



# Proverb Studies: A Practical Manual



Peter Unseth

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# Proverb Studies: A Practical Manual

A linguistically-oriented guidebook for  
studying proverbs for academic writing

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to the proverb scholars of tomorrow. I hope you will surpass me and the scholars of my generation. I hope you study the proverbs of languages that have not been studied, yet. I hope you find new ways to benefit communities by using local proverbs in new ways. I hope this book helps you understand proverbs in deeper ways and tell others about your insights in more insightful ways.

May you discover the beginning of wisdom.



## Message to all readers

This book will help you to study proverbs. But, you do *not* have to read the entire book from beginning to end!

Readers do *not* have to read this whole book! You may read only the parts that are most relevant to your curiosity and their proverb project. For example, some readers may read only the chapter on collecting and still benefit from this book.

I suggest that every reader study the Table of Contents and also the chapter 1, “Introducing the Study of Proverbs”. This chapter also includes discussions of definitions and also resources for proverb study.

The contents of this book can be summarized as: Define, Collect, Translate, Analyze, Apply. This approach uses ideas from the work of Brian Schrag (2003, Van Buren and Brian Schrag 2018).

You do not have to study each section. Instead, just see what the topics are. You may find out that you like some topics so you want to read much of the book. Or you may find that for your topic, you need to concentrate on only one small section.

This book contains a section addressed to professors helping students write theses and dissertations about proverbs. It also contains a section addressed to students who want to write theses and dissertations about proverbs. I have also written it for community members who want to study the proverbs of their own community.

At the end of almost every chapter, and at the end of some sections, I have a section labeled “Research projects”. For all of the topics, I have tried to give useful advice about how to study them. I have also given some opinions about whether a topic is appropriate for a thesis, dissertation, or article.

In the book, readers will notice that I have quoted proverbs from around the world. This is to show that the principles and topics that I discuss are found in proverbs from around the world. I could have written the book citing only English proverbs for about 95% of the book, but I want readers to see that these principles can be found in proverbs from their part of the world.

This book contains many proverbs from the Bible. Some are from the book titled Proverbs, others are from other parts of the Bible. Most of the Bible proverbs I have quoted them from the King James Version of 1611 since these archaic forms may be familiar. (For those who actually want to read and understand the Bible, I strongly recommend reading a newer translation to understand the Bible, like I do.) I have followed Yomna Y. Mohamed (2017) in classifying some passages from the Qur’an.

I have repeated some material in different chapters. Because many readers will not read every chapter, I have put some information in twice, putting it in places where I think it will be useful.

This is the first edition of this book. I will make improvements in the future. *Please* send me your suggestions about how I can make this book better. The future editions of this book will also be available on the Web for free downloading. If you want to be notified when a new edition is posted on the web, please e-mail me. If the ideas in this book are helpful to you, I will be very grateful if you send me copies of the publications that you write.

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## Thanks and acknowledgements

There are thousands of proverbs about working together, helping each other, cooperating with others. As I have prepared this book, many people have helped me in many ways. I will mention a few here, but I am sorry that I will forget many important people.

My first thanks are to my wife, Carole. She has been patient through the years of me working on this book. She has helped me with interlibrary loan service. She has carefully read and edited almost the entire book, and she has encouraged me in very many ways. Many authors thank their spouse for their patience and support, but my debt to my spouse is greater than most.

In Japan, my father taught me the first proverb I remember, *Saru mo ki kara ochiru* さるも木から落ちる “Even monkeys fall from trees.” This proverb means that everyone makes mistakes, even skilled people fail.

I am also grateful to Wolfgang Mieder for his generosity, especially giving me insights, encouragement, advice, and materials. Without his contributions to proverb scholarship, I would not have been able to write this book. Special thanks to Dorothy West for collecting and sending me books of Ethiopian proverbs. Thanks to Abby Martin Farmer who has helped me with formatting references, a big task and to Tyler Herrera for helping with formatting styles.

I am also grateful to the Pike Center for a grant to present at a conference and for other expenses in preparing this book. My thanks to Dallas International University for the purchase of over a dozen proverb collections for the DIU library. Colleagues and students at Dallas International University have been a major force in developing my thinking about applications of proverbs to benefit the communities that use them, including Wendy Atkins, Robin Harris, David Oluseyi Ige, Michelle Petersen, Brian Schrag, Susan Walters, Bitania Zeamanuel. I am grateful to others who have helped me develop ideas about creative applications of proverbs, including Marina Mogli, Rachel Stevenson, Edward Zellem.

I am happy to thank and acknowledge Addis Ababa University for helpfully facilitating me and my family to live nine years in Ethiopia. During my time with the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and the Linguistics Department, I had the opportunity to interact with Ethiopian scholars and future Ethiopian scholars. I am proud that three of the collections of Ethiopian proverbs that I cite have been compiled by my former students from Addis Ababa University! I am responsible for translations of Amharic proverbs. Readers will notice that a large number of the proverbs that I quote are from Ethiopia. This is because I have studied Ethiopian proverbs more than I have studied proverbs from other parts of the world. For example, I don't read Russian, so I was not able to cite many proverbs from places where Russian-writing scholars were the primary researchers.

I have benefited from many books, articles, dissertations, and theses written by scholars

I cannot remember all of the friends and colleagues who have shared ideas, insights, encouragement, examples, explanations, and enthusiasm. Sadly, much of this has been by e-mail, but I wish we could sit together, face to face, and sip cups of Ethiopian coffee. Here is a list of some of them. I hope the rest will forgive me: Erik Aasland, Daniel Aberra, Ayew Bacha, Evan Bell, Ernest N. Biktimirov, Filip Busau, Asli Kahraman Çinar, Mengistu Didena, Charles Doyle, Ngozi Emeka-Nwobia, Michael Fiddler, Mavuto Kapyepye, Abedian Kasgari, Ahmar Khan, Mary Njeri Kinyanjui, Taddese Jaleta Jirata, Georgi Kapchits, Lenin Kuto, Basil Laboka, Damegal Lamboni, Jacob Mapara, Dereje Haile Mamo, N. Masuku, Abigael Mbua, Jay Moon, Olabamiji Oyeboode, Chris Pluger, Aderemi Raji-Oyelade, Tshinetise Raphalalani, Janice Raymond, Megersa Regassa,

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None of these are to blame for what I have done with their wisdom and advice. There is an English proverb that reminds us all: “Do not blame the doctor if the patient dies.”

# Message to professors advising thesis and dissertation students

I have been the advising professor for students writing about proverbs for their Masters Degree thesis projects. I have also read many thesis and dissertation projects written by other students. Many of the students had wonderful insights into the proverbs of the communities they studied. However, some of their works made me sad. I understood that they knew the proverbs of their community well, but it was sometimes clear that some students did not have a clear idea of appropriate methods to analyze proverbs. There are not enough good examples of thesis and dissertation projects about proverbs for students to follow. Many students are excited to write about the proverbs from their language community, but they are not sure how to do this.

For many professors, it is difficult to advise students well about studying proverbs. Some professors do not have a strong background in studying proverbs but must advise students about thesis and dissertation topics in the field of proverbs. For example, a friend of mine teaches linguistics at a good university. He is an excellent syntax scholar, but it was difficult for him to give useful guidance to a student who wanted to write about proverbs. His expertise is syntax. The student's final paper about proverbs was not excellent. Other professors have had the same challenge, because they have expertise in other areas, such as phonology, literature, English, etc. They know their own fields, but they are not fully equipped to guide students well in the study proverbs.

I have written this book to help both students and professors. This book gives many ideas for students to choose topics when they want to study proverbs. Some of the topics have been studied by authors in a variety of languages, such as the “\*paremiological minimum”, the list of proverbs that are widely known in a community. Other topics in this book are new, such as compiling a list of the proverbs that people in the community think people *should* know, the “\*paremiological desideratum”. I hope this book helps professors and students to make wise decisions about choosing a topic about proverbs and an appropriate research method.

At the end of each section, I have a section labeled “Research projects”. For each of the topics, I have tried to give useful advice about how to study them.

In many places in this book, I encourage readers to discuss the topics with their advising professors. It is important that professors and students both understand and agree about the students' topic and methodology. There are many proverbs that give wisdom about getting advice from wise elders.

What are possible topics for a thesis or dissertation about proverbs?

Sometimes a dissertation or thesis about proverbs focuses on a single narrow topic. For example, I have seen theses and dissertations on such topics as cultural values expressed in proverbs, linguistic structures in proverbs, college students' opinions about “community” as expressed in proverbs, proverbs and peacemaking, proverbs about gender, paremiological minimum, etc.

It is also possible for students to write a thesis or dissertation about linguistic analysis of a proverb collection. A thesis or dissertation may examine a wide variety of grammatical structures or examine many patterns of phonologically analyzed sound-based art.

Or, a thesis or dissertation may examine several smaller topics, such as anecdotal proverbs, adynaton, imperative proverbs, quotation proverbs, proverbs about body parts, etc. The title for such a collection can be broad, such as “An Examination of Proverbs from the X [ethnic community]” or “A Study of Some Elements of X [ethnic community] Proverbs”.

Writing an article or a book chapter about proverbs is a much smaller project. For such a project, one of the topics in the Table of Contents may be appropriate. The proverb collections of each community will vary. For example, one collection of proverbs may contain enough data for a study of adynaton, or numbers in proverbs, or body parts in proverbs, or imperative proverbs, or animals in proverbs, etc.

This book is the first edition. I plan to make many improvements in the future. Please send me your suggestions for how I should improve this book. Please tell me about parts that are not clear. Also, please tell me about topics that I should add to this book.

If you think this book is useful, please tell your colleagues, friends, and students about it.

The future editions of this book will also be available on the Web for free downloading. If you want to be notified when a new edition is posted on the web, please e-mail me.

I hope this book is helpful to many who study their proverbs!

Peter Unseth

Dallas International University and SIL Global

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# Message to students who want to write a thesis or dissertation

I have been the advising professor for students writing about proverbs for their Masters Degree thesis projects. I have also read many thesis and dissertation projects written by other students, from BA level to PhD level. Many of them had wonderful insights into the proverbs of the communities they studied. Some of their works made me sad. As I read some of these, I understood that the writer knew the proverbs of their community well, but it was sometimes apparent that some students did not have a clear idea about appropriate methods to analyze proverbs. There are not enough good examples of thesis and dissertation projects about proverbs for students to follow. Many students are excited to write about the proverbs from their language community, but they are not sure how to do this. I hope this book helps solve this problem.

For many students, it is not easy to think clearly about studying proverbs. Discuss this book with your thesis or dissertation professor.

I have written this book to help both students and professors. This book gives many ideas for students to choose topics when they want to study proverbs. Some are linguistic, some are anthropological, some are religious, some are literary, etc.

Some of the topics have been studied by many authors, such as the “paremiological minimum”. Other topics in this book are new, such as compiling a list of the proverbs that people in the community think people *should* know, the “\*paremiological desideratum”. I hope this book helps professors and students to make wise decisions about choosing a topic about proverbs and an appropriate research method.

At the end of each section, I have a section labeled “Research projects”. For each of the topics, I have tried to give useful advice about how to study them.

In many places in this book, I encourage students to discuss the topics with their advising professors. It is important that professors and students both understand and agree about the students’ topic and methodology. There are many proverbs that give wisdom about getting advice from wise elders.

What are possible topics for a thesis or dissertation about proverbs?

Sometimes a dissertation or thesis about proverbs focuses on a single narrow topic. For example, I have seen theses and dissertations on such topics as cultural values expressed in proverbs, linguistic structures in proverbs, college students’ opinions about “community” as expressed in proverbs, proverbs and peacemaking, proverbs about gender, paremiological minimum, etc.

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If you think this book is useful, please tell your professors, friends, and fellow students about it.

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I hope this book is helpful to many who study their proverbs!

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# Message to community members who want to study their proverbs

Many language communities have many proverbs that they love and use. If you are interested in the proverbs of your community, this book tells many ways that you can collect and study your proverbs. I have written about how to collect proverbs, how to analyze the proverbs, how to study people's attitudes about their proverbs, and how to use your traditional proverbs in new ways to benefit your community.

I have written this book to help both students and professors, but it also has many ideas that will be helpful for anybody in the community who wants to study proverbs. This book gives many ideas for ways to study proverbs.

Some of the topics have been studied by many authors, such as the “paremiological minimum”, the list of the most common proverbs in a community. In many communities, young people are not learning many of the traditional proverbs. I explain how you can study which proverbs are known by older people and which proverbs are known by young people. Other topics in this book are new, such as compiling a list of the proverbs that people in the community think people *should* know, the “\*paremiological desideratum”.

Some proverbs refer to stories. In some proverbs people, animals, and even objects speak. Some proverbs sound very poetic, their sounds carefully chosen. Some proverbs give commands. Some proverbs have two parts. I will explain ways to study these different forms of proverb art.

I hope this book helps people to make wise decisions about choosing a topic to study about proverbs and an appropriate research method.

At the end of each section, I have a section labeled “Research projects”. For each of the topics, I have tried to give useful advice about how to study them.

In the last chapter, I give some ideas for using your traditional proverbs in new ways to benefit your community. I give some ideas, but you and your friends will think of new ideas, ideas that will fit your community.

This book is the first edition. I will make many improvements in the future. Please send me your suggestions for how I should improve this book. Please tell me about parts that are not clear. Also, please tell me about topics that I should add to this book.

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## Message to proverb scholars

This book will give you new ideas about how to study proverbs, though it is written primarily for students who are writing theses and dissertations.

If you are teaching students who study proverbs, please look at the Table of Contents and the Index to see if this book will help them with their topic. Also, please tell appropriate colleagues about this book.

In addition to ideas for students, there is some new material that will be of interest to many proverb scholars. The new material includes new categories and new questions. For example, I introduce the term “quotation proverbs”, which includes wellerism proverbs, dialogue proverbs, and question and answer proverbs. My prediction is that wellerism proverbs will be the most common. Also, I predict that in a community that has no wellerism proverbs, they will not have any dialogue proverbs. If a language community has both wellerism proverbs and dialogue proverbs, there will be more wellerism proverbs than dialogue proverbs. These predictions should be tested by studying more collections of proverbs.

I have also written about topics that have not been studied by many scholars, including metaproverbs, adynaton, anecdotal proverbs.

Also, I have discussed the topic of the average number of words per proverb. I suggest that people can compare the average number of words across multiple languages. Additionally, researchers can study what ways are used to shorten proverbs, such as omitting some words.

Also, in chapter nine, I present examples of how local proverbs have been applied in new ways to benefit communities. Scholars are often content to simply study and describe proverbs, so this is a new concept for many scholars.

These are a few of my new ideas. It is not yet clear how useful these ideas are for students and proverb scholars. Please write to me and tell me which ideas you think are most useful. Also, please write and tell me how to improve this book. Tell me your ideas for new topics that I should add. Also, tell me where you think my explanations are wrong or unclear.

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# 1 Introducing the study of proverbs

In most cultures of the world, traditional proverbs contain great wisdom and tradition. Some are very poetic. Some are being forgotten. And new proverbs are being created.

Welcome to the study of proverbs, “paremiology”. People who study proverbs are “paremiologists”. The study of paremiology includes a wide variety of topics and applications related to proverbs, including psychology, literature, history, music, linguistics, cultural anthropology.

There is another very similar word. The word “paremiography” means the collection of proverbs. People who collect proverbs are “paremiographers”.

This book is written to equip people to study proverbs among the world’s language communities. It is prepared with smaller language communities in mind, not so much for large language communities like English, Arabic, Indonesian, Swahili, Chinese, Hindi, or Hausa. For most large language communities, many published collections and other studies of their proverbs already exist. This book is written thinking about the smaller, less-studied language communities of the world. Those who work with proverbs from larger language communities speaking such languages as Russian, Hindi, Spanish, and Hausa will also find many useful ideas in this book.

This book is not simply a guide to collecting large numbers of proverbs, though it does include detailed discussions of how to collect large numbers of proverbs. The innovative goal of the book is ultimately to enable language communities to apply their traditional proverbs in new ways for the benefit of their own communities. Applying proverbs for community benefit is not a traditional goal of proverb scholarship.

To reach this goal of applying proverbs for community benefit, this book has the following broad outline: Collect, Translate, Analyze, Apply.

For some language communities, substantial proverb collections have already been published. That does not mean that this book is irrelevant to their situation. Rather it means that they can use their collection of proverbs and proceed to the next steps in a later chapter. But even having a published collection of proverbs does not automatically prevent a team from gathering more. For example, there is a published collection of over 1,300 Pashto proverbs (Bartlotti and Khattack 2006), but most in the Pashto community were not aware of the book. In 2013, Edward Zellel launched a Pashto proverb collection effort via the Web and generated enthusiastic participation and interest among many in the Pashto community. After receiving hundreds of proverbs and generating much discussion within the Pashto community, Zellel published some of the results in a book (Zellel 2014).

## 1.1.1 What are proverbs?

Proverb scholars have tried many times and in different ways to produce a definition of “proverb” that will be useful for all language communities. However, it is not the purpose of this book to produce such a universal definition. Since this book is prepared for researchers studying proverbs generally in only one language community at a time, it is only necessary to help proverb researchers find ways of defining proverbs in their own contexts. In a later chapter, I give examples of different paths of thought and different questions that have been used by those trying to define “proverb”.

### 1.1.2 What about proverbs shared with neighbors?

Proverbs are frequently shared among languages. When a proverb has a memorable image and says something useful and important, it is common to translate it into other languages. For example, there is a proverb of the general form, “In her hurry, a dog gave birth to blind puppies.” This proverb has been documented in English, German, Italian, Turkish, Greek, and at least three language communities in Ethiopia. It is said to have “a longer history than any other recorded proverb in the world”, documented in Akkadian “around 1800 BC” (Alster 1979). Proverbs about not counting the teeth of a horse given as a gift are found in such widely separated language communities as Pashto (Afghanistan), Amharic (Ethiopia), English and many communities in between. It is usually impossible to trace the routes of shared proverbs. Who can know where a proverb was first used? It is also possible that similar proverbs have been created independently in different places.

For the goals of this book, it is quite clear how to handle shared proverbs: if a community uses and claims a proverb as their own, then it is their proverb. A proverb can be totally authentic in many places at once.

### 1.1.3 What about “bad” proverbs?

In every language community’s proverbs, there are some proverbs that the community is not proud of. For example, there may be proverbs that call for taking revenge, proverbs that mock crippled people, proverbs that condone rape, etc. The community may not want some proverbs included in a published collection of proverbs. If the community does not want a proverb included in a collection, the will of the community should be decisive. Researchers should not include those proverbs in their writings.

### 1.1.4 Who is this book for?

This book is for anybody who wants to know better how to study proverbs in a language community. This book is designed to be used by a variety of people. As I wrote it, I imagined a university student who was studying proverbs from his own language community. University professors will also find useful ideas in this book.

