⁰

We could happily follow the news for the next 10 days to witness that the decision to act was inevitable and a success. The proverb got its confirmation.

Contrary to this traditional proverb idea you can find the same proverb pattern turned around like in the title of this chapter. Discussion forums in the Internet use this kind of reasoning. One example comes from Patrick Meier’s *irevolutions.org* pages. He tells about the lively discussion, which followed his question about the argument *No data is better than bad data*. Meier had heard this proverb-like slogan used before.

I recently tweeted the following: “*No data is better than bad data...*” really? if you have no data, how do you know it’s bad data? Doh.

This prompted a surprising number of DM’s, follow-up emails and even two in-person conversations. Everyone wholeheartedly agreed with my tweet, which was a delayed reaction to a response I got from a journalist who works for The Economist who in a rather derisive tone tweeted that “no data is better than bad data.” This is of course not the first time I’ve heard this statement so lets explore this issue further (...)¹¹

Bob Martens deals with the same proverb-like argument, when he writes about business and technology. He starts a discussion asking if *No data is better than bad data*.

nateberan: Too many people create data then put it in places or in formats where it just goes to die a lonely death. With all your data there should be a strategy for its useful life.

BM: Absolutely. That’s the other side of it.

Itskeptic: I’m inclined to think *bad data is better than no data* SO LONG AS YOU KNOW IT IS BAD. – – The trick then is to start measuring folk using it. They’ll soon fix it :)

BM: I still think no data is better since it forces a person to think. You have nothing else to base your decision off of. Give humans an “out” and they’ll choose the path of least responsibility almost every time. – In the same breath, ideally you’d know what you are working with and then make decisions with both eyes open.¹²

¹⁰ Yle News in the Finnish Broadcasting company 4.7.2018.

¹¹ <https://irevolutions.org/2011/06/22/no-data-bad-data/> (visited 17.12.2018).

¹² <http://bobmartens.net/2015/04/no-data-is-better-than-bad-data/> (visited 17.12.2018).

Marten seems to keep the last word when he closes the conversation and serves his own opinion that “no data is better since it forces a person to think”. This way of using the proverb-like expression resembles a spoken conversation, in which a proverb is brought out as a support to one’s own decisions.

3.6. *No deal is better than a bad deal* slogan as a political mantra

Using a proverb is a signal of the speaker’s need to position the main point of the discussion in an acceptable way and often it is a signal of the speaker’s effort to get the last word. This is what UK’s prime minister Theresa May has tried with her proverb-like expression about Brexit in her Lancaster House speech in January 2017: *No deal is better than a bad deal* with the EU.

The slogan really had an effect. Many pointed out its foolishness, its lack of realism. She stopped using it for a while. But after some months she and her ministers started again and repeated it several times – and got applause. But in the 28th of May 2017 the newspaper *Independent* asks why the slogan is back.

(...) for May, the prospect of such a backlash from her media allies and backbenchers¹³ might seem worse than the bad deal, even if she fully understands the economic consequences of no deal for the country.¹⁴

John Springford and Simon Tilford from UK dealt with May’s argument in June 2017 in the *CER bulletin* of EU in their article titled “Why no deal would be much worse than a bad deal”. The insert of the article tells that

Theresa May and several of her ministers have claimed that no Brexit deal would be better than a poor deal. They are wrong. UK economy of failing to strike a deal would dwarf those of signing up to a bad deal.¹⁵

After a year the same discussion was still going on. Liam Fox, the international trade secretary, defended the hard alignment in a BBC interview:

¹³ Boris Johnson etc.

¹⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/brexit-theresa-may-tories-no-deal-better-bad-deal-brussels-destroy-british-economy-a7760026.html> 28.5.2017 (visited 17.12.2018).

¹⁵ www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/bulletin_114_js_st_article1.pdf CER Bulletin, issue 114. June/July 2017 –3 (visited 17.12.2018).

The prime minister has always said that *nothing is agreed until everything is agreed* and that *no deal would be better than a bad deal*. I think it's essential as we enter the next phase of the negotiations that the European Union understands that and believes it.¹⁶

At the same time a petition text attacked May's politics.