This book can also be used by people from outside of the language community, whether they are from the same country or from another country. This book can be used by readers with no formal training in proverbs. The book provides explanations and examples to give readers enough understanding to grasp the concepts and use them. Readers with relevant formal education in the study of proverbs, folklore, or related fields will find some familiar ideas, but all will find some new ideas.

### 1.1.5 What is new in this book?

There are several things about this book that are new and innovative. First of all, it is the first field manual for proverb study. Much has been written about analyzing proverbs in literature, in psychiatry, in translation, in culture, etc. This book describes ways that are linguistic and cultural to analyze proverbs. Also, not much has been written about how to collect proverbs, but this book gives practical techniques for collecting many proverbs. This book is for those who are interested in working with language communities whose proverbs have been neglected by the scholarly world, and sometimes by the communities themselves.

This book contains much material that is found in standard academic approaches to proverbs, summarizing some relevant previous work. The book also presents a number of

innovative concepts and practices. Two important points (in my thinking) are the development of application of proverbs in the community and the importance of discussing ideas with members of the community.

### 1.1.6 Do I have to read the whole book?

No! Readers do *not* have to read the whole book! Readers may read only the parts that are most relevant to their curiosity. For example, readers may read only the chapter on collecting proverbs and not read the rest of the book. They will benefit from this book's idea guidelines for collecting proverbs. Some readers may read only the sections about translating and arranging the proverbs in a collection. Others will read only the chapters on analysis.

### 1.1.7 Vocabulary

A number of the words used in this book are not widely known. To help readers, there is a glossary at the end of the book, a list of technical terms with definitions. Some words are marked with an asterisk, e.g. \*assonance. This means that the word is defined in the glossary. At the end of the book is an index. This will help you find words, language names, and countries in this book.

### 1.1.8 What is a “language community”?

This book uses the phrase “language community” to refer to a group of people who share a common language and identity. For example, within India there are numerous language communities. There are those who identify themselves as members of the Nimadi language community, Nimadi being spoken by over one million people. The Nimadi language is identified by ISO (International Standards Organization) by the three letter code [noe]. A number of Nimadi people also speak Hindi [hin], but they identify themselves as part of the Nimadi language community. The Lodhi speaking [lbn] language community of Bangladesh is reported to be about 75,000 people. Many Lodhi are reported to be fluent in Bengali [ben], but they still identify themselves as part of the Lodhi speech community. It is possible for people to feel that they are part of more than one language community. Also, the factors that affect which language community people identify with can vary, including such factors as religion, location, genetic descent, customs and traditions, caste, education, etc. For purposes of this book, the concept “language community” assumes that the people share a common language, even if other factors are also locally relevant in identifying language community membership. If you are writing about the proverbs of a language community, you may need to carefully identify the community. The language community's identification may be by location, by religion, by self-identification, etc.

### 1.1.9 Endangered languages

Every language has been passed down from parents to children. This is true of large language communities, and also equally true of very small language communities. For a variety of reasons, parents may not teach their language to their children (or the children may choose to learn another language). When the children of a language community do not speak the traditional language of their community, the language is said to be “endangered”. That is, the language is in danger of not being used. Many speak of the final stage of this as “language death”.

But before a language “dies” and is not used by anybody, there is often a process of the language being used for fewer functions in the community and the language is used by fewer people. As the functions of a language are reduced in the community, such as no longer being used for large community meetings, people may use of some traditional oral arts less and less. As the number of speakers of a language grows smaller, they will have fewer opportunities to use

traditional verbal arts, and fewer people to tell them to. Young people will not learn and use as many proverbs as was done by the previous generations. Many proverbs will be forgotten.

The importance of collecting proverbs from languages where this has not previously been done is increasingly urgent as the use of these oral riches of language is being weakened or lost in many communities. As many of the world's language communities are assimilating to broader society, they are losing their cultural distinctives and languages, which includes the loss of their proverbs. Various scholars differ in their estimation of how many of the world's languages are in danger of extinction. Michael Krauss has estimated that as many as 50% of the world's approximately 6,000 languages will be lost by the end of the century and maybe 40% more will be doomed, having lost domains and speakers (1992, 6,7). Though a community may not be in immediate danger of losing their language, one social setting that is frequently vulnerable is a community's proverbial lore. Its loss is an incremental step in the loss of language and culture. One study among the Kikuyu of Kenya found that their "customs and oral traditions are being lost at a rate of 60 percent in each succeeding generation. So, if a particular generation knew 100 proverbs, the next generation will know forty and the following generation" will know even fewer, etc. (Healey and Sybertz 1996, 58). Clearly, collecting proverbs from marginal or endangered language communities is a time-sensitive priority. It is helpful to think of not just "endangered languages" but also "endangered proverbs".

Proverbs are in danger of being forgotten even in large language communities. Though the language may be learned by children and carried on by all generations, people may use their traditional proverbs less, forgetting important parts of their heritage. Even for a language like Czech, spoken by over 10,000,000, Blatná worries of traditional "Czech proverbs vanishing in the black hole" (1998).

In a strategic effort to fight this loss of proverbs, the African Proverbs Project has even commissioned some researchers to collect "endangered proverbs" from language communities where ethnolinguistic vitality is diminishing. Asogwa (2002) has collected proverbs to strengthen his Igbo language, hoping that people of the community will be "lured back" to the language. Collecting and publishing proverbs may not be adequate to persuade people to resume learning and speaking a community's ancestral language, but it can be an important part of a broader community effort to revitalize a language. Even if the community does not resume using their language in full form, a collection of proverbs is a wonderful way to document and remember a community's rich heritage. Also, outside scholars are always grateful for documented proverbs from any language community.

Himmelman argues strongly and cogently for field researchers to document not just linguistic structures, but language use, including proverbs and different genres of speaking (1998). Naturally, this includes such genres as proverb use. Ideally, proverbs are collected in context, in real situations. Collecting simple lists of proverbs is a "staged communicative event" (Himmelman 1998, 185). But this is the fastest way to collect a substantial number of proverbs quickly, especially important for documentation of endangered languages. This book can be used by proverb projects in languages that are endangered or languages that are healthy and spoken by many.

## 1.2 Definitions of proverb

What is a "proverb"?

Archer Taylor famously stated: "The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and

give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone. An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial” (1962, 3). This is not a definition of a proverb, but a statement that there can be no definition.

Richard Honeck listed seven different approaches to studying proverbs, each with its points of concentration (1997, 1-43). Norrick focused on the wide variation in what constitutes a proverb, concluding that “there is no single proverbiality and no single inclusive definition of the proverb” (2015, 14).

Wolfgang Mieder, the acknowledged world expert of proverb studies, lamented that “there are more definition attempts than there are proverbs” (Mieder 1989, 13). He later proposed his own definition of a proverb: “A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk<sup>1</sup> which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” (Mieder 1993, 5).

This definition is very useful, especially in many languages of Europe and much of Asia. But frequently in African language communities, the definition of what is included within the category “proverb” varies between groups.

It is useful to remember that Dan Ben-Amos pointed out the frustration and futility of trying to categorize other cultures’ folklore concepts into our categories (1976). As an English speaker, I have a concept of proverb, but I should remember that other cultures may have a different concept of proverb. They may not have a concept that matches my concept of proverb.

Pekka Hakamies (2016)<sup>2</sup> examined the question of whether “proverb” is a genre of saying that can be assumed to have a similar definition around the world, see especially pages 313,314. There are theoretical reasons to think that “proverb” is a nominalist, etic concept, that researchers have a preconceived concept of the genre of proverb. Though there are a wide variety of definitions of “proverb”, Hakamies agreed with Ruth Finnegan:

Although she has favored the genre categories and approaches of the bearers of folklore as a starting point, she has adopted the attitude that it is inevitable, given the needs and comparative nature of research, for researchers to use a common, \*etic-based conceptualisation of genre. (Hakamies 2016, 299)

Though some have raised theoretical arguments to the contrary, Hakamies pragmatically concluded that “it is possible, on the basis of many-sided examination, to present criteria which define approximately, as an ideal type, an analytical type of the proverb” (Hakamies 2016, 314).

My approach in writing this book follows the assumption that there is an \*etic concept of proverb, though it is not precise. I also emphasize that every culture has its own conceptions and definitions of genres. The rest of this chapter is about studying and understanding local definitions of genres. If you do not agree with my approach to defining proverbs, please do not use that as a reason to stop using this book.

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<sup>1</sup> Mieder used the word “folk” to mean the common people, rather than elite scholars.

<sup>2</sup> This article by Hakamies (2016) is in the same book as one by Liisa Granbom-Herranen, “The Proverb Genre: A Relic or Very Much Alive?” (2016). These two articles are helpful for those who want to study whether proverbs are a universal genre. The book is freely available online.

Looking across the world, the definition of “proverb” is not as uniform as many think it is. The following examples illustrate that the concept of what is referred to as a “proverb” varies from language to language. Most of these explanations about different cultures and their concept of proverbs were written by outsiders, so we should remember that they may not be fully correct.

In this first group of examples, the English concept of “proverb” is divided into separate emic categories in other languages and cultures. That is, there is more than one word in the other language that are included in the English language concept of “proverb”. Many times, the categories, distinctions, and definitions are not clear to outsiders.

- Among the Haya of Tanzania there are two words that are translated into English as “proverb”, *enfumo* and *omwizo*. “The speaker interprets an *enfumo* for you. An *omwizo* you interpret for yourself” (Seitel 1977, 92).
- Bushongo speakers of the Democratic Republic of Congo distinguish three categories of sayings, *shoosh*, *ncyeeem*, *mikwoon*. All are similar to Westerner’s concept of “proverbs”. Distinguishing them requires “adoption of a different form of classification” (Vansina 1961, 69).
- Among the Balochi of Iran and Afghanistan, there are two words that are translated into English as “proverb”. The term *batal* is generally comparable to the English word “proverb”, but *bassittuks* refers only to “proverbs with background stories”, that is “\*anecdotal proverbs” (Badalkhan 2000, 43).
- “In Zulu, as in many languages, it is not easy to draw a sharp emic line between idioms and proverbs proper, but there seems to be a general distinction in form and terminology between ‘sayings’ or plain prose usages (*izisho*), and *izaga*, proverbs” (Finnegan 2012, 407).
- Among the Kasena community of Ghana, Albert Awedoba labels their ‘proverbs’ as *fana tu memaje*, “translatable as ‘the ancient man’s utterances’” (2000, 31,32). He differentiates these from a class of sayings called *sinseira*, which are different because their origin is known, such as a known author or a known situation to which it refers (2000, 34). He goes on to say that a *sinseira* may be transformed into a proverb, and a proverb may be transformed into a *sinseira*. It appears that classifying a Kasena saying as a proverb is not absolutely clear nor rigid.

We have just read examples of language communities where they have multiple categories that are included when translated as the English word “proverb”. Sometimes the opposite is true. That is, sometimes language communities have one category that matches more than one category in English. Below are examples of language communities that have a named \*emic category that matches more than just the English category “proverb”. It also includes other English labels for genres.

- Mongo speakers of central Africa use *bokolo* for sayings that \*etic labels in English differentiate as “fable”, “proverb”, “poetry”, and “allegory” (Finnegan 2012, 380).
- Among the Zande of central Africa, the word *sanza* includes what is in the English word “proverb”. But additionally, *sanza* “refers to the whole range of circumlocutory expression in which there is a hidden as well as a manifest meaning, usually malicious” (Finnegan 2012, 409).
- Among the of Sierra Leone, the term “*mborɔ*” can be used for “story, in the sense of narrative tales... It can also mean a proverb, a parable, a wise or imaginative saying, an elaborate metaphor, a riddle, an analogy” (Finnegan 1967, 27).

- Fulani of Senegal, are reported to use the label *tin<sup>n</sup>dol* to label a proverb and also a story with a moral (Gaden 1931, vi).
- The Nyanja people of southern Africa use the word *mwambi* to include the English genres of “story”, “riddle”, and “proverb” (Finnegan 2012, 380).
- In the Efik community of Nigeria and Cameroon, the word *ɲke* can be translated into English as “story, riddle, tongue-twister, proverb” (Finnegan 2012, 413, fn. 2).
- Among the Chumburung language community of Ghana, there are also two named categories that include proverbs: “*anase* are literal proverbs and *akpare* are metaphoric ones” (Hansford 2003, 64). In this case, members of the Chumburung language community will consistently categorize sayings into two groups, but outsiders may not understand the differences between the two groups.
- Among the Isoko of Nigeria, Peek and Yankah report that “they have three types of proverbs” (Peek and Yankah 2004:x). One of these is “*emite*”, which is distinguished by its use of *eme didi* [n.b. ‘hidden words’], and thus can only be spoken by the elders” (Peek 1981, 36).
- Among the Luo of Kenya, the English word ‘proverb’ is translated as *ngero*. But this word is much richer than that, so rich that Peter S.O. Amuka wrote his entire MA thesis about this word. “Scholars of Luo oral tradition and culture translate and define *ngero* mistakenly as the proverb, thus making it lexically and culturally English by assuming that their name systems are universal... [It is] much bigger than the English proverb, with many aspects to its definition.” *Ngero* can be a riddle, a folktale a complex, puzzling matter or utterance” (Amuka 1978, iii,iv).
- In a different Luo community, Odaga says that *ngeche* means “proverb”. However, the word “cannot be taken to mean only proverbs... The word *ngeche* in Luo means and embraces a wide cluster comprising riddles, sayings as well as some stories and phrases which call for interpretation before their meanings can be fully understood” (Odaga 1980, 33,34).

Ruth Finnegan observed, “This overlap in terms is fairly common in Bantu languages and also sometimes occurs in West Africa, too” (2012, 380).

These examples show that the definition of “proverb” in various languages differs. In some languages, the word that is translated into English as “proverb” is broader, but in other languages it is narrower. Writing about the Tibetan area, Mortenson noted “the sub-classification of folk genres into proverbs and folktales is not always rigid” (Mortenson 2003, 159).

Some researchers have had a strong belief that they will find proverbs in almost every culture. As a result, some scholars have used the English label “proverb” for sayings that many other scholars would not. For example, Gary Gossen, researching among the Chamula people of southern Mexico said that they have a speech genre they call *k’ehel cop*. Though the label *k’ehel k’op* may be “glossed as ‘proverb’ [in English], this subgenre... has a different nature... than proverbs have in Western societies” (Gossen 1972, 158). Based on his explanation and example, most proverb scholars would not agree that the English word “proverb” would include *k’ehel k’op*.

### 1.2.1 Research projects about definition

It is useful to examine the definitions of sayings in the language community where you will study “proverbs”. What is the *local* definition of a “proverb”? Discuss this with local elders and people who use proverbs a lot.

Before you examine local words for proverbs and related sayings, think carefully about what words you will use as you discuss these sayings. If you are discussing this using a language that is different than the local language that you are researching, first, write down the words in the language of wider communication that may be useful. Here are some ways to study the local categories and labels related to “proverbs”.

It is useful if you can write these words for people to see as they discuss the words, using a whiteboard, chalk board, or large sheets of paper or cardboard, etc. You can start the discussion by mentioning labels you already know. Write these for all to see. Ask people if they know more labels. When they mention additional labels for sayings, write them for people to see. Then ask for examples of sayings that match each label. Write these, also. As you write sayings in each category, the group may disagree with each other and discuss which sayings belong in which category. **Cards which group together**

Ask people for ideas about how the labels for categories are different from each other. Their answers may contradict each other. Also, the longer they think about the topics, they may change their minds. Defining “proverbs” is *never* easy, in any language and culture.

After most people have agreed on the list of categories and the list of examples in each category, you should preserve the lists. If it is on paper, you can keep the paper. If it is written on something else, take a photo of the list.

After you have a list of labeled categories and understand their differences, do you have a clearer understanding of how to define “proverb” and related sayings in the local language and culture? This may not be enough for a thesis or dissertation, but it may be an important part of one. It may be one chapter in your thesis or dissertation. Exploring and defining local labels for sayings and giving clear examples may be enough for an article or book chapter.

### 1.3 Resources for proverb study

For people who choose to study proverbs, there are books, journals, and websites that are useful. Some of these are freely available on the Web.

It is wise to start studying about local proverb by reading sources that are locally available. Learn about proverb collections done with language communities in your area. Find out if any thesis or dissertations have been written about proverbs in your area.

For researchers who want to start proverb research, there is a book that is a general introduction to the study of proverbs. It has chapters on a wide variety of topics. Read the Table of Contents and decide which chapters are useful and relevant for you. The book is *Introduction to Paremiology*, edited by Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita Aleksa Varga, published in 2014. The book has 15 chapters, written by different authors. It is available by free open access on the Web: <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.2478/9783110410167/html?lang=en>

Here is the list of the chapters in the book:

1. Subject Area, Terminology, Proverb Definitions, Proverb Features
2. Origin of Proverbs
3. Categorization of Proverbs
4. Semiotic and Semantic Aspects of the Proverb
5. Structural Aspects of Proverbs
6. Pragmatic and Stylistic Aspects of Proverbs

7. Cognitive Aspects of Proverbs
8. Empirical Research and Paremiological Minimum
9. Proverbs from a Corpus Linguistic Point of View
10. Paremiography: Proverb Collections
11. Contrastive Study of Proverbs
12. Proverbs in Literature
13. Proverbs in Mass Media
14. Proverbs and Foreign Language Teaching
15. Anti-proverbs

Wolfgang Mieder is the most widely known and respected proverb scholar in the world. For over 35 years, he edited the journal *Proverbium*. He has written hundreds of books and articles about proverbs. A good introduction to the general study of proverbs is Wolfgang Mieder's book, *Proverbs: A Handbook* (Mieder 2004). It has been unofficially posted to the Web, [[https://www.academia.edu/31875861/Proverbs\\_A\\_Handbook](https://www.academia.edu/31875861/Proverbs_A_Handbook)]. This book is mostly about studying proverbs from languages that have not been well studied. It gives examples of many ways to look at proverbs and the use of proverbs. Study the Table of Contents and the Index to help you find the sections that are relevant for your proverb research.

In 2009, Mieder published a two-volume bibliography on proverb research: *International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology*. It was published by de Gruyter in 2009. It includes entries for over 10,000 publications about proverbs. In 2023, Mieder published another volume *International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology (2008-2022)*. It is focused on publications from 2008-2022, but this volume also contains some items from before 2008. The book is freely available online: <https://naklada.ffos.hr/knjige/ff/catalog/book/15>.

Mieder has also compiled a separate bibliography of collections of proverbs: *International Bibliography of Paremiography*. This book is a list of publications that contain lists of proverbs, not analysis of proverbs. It was published as volume 34 in his companion series to the journal *Proverbium*, published through the University of Vermont in 2011 (Mieder 2011).

These bibliographies have similar titles, but different goals. The first two (Mieder 2009, 2023), are lists of publications about the study of proverbs, paremiology. The third (Mieder 2011), is lists of publications that contain lists of proverbs, paremiography. It contains over 3,000 entries. It has a Table of Contents and two helpful Indexes.

Gyula Paczolay has compared proverbs across Europe and published a collection of 106 proverbs in 55 European languages, *European proverbs : in 55 languages, with equivalents in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese* (1997). It enables researchers to see which of these languages have certain proverbs. For example, this book documents that in the 55 languages studied, all of them have a proverb similar to “Where there is smoke there is fire” or “There is no fire without smoke.”

There is a collection of proverbs from many parts of the world, *The Routledge Book of World Proverbs*, edited by Jon R. Stone, 2006. I have downloaded it from this website: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203968956/routledge-book-world-proverbs-jon-stone>

On the Web, there is a book titled *An Annotated Corpus of Three Hundred Proverbs, Sayings, and Idioms in Eastern Jibbali/Šḥarēt*, by Giuliano Castagna, published in 2024. The

language is a Semitic language spoken at the edge of Yemen. It is free to download from the Web: <https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0422.pdf>

There is a website that matches a book of Chewa proverbs, *Dzedzere-dzedzere Salingana Nkugweratu. Collection of a 1000 Chewa Proverbs* (van Kessel 2015). The website allows a user to search the for words in Chewa proverbs, in the English translations, in the explanations, or in the subject words: <https://www.fenza.org/chewaproverbs.php>.

There is a similar website that matches a book of Bemba proverbs, *Ushikala pa nsaka takula mu mano: Common Bemba proverbs to understand the art of living* (Carey and FENZA 2021). The website allows a user to search the for words in Bemba proverbs, in the English translations, in the explanations: [https://fenza.org/bembaproverbs\\_Carey.php](https://fenza.org/bembaproverbs_Carey.php).

There are two main academic journals about proverb study, *Proverbium* and *Paremia*. Both are freely accessible on the Web. Both are published once a year.

### 1.3.1 Proverbium:

The journal *Proverbium* was first published from 1965 through 1975. The articles between 1965-1975 were short, most articles were five pages or shorter. Articles were in English and other European languages. Articles from *Proverbium* 1965-1975 are not available on the Web. When citing an article from this older form of *Proverbium*, many proverb scholars will use the abbreviation “no.”<sup>3</sup> meaning “number”, as shown here:

Kuusi, Matti. 1969. Southwest African Riddle-Proverbs. *Proverbium* no. 12: 305-311.

Beginning in 1984, *Proverbium* began again. Since then, each year’s publication has been printed in a single volume. When citing an article from the newer *Proverbium*, some proverb scholars will use the abbreviation “vol.” (for “volume”) as shown here:

Sabir Badalkhan. 2000. “Ropes break at the weakest point”: Some examples of Balochi proverbs with background stories. *Proverbium* vol. 17:43–69.

Now, the formal name of the journal is *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*. It is published as an annual volume with more articles and longer articles. Most of the articles published in *Proverbium* (ISSN|0743-782X) (<https://naklada.ffos.hr/casopisi/proverbium>), are in English, also a number in German, with a few in French and Spanish. Each annual volume contains articles and book reviews. *Proverbium* volumes from 1984 onward are available on the Web, <https://naklada.ffos.hr/casopisi/index.php/proverbium/issue/archive>.

*Proverbium* is the most important journal for the study of proverbs. It was published on paper through 2021. After that, it has been published only online. The website for the journal *Proverbium* is a wonderful tool for proverb researchers. Across the top, there are “Current”, “Archives”, “Proverbium Online Supplement”, “Submissions”, and “About”. Down the right side, you can choose from five languages: English, German, Spanish, French, Russian. Click on the language that you know best. Then the website will use that language to guide you in all of the sections of the website. Under “information”, it says “For readers”. If you click on this and register your e-mail address, then every year, when the new volume of *Proverbium* is published online, you will receive an e-mail with the Table of Contents.

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<sup>3</sup> The abbreviation “no.” for “number” comes from the Latin word *numero* meaning “number”.

<https://naklada.ffos.hr/casopisi/proverbium/index>

Under “Current” is the newest volume of *Proverbium Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*. You can download the entire volume as a PDF file. Also, you can download individual articles and reviews. <https://naklada.ffos.hr/casopisi/proverbium/index>

Under “Archives”, you will find all of the previous volumes of *Proverbium*, all the way back to vol. 1 of 1984. The first page of “Archives” has the most recent 25 volumes. At the bottom of the page, it says “Next →”. Click on this and it will take you to the older volumes.

Each volume contains articles and book reviews. Also, each volume also includes two bibliographies compiled by Dr. Wolfgang Mieder. One is the “International Bibliography of New and Reprinted Proverb Collections”. It contains a list of proverb collections that Mieder has discovered. These are collections of proverbs, not analyses of proverbs. Most of the entries are very new. But sometimes there are older items that Dr. Mieder has found. For example, in the 2024 bibliography, there was an item that was published in 2008. The second bibliography is the “International Proverb Scholarship: An Updated Bibliography”. This bibliography lists all of the publications that Dr. Mieder has found in the last year, hundreds of books, book chapters, and journal articles. The items include studies of proverbs from a variety of times places and languages, everything from ancient Sumer to recent proverbs about COVID.

When you click on “Proverbium Online Supplement Series”. These are books that have been prepared under the supervision of the editors of *Proverbium*. There is at least one new volume every year. You may download each volume as a PDF file. Recent volumes have included:

Mieder, Wolfgang. 2023. [International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology \(2008-2022\)](#). Online Supplement Series of *Proverbium Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*, volume 1. Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, 2023.

Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Hrisztalina (ed.), Melita Aleksa Varga (ed.), Wolfgang Mieder (ed.). 2024. [Diligence brings delight: A Festschrift in honour of Anna T. Litovkina on the occasion of her 60th birthday](#). Supplement Series of *Proverbium Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*, volume 2. Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek.

Babič, Saša (ed.), Fionnuala Carson Williams (ed.), Christian Grandl (ed.), Anna T. Litovkina (ed.) 2024. [“Standing on the shoulders of giants”: A Festschrift in honour of Wolfgang Mieder on the occasion of his 80th birthday](#). Online Supplement Series of *Proverbium Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* volume 3. Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek.

Raji-Oyelade, Aderemi, ed. 2024. [Postproverbials at Work: The Context of Radical Proverb-Making in Nigerian Languages](#). Online Supplement Series of *Proverbium Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* volume 4. Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek.

If you click on “Submissions”, you will see instructions about how to submit an article to *Proverbium*. It is useful information.

On the right side of the page there is an empty box next to the word “Search”. You can use this to search in all volumes of *Proverbium*, searching for a keyword or an author.

### 1.3.2 Paremia

The other paremiological journal is *Paremia*. It is freely available online. It began with vol. 1 in 1993. Most of the articles are in Spanish, a few are in English and in French.

<https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/paremia/>.

*Paremia* is a journal that covers proverbs and related topics. The name *Paremia* is an ancient Greek word that includes proverbs and similar sayings. *Paremia* is produced in Spain. The abstracts and keywords for each article are written in three languages, Spanish, French, English. The website also includes “Reseñas” book reviews. Also, the website includes descriptions of doctoral theses/dissertations that have been recently published in Spanish.

### 1.3.3 African Proverbs Project (Afripro)

<https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/>

There is a website based in Kenya that is known as Afripro. The website includes a number of collections of proverbs from African languages. The website has over 50 e-books, each with 100 proverbs from an African language, mostly languages of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and DR Congo <https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/e-books/>. In these collections, each proverb is translated into English, most collections also translate the proverbs into Swahili, and a few collections into French. It was part of the plan for each of these proverbs to be given with a teaching topic and a Bible verse. Over the years, the format evolved. Here is one example from the Zigula of Tanzania ([https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/zigula\\_2019.pdf](https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/zigula_2019.pdf)):

55. Mazino ya kuli hayakulumana.

**Swahili:** Meno ya mbwa hayaumani.

**French:** Les dents d'un chien ne se mordent pas.

**English:** The teeth of a dog do not bite each other.

**Teachings:** There is always harmony among those who/which belong together.

**Bible parallel:** Psalm 133:1 (ESV) “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!”

In addition to these lists of 100 proverbs, the Afripro website also offers some books, such as:

*Collection of, and Commentary on, 436 Sayings on East African Cloth*, by Joseph G. Healey.

([https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/wp-content/uploads/1970/01/images\\_afriprov\\_books\\_easayingsoncloth.pdf](https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/wp-content/uploads/1970/01/images_afriprov_books_easayingsoncloth.pdf))

*Bassa Proverbs for Preaching and Teaching* by Abba Karnga of Ghana

([https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/wp-content/uploads/1970/01/images\\_afriprov\\_books\\_bassaintro.pdf](https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/wp-content/uploads/1970/01/images_afriprov_books_bassaintro.pdf)).

### 1.3.4 Postproverbial.com

This website is a collection of “\*postproverbials”, also known as “\*anti-proverbs”. The website shows traditional proverbs, then lists a postproverbial form, sometimes more than one. There is also a bibliography of publications related to postproverbials. All of the examples are from African languages.

### 1.3.5 Wikipedia

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proverb>

The English version of Wikipedia has a significant article on “proverb”. The article presents explanations and examples of many categories related to studying proverbs. There are Wikipedia articles about “proverb” in many other languages, but some are quite short.

### 1.3.6 Archive.org

In the past, proverb scholars had to buy or borrow books to study and do research. Now, many resources are available on the Web. One of the Web-based resources for scholars is the website *archive.org*. This website hosts many books, on a wide variety of topics. Many older books can be freely downloaded, such as in PDF format.

There are many collections of proverbs available on *archive.org*. For copyright reasons, the books that can be read are from 1926 or earlier. Here is a sample of the older proverb collections at *archive.org*. These collections can be freely downloaded.

Banfield, Alexander Woods. 1916. *Gàmaḡà nyá Nupe = (Nupe proverbs)*. Shonga, Nigeria: Niger Press.

Gurdon, Philip Richard Thornhagh. *Some Assamese Proverbs*. Printed at the Assam secretariat printing office, 1903.

Henderson, Andrew. *Scottish proverbs*. Oliver & Boyd, 1832.

Manwaring, Alfred. *Marathi proverbs*. Clarendon Press, 1899.

Rattray, Robert Sutherland. *Ashanti proverbs*. Clarendon Press, 1916.

## 1.4 Choosing a topic

If you are preparing to write a thesis or a dissertation, think very carefully about choosing your topic. Every thesis and dissertation student faces similar questions:

- What topics am I interested in?
- What topics am I qualified to research and describe?
- Has somebody else written about this already?
- Is there a professor who is qualified and willing to help me with my topic?
- Do I have access to enough academic literature about proverbs to equip me to write about this topic?
- Are there people from the language community who are willing to work with me on proverb research?
- How much time and money will it take for me to do a research topic?
- What does the community want me to do with their proverbs?
  - Maybe a collection of proverbs?
  - Maybe a study of which proverbs are known by most people?
  - Maybe a study of how young people think about proverbs?

In this book, at the end of many chapters there is a list of possible research projects. Read these and think about your interest in proverbs. Maybe these lists of possible research projects will guide you in choosing a topic for your proverb research.

I suggest that you do not choose a topic quickly. Read about various topics. If there is a proverb collection available, try some topics, do the beginning steps. After you try one topic, you may want to change and study a different topic.

Some of the chapters may be appropriate topics for a thesis or dissertation. For example, Chapter 4 on sound-based art may be a broad enough topic for a good dissertation or thesis. It will depend on your data and your skills in analyzing and describing sound-based art. Discuss this with your professor.

It may be possible to research and write about several small topics for a thesis. For example, you may consider writing a thesis or dissertation that contained chapters about imperative proverbs, quotations proverbs, adynaton proverbs, proverbs about animals, and proverbs about numbers. The title could be something broad, such as “An Examination of Proverbs from the X [ethnic community]”, “A Study of Some Elements of X [ethnic community] Proverbs”, and “Proverb Structures of X [ethnic community]”. If you are interested in such an approach, writing about several smaller topics, you must discuss this with your advising professor.

As I have written this book, I have been thinking about students writing theses or dissertations. But this book can also be very useful for scholars who are planning to write an article for a journal or write a chapter for a book. Articles and chapters are generally much shorter than theses and dissertations. Articles and chapters must have a clear, narrow topic. One of the chapters in this book may be appropriate for an article or a book chapter. For example, if your collection of proverbs contains enough quotation proverbs, that may be a good topic. If you are a specialist in literature, maybe you can write about proverbs used by authors in your language community. Read the descriptions of research projects in the chapters and think about your interests, your areas of academic strength, the amount of time you can spend on the project, etc.

## 2 How to collect many proverbs

To study proverbs, it is usually vital to have a collection of local proverbs. But how can we collect many proverbs. One proverb scholar complained, “Proverbs cannot be collected in a hurry” (McKelvie 1970, 5). This chapter will show many ways to collect proverbs. It is not clear what it means to collect proverbs “in a hurry”, but these ideas will enable you to collect many proverbs. You will find ideas about how to collect proverbs more quickly than sitting with an open notebook, trying to think.

### 2.1 Introduction to collecting proverbs

Collecting proverbs from languages where they have not been documented is valuable for a variety of people: proverb scholars, anthropologists of several sub-disciplines, linguists, folklorists, and also the people of the language community (and their descendants).

The importance of collecting proverbs from languages where this has not previously been done is increasingly urgent as they are being lost in many communities. As many of the world’s language communities are assimilating to broader society, they are losing their cultural distinctives and languages, which includes the loss of their proverbs.

Various scholars differ in their estimation of how many of the world’s languages are in danger of extinction. Krauss has estimated that as many as 50% of the world’s approximately 6,000 languages will be lost by the end of the century and maybe 40% more will be doomed, having lost domains and speakers (1992, 6,7). Though a community may not be in immediate danger of losing their language, one social domain that is frequently vulnerable is a community’s proverbial lore, its loss being an incremental step in the loss of language and culture. One study among the Kikuyu of Kenya found that their “customs and oral traditions are being lost at a rate of 60 percent in each succeeding generation. So, if a particular generation knew 100 proverbs, the next generation will know forty and the following generation” will know even fewer, etc. (Healey and Sybertz 1996, 58). Clearly collecting proverbs from endangered language communities is a time-sensitive priority.

In a strategic effort to fight this loss of proverbs, the African Proverbs Project has even commissioned some researchers to collect “endangered proverbs” from language communities where ethnolinguistic vitality is diminishing. Asogwa (2002) has collected proverbs to strengthen the Igbo language, hoping that people of the community will be “lured back” to the language.

Himmelmann argues strongly and cogently for field researchers to document not just linguistic structures, but language use, including different genres of speaking (1998). Naturally, this includes such genres as proverbs. Ideally, proverbs are collected in context, in real situations, but collecting lists is the fastest way to collect a substantial number of proverbs quickly. This is important for documentation of endangered languages.

Proverbs are not remembered as lists but are usually recalled in an appropriate context. How does a field worker elicit hundreds, or even thousands, of proverbs from people in a short time? How do we go about collecting significant numbers of proverbs in a limited time from a language community? Asking people to simply list long lists of proverbs in their language will only elicit a fraction of the proverbs in their language. The biggest hurdle is generally helping people to remember their proverbs in an artificial elicitation setting. Therefore, the techniques presented here have been developed to provide more efficient methods for eliciting proverbs. These techniques are all based on the fact that “Proverbs are difficult to recall from memory without an eliciting context or situation” (Herzfeld 1991, 163, fn. 4). These techniques are written with an outside scholar in

mind, but the techniques could be profitably used by a member of the language community working to collect proverbs from their own heritage.

Some will rightfully object that simply collecting lists of proverbs, without documenting their use in contexts, is of limited value. They may say it seems more a practice from the past, when bits of folklore data were collected with little regard for their context. “Doubtless... proverbs recorded in actual life situations, with the full complement of social, situational, and discourse contexts would be the ideal data” (Yankah 1989, 172). Arewa and Dundes stress the importance of studying the context and use of proverbs, “What are the rules governing who can use proverbs, or particular proverbs, and to who? Upon what occasions? In what places? With what other persons present or absent?” (Arewa and Dundes 1964, 71).

But collecting significant amounts of this sort of data requires years of work. As an alternative, this set of guidelines is prepared for scholars who will not be able to spend the years that are needed to do such well-documented collecting within a society. For researchers with only short times available for field work, given a choice between collecting lists of many proverbs and collecting only a very few proverbs in context, it seems preferable to collect lists which can later be studied in more detail. In languages which are endangered or whose homelands are inaccessible, this course of action is the only alternative. If lists of proverbs are collected, then data related to use and context can later be gathered by asking knowledgeable people about the use of specific proverbs.

The ideal setting in which to gather proverbs is in the homeland where the language community lives. When this is not possible, researchers can often work with an immigrant group of people from the language area. This might be in a refugee camp, or working with rural people who have moved to a larger city, or even in another country to which people have immigrated. It is generally preferable to work with more than one person at once, but sometimes only one person is available, possibly a student at a university. However, such a student is likely not the best person since they have studied for a significant time outside of the traditional culture and likely outside of the language community’s homeland. For example, an Ethiopian graduate student once admitted to me that if he went back to his home area and were to be involved in a lawsuit, he would inevitably lose since he did not know enough of the culture’s proverbs and rhetorical traditions. Arewa and Hymes reported a Nigerian graduate student with a similar deficit in his familiarity with the use of proverbs in his home language (1964, 70). Similarly, in Cameroon, Siran found that native speakers of Vute who had grown up away from the traditional heartland could not explain proverbs well (1993, 236,237).

Though most of the work of gathering proverbs is usually done in person, it has also been possible in some places to solicit proverbs in written form by having school students solicit proverbs from their families (Abrahams 1967, 184, Kimmerle 1947, 352, Kebede p.c. 2005, Tafari p.c. 2006, Lysaght 2021), though this requires an adequate number of people who can write the vernacular competently. Gathering written proverb data may also be possible through ethnic associations, through less formal literacy programs (such as connected with churches), or simply via the social networks of people in the language community.

A male proverb collector working in India hired women to collect proverbs where he, as a male, could not go. He reported, “The best collections of proverbs are among the women, who interlard their discourses plentifully with them, I paid women to collect them in the *zenanas*[women’s quarters]. I got a plentiful and rich crop” (Long 1875, 347).

Whether working with speakers in their traditional homeland or in a displaced community, it is best to search for people who are recognized as good with proverbs, typically an older person. (It is also very useful if they can speak a language which the researcher knows, rather than depending on a translator.) But even when a person who is excellent with proverbs is found, it is preferable if the person does not have to work alone. Proverbs are more easily generated if there is more than one person from the community involved in the discussion. As people talk with each other, they remind each other of proverbs and help each other quote partially remembered proverbs. Just one person may be adequate to help with transcribing the proverbs, but it is generally easier to elicit proverbs in a group setting.

To begin collecting proverbs, a scholar must find the best local way to speak of “proverbs”. Some languages have a specific word for them, others use a more generic label that may include idioms, riddles, euphemisms, or stories. (This exploration of the cultural insiders’ view, the emic view, of proverbs and related speech genres can be valuable in itself.) If there is not a specific label for “proverb”, then a few examples should clarify what kinds of language forms are desired, but do not spend much time rejecting forms that are not canonical proverbs.