The most extreme and dangerous Brexit of all is one where we leave without a deal. The Government should drop its mantra that 'no deal is better than a bad deal' and rule out any prospect of leaving the European Union without one.¹⁷

Janet Daley's article in The Daily Telegraph known as a paper of right wing had a headline in the 14th of July: There will be no going back from May's Orwellian Brexit deal.¹⁸

All these interpretations of the situation with or without the need of negotiations used the same slogan or proverb-like saying as a concrete thing to keep or drop. There were no traditional, absolute and shared wisdom to be relied on. Still the familiar proverb pattern was used behind this argument. It was suitable for political speeches.

4. Conclusions

Re-evaluating a preconceived opinion may succeed by referring to an old and familiar proverb, but in this study we searched for situations and motivations, which would transform a common proverb according to the aims of their users. The focus was in a few familiar proverb patterns that served as a triggering factor for the acceptance of otherwise doubtful opinions. The Matti Kuusi international typology of proverbs was used for measuring the emphasis of common values in traditional proverb lore. Proverbs live by being reinterpreted or transformed to suit pluralistic and ambiguous commonplace situations.

One aim of this short research was to test how common proverb patterns live in contemporary media. You could find different ways of using proverb-like expressions both in the discussion forums of the Internet and

¹⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-latest-theresa-may-no-deal-threat-bluff-liam-fox-eu-boris-johnson-david-davis-a8413021.html> 23.6.2018 (visited 17.12.2018).

¹⁷ https://www.open-britain.co.uk/theresa_may_has_no_mandate_for_hard_brexit 23.6.2018 (visited 17.12.2018).

¹⁸ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/07/14/will-no-going-back-mays-orwellian-brexit-deal/> 14.7.2018 (visited 17.12.2018).

in political speeches and comments. In the same way as proverbs in spoken conversations both reframed proverbs and transformed expressions based on a familiar proverb pattern were brought out to support speaker's own aims. This is one of the universal social functions of proverb speech.

The most difficult political situation in Britain led the prime minister to use a slogan made of a familiar proverb pattern. The whole Brexit process seems to be a reconstruction of George Washington's proverbial saying: *It is better to be alone than in bad company*.

This study opened a few rhetorical ways proverbs and proverb-patterns influence in very ambiguous and sometimes societally critical situations. As a paremiologist you can at least be aware of the use of them.

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Besser vertraut schlecht als unbekannt gut. Neubewertung gemeinsamer Werte durch Sprichwortgebrauch

Zusammenfassung

Eine Neubewertung einer vorgefassten Meinung kann erfolgreich sein, wenn auf ein altes und bekanntes Sprichwort Bezug genommen wird. In dieser Studie haben wir jedoch nach Situationen und Motivationen gesucht, die ein gemeinsames Sprichwort entsprechend den Zielen seiner Nutzer verändern würden. Im Mittelpunkt standen einige bekannte Sprichwortmuster, die als Auslöser für die Akzeptanz sonst zweifelhafter Meinungen dienten. Die internationale Typologie der Sprichwörter von Matti Kuusi wurde zur Messung der Betonung gemeinsamer Werte in der traditionellen Sprichwortkunde verwendet. Sprichwörter leben, indem sie neu interpretiert oder transformiert werden, um sich an pluralistische und mehrdeutige gewöhnliche Situationen anzupassen.

Das Ziel dieser kurzen Forschung war es zu testen, wie gängige Sprichwortmuster in zeitgenössischen Medien leben. Es gibt verschiedene Möglichkeiten, sprichwortartige Ausdrücke sowohl in den Diskussionsforen des Internets als auch in politischen Reden und Kommentaren zu verwenden. Auf dieselbe Weise wie Sprichwörter in gesprochenen Gesprächen wurden sowohl umgesetzte Sprichwörter als auch transformierte Ausdrücke, die auf einem bekannten Sprichwortmuster basieren, zur Unterstützung der eigenen Ziele des Redners herausgebracht. Dies ist eine der universellen sozialen Funktionen der Sprichwortsprache.

Die schwierigste politische Situation in Großbritannien veranlasste den Premierminister, einen Slogan zu verwenden, der ein bekanntes Sprichwortmuster verwendete. Der gesamte Brexit-Prozess scheint eine Rekonstruktion von George Washingtons sprichwörtlichem Spruch zu sein: Es ist besser, alleine zu sein als in schlechter Gesellschaft.

Diese Studie eröffnete einige rhetorische Möglichkeiten, wie Sprichwörter und Sprichwortmuster in sehr vieldeutigen und manchmal gesellschaftlich kritischen Situationen wirken. Als Paremiologe können Sie sich zumindest der Verwendung dieser bewusst sein.