Gather a group of people together, (provide beverage and food as culturally appropriate), prompt the conversation, turn on a recording device, and have fun. (Recording the conversation rather than transcribing it as it is said is preferable since it allows for the free flow of the conversation, with no pauses while waiting for the scribe to catch up.) As much as possible, the conversation should be in the vernacular, since that is the language most likely to help the people recall proverbs. The first step is to ask the people or person to simply tell as many of their proverbs as they can think of. This step will elicit only a limited list of the most common proverbs since proverbs usually need a context to bring them to mind.

Some researchers have staged proverb contests to stimulate people to recall more proverbs (Yankah 1989, 169). In this format, hearing another person recite a proverb often helps stimulate the memory of other proverbs through a variety of associations.

As people recite proverbs, they may produce utterances that may not fit the researcher’s definition of what proverbs are. Though the researcher may think that some of the utterances being collected are not within the narrow definition of proverb, it is generally wiser to adopt the policy “if in doubt, collect” (Bryant 1945, 21) and edit later.

### 2.1.1 Using Situations to Remind People of Proverbs.

After people can no longer remember any additional proverbs during this first elicitation step, it is time to use additional methods to prompt people’s memories. These are not presented in any crucial order; they can be used as dictated by the situation. Also, they can be used cyclically, as new proverbs open up additional topics to be explored by a previous method.

By suggesting situations in which proverbs are likely to be quoted, a researcher can help people’s ability to remember additional proverbs (Asogwa 2002). For example, a researcher can pose situations such as “What proverbs might a father say to his child who is slack in their household duties?” Or, “What proverbs might a mother say to her child who is angry at a friend?” Or, “What might elders say to a person who is causing discord in the community?” Other likely situations that might call for naturally using proverbs include consoling somebody who has been cheated, rebuking a lazy person, complaining about a gossip, seeking to identify the cause of misfortune. By helping people imagine themselves in appropriate settings we are able to help them remember more proverbs. A related technique for eliciting additional proverbs is to prompt people

by eliciting proverbs by topics. Ask people for proverbs about such topics as gossip, laziness, mediation, injustice, married life, treatment of elders, sorcery, etc. The topic may not be explicitly mentioned in the proverb, but people are likely to remember it when prompted by the topic that the proverb addresses. For example, the Saramaccan proverb “High branches, low branches” is about showing respect to elders, but neither “elders” nor “respect” are explicitly mentioned. Researchers will get additional ideas for potential topics from the proverbs already elicited. The more that scholars know about a culture (or a neighboring or related culture), the more appropriate topics they are likely to think of.

Healey and Sybertz found that a number of topics “seem to be universal in all African languages such as animals, children, community, death, evil, family, food, hospitality, marriage, personal relationships, sickness, visitors and work” (1996, 59). Scholars working in other parts of the world will find some similarity with this list, but local distinctives, also.

In addition, researchers can help people recall additional proverbs by mentioning various events, asking them to think of proverbs that are used at such events, or proverbs that mention such events. It would be likely that people can think of proverbs related to funerals, weddings, betrothals, births, planting, butchering, harvesting, religious rituals, fishing, house building, reconciliation, fires, holidays, earthquakes, games, pilgrimages, elections, battles, seasons, etc.

### 2.1.2 Using Types of People to Remind People of Proverbs.

Proverbs often mention different categories of people, so researchers can help people call to mind additional proverbs by asking for proverbs that mention different kinds of people. Frequently there are proverbs about such different roles as debtors, merchants, matchmakers, craftsmen, herders, warriors, chiefs, bandits, religious leaders, mourners, old people, musicians, potters, tanners, thieves, the blind, healers, supernatural beings, mediators, hunters, brides, grooms, ancestors, midwives, neighboring clans or ethnic groups, etc.

It may also be helpful to learn which types of people or occupations are seen as higher and lower. For example, in many parts of Africa, blacksmiths are despised and feared. (McNaughton 1988, Kusimba 1996). It is almost certain that there will be proverbs that mention these lowest roles, as well as proverbs that mention the higher roles.

It is also expected to find proverbs about relatives. A study of the kinship system can aid the study of proverbs, and vice versa, as scholars gain additional light on the behavioral expectations related to various kin, such parents, children, siblings, and grandparents as well as various kinds of aunts, uncles, and in-laws.

Proverbs are also common about people with behavioral characteristics, such as being honest or dishonest, polite or rude, lazy or ambitious, truthful or deceptive, generous or stingy, brave or fearful. Other traits likely to produce proverbs include people who flatter, feign sickness, gossip, exploit others, chatter, cause dissension, desire power, etc.

## 2.2 Using Keywords to Remind People of Proverbs.

An additional technique for stirring additional proverbs from people’s memories is to ask for proverbs built on keywords (Bauman 1963, drawing from the work of Cahan). Around the world, proverbs frequently include reference to various body parts, insects, animals, weather, implements, geographical features, etc. Asking people to tell us proverbs that mention “mouth”, “ant”, “donkey”, “rain”, “hammer”, “river” will inevitably bring to mind additional proverbs that are formed by using these words. For example, at the mention of “donkey”, the present author can quickly think of three

Amharic proverbs about donkeys. A proverb may include a keyword such as “donkey”, but the proverb may really be about a person who gossips. This mention of gossip can then lead to people remembering more proverbs about gossip.

In preparing a list of potential keywords, it will be helpful to prepare a list of local names for creatures, birds, bugs, beasts, and fish, domestic and wild. To help with this, there are often illustrated books that will help with compiling such a list (such books are often only available in larger cities). They typically have such titles as “A field guide to the birds of ...”, or “The larger mammals of...”. The pictures in these books can be used to visually prompt the people who are trying to remember proverbs, a change of pace from all the verbal interviewing. Some people will find it hard to stay focused on proverbs as they look at animal pictures, wanting to tell stories about some of the animals, the habits of various creatures, etc., so this method works better with some people than others.

Using nouns as keywords is likely the simplest way to start. As people get used to the idea of using keywords to remind them of proverbs (and as the researcher learns more about the language and how to work with people from the speech community), other parts of speech can also be used. Verbs such as “cut”, “plant”, “kill”, “seek”, “die”, “cook”, “flatter”, “promise”, “marry”, “borrow”, “deceive”, “buy”, “gossip” are all likely to elicit more proverbs. Some adjectives are also helpful in this, also, such as “good”, “evil”, “shoddy”, “expensive”, “poor”, “rich”, “smooth”, “deceitful”, etc. Many adverbs will also remind people of more proverbs; likely candidates include “poorly”, “well”, “quickly”, “very”, “belatedly”, “stealthily”, “insincerely”, etc. Also, words to indicate time and frequency will remind people of more proverbs, such concepts as “never”, “frequently”, “always”, “seldom”, “occasionally”, “regularly”. Even conjunctions may be keywords in the proverbs of some languages, especially if they occur in common formulae. For example, Owomoyela (1988) collected over 60 proverbs in Yorùbá that begin with ‘if’. The grammars of different languages will configure these in different ways, but these types of concepts can be profitably used to stir people’s memories.

Some words are the basis for large number of proverbs. For example, in Finnish, there are “hundreds of proverbs about pigs, partridges and mice” (Kuusi 1998). In his collection of Yorùbá proverbs, Owomoyela (1988, 360), found over 20 that mentioned “dog(s)”. In Kikuyu, Stevenson found “very many” proverbs about the “ubiquitous banana” (1927, 243). Using words that are so productive as a prompt is likely to assist people in calling more proverbs to remembrance.

It can also be profitable to note if no proverbs (or very few) are found using words that might be expected to be productive. Kuusi notes the lack of proverbs about snakes and bears in Finnish, directly linked to taboos about these animals (1998). Yoffie noted an absence of “proverbs about love” in a Yiddish speaking community, tying this to the custom of marriages being arranged (1920, 148). Not surprisingly, she listed a number of proverbs about matchmaking.

### 2.3 Using Structure to Remind People of Proverbs.

It is also possible to aid people’s recollection of proverbs by asking them to think of proverbs with a similar structure or pattern. For example, Yorùbá has many proverbs that begin with the structure “A kì í...” ‘One does not...’, Owomoyela (1988) listing 239 examples of proverbs that begin with this structure. This is seen in such examples as “*A kì í fi ogun dán èsò wò*” “One does not taunt a warrior to a fight.” If a Yorùbá speaker was asked to remember more proverbs that begin with “A kì í...”, such a reminder of this opening structure would enable them to remember quite a number of such proverbs. Then by changing the grammatical subject from a 3rd person singular pronoun (the initial word “A”), other proverbs may also be remembered, such as “*Òran kì í yè lóri alábaun*” “Troubles never fails to implicate the tortoise” (Owomoyela 1988, 325). Having found

that this “ki í” structure can also be found medially within a proverb, the researcher may use such proverbs to help remind people of more proverbs with this structure, such as *Orun ñya bò! ’kì í se òràn enìkan* “‘The sky is falling!’ is no individual’s problem” (Owomoyela 1988, 327).

Asking for proverbs based on a structure was productive for the author when he found the Oromo proverb “‘The ground is nice, too,’ said the old woman, falling off of her horse.” The author asked an Oromo friend for other proverbs quoting “the old woman.” Being reminded of this structure in a proverb, the Oromo quickly remembered three more proverbs that quote an old woman. In a similar fashion, other languages have many proverbs quoting a specific character, such as Twi where a number of proverbs begin with the structure “The tortoise says...” (Akrofi 1958).

A number of Somali proverbs are formed on the pattern, “Three are the marks of one who...,” e.g. “Three are the marks of one who is a liar...” Finding proverbs in a pattern such as this, the researcher can ask for more proverbs of this structural pattern.

Similarly, in Spanish, Arora found that the introductory phrase “*El que nace...*” is very productive in proverbs, listing 125 of them (1968) then later documenting about 40 more (1998). Not surprisingly, in Portuguese (close both linguistically and geographically), she also found 27 more (1998, appendix III).

Other types of structures that may appear in proverbs include rhetorical questions, dialogues, questions and answers, comparisons. Also, there are likely to be proverbs whose structure connects clauses with “if”, “because”, “even though”, “whenever”, etc. As an example of the productivity of such a pattern, Owomoyela (1988) collected over 60 proverbs in Yorùbá that begin with “*Bí...*”, the conjunction ‘if’.

## 2.4 Asking People for Proverbs with Related Meanings.

Using proverbs already gathered, proverb collectors can then use some of these to ask people to think of proverbs that have similar meanings. For example, hearing a proverb that reminds people to be generous, people may be able to think of more proverbs that remind hearers to be generous. The meanings of the proverbs elicited may not always be so similar, but it is a useful way to help people think of proverbs in different ways.

In a similar way, people can be asked to think of proverbs with opposite meanings, such as proverbs that advise contrary actions. For example, in Khmer, there is a proverb that says, “Too generous a nature makes one poor”, but also one that seems contradictory, “One with a generous nature will not be poor for long.” Similarly, in English we find “Look before you leap” and “He who hesitates is lost.” Such contradictions can be on the surface level, as in the Khmer pair, or the contradiction may be at a more abstract level of meaning, as in the English pair. In the process of collecting proverbs, it is unimportant if the proverbs truly are exactly opposite; the purpose of this technique is simply to help people think of proverbs by suggesting categories of meaning.

## 2.5 Using Proverbs from Nearby Languages.

Another way to help people remember more of their proverbs is to mention proverbs from a nearby or related language to help them think of similar proverbs. This can be done from a language they know or by translation into their language. In the author’s experience, people are always fascinated by proverb collections from their neighbors, and it helps give value and motivation to work toward their own proverbs being collected and published. I was talking about proverbs with an Ethiopian friend who is a member of the Silte ethnic group. Because the Silte language is language closely related to Silte people, I showed him a newly published collection of proverbs from the

Harari people, with Amharic translations. He was enthralled, commenting that some were identical to proverbs in his language, while some were slightly different. This book was an important tool as the man worked with a team that produced a book of proverbs in his language (Hussein and Awäl 1995).

Published book-length collections of proverbs are available for many languages of wider communication, and articles containing shorter collections are available for a number of other languages. For example, if a scholar is collecting proverbs from a Nigerian language, they should consider using a book such as Owomoyela's (1988) *A kù í: Yorùbá Proscriptive and Prescriptive Proverbs*. Or if doing proverb collection from an Ethiopian language community, using Cotter's (1990) *Salt for Stew: Proverbs and Sayings of the Oromo People* would be helpful. Even an article of collected proverbs, though much shorter, can be useful. Such a collection of proverbs does not have to be in a language that the investigator understands, as long as a member of the language community who can read it is part of the team.

Proverbs from related or nearby groups may also suggest structural patterns that are common in proverbs of the area. For example, proverbs from a number of languages of India have enumerative constructions, such as "There exist three things which must be controlled: lust, mind, and anger" (Doctor 1993, 58). If collecting proverbs from a group near the Kannada, it would be wise to ask about proverbs of similar structure. As another example, since both Georgian and Armenian proverbs are often built on dialogue (Sakayan 1995), if eliciting proverbs from language communities near these groups, it would be wise to seek proverbs with this structure.

As an experiment, fifty Afghan proverbs were given to a man from the Brahui community in western Pakistan. His Dravidian language was not linguistically related to any language in Afghanistan, but his community shared a common religion and a number of cultural features with Afghanistan. From these 50 Afghan proverbs, he was reminded of 32 proverbs in his language (in some cases one proverb reminding him of two different ones). He said of some, "We have that same proverb." For others, he said, "We have a proverb that's similar." Sometimes the similarity was in both meaning and structure; when he heard "Too many butchers spoil the cow," he remembered the Brahui proverb "Too many midwives mis-shape the baby's head."

Sometimes he picked up on the meaning of a proverb and was reminded of a Brahui proverb that had a similar application, though a different form, e.g. "If there is only bread and onions, still have a happy face" reminded him of a very different Brahui proverb instilling contentment. Listening to other proverbs, he was struck by a particular word or phrase and reminded of an otherwise unrelated Brahui proverb that contained the same word or phrase. For example, the proverb "A broken hand can work, but a broken heart can't," reminded him of a Brahui proverb "A broken hand/arm always hangs from your neck." The meanings of the two proverbs are totally different, but the identical opening phrase of the Afghan proverb reminded him of the proverb in his own language.

I consulted with a scholar collecting proverbs in a minority language in China. She found that a local proverb enthusiast from a minority group was a language purist and tended to withhold or reject vernacular proverbs that too closely matched proverbs from standard Chinese. However, in collecting proverbs, the assumed origin of a proverb should not disqualify it from being included. In actual fact, many proverbs that people assume are locally indigenous are borrowed across language lines. The fact that a proverb is used within the language community is enough to include it in a collection, even if it is also found elsewhere. If a community uses a proverb, it is their proverb, even if the proverb is also used by other communities.

It may be helpful to remind such purists that proverbs migrate widely, being fully at home in several languages, so it is often not possible to identify a definite language of origin. For example, a proverb of the approximate form “No flies enter a mouth that is shut” is found in Portugal, Ethiopia, Italy, Egypt, and many countries in between. It is embraced as a true local proverb in many places and should not be excluded in any collection of proverbs because it is shared by the neighbors. This proverb was also found in Sumerian approximately 4,000 years ago. “Into an open mouth a fly will enter” (Pfeiffer 1958, 245).

During the collecting phase of research, the emphasis should be on collecting as broadly as possible (Bryant 1945), questions of origin can be addressed later.

## **2.6 Transcription and Cyclical Use of Techniques.**

Using this list of techniques will produce a significant number of proverbs. By systematically using these techniques cyclically, many more proverbs can be recalled.

To expedite this, the proverbs that have been elicited and recorded should be transcribed, preferably by a native speaker. If a person who can write accurately in the vernacular is available, they can do this on their own. If there is no established orthography for the language, the proverbs can be transcribed by some phonetic system, but such a form is much less accessible and useful to speakers of the language community. The medium for transcription will vary according to the ability of the local transcriber: it may be as simple as writing proverbs on paper cards, or as sophisticated as keying them into a computer database.

After working to remember a large number of proverbs, the team of speakers needs a rest. This is a good time for the researcher to work with the transcription and writing notes about those proverbs already collected. In addition to the proverbs themselves, for each entry there should be notes about keywords, topics, and structures that are found in the proverb, (plus any notes about how a proverb is used). For example, in an entry for the Hindi proverb “Clouds that thunder seldom rain,” the notes could include the keywords “cloud(s)”, “thunder”, “seldom”, “rain” and also the topics “weather”, “threaten”, and “bluff”.

In future elicitation sessions, these notes are then used as an aid in preparing questions that are likely to remind speakers of more proverbs. For example, if two proverbs are found that mention “scorpions”, then this suggests that there may be more proverbs about scorpions. Or, if an enumerating proverb is noted, this will prompt the researcher to ask for other enumerating proverbs. If proverbs about honoring elders are noted, this suggests that people should be asked about more proverbs related to honoring elders, and also about dishonoring them.

By systematically following the clues provided by the keywords, topics, and structure of previously elicited proverbs, a researcher can help the team from the language community remember many additional proverbs in a shorter time. This sort of coding by topics and keywords can also be used to help organize proverbs by topics, a possible way to arrange and present them for publication.

## **2.7 Proverb research outside of a community’s home area**

It is always better to study proverbs in the home area. However, sometimes, for a variety of reasons, proverb research is done outside of the home area. When people move away from their traditional homeland, they are referred to as \*diaspora.

Here are some of the situations when proverb research is done away from the home area:

- The first situation is the most obvious: proverb researchers study written collections of proverbs in dead languages, languages that are no longer spoken, such as Sumerian of 3,000 years ago (Alster 1975).
- The researcher cannot go to the community's home area.
- A group of people from the language community now lives in a new location. (If people have lived in their new location long enough, their proverbs will be changed a little from the traditional proverbs of their home area.)
- A scholar who is a member of the language community now lives outside of the home area. (This may be inside the same country as the homeland, such as living in the capital city, or it may be living in a different country.)

The following are a few examples of how proverb study has been done away from the community's homeland. Some of these examples are about proverb research done by members of the community and others are about research done by outsiders.

Elías Domínguez Barajas grew up in a Spanish-speaking Mexican-American family in the American city of Chicago. He studied how Spanish proverbs were used in actual family conversations. However, he did not have enough good examples from Chicago, so he included a proverb conversation that happened in Mexico (2010, 93).

Daniel Abera, a native speaker of Amharic, moved to Canada from Ethiopia. He compiled Amharic proverbs from every book and article he knew. He also used e-mail to collect and discuss proverbs with friends and family. Living in Canada, he produced the world's largest collection of Amharic proverbs, 22,000 entries (2019).

Edward Zellem was asked to produce a volume of Pashto proverbs of Afghanistan and Pakistan. He did not know the Pashto language and was living in the United States. He developed a new way to gather proverbs, using Facebook, Twitter (now X), and a website to invite Pashto speakers to submit traditional proverbs.

There were three significant results of this work. First, many proverbs were submitted online from Pashto speakers who lived in the home areas and from speakers who had moved to other countries. This increased the importance of proverbs in the minds of Pashto speakers who lived outside of the traditional area. Second, Zellem produced a volume of Pashto proverbs, *Mataluna: 151 Afghan Pashto Proverbs* (2014), to match his earlier book of 151 Dari proverbs. Third, Zellem was able to see which proverbs were submitted and then retweeted the most often. This allowed him to understand the \*paremiological minimum.

Georgi Kapchits is a Russian scholar who has studied Somali proverbs for many years. He met with Somalis who had moved to Germany and Denmark and used a questionnaire to study the \*paremiological minimum<sup>4</sup> for Somali proverbs (Kapchits 2002).

Katherine Luomala did not know the Korean language and was a university professor in the USA. She was teaching a group of Korean university students, teaching in English. She asked these Korean students to write down Korean proverbs (Luomala 1971). The Korean college students did not remember many Korean proverbs.

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<sup>4</sup> Studying the paremiological minimum in the home community is better, but the researcher was not able to do this at that time.

Many speakers of the Georgian language moved to Iran over 400 years ago, settling in the Fereydan region. They maintained some features of Georgian identity, including speaking the Georgian language. The Georgian community at Fereydan is surrounded by Iranians who speak Farsi. Therefore, some scholars label their Georgian-speaking community a “language island”. The proverb scholar Tea Shurgaia is a speaker of the Georgian language and travelled to this community of Georgian speakers to study their proverbs. She found that the Georgian speakers in Fereydan use some Georgian proverbs in the same form as the proverbs are used in Georgia. Also, they use some proverbs that contain Persian loanwords. They also use some proverbs that are translated from Persian (Shurgaia 2020).

From the early history of America, many Germans moved to Pennsylvania, a state in the eastern part of USA. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Edwin Fogel collected hundreds of proverbs from people who spoke German in Pennsylvania. He published a collection of German proverbs from Pennsylvania and compared them to German proverbs used in Germany (Fogel 1929). Similarly to the results of Shurgaia studying Georgian proverbs in a place that was separated from the home area, he found some of the German proverbs spoken in America were the same as proverbs used in the homeland, some had changes, and some showed the influence of the English that surrounded them.

Many speakers of Low German moved to the American state of Kansas and formed communities there, but they were surrounded by the use of English. Isaias McCaffery gathered proverbs from members of a community of Low German speakers in Kansas, a place where the language is no longer fully spoken. He published a book that lists Low German proverbs as spoken in Kansas, translated them into English, and compared them with proverbs spoken in German (McCaffery 2008).

Leah Yoffie spoke Yiddish and collected the Yiddish proverbs remembered and used by Russian-Jewish immigrants in the American city St. Louis. She identified one new Yiddish saying that was created in the city of St. Louis (Yoffie 1920, 165).

Guntis Šmidchens wrote about Latvian proverbs in America that were remembered and used by his grandfather. He wrote about how his grandfather repeatedly used five proverbs that would strengthen the relationship between them and remind him of his Latvian heritage (Šmidchens 2019).

An extreme example of comparing proverbs from published sources in multiple language communities is the work of Gyula Paczolay, who studied proverbs from over 55 language communities to see which proverbs are most common in Europe (1997).

## **2.8 Organizing a Collection of Proverbs**

Organizing a collection of proverbs for publication forces the researcher to make some basic choices: should the proverbs be organized simply alphabetically by the first letters of the proverbs, by topic, or by some other system. Though he had earlier advocated publishing proverbs organized by topic, Loukatos later changed his mind and admitted that an alphabetical listing is still essential for scholars (1974,887). Organizing them topically may turn out differently if done according to an outside researcher’s conceptual grid or if done with an insider’s understanding (Roberts and Hayes 1987). Also, organizing them topically can be challenging since proverbs are famous for being applicable to multiple topics.

Here is an example of the topical organization of a collection of proverbs, from Kamba of Kenya (Kitunda 2021):

## PART I: INTRODUCTION

### 1. Introduction

## PART II: THE NATURAL WORLD

### 2. Atmosphere and Biosphere

### 3. Wild Plants

### 4. Wild Game

### 5. Wild Birds

### 6. Predators and Vermin

### 7. Insects in Kamba History

### 8. Amphibians and Reptiles

## PART III: KAMBA AT HOME

### 9. Farm, Hearth, and Home

### 10. Crops and Other Plants

### 11. Domesticated Animals

### 12. Men and Masculinity

### 13. Women and Motherhood

### 14. Children and Adulthood

## PART IV: KAMBA SOCIETY

### 15. Place Names and Ethnic Names

### 16. Beliefs, Rituals, and Cosmology

### 17. Wealth and Poverty

### 18. Cuisine and Consumption

### 19. Health, Healing, and the Body

### 20. Trade, Markets, and Industries

### 21. Politics, Conflict, and Peacemaking

In the Kamba collection, within these chapters the author also grouped proverbs that shared similar topics. For example, the author has helpfully grouped seven proverbs about barren women (241-242) and nine about houses (128-130) (Kitunda 2021).

However, for article-length publications, it is sometimes appropriate to present a subset of the proverbs gathered. These can be selected on the basis of sharing a common structures, such as proverbs that begin with “*El que nace...*” in Spanish (Arora 1968), dialogue in Armenian proverbs (Sakayan 1999), or enumerating lists in Gujarati (Doctor 1993). Also, it may be possible that a keyword is used in enough proverbs for an article, such as “rain” (Blanco García 1993). Or a topic may be productive enough for an article, such as proverbial names for dogs among the Baatomba

(Schottman 1993), proverbs about caste (Upadhyaya 1965), proverbs about weather (Arora 1995), proverbs about body parts (Beck 1979), proverbs about animals (Simon and Wijayatilake 1956), proverbs about death (Brookman-Amissah 1996), proverbs about frogs and toads (Malaisse et al 2021), or proverbs about women (Jeylan Hussein 2004, Storm 1992). Or proverbs may be organized by the situation in which they are likely to be heard, such as when playing dominoes (Borajo et al 1990) or in legal proceedings (Messenger 1959; Amali 1998).

Organizing the collection of proverbs by strict alphabetical order may be useful in some languages, but in languages with prefixes or with initial grammatical particles, this may reduce the usefulness of this method of organizing a collection. For example, a published collection of Amharic proverbs was organized strictly alphabetically, but since Amharic has some case prefixes<sup>5</sup> (*kä-, lä-, bä-, yä-*),<sup>6</sup> this meant that proverbs that begin with “donkey” were found in four different places in the book, depending on what case was marked on the word “donkey”. Of course, this is in addition to the proverbs in which ‘donkey’ is not the first word in a proverb.

A similar situation would be found in Bantu languages that mark noun classes by prefixes. Also, verb-initial languages with verbal prefixes would face the same problems. A better solution might be to alphabetize proverbs by the usual form of the proverb, the citation form of their first word. It is informative to see how dictionaries in the language (or language family) alphabetize words, especially when some classes of roots are always pronounced with obligatory prefixes. In a collection of Bemba proverbs from Zambia, the rules for alphabetizing words are explained, “Like the Bemba dictionary, you find all indexed words alphabetically ordered – without the prefix, except for the *li-* class which maintains its prefix when stressed” (Carey and FENZA 2021, 8).

However, it is interesting to see how many proverbs begin with the same grammatical word. For example, many Yorùbá proverbs begin with “*Bí...*” ‘if’. The following examples of English proverbs show how it can be interesting to collect a group of proverbs that begin with a grammatical word, such as “if”:

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”

“If life hands you lemons, make lemonade.”

“If passion drives, let reason hold the reins.”

“If there is no struggle, there is no progress.”

“If you are not angry, you are not paying attention.”

“If you can dream it, you can do it.”

“If you have to ask the price, you can’t afford it.”

Compiling a significant-sized, original collection of proverbs is not a quick or simple process. Scholars collecting proverbs from language communities of which they are not a part should hire and collaborate with local scholars to be involved in as much of the work as possible. After these elicitation methods are explained and demonstrated to local scholars, they may be able

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<sup>5</sup> For linguists, case *prefixes* are unusual. Those who want to read more about this can consult Reh (1986) and Baker and Kramer (2014).

<sup>6</sup> The vowel symbol *ä-* in these prefixes is not a standard IPA symbol. It is the standard symbol used by linguists writing about Amharic. It is approximately the sound represented by the IPA symbol [ɜ].

to collect proverbs as well, or better, than a complete outsider. Innumerable proverbs remind us that work done together with others is faster, easier, and more pleasant.

Using these techniques will make eliciting and collecting proverbs easier and more productive, both for those collecting proverbs and those remembering and telling proverbs. How many proverbs can we hope to elicit in a short time? Luomala (1971) describes a small collection project done with Korean students in the USA, the article suggesting she was only able to elicit 33 proverbs. By contrast, Asogwa used some of these methods mentioned here in collecting proverbs among his own Igbo community and reported that he was “able to collect up to two hundred proverbs from a single person in one sitting. We have also been able to collect up to one thousand in several sittings from one person” (2002, 49). Using these techniques with a Pakistani student in the USA, I gathered over 100 proverbs in less than two and a half hours, though I knew nothing about the culture or the structure of the language. Clearly, presenting people with contexts, topics, and also proverbs from nearby can greatly increase their ability to remember more proverbs. Obviously, these techniques can only elicit large numbers of proverbs in situations where large numbers are known and used. For example, Riesenbergh and Fischer used some of these techniques in a Ponapean community, but found that some people could recall no proverbs at all (1955, 9).

Linguistic scholars frequently gather language data to write on topics that are not understood by the language community, such as tone spreading or theta role assignment. Gathering proverbs is different, since this is something that the community can understand and appreciate. Professional ethics, as well as courtesy, should move proverb collectors to acknowledge and reward the help of the language community by giving printed copies of collected proverbs to those who have been most helpful, whether directly involved or by virtue of their support from positions of power and influence. As a scholar leaves an area, giving a printout of the proverbs collected (even if unedited), is not burdensome, but is an appropriate way to both thank people and help them value the riches of their proverbial lore. “A debt of gold we can repay, kindness indebts to our dying day.”

## 2.9 Translating Collected Proverbs.

Translating proverbs is never easy. Translators want to make the proverb sound artistic and also make the meaning clear. See chapter three, “Translating your proverb collection”.

After transcription comes what is usually the more difficult part: trying to understand the proverbs. It is frustrating to read the translation of a proverb but still not be able to understand it. At least two kinds of translations are needed for most proverbs. First, a fairly literal translation is needed, such as this version of an Amharic proverb “When the unlucky man marries, the river fills up in [the month of] *T’ər*.”

After a literal translation, many proverbs need a second translation or a commentary, something that explains the proverb. This may be much longer than the proverb itself. For example, the Amharic proverb just quoted about the unlucky man’s marriage is based on the fact that *T’ər* is normally a very dry month. Also, when it rains, rivers fill up, so it is not possible to cross rivers to attend weddings. So, if it ever would rain during the month of *T’ər*, the rivers would fill up and the guests cannot ford them to attend the wedding. The implication is that an unlucky person is thoroughly unlucky, rivers flooding even during the dry season. This translation stage can be done by a native speaker of a language, but an outsider will have to consult on the translations so that they properly communicate to cultural outsiders (such as people who don’t know that *T’ər* is a very dry time). The translator will also need to confer with other speakers about the best way to translate some proverbs, a job that is complicated by the fact that some proverbs have the potential to mean different things in different contexts.

As an example of the complexity of translation, Healey and Sybertz (1996, 59 fn. 98) cite the two-word Swahili proverb “*walala hoi,*” which takes five English words for the literal translation “the people who sleep exhausted,” but then their “meaning translation” requires 20 words. Clearly, a simple, literal translation is not enough.

For publication, especially for a popular audience, some will desire to produce translations that sound proverbial and artistic. This requires additional effort drawing on a variety of techniques, but can make it easier for readers to appreciate the artistic quality of the proverbs (Unseth 2005, 2006).

Be warned that translating proverbs is complicated by the fact that many proverbs do not follow the usual rules of the grammar of the language, some words are deleted, less common words occur more frequently, and even common words are often used with secondary meanings.

### 2.9.1 Research projects:

If you are not able to study proverbs in the area where a language is spoken, are there collections of proverbs available? If so, you can study these proverbs in similar ways as you would if you were living in the community.

If there is no collection of proverbs available from the traditional home of the language community, you may consider collecting proverbs from your location. Start by writing down the proverbs you know. Then ask friends and family. Consider collecting proverbs by using social media and the internet. Compiling a collection of proverbs may be enough for a research project.

After you have prepared a collection, you can study and analyze it in the same ways that are explained in the earlier chapters of this book.

Ask people who are living out of the traditional homeland if they use the same proverbs as they did in the homeland. Also, ask if they have adopted any new proverbs from the people around them in their new location.

### 3 Translating your proverb collection

After you collect your proverbs, most collectors translate them into one or more languages. Translating your proverb collection will take a lot of time and effort.

#### 3.1 Examples of translations

If you plan to translate the proverbs into another language, then you have to think about how to translate your proverbs. How much explanation and linguistic detail do you want to write? Into which languages will the proverbs be translated?

Proverb researchers have translated their proverbs in different ways. You will have to decide what is the best way to translate your collection. You should try more than one way of translating proverbs. Then you will know how difficult each step is. Also, you can look at the results and see how helpful each step of translation is. After you have translated a few proverbs, you will examine the results and decide which steps to include.

After proverbs are collected, sometimes they are published only in the local language. This may be done if the collection is being planned for use mainly in the language community, such as in schools. If this is done, no translation may be needed. For example, Manyang Deng, a Dinka proverb collector, wrote all of the proverbs in his collection only in Dinka. He wanted the book to interest Dinka children to learn Dinka proverbs and to speak Dinka (Deng 2018, 61). Here is a sample of Dinka proverbs, printed with no translation.

- 13) Kööl e tēek e lip.
- 14) Kööl tö awär pæeri.
- 15) Köör cië dhiop kuka cië niööp e cam agueek.
- 16) Köör cië niööp e cam nē kām.
- 17) Köör e rət kuath nē luaŋ.

The following is part of a book of German proverbs, published for German-speakers. There are no translations or explanations of the proverbs (Simrock 1988, 181):

3327. Klein Geld, kleine Arbeit.
3328. Schlechtes Geld kommt immer wieder.
3329. Es ist alle Tage gut Geld annehmen.
3330. Bei Geld ist gut wohnen.
3331. Wer Geld in der Tasche hat, braucht keinen Staat zu machen.
3332. Geliehen Geld soll man lachend bezahlen.
3333. Was macht man nicht alles fürs Geld! sprach der Narr, da sah er einen Affen.

Some proverb collections provide a translation that closely follows the grammar of the source language. These more literal translations may show the grammar of the source language, but they may not be fully grammatical in the receptor language.

The following examples show samples from collections of proverbs translated into one other language. The first example is a collection of Amharic proverbs translated into English (Demoze and Armstrong 2019, 63).

In this collection of Amharic proverbs, each proverb is given a number and printed in the traditional Amharic script. Beneath this is a phonetic transcription (the symbols are explained at the beginning of the book). This is followed by a grammatical translation into English. For some proverbs in the book, there are additional useful explanations of cultural patterns.

**Amharic** (Demoze and Armstrong 2019, 63):

253 በጠብ ከተለየ፣ በፍቅር የተለይ ይሻለል። beTeb keteleyye, befq'r yeteley y'Sallal. "To be separated in amity is better than to be separated by enmity."
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Some collections of proverbs are translated into more than one language. Proverbs may be translated into a national language and an international language or two international languages. Here are examples of proverb collections that were translated into two languages.

In most situations, people want a translation of their proverb collection into a language that is used in a wider area. This language may be at the national level or international level. For example, proverbs from a language in China may be translated into Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua), proverbs from a language in Thailand may be translated into Thai, proverbs from a language in India may be translated into Hindi, proverbs from an Ethiopian language may be translated into Amharic. It is also possible for proverbs to be translated into two languages of wider communication, one for national use and one for international users, such as French, Russian, Arabic, English. In this book, I will use the term "source language" for the language that has the proverb. I will use the term "receptor language" for the language that the translation will be written in. For example, if an Amharic proverb is being translated into English, Amharic is the "source language" and English is the "receptor language".

In this example below, proverbs from Zhuang (a language of China), each proverb has a number. Then each is translated into two languages, into Chinese (national language) and into English (international language). In this book, the author used footnotes for cultural explanations.

**Zhuang**, China (Yanxian 2017, 108):

1073. Bouxgaenx maj byoem, boux gik maj rid. 勤人长发，懒人长甲。 A diligent man grows long hair, a lazy one has long fingernails.
1074. Bouxgik gwn maenz, boux gaenx gwn bya. 懒人吃薯，勤人吃鱼。 A lazy man eats potatoes, a diligent man eats fish.
1075. Bouxgik youq bien mboq hix hoz hawq dai. 懒汉住泉边也会渴死。 A lazy man dies of thirst even when he lives near a spring.

In China, when writing some languages, certain consonant symbols are written at the end of syllables to indicate tones, such as for Zhuang. If this is explained to English readers, then they can appreciate more of the sound-based artistry of Zhuang proverbs.

Understanding that many Zhuang syllable-final consonants indicate tones, we can understand the sound-based art in the following proverb better. The written form of the proverb in the book is *Monzmonz miz loh lohloh miz dou* “Each door has its path, each path has its door” (Yanxian 2017, 36). When we read the proverb written without the tone consonants, the proverb is *Monmon mi lo lolo mi dou*. When we read it without the tone consonants, we see more clearly the repetition of the nasal consonants *m* and *n*, the repetition of *l*, and the repetition of the vowel *o*. But, if we look at only the tones of the syllables, we again find a type of sound-based art: *z, z, z, h, h, h, z*. This proverb shows signs of deliberate artistic crafting, with vowels, consonants, and tones. But a reader can only understand this sound-based artistry if the spelling system is explained.

In a Lhomwe proverb collection from Malawi, every proverb is given a number, then translated into two languages: Chichewa (a major language in Malawi and other parts of southern Africa) and English. The translation is followed by an explanation.

**Lhomwe**, Malawi (Kapyepye 2021, 23):

44. *Epuri yahakalhalha ookulha eri vakhuviru*

Chichewa: *Mbuzi ikakondwa amalonda alipafupi.*

English: When a goat is excited, buyers are nearby. It will soon be slaughtered.

Some proverb projects have even chosen to translate the proverbs into three languages. This requires that a person or a team can translate well for each of the languages. Also, it will take more time. The following example is from Tanzania, a book that translated the Kara proverbs into Swahili (national language), into French (international language), and into English (international language).

**(Ki)Kara**, Tanzania (Durand and Nkumbulwa 2011, 7):

13. **Kikara**: ‘**Ligi ni kumunyi.**’

**Kiswahili**: ‘Kuku hutaga yai la kuku.’ Kuku hawezi kutaga yai la mamba, na mamba hawezi kutaga yai la kuku. Watu hufanana kwa sura, lakini kila mmoja atakuwa na tabia yake.

**English**: ‘The hen lay eggs of hens.’ The hen cannot lay eggs of crocodiles, and crocodiles can not lay eggs of hens. Though people may resemble each other, each has his own personality.

**Français**: ‘La poule pond des oeufs de poule.’ La poule ne peut pondre des oeufs de crocodile, et le crocodile ne peut pondre des oeufs de poule. Malgré le fait que des personnes peuvent se ressembler, chacun possède sa personnalité qui lui est propre.

The proverbs are spelled in Kara so any reader can understand the sounds. This is helpful for readers to be able to see the sound-based art, e.g. each word of the proverb ends with the vowel *-i*, an artistic use of sound. Each proverb has a number and is translated into Swahili, French, and English. After the translation, there is an explanation in each language.

Translating between two languages is always more difficult than it seems at first. Translating proverbs is extra hard since we are translating not only the meaning of the proverb, but usually we are trying to translate in a way that makes the result sound like a beautiful proverb. Also proverbs often need cultural explanations to help people understand a translation.

Sadly, some proverb collections do not give the local form of the proverb. These collections simply give a translation of the proverb in the receptor language, such as English. When this is

done, a collection of proverbs may appear to simply be a collection of English proverbs, instead of a collection of proverbs in another language. This kind of collection is not useful for many people. For example, I have a proverb book that gives *only* the English forms of Greek proverbs. It does not give explanations or the Greek forms, just a translation.

**Greek** (Marketos 1945, 84):

<p>INGRATITUDE 605 A favor ages sooner than anything else. 606 I taught him to swim and he tried to drown me. 607 The ungrateful and the viper are brothers. 608 We kept a dog, and he helped the wolf.</p>
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Under a topic, such as “ingratitude” here, each proverb is given with a number. The proverb is given in a smooth grammatical form in the receptor language, English. The proverbs were not given in Greek, but were only given in English translation, with no explanation of any cultural practices. With no explanation of cultural practices, I am not able to understand a later proverb in the book, #635, “Let him go get a haircut” (Marketos 1945, 87).

A brief discussion of steps and techniques for translation follows. The discussion of translation techniques is brief since this chapter is intended for those who will translate lists of proverbs, not translate proverbs in literature. (When translating proverbs in literature, translators will give much more attention to artistic translation.)

When you translate proverbs to publish in a collection, you have to decide what to include for the proverbs in the collection. Some researchers publish only a list of proverbs. Other researchers include many different items for the proverb translation. The following table shows a long list of items that proverb researchers have included. But *no* researcher has included *all* of these. Each of these items is explained after the table.

**Table 1. Example of maximum form of translating and presenting a proverb**

1. Number of the proverb	679
2. Proverb in own script and spelling	ጉልጽ ቢለወወጥ ወጥ አያጣፍጥም።
3. Proverb transliterated	gulacca billäwäwwät’ wät’ ayat’afət’əm
4. Morpheme breaks	gulacca bi-lläwäwwät’ wät’ ay-a-t’afət’-əm
5. Word-by-word translation	pot-things if-be.changed stew not-cause-flavor-not

6. Grammatical translation	“Exchanging the things (under a pot) does not improve the flavor of the stew.”
7. Meaning of the proverb	Minor changes do not solve a problem.
8. Cultural note	Cultural note: <i>gulacca</i> are three objects of clay or stone under a cooking pot to hold it level above the fire.
9. Similar proverb from receptor language	“That is just rearranging the deck chairs on the <i>Titanic</i> .” Approximately 1,500 passengers died when the large ship <i>Titanic</i> sank. When water was entering through a large hole, it was not useful to rearrange the deck chairs.
10. Notes on use	Used when a speaker wants to indicate that small changes are not enough to solve a deeper problem. This proverb was once used in an anti-government protest.
11. Similar proverb in source language	See also similar proverb, number 427
12. Frequency of use	This proverb is used very frequently.
13. New application	This proverb might be useful in a drug addiction or alcoholism treatment program.
14. Visual illustration (sometimes with brief explanation)	 <p>Ethiopian pot, balanced on three <i>gulacca</i>.</p>
15. Language note	The stew <i>wät</i> is indefinite, meaning any “stew”, so the object suffix is not used.
16. Alternate form of the proverb	If a proverb has alternate forms that are also known, some collections include these alternative forms after the citation form. In this example, a reduplicating consonant is in the second word. ጉልቻ ቢቀየር ወጥ አያጣፍጥም። ጉልቻ ቢቀያየር ወጥ አያጣፍጥም።
17. Translation into international language	“Changing the things (under a pot) does not improve the flavor of the stew.”
18. Anecdote behind the proverb	Some proverbs are based on an anecdote. If so, write the story.

These elements used in presenting a proverb from Table 1 are explained below.

1. Proverbs numbered: In large collections of proverbs, it is useful to number each proverb. This is especially useful if there is an index to the proverbs.
2. Proverb in its own script: Each entry may have the proverb written in its own language and script and spelling. Sometimes the proverb is transliterated in a different script. Also, the translation may be in a different script than the written form of the proverb.
3. Proverb transliterated: If the proverb entry is written in a different script than the explanation, it is useful to transliterate it, using the letters of a different script to spell out the sounds of the original, showing the sound-based art in the proverbs.
4. Proverb with breaks in words: For some proverb projects, it is important and useful to show the breaks for prefixes, roots, and suffixes (what linguists call “morphemes”). In some languages, the shape of these pieces in isolation is different than when pronounced in a sentence. For example, in Borana Oromo, ‘we bring’ is *finna*, but this is made up of the root *fid-* and the suffix *-na* (Lloret 1997, 507). Also, in Oromo, the negative marker *hin* is pronounced *him* before a word that begins with <b>, so *hin* is often spelled as *him-himbeeku*, not as *hinbeeku* ‘I don’t know’ (Devardhi 2013, 342). Also, sometimes it is inconsistently spelled as a separate word, e.g.:  
*Bara darbuuf jettee jecha hindarbine hin dubbatiin.* (Tolasa and Chala 2019, 120)  
“Don’t say a word that doesn’t pass for the sake of passing the year.”<sup>7</sup>

This line is not important for some proverb collections, but it is important if the collection is being used for linguistic analysis. For example, as a linguist, when I study proverbs, I look for examples of proverbs that are only one word (Unseth 2024). For this study, it is very important to understand if a proverb is one word or whether it can be divided. If this line is used, it does not need to be used for every proverb in the collection. For some proverb publications, it is not important to be as detailed as the Leipzig Glossing Rules: (<https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>) Students should discuss this with their advising professor.

5. Word-by-word translation: Each word has a translation under it. This line will often not be perfect, but it can help readers better understand the form of the proverb. Each researcher will have their own questions and answers about how detailed to cut words up. For some proverbs, this line may not be needed.
6. Grammatical translation: Each proverb should be given in a smooth grammatical form in the receptor language. Some translators want a proverb to retain the idea of being different from the receptor language and culture. Other translators want proverbs to sound perfectly normal to receptor culture readers. But all readers should be able to understand the grammar of the proverb. You should try translating proverbs different ways until you find a balance. A grammatical translation does not have to explain everything about a proverb. A fuller explanation can be done in a separate line.
7. Meaning of the proverb: The readers want to understand the message of the proverb. If the grammatical translation is not enough, then this line will have to be added. This is not needed for every proverb in a collection. If the grammatical translation is clear enough, this

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<sup>7</sup> Translated with help of Google Translate.

line may not be needed. For example, there is a Yorùbá proverb, “It is from his treatment of his dog that one can tell which unmarried man will be a terror to live with” (Owomoyela 2005, 397). I think this is clear enough so that even people who do not know Yorùbá culture can understand it. Therefore, this line may not be needed for this proverb. Another Yorùbá proverb, however, needs explanation for many readers: “All lizards have their stomachs to the ground: no one knows which among them is suffering from stomachache” (2005, 397). Readers are helped with an explanation, “One cannot tell from looks alone the worries anyone is concealing behind a cheerful mien.” Helpfully the book explained that among the Yorùbá “one of the ways to relieve stomachache is to lie on one’s stomach.” For unfamiliar proverbs, an explanation of the meaning of a proverb may be needed even for those who know the language and culture.

8. Cultural note: People from the culture of the source language may not know if cultural notes are needed because the proverb and its culture are familiar to them. Cultural notes may be needed for such things as explaining local plants and animals, stereotypical behaviors, religious matters, etc. It may be useful for you to ask outsiders to listen to or read the translations and advise you if cultural notes are needed.


A book of Kasena proverbs from Ghana included “One does not point to the mother’s home with the left hand.” This is explained, “It is considered a sign of disrespect, if not outright insult, to use the left hand to point to a person or an object of some importance, and in the case of the mother’s clan-settlement, it would constitute gross disrespect and ingratitude to use the left to point to it” (Awedoba 2000, 148). Clearly, this proverb needs to be explained to outsiders like me.

9. Similar proverb from receptor language: If the proverb researcher knows of an equivalent proverb in the target language, it may be useful to include it. This line should not be used to replace “Grammatical translation”. That is, citing a receptor language proverb should not take the place of a grammatical translation of the source language proverb. For example, a collection of Lhomwe proverbs translated a proverb into English as “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” (Kapyepye 2021, 60). This English proverb may have a very similar purpose as the local proverb, but I doubt this is a translation of the form of the proverb. A person who is knowledgeable of receptor language proverbs can be useful for writing this line. This line can be useful when there is a proverb with a very similar message but a different form. This line is usually one of the least important of all the lines presented here.
10. Notes on use: For some proverbs it is useful to explain under what circumstances a proverb is used. For example, for the Borana Oromo (Kenya) proverb “If the distribution of milk is bad, it is better if the cows dry up,” an explanation of the circumstances to use the proverb is needed. The useful explanation said, “To appeal for just food distribution” (Shongolo and Schlee 2007, 77).
11. Similar proverb in the source language: If there are proverbs with similar meanings, this line can be used to point a reader to similar proverbs. For example, a collection of Pashto proverbs included “A true comrade is one who comes to your aid in time of trouble.” The entry also included “See Proverb 911 and 1173”. This points the reader to two similar Pashto proverbs (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 228).

Or, if there are proverbs that have opposite meanings, this line can be used to tell the readers about these. For example, Nepali has two proverbs that totally contradict each other:

“Religion is victorious and sin erodes” which contradicts “Sin is victorious and religion erodes” (Inchley 2010, 378).

12. Frequency of use: In a few proverb projects, they asked people associated to read the collection and indicate how often they heard the proverb, such as was done for the study of Mongolian proverbs by Raymond (vi, 2010) . These scores were then averaged for each proverb and each proverb was then marked for frequency of use. This helps analysts (community members and outsiders) to evaluate how common certain proverbs are. This is also useful for outsiders who want to learn proverbs, they can know which are the most useful proverbs to learn.
13. New application: This line has not been used for many projects (but more should consider it). It will help people if they can think of contexts where this proverb might be useful in new applications. For example, some proverb projects have looked through their collection to find proverbs to use in marriage counseling (Bennett 1997). In Kenya, there was a program to urge mothers to nurse their babies naturally. They used a traditional Swahili proverb *Maziwa wa mama ni tamu* “Mothers milk is sweetest.” The proverb traditionally supports unity among brothers and sisters who had nursed from their same mother. The program used the *literal* meaning of the proverb to remind new mothers that their own milk was sweet for their babies. In other places, also, traditional proverbs have also been applied in new ways for public health, reconciliation, religious, and educational purposes. E-books on the Afriprov website also include examples of applying traditional proverbs for new uses (<https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/?s=e-books>).
14. A visual illustration of the proverb: A picture showing a proverb in action may be useful for the cover of a book, either the back or the front. Many proverb collections have been published with illustrations, but this always takes more time and costs more. If some illustrations are included, they do not have to be included for every proverb. There may be some proverbs that are much easier to understand with an illustration. The following example is from Borana Oromo. :

 <p style="text-align: center;"><i>chiicho</i></p>	<p>“Milk containers need to be woven and children need to be given birth to.” (Shongolo and Schlee (2007, 49)</p> <p><b>Cultural context:</b> Certain milk containers like <i>chiicho</i> and <i>madaala</i> are made of <i>ergems</i> (<i>Asparagus sp.</i>) fibres in a technique which can be compared to basket making. The disc of concentric rings of fibres which is going to be the bottom of the container and on which the container is built up is called <i>gundo</i>.</p>
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15. Language note: Sometimes a proverb contains an unusual grammatical pattern, an uncommon word, an archaic word, or a word that does not have its usual meaning. Because many proverbs are old, they often use words or grammar that are different from the way people talk today. You can add explanation of language forms if you think they are needed. For example, Livhuwani Mafenya gave a proverb from Venda of South Africa: *Hu lumbwa nga tsha thengo; tsha u fhiwa a tshi pfi engedza*. “Demands are made when buying; when given you cannot say ‘add’.” She explained that *lumbwa* is an archaic word for “demands”, but this archaic word is still preserved in this proverb. The normal word is *gungula* (Mafenya 1994).

A Kamba proverb from Kenya contains a word that has fallen out of use after the Second World War (Kitunda 2021, 228): *Aka ni mamithemba ta mathamba*. “Women are of different kinds, like iron sheets... Corrugated iron sheets were initially called *mathambo*.”

A note explaining such archaic words is useful, both for native speakers and outsiders.

16. Alternate form of the proverb: Many proverbs have alternative forms. You may choose to include these alternative forms after the standard citation form. For example, the following two alternate forms of an English proverb are both acceptable: “It ain’t over ’till the fat lady sings” and “It’s not over until the fat lady sings.”<sup>8</sup>
17. Translation into an additional language: Some proverb projects translate proverbs into more than one language. In a Kara collection, for example, all the proverbs were translated into three languages, Swahili, English, French.

**(Ki)Kara**, Tanzania (Durand and Nkumbulwa 2011, 7):

13. **Kikara**: ‘Ligi ni kumunyi.’

**Kiswahili**: ‘Kuku hutaga yai la kuku.’ Kuku hawezi kutaga yai la mamba, na mamba hawezi kutaga yai la kuku. Watu hufanana kwa sura, lakini kila mmoja atakuwa na tabia yake.

**English**: ‘The hen lay eggs of hens.’ The hen cannot lay eggs of crocodiles, and crocodiles can not lay eggs of hens. Though people may resemble each other, each has his own personality.

**Français**: ‘La poule pond des oeufs de poule.’ La poule ne peut pondre des oeufs de crocodile, et le crocodile ne peut pondre des oeufs de poule. Malgré le fait que des personnes peuvent se ressembler, chacun possède sa personnalité qui lui est propre.

18. Story behind a proverb: In many languages, some of the proverbs are based on a story. This is explained more in the section on \*Anecdotal proverbs. A proverb from Kamba in Kenya has a story that is important to understanding a proverb: “The rock-hyrax lost its tail because of measuring itself.” The story tells how the grandmother was giving out tails to all of the animals. However, this rock-hyrax was measuring itself, so it did not arrive in time, therefore received only a tiny tail (Kitunda 2021, 81).

Depending on the goal of the proverb project and the audience, there can be several parts to each proverb’s entry. *No* collection will include *all* of these parts. Also, some proverbs require more lines of translation and explanation than other proverbs. For example, one proverb may need a line of explanation and also have two similar proverbs from the receptor language listed. But other proverbs may need no extra explanation. For many collections, it is not necessary to be consistent and include all of the same number of lines for each proverb.

Translating and explaining the proverb in all these ways takes more time and skill from translators and also makes the publication larger and more expensive. Every proverb project

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<sup>8</sup> This proverb is based on the image of a fat lady singing the final song of an opera by Wagner. The opera is not over until this very last song.

researcher will have to carefully discuss and decide how full a translation should be given for each proverb. You may choose to include a small number of lines of translation for most proverbs, but you may still need to add extra lines of explanation for some proverbs.

There is no perfect template for presenting proverbs and their translations. Below are examples from real books and articles. These examples of translated proverbs show a variety of needs and solutions for explanation of grammar, customs, and symbolism. Because the books were prepared for different audiences and different goals, each one presents proverbs and translations differently. As you work on preparing your collection of proverbs, study these examples and choose the features that are most useful for your work. It may be useful to take ideas from different examples and combine them. None of these examples is a perfect model for all proverb projects. If you are a student working on a thesis or dissertation, you should discuss this with your professor.

### 3.1.1 Explanation of the writing system

When a collection presents proverbs in a written system that may not be clear to many readers, it is very useful to explain this to readers. For example, a collection of Lur proverbs from Iran is written using Roman/Latin letters.

*Dusti be khers kardan doshvāre.* (Freidl 2019, 206)  
 “To befriend a bear brings troubles.”

The author of the book explained her spelling system: “The simplified code for English speakers used here retains the value of most letters, with these additions: *ā* is the ‘a’ sound we hear in ‘law’; *gh* is a soft, guttural ‘g’ sound; *z* is ‘z’ as in ‘zero’; *c* is the ‘ch’ in English ‘child’; *ou* is the vowel in ‘low’; and ‘*kh*’ corresponds to the Scottish, German and Russian guttural ‘ch’ as in ‘*loch*’ or ‘*xopouo*’” (Freidl 2015, 9)

Sometimes the proverb is written in a script that may not be familiar to many readers. If this is done, then you should transliterate it into a script that your readers know. For example, in explaining the pronunciation of the Arabic script-based spelling of words in a collection of Pashai proverbs from Afghanistan, the back of the book contained two pages of charts explaining the pronunciation, with examples. Here is a small sample from a collection of Pashai proverbs (Jun 2010).

پښتنيک تلفوز Phonemic Pronuncia- tion	ميسال Examples	پښتنيک وړوې Phone- mic Symbols	پښتنيک آلپبا Pashai Alphabet
zek	ژېک	z (zh)	ژ
sor, amis	سور، اميس	s	س
jar, aruf	شار، اروش	ʃ	ش

Figure 1: Explanation of Pashai spelling (Jun 2010)

The following example is from the Nuer language of South Sudan and Ethiopia (Carlassare 2015, 107):

135. /*Ci naath la kot kä keel*. People do not climb at once.

Unless a reader already knows the spelling rules of Nuer, a reader cannot understand what sounds are represented by the various symbols. An explanation of sounds represented by these symbols at the beginning (or ending) of the collection would make it easier for readers to understand how similar the vowels are. This will prevent readers from understanding the verbal art used in rhyme and assonance, etc.

### 3.1.2 Explaining grammatical features

Some readers will want to know more about the grammar of a proverb. The grammatical translation may be given as a statement, a declarative sentence with an indicative verb. Sometimes, the grammar of a proverb may be a question, but a translator may think it is appropriate to translate the proverb as an indicative statement.

Even if the smooth, grammatical translation is a statement, the grammar of the proverb may be a question. But if the source language form of the proverb is grammatically a question, it is useful to indicate this in the translations or in an explanatory note.

One benefit of a book with proverbs from multiple languages in a country is that readers can compare similar proverbs from different languages. Note the following set of five similar proverbs from different Nigerian languages (Pachocinski 1996), here giving only their English translations:

- “When one finger is sore you do not cut it off.” (Njak language, p. 50)
- “No matter how affected one’s finger is, one cannot cut it off.” (Kamantan language, p. 50)
- “Is a man’s rotten finger cut off and thrown away?” (Bolewa language, p. 50)
- “Do you cut off your hand when it gets rotten?” (Tangale language p. 50)
- “A person who has a smelling hand does not cut it off.” (Nupe language, p. 43)

Each of these was given a very similar cultural explanation: people should not reject relatives, even if they are bad. This strongly suggests that these cultures all share a strong value about how people should treat relatives.

Examine the examples from Nigeria, above. Proverbs from some languages are translated as questions but the forms then are translated as imperative. A careful reader will want to know if this grammatical information is precise, even if the underlying message is clearly the same.

Other grammatical matters should also be translated carefully. In the Nigerian examples given above, note that two of them use the 2nd person pronoun “you”, but the others use 3rd person forms. Also, one of them uses a passive form, but the other four use active verbs. The last one uses an imperative verb form. As careful readers read the various lines of translations, they will want to know what the source language grammatical form is. Such grammatical differences can be important to analysts.

Most proverb scholars will not be comparing proverbs from different languages. However, this example shows that the same general proverb meaning may be expressed by different forms of grammar. Therefore, for many proverb collections, it is important to show or explain the grammar of the language in the translation or in an explanation.

Though simply citing a receptor language proverb is not an adequate translation of a proverb, it can sometimes be useful to cite a receptor language proverb as a way of explaining the

underlying meaning of a proverb. For example, many languages have a proverb of the general form “Too many X harm/destroy Y.” For example:

“With too many butchers, the cow dies without being lawfully<sup>9</sup> slaughtered” Pashto (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 109); Pashai (Yun 2010, 161); Dari (Wilson 2002, 37,38)

“Too many nannies kill the baby.” Yiddish (Kumove 1999, 115)

“Too many captains sink the ship” Arabic (Arnander and Skipwith 1985, 48)

“When doctors are numerous, the patient dies.” Amharic (Daniel Aberra 2019, 576)

“When women are numerous, the kale is singed.” Amharic (Daniel Aberra 2019, 576)

“Too many midwives and the baby’s head is misshapen. Brahui (Pakistan)

A slightly different grammatical form is “When there are seven baby-sitters, the baby loses an eye.” Russian (Dubrovin 1995, 278)

The translators for these proverbs (built on the pattern “Too many X harm/destroy Y”) gave a literal translation, as given above, and some also used the same standard English proverb to explain the literal meaning, “Too many cooks spoil the broth.” The use of the English proverb by itself would have carried the basic meaning of the proverb, but it would not have given the reader the form or the flavor of the proverb in the original language.

### 3.2 Examples of proverb translations:

The following examples are taken from a variety of proverb collections. Each sample is labeled as to its language and the source where it was found. Some have been scanned and others have been keyed for this book. You will see that authors have used different fonts, point sizes, bolding, or italics. For the examples I keyed, I tried to copy the formatting of the original, using similar fonts, italics, and type size.

**Amharic**, Ethiopia (Debbebe 1999, 398):

**ዶከተሮች ሲበዙ በሽተኛው ይሞታል**  
**• ሴት ሲበዛ ጉመን ጠነዛ**

This Amharic proverb is from a collection prepared for Amharic speakers. Each proverb is written in Amharic. In this book, some of the explanations are simple prose, other explanations are proverbs themselves. The proverb means “When doctors are numerous, the patient dies.” This is explained by citing a much more common Amharic proverb, “When women are numerous, the greens are burnt.” Both proverbs mean about the same as the English proverb, “Too many cooks spoil the broth.” It is similar to the Japanese proverb, “Too many boatmen will bring a boat up a mountain” (Galef 1987:16).

**Chinese** proverbs (Ching 197, 3 152) :

The best way to avoid punishment is to fear it.

Clean out the drainpipes while the weather is good.

It is easy to dodge a spear in the daylight, but it is difficult to avoid an arrow in the dark.

<sup>9</sup> In this Islamic society, cattle must be properly slaughtered according to religious laws to be eaten.

An official never flogs a bearer of gifts.

In this book, the proverbs are given in a smooth grammatical form in the receptor language, English. The proverbs in this book are only written as translations into English. Readers cannot see the pronunciation or structure of the Chinese proverbs.

**Bamoun**, Cameroon (Yeyap 1969, 13):

8. Pe kà "ntèru" nda mvù a shi nzâne ru  
On déjà offert (à) toi case chiens c'est alors sage toi  
«Ntèru» : te servir copieusement, t'offrir à manger (Yi ntèru)  
Quand on te sert dans une case où vivent les chiens,  
c'est à toi d'être sage.  
Nos ancêtres n'avaient pas de tables pour manger dessus.  
Alors les chiens de la maison pouvaient facilement leur  
disputer leur plat de nourriture.  
Donc cette femme qui t'est confiée ne peut être vraiment  
la tienne que grâce à ta vigilance.  
Par extension : Lorsqu'une responsabilité t'est confiée,  
à toi de te mettre à la hauteur de ta tâche pour pouvoir la  
conserver.

In Yeyap's book of Bamoun proverbs, the proverb is given a number and written to show its pronunciation. The proverb is given in a smooth grammatical form in the receptor language, French. Also, there are explanations about the proverb in French.

**Wolaytta**, Ethiopia (Getachew and Tsegaye 1987, 411):

600. ዴሽያ ዴእሽን ዴሹ ጎይነይ ማሌስ  
. ፍየላ እያለች ጅራቷ ይደርቃል  
.. በልቶ የማያስመስግን  
.. ለፍቶ መና  
.. ሲያበሉት የሚከሳ ሲነግሩት የሚረሳ

In this book from Ethiopia, the Wolaytta proverb is given with its number and spelled out in its (former) spelling system. Then, to the right of the *single* dot, the proverb is given in a smooth grammatical form in the receptor language, Amharic. Then, to the right of the *two* dots, there are Amharic proverbs with similar meanings in the receptor language.

**Pashto**, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 317):

که د فتح خان باندي ئې خو حال مې در معلوم دے. که نه وي نو در  
باندي در غم.

1226. *If you belong to Fatheh Khan Banda (village) then you know me very well. If not, be prepared to receive my attack.*

The proverb refers to a habitual criminal who used to sit an arrow's distance from the road and challenge passersby with this statement. As he was a cripple, the inhabitants of Fatheh Khan Banda would only laugh. Those who were strangers would fear his words and lay down their belongings there and then.

This proverb is similar to the truism, "Barking dogs seldom bite."  
[See Proverbs 43, 511 and 685.]

The proverb is printed with a number and in its own spelling and script. Then the proverb is given in a smooth grammatical form in the receptor language, English. The proverb is explained so that people from outside the culture of the source language can understand it. Then there is an explanation of the story behind the proverb. Then a proverb with a similar meaning from receptor language is printed. At the bottom are the numbers for three similar proverbs in the Pashto language, all printed in this book.

30. **Gundoon waan hodd'an, ilmeen waan d'alan.**

Gundoo+n waan hodd'+an, ilmee+n waan d'al+an  
Bottom-of-unfinished-milk-  
container+Subj.-Marker something  
weave+3<sup>rd</sup>-Pers.-Plural, child+Subj.-  
Marker something give-birth+3<sup>rd</sup>-Pers.-  
Plural

**T**<sub>rans</sub>  
**l**<sub>ation</sub> Milk containers need to be woven  
and children need to be given birth  
to.

**M**<sub>ean</sub>  
**i**<sub>ng</sub> Fertility is a delicate thing which  
needs God's blessing. Children  
cannot be made by hand and at will  
like milk containers. One should  
therefore be grateful for having  
children and treat them with care.



*chiicho*

**Linguistic note:**

*hodd'* means 'to sew' or 'to weave', the latter both in the sense of weaving on a loom, as the neighbouring Konso do, and of weaving baskets etc.

**Cultural context:**

Certain milk containers like *chiicho* and *madaala* are made of *ergems* (*Asparagus sp.*) fibres in a technique which can be compared to basket making. The disc of concentric rings of fibres which is going to be the bottom of the container and on which the container is built up is called *gundo*.

The proverb is first given in its spelling. This is followed by the proverb spelled with morpheme breaks. The next line gives the translation for each word or morpheme. Then the proverb is given in a smooth grammatical form in the receptor language, English. The explanation of the meaning of the proverb enables readers to understand the message of the proverb. There is a linguistic note about the verb *hodd'*-, followed by a cultural explanation. This example contains many different kinds of information. It is interesting and useful to ordinary people and to scholars.

**Mongolian** (Raymond 2010, 186):

#670	-frequently used	
Нэт тэрзгийн		Two wheels
Хоёр дугуй		Of one cart
Адилхан муу зан чанартай хоёр хүнийг дүрслэн хэлэхдээ ингэж хэлдэг. Тэд яг адилхан муу зүйлсийг үйлддэг.		This can be used to refer to two people who are similar in their bad characters. They do the same bad things.

This book of Mongolian proverbs gave each proverb a number, then told how often it is used, this one “frequently”. The proverbs are written in standard Mongolian spelling. This example is written on two lines to show the parallel structure of the proverb. Because the actual Mongolian form of the proverb is spelled, a reader can see that the ends of the two lines rhyme. Then the proverb is given in a grammatical English translation. The proverb is then explained in both English and Mongolian.

**Burmese, Myanmar/Burma** (Thamein 2000, 12): :

<b>24.</b> ကံမခိုင့်၊ သံတိုင်အိမ်ဆောက်တော၊ ကမောက်လျှင်ကျိုး။ <b>The misfortune can wreck a structure reinforced with iron rods.</b> (No one can prevent the destructiveness of the misfortune.)
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This proverb is from a book of Burmese/Myanmar proverbs. Each proverb is printed with a number, then printed in Burmese characters. This is followed by a grammatical translation in English, then an explanation in English.

**Bemba, Zambia** (Carey and FENZA 2021, 145):

<b>802. Lesa tafilwa ciminine</b> God does not fail those who stand – God helps those who help themselves. (Cf. explanation at Lesa talaba ku ciminine.) Try your best and God will not let you down. (Catchwords: God’s help)
<b>803. Lesa tafilwa kantu</b> There is nothing that God is unable to do. <i>God is all powerful, nothing is impossible with God.</i> (Catchwords: God’s strength)

The Bemba proverbs above are given with a number, then spelled in Bemba. This is followed by a grammatical translation into English. Then there is an application of the proverb. Proverb 802 includes an English proverb after the translation. At the end of each proverb’s translation are “Catchwords”. These are the topics used in the index. In the index, under the topic “God’s help”, there is a list of proverb numbers that have been chosen for this topic, including “802”.

**Alaaba, Ethiopia (Schneider-Blum 2009, 47):**

192. hak'eetindóoh(u) ʔossút(i) birít(a)  
hak'-eeti-ndóoh(u) ʔoss-út(i) bir-ít(a)  
dream-TN:F:NOM-QU-CL:M:NOM sleep-TN-F:NOM front-TN:F:ABS  
“What was first, the dream or the sleep?”  
(Don't do the second step before the first. Cf. proverbs 149 and 189.)

This collection of Alaaba proverbs was prepared by a linguist. She gave each proverb a number, then printed the proverb. The proverb is written phonetically. The next line shows morpheme breaks inside of words. The third line gives the meaning for each morpheme, often with linguistic abbreviations (they are explained at the beginning of the book). Then the proverb is translated into grammatical English. Following this is an explanation of the meaning of the proverb, then the numbers for similar proverbs.

**Yorùbá, Nigeria (Owomoyela 1998, 98):**

225. A kì í ti òkèèrè mọ́ dídùn ọ̀bẹ̀  
One does not know from afar how delicious a stew is.  
The taste of the stew is in the eating, and one cannot do the eating from afar.

This proverb is popular in songs, where it is used by the singer or persona to invite another person or other people to enter into a closer relationship, because people cannot savor one another's qualities in a distant relationship.

Each Yorùbá proverb is given a number and written in Yorùbá spelling. After this is a grammatical translation, then an explanation. The note after this is a description of its use in songs.

**Badaga, India (Hockings 1988, 396):**

785 baalu-a bađđi-ga-hooga beeđa  
tail- ACC having interest-DAT-go -don't  
“Possessing a tail, don't go after interest.”  
i.e. with your very slender means, don't try borrowing money with interest. *Baalu*, lit. “a tail”, can mean anything slender or meager. Cf. 828.

Each Badaga proverb is given a number, then written phonetically, with morpheme breaks. This is followed by a translation of each word and morpheme. Then there is a grammatical translation of the proverb into English. After this is an explanation of the proverb, including the meaning of “tail” in this proverb. At the end is a reference to another proverb in the source language that also mentions a poor person possessing only a “tail”.

**Bambara, Cote d'Ivoire and Mali (Bailleul 2005, 40):**

326. À kɛnɛ-kɛnɛ karila.  
Il a été cueilli precocement.  
◆ Comme le fruit vert, il a été cueilli trop tôt.  
● Il n'a pas eu son compte de vie.  
➤ Il est mort dans la fleur de l'âge.  
📖 Sag 4.7-9  
✓ Se dit d'une personne morte toute jeune.

In this collection of Bambara proverbs, each proverb is written in the Bambara spelling system, with its number. Then a grammatical translation is given in French. This collection of proverbs uses five different shapes on the left margin to indicate other categories of information. The first category, with a diamond, gives an explanation of the proverb. The second category, marked with a big dot, gives a sense of the proverb. The arrow symbol marks a French proverb with a similar meaning. The image of the open book indicates a part of the Bible that has a similar topic. The check mark introduces a situation in which the proverb is commonly used. For some proverbs, there is an additional mark that indicates a French proverb with a similar meaning. Most proverbs in the book have only four lines, not seven as in this example.

**Kasena, Ghana** (Awedoba 2000, 203):

231.	Kabaa ba nabɔŋɔ jega
	The slave has no mother's family

“Commentary: A slave has no kin. Implied in the literal statement is the view that those who have kin could never have been permitted to remain in slavery. Kasena did not institutionalize pawning or the enslavement of kin. A slave was therefore a person of foreign origin. Since his masters did not know his origins they could accept him as a kinless person and a slave. A slave can be said not to have a mother's lineage. A mother's lineage has an obligation, albeit moral rather than legal, to redeem the sister's child in his crisis moment. Thus, the fact that a slave remains in bondage can only imply that the mother's people are ineffectual or else they do not know his whereabouts and for that reason cannot attempt a rescue. Either way, the bottom line is that the slave lacks kin he can call kin... The proverb's message is that kinship is a valuable asset in a person's life and his liberties and citizenship rights depend on it. Kinfolk are expected to provide mutual support and failure to discharge their joint obligation to the one in need undermines the very foundation of kinship and the *raison d'être* of the kin group.”

The number of the proverb is given, then the proverb spelled in Kasena. Then the proverb is translated into English. After this, the meaning of the proverb is given with an explanation. The Kasena proverb book is titled *An Introduction to Kasena Society and Their Culture Through Their Proverbs*. Therefore, the author gave long explanations for many of the proverbs. The explanations include much information on Kasena society so that the reader can understand the proverb more deeply.

**Arabic**, of Cairo (Mahgoub 1968, 75): :

/ʔilli yiggáwîz úmmi, ʔaʔúllu ya çammi./ “Whoever marries my mother, I call him uncle.”

The proverb is not written in Arabic, but only transliterated so that readers have an understanding of what the proverb sounds like. However, many speakers of Arabic will find it difficult to read the phonetic transcription of the proverb. The proverb is given in a smooth grammatical form in the target language, English.


**Dutch** (Holland) (De Ley 1998, 109):

<b>Vogel</b>	843	Beter één vogel in de hand dan tien in de lucht. Better a bird in the hand than ten in the air. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
	844	Geen vogel vliegt zo hoog dat hij niet naar beneden moet komen voor voedsel. A bird never flew so high but it had to come down to the ground for food.

These Dutch proverbs are each given a number. The proverbs are arranged under a keyword, “Vogel” which is ‘bird’. The proverb is spelled in Dutch, followed by a translation into English. A similar proverb in English is given for some, as for 843, but not for 844. :

**Spanish** (Aparicio 1998, 69) :

**59** **No hay que ahogarse en un vaso de agua**



(one should not drown in a glass of water)  
don't make a mountain out of a molehill

This example is from a collection of Spanish proverbs that was meant to teach Spanish proverbs and Spanish-speaking culture to English speakers. First is the number of the proverb and the proverb spelled in Spanish. For each proverb, there is also a picture to help the reader remember the meaning of the proverb. After the proverb and the drawing is a grammatical translation of the proverb, in parentheses. Below that is an English proverb with a similar meaning. Beneath this is a short dialogue in Spanish where one of the speakers uses this proverb in a conversational context. (This is not included here.)

**Sorbian, Germany**, (Hose and Mieder 2004, 53)

fiddle  
172 The older the fiddle, the nicer the sound.  
Starše husle a rjeńši pisk. SSL 672  
Eine alte Geige klingt besser als eine neue. Wander 1, 1444

This book was published for an English reading audience. The proverbs are entered under English keywords, so this one was found under “fiddle”. Each proverb is presented first in English translation, then in Sorbian. At the end of the Sorbian form is an abbreviation and page number, indicating where this proverb is found in a Sorbian proverb dictionary. Following that is a similar German proverb from the collection of Karl Friedrich Wilhelm Wander, with a number specifying where it is found in Wander’s work.

**Nepali** (Inchley 2010, 300) :

उपियाँ फड्क्यो, जुम्माको काल।

The flea jumps away, the louse is killed.

The proverb is presented in the Nepali script. Then it is translated in a smooth grammatical form in the receptor language (English), but no explanation is given.

**Kashmiri** (Koul 2006, 67):

तेलि तोश येलि न्वश गरु वाति।

*teli to:š yeli nǝš gar i va:ti.*

Be glad only when the bride reaches home.

There's many a slip between the cup and the lip.

Don't count your chicks before they are hatched.

The proverb is presented in its own spelling in the Kashmiri script. Then the proverb is transliterated into Roman letters so that readers have an understanding of what the proverb sounds like. The proverb is given in a smooth grammatical form in the receptor language, English. Then two similar proverbs are quoted from English. There is no explanation of the proverb, so a reader who does not understand Kashmiri marriage customs does not understand the English translation fully.

**Korean (Old Korean)** (Ha 1970, 303):

203. Words become seeds.

말이 씨가 된다

**Comment:** Words repeatedly said, like seeds of flowering plants, grow into fruit according to the wishes. Therefore, on the New Year's Day the elderly gentlemen and ladies in Korea, when receiving their New Year's bows, bless children and youths with many kind words and good wishes for the coming year. So, this is a lesson forbidding swearing or pronouncing evil words upon one's own self or upon other people, even for a joke. Kind hearts are the gardens; kind thoughts are the roots; kind words are flowers; kind words are the fruits.

The proverb was given with its number. The proverb is given in Korean script, with no other indication of how to pronounce it. The grammatical translation of the proverb is in English. There is a long explanation of the proverb and cultural information.

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**Ngu ronda poṅewe u wa ondjendje.**

<b>Literal translation</b>	<i>He who climbs on a rock falls [like] a monkey.</i>
<b>Origin</b>	<p>Omundu tja rondo ewe poo omuti omure tjinene okukavaza pondomba tja u okuza ngo ma hihamwa tjinene pu ingwi ngu ha rondere tjinene. Ozondjendje oupuka mbu tjiukirwa kokuronda omiti nga pombanda tjinene. Pu nao omarondero nga otji maye sasanekwa nomarondero nomawiro wozondjendje.</p> <p><i>When a person falls after climbing to the top of a rock or tree (as monkeys are known to do), their fall is harder than the fall of someone who has not climbed so high.</i></p>
<b>General meaning</b>	<p>Omundu ngu me ritongamisa ma susuparisiwa.</p> <p><i>He who is over-confident will be abased.</i></p>
<b>English equivalent(s)</b>	<p><i>Pride comes before a fall.</i></p> <p><i>Do not ride the high horse.</i></p>
<b>English free rendering</b>	<p><i>If you are known to have an inflated opinion of yourself or your abilities, one day you will encounter a situation that makes you look bad in the eyes of others.</i></p>
<b>Context(s)</b>	<p>U ungurisiwa otjerakiza komundu ngu me ritongamisa.</p> <p><i>It is used as a warning to someone who has an inflated opinion of themselves.</i></p>

The proverbs in this collection have long entries. Each proverb is given a number and spelled out, then there are six labeled sections. The meaning of the proverb is explained in both the source language (Herero) and the receptor language (English).

**Khmer**, Cambodia (Fressanges 2010, 136):

ចិញ្ចឹមមនុស្សឲ្យមើលចិត្ត		
ចិញ្ចឹមសត្វឲ្យមើលចង្កុម		
Nuôi người phải xem tính; nuôi thú phải xem nanh.	사람을 기를 때는 마음을 살피고, 동물을 기를 때는 송곳니를 살피라.	Raising humans, watch their heart; raising animals watch their fangs.

The Khmer proverb is presented in its own spelling and script. There is no transliteration into any other script that would show the sounds. The proverb is given in a smooth grammatical form in the three receptor languages, Vietnamese, Korean, and English, each written in its own script.

**Dagaara**, (Ghana and Burkina Faso) (Kyiilelang 2017, 170):

Proverb no. 59 “Vaar bæ lore kuomi puone u dare i.” (A leaf does not get rotten the same day that it falls into water.) Source: 55 year-old man, Dondometeng Theme: Development and maturity of things
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This Dagaara proverb is numbered and given in the source language. Then it is translated into grammatical English. The entry tells about the person who gave the proverb, then names the town in which the proverb was collected. Then the proverb is labeled with a theme for an index at the end of the book.

**Nigerian languages** (Pachocinski 1996, 281):

Amaokut akagnwan nte efehe osoyoho obot ana odo ngkpo ebine enye ubak odo enye ebeine ngkpo. If you see an old woman running down a hill, it is either she is pursuing something or something is pursuing her. [Try to find out a cause of everything.] <i>Ibibio</i> To nni ge bura ro, nni ge burarc. If you don't go to the farm, you will join the women at the shea butter oil mill. [Used to stress that the man who does not show masculine attributes will feel more at home with women. If you are not one thing you are the other.] <i>Boko</i>
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This book contains proverbs from 64 Nigerian language communities, organized under broad themes, such as Poverty, Moral Law, Bad Luck and Misfortune, Joy and Happiness. These two proverbs were under the category “Human experience”. Each proverb is spelled in its own language, then given with a grammatical English translation. This is followed by an explanation of the proverb, then the name of the language.

**Kafa**, Ethiopia (Mesfin 2012, 71):

48. Wogoonaa tukoonaa/ gubbi qaaqiye wone.  
An oath and a hit on a back/ damages later, it was said.
49. Ittonaa ittoona/ kechee kechiye wone.  
Respect and stew /comes out of house, it was said.

“These proverbs have compound subjects that are joined by a suffix conjunction ‘-na’ (equivalent to English ‘and’). However, the proverbs reflect grammatical incongruence between their subjects and predicates. The subjects are plurals and the verbs are singulars. This grammatical incongruence is resulted from the attachments of the third person singular masculine marker suffix ‘-iye’ with the verbs /qaaq/ (damage) and /kech/ (come) of proverb sentences 48 and 49 respectively, instead of third person plural marker ‘-iyete’.”

Each proverb is given with its number, then spelled in Kafa. The slash mark indicates where a proverb is divided into two halves, a very common feature of Kafa proverbs. After this is a grammatical translation of the proverb into English. This is followed by a language note, an explanation of a grammatical complication in the original proverb.

**Chinese** (Rohsenow 2002, 154): :

Wǎguàn bù lí jǐng ... (W1)

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Wǎpiàn shàng yǒu fānshēn ... (W21)

## W

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|---|--|
| <p>1 <b>Wǎguàn bù lí jǐng shàng pò; jiāngjūn nánmiǎn zhèn zhōng wáng.</b> 瓦罐不离井上破, 将军难免阵中亡。(lit) [Just as] clay [water-carrying] jugs will [always] break not far from the well, [so] generals will die on the battlefield [sooner or later]. (fig) People who engage in dangerous occupations or activities eventually will be hurt or killed.</p> <p>2 <b>Wài cái bù fú rén.</b> 外财不扶人。Property [gained by] improper [means] won't make one rich. [See also <i>xiǎng shí hènghái</i> below; vs. <i>rén wú hènghái</i> above.]</p> <p>3 <b>Wāi mùtòu; zhí mùjiāng.</b> 歪木头, 直木匠。(lit) A crooked board [but a] straight carpenter. (fig) A board may be crooked, but a good carpenter can make use of it for various purposes. Human effort is the decisive factor.</p> | <p>12 <b>Wáng yáng bǔ lǎo, (yóu wèi wéi wǎn).</b> 亡羊补牢, (犹未为晚)。(lit) [After] losing sheep, mending the fold (is still not too late). (fig) It is not too late to mend the fold, even after (some of) the sheep have been lost. “Better late than never.” [The first half is often used alone as a <i>chengyu</i>: <i>wángyáng-bǔlǎo</i>; note: this is <i>not</i> “locking the barn after the horse has bolted”; see also <i>jiàn tù gù quǎn</i> above.]</p> <p>13 <b>Wángzǐ fàn fǎ, yǔ shù mǐn tóng zuì.*</b> 王子犯法与庶民同罪。(lit) [If a] prince violates the law, [he must be] punished like an ordinary person. (fig) No matter who he is, anyone who violates the law must be dealt with according to the law. All men are equal under the law. [See also <i>rén suí wángfǎ</i> above.]</p> |
|---|--|

This set of Chinese proverbs is from a book of Chinese proverbs written for English speakers. The proverbs are numbered, and alphabetized by English spelling. Each proverb is transliterated into English, then written in standard Chinese characters. Following this is a literal translation of the proverb, marked with “(lit)”. This is followed by a grammatical English translation that tries to explain the figure of speech, marked with “(fig)”. One of the proverbs, number 12, is compared to the English proverb “Better late than never”. The explanation makes it clear that it does not have meaning of a similar English proverb, “Locking the barn after the horse has bolted.” Also, for 2, 12, 13, “see also” notes tell the readers about similar Chinese proverbs.

**Ibibio** (Nigeria) (Iwoksetok 2014, 69): :

120. Akpòk ete ‘ndiòk idem odo ndiaha udia okoneyio’.

The lizard says, ‘I may look rough and ugly but I don’t eat at night.’

The proverb describes a person who is poor and in need but will not trade away his integrity. The statement applies to indigent fellows who will not be subjected to inhuman treatment/humiliation by the rich. It also speaks of a disciplined fellow.

The proverb is given a number and then spelled out in Ibibio. It has a literal translation in English that shows that the original grammatical form is a “wellerism proverb”, a topic addressed in a later chapter. Then it gives a useful and important explanation of the meaning of the proverb.

**Lur**, Iran (Freidl 2015, 29):

4. *Cā bāsi khosh ou dashte bu.*

**A well has to have its own water.**

This fits a great many occasions in the local schemas of self-reliance and competence, such as ‘one has to stand on one’s own feet; to be of use one has to know his/her work; one ought not to rely on the skills and good will of others.’ In the traditional economy of the 1960s an elderly man said it to his son who wanted to separate from the father’s compound but did not have enough land and animals to do so; he quite literally did not have his own water. (Most fields were irrigated, and rights to water were guarded jealously.) Two decades later a professional man said the proverb to his daughter regarding her mediocre school performance, explaining that she could not rely on him to help her but should study harder to “make progress” in this competitive world that did not favor Lurs. In 2010 a local banker used it to condemn Iran’s reliance on imports for essential goods such as wheat and gasoline.

This proverb is printed with a number and then spelled in Roman letters to show the pronunciation to English readers. (The language is not normally spelled with Roman letters.) Then the book gives a grammatical translation of the proverb in English. This is followed by a cultural explanation of the proverb. In addition, the author tells of three situations where the proverb was actually used.

### 3.3 Arranging & organizing your translated proverbs

After you have collected your proverbs, you will organize the proverbs in some order. You can do this before you translate the proverbs in your collection or after you translate them. A collection of proverbs is much more useful to people if the proverbs are arranged in a way that readers can find what they are looking for.

There are three common ways to organize a collection of proverbs. They can be organized by alphabetical order, by keyword, or by topic. Each of these will be explained with examples. No method of arranging proverbs is perfect, and all three are more complex than it may appear

For all of these methods, after the proverbs are arranged, it is very useful if each proverb is numbered.

Your goals, audience, and purposes for your proverb collection will help you decide which method of arranging proverbs is best for your project.

### 3.3.1 Arranging proverbs alphabetically

It is usually not difficult to arrange proverbs alphabetically. A computer can arrange proverbs in alphabetical order (in most scripts). This method of organizing proverbs is used very commonly for proverb collections in many languages.

However, many languages have complex questions about alphabetizing. For example, in English, the three words “A”, “An”, and “The” at the beginning of a proverb are normally ignored when alphabetizing. If these three English words are ignored in the alphabetizing process, these proverbs are arranged in a very different order. This is seen in the following table. The left column shows the proverbs arranged in strict alphabetical order. The right column shows the same proverbs arranged by the standard alphabetizing rule of English, ignoring “A”, “An”, and “The”.

**Table 2: Different ways to alphabetize proverbs**

Alphabetizing “A”, “An”, “The”	Ignoring “A”, “An”, “The”
A penny saved is a penny earned.	Don't judge a book by its cover.
An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.	The early bird catches the worm.
Don't judge a book by its cover.	Every cloud has a silver lining.
Every cloud has a silver lining.	An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.
The early bird catches the worm.	A penny saved is a penny earned.

Some other languages also have some exceptions to strict alphabetical order. For example, in French, certain forms are ignored when alphabetizing, such as “l’” at the beginning of a word and “le” at the beginning of a sentence. For example, in *L’habit ne fait pas le moine* (“The robe/habit does not make a monk”) the *L’* is ignored and the proverb is alphabetized under *habit* rather than *L’*. Similarly, the proverb *Le mot de la fin* (“The final word”) is alphabetized under *mot*, not *le mot*.

In many Bantu languages, some noun prefixes are ignored when alphabetizing. In one example, the team producing a collection of 1785 Bemba proverbs wrote an explanation for their readers in the front of the book, “like the Bemba dictionary, you will find all index words alphabetically ordered -- without the prefix, except for the *li-* class which maintains its prefix when stressed. When looking for *bakolwe*, look under *kolwe*, while you find the *isuku* fruit under *lisuku*, etc. Verbs are registered under their stem and preceded by a minus-dash (-)” (Carey & FENZA 2021, 8).

How is alphabetization done in your language? If there are no clear rules about how to alphabetize in your language, experiment alphabetizing your proverbs in different ways.

There are advantages and disadvantages to arranging proverbs by alphabetical order. One of the advantages is that it is clear where a proverb is found in the list. One of the disadvantages is that proverbs that begin with the same root word will not be together if these words have prefixes.

For example, in the Amharic language of Ethiopia, many proverbs begin with a noun. If a proverb researcher wants to alphabetize the proverbs in a way that puts proverbs with the same initial noun all together, then the researcher will ignore case prefixes.

There is a column showing a word alphabetized by the first letter. Then this is followed a column showing the same word alphabetized by the first letter of the root word.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 3 Alphabetizing by prefixes or roots**

translation	Transliterated	Alphabetized by first letter	Alphabetized by first letter of root word
“for a donkey”	lä-ahəyya	ለአሁያ	አሁያ
“on a donkey”	bä-ahəyya	በአሁያ	አሁያ
“donkey”	ahəyya	አሁያ	አሁያ
“from a donkey”	kä-ahəyya	ከአሁያ	አሁያ
“of a donkey”	yä-ahəyya	የአሁያ	አሁያ

If proverbs are arranged strictly alphabetically, proverbs that begin with these words appear in different sections of the proverb list. But if a proverb researcher wants the collection to group all examples of proverbs that begin with a form of one word, such as “donkey”, then the proverbs could be alphabetized by the root word አሁያ “donkey”, regardless of prefixes or other words that come before “donkey”.

Many languages use a verb at the beginning of sentences. If many proverbs begin with the same prefix on verbs at the beginning of a proverb, a list prepared by strict alphabetization will have very, very many proverbs alphabetized under one letter. I have a book that arranged proverbs in strict alphabetical order, so the results are 17% of the proverbs are alphabetized under one prefix.

Try different ways to alphabetize your collection and decide what works best for your language.

### 3.3.2 Arranging proverbs by keyword

If you want to arrange your proverb collection so that readers can focus on a keyword in the proverb, you can arrange your proverbs to do this. You should explain this carefully to your readers.

Here is an explanation of how to arrange a collection of proverbs by keyword.

First, for each proverb you choose the keyword for alphabetizing. You may choose more than one keyword for some proverbs, then insert the proverb in two places in your collection. The keyword should be an important, prominent word in the proverb, the word that people will think of when they look for a proverb in the collection. In collections of proverbs in English and other European languages, the keyword is usually the first noun. In your language, you may decide that the first verb is prominent so it should be the keyword.

Here is a sample of how keywords were used to arrange Sorbian proverbs (spoken in eastern Germany). This collection is planned for English speakers who do not understand Sorbian, so the keywords are English words. Under each keyword, there is at least one proverb that contains that keyword. Below, each proverb is numbered (Hose and Mieder 2004, 123).

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<sup>10</sup> Amharic is written with a traditional syllable-based script and has a different order for letters than the Roman alphabet.

**wealth**

- 580** The greater the wealth, the worse the miser.  
Wjetše kubło, hórši skupc. SSL 1084  
Kein Gut hilft für den Geiz. Wander 2, 194
- 581** Wealth breeds misdeeds, but so does poverty.  
Bohatstwo njeskutki lehnje, ale chudoba tež. SSL 68  
Reichtum stiftet viel Torheit. Wander 3, 1628
- 582** Wealth does not make one as happy as its loss makes one sad.  
Bohatstwo měć tak njezwjeseli, kaž bohatstwo zhubić potuži. SSL 67  
Großer Reichtum, schwere Sorgen. Wander 4, 1625

**wedding**

- 583** Before the wedding a sweet pear, after the wedding, sour cabbage.  
Mjedawka do kwasu, ščehelca po kwasu. SSL 1112  
Vor der Hochzeit gibt 's Küsse, nach der Hochzeit Schmissee. Wander 2, 697
- 584** Between the engagement and the wedding the devil likes to lay poisonous eggs.  
Srjedź sluba a kwasa nanjese djas rady jědojte jejo. SSL 1116

**weed/s**

- 585** Weeds have a rough life.  
Złe zelo ma twjerde žiwjenje. SSL 2900  
Unkraut vergeht nicht. (today)
- 586** Weeds have stubborn roots.  
Njerjad ma zasakły korjeń. SSL 1519  
Unkraut vergeht nicht. (today)

Usually, proverbs are listed under only one keyword. If you think some proverbs should be listed under more than one keyword, then your collection of proverbs will require more pages. This system is not easy for those preparing the proverb collection and it is not easy for the readers. This system is used for many collections of English proverbs. The use of this type of system is explained in greater detail by Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro (2012, xiii.) The following example is derived from a recent collection of American proverbs by Mieder (2021, 48), where the keyword is marked by bold letters.

- 67 The **ball** doesn't lie,  
 68 You can't hit the **ball** if you don't swing.  
 69 No matter how you slice it, it's still **baloney**.  
 70 **Banks** have no heart.  
 71 You can't argue with the **barrel** of a gun.

In a collection of German proverbs (Simrock 1988, 181), one of the keywords is *Geld* "gold". In the *Geld* section, proverbs are included even if *Geld* is not the first word of the proverb. In proverb #3333 *Geld* is the seventh word. In this collection, the keyword is not marked in a special way.

3327. Klein Geld, kleine Arbeit.  
 3328. Schlechtes Geld kommt immer wieder.  
 3329. Es ist alle Tage gut Geld annehmen.  
 3330. Bei Geld ist gut wohnen.  
 3331. Wer Geld in der Tasche hat, braucht keinen Staat zu machen.  
 3332. Geliehen Geld soll man lachend bezahlen.  
 3333. Was macht man nicht alles fürs Geld! sprach der Narr, da sah er einen Affen.

Sometimes proverbs are included in two or more different places in the lists, for example, a proverb may mention both a "Knife" and a "Chicken" and the same proverb may be about "Forgiveness". Each researcher will have to make their own decision.

### 3.3.3 Arranging proverbs by topic

For some proverb collectors, arranging proverbs by topic is more useful than alphabetically. First, the proverb researcher writes the topics that are useful and common in analyzing their proverb collection. Topics may include "Cooperation", "Family unity", "Laziness", "Death", "Gossip", "Marriage", "Other ethnic groups" etc. The team then discusses each proverb and puts it into one of the topics. A proverb may be about gossip, but the word "gossip" may not be used in the proverb. The topics should be listed alphabetically, for example: Beauty, Danger, Death, Debt, Divorce, Doctors, Family, Laziness. As you work with your topics, you may decide to divide some topics. For example, there may be many proverbs about Marriage. As you study your list, you may notice that there are many proverbs about weddings and wedding feasts. Then you might decide to create new topics "Wedding" and "Wedding feast". As you and your friends discuss your topics, you will make many changes to your list of topics.

Very quickly, you will realize that they need to add new topics to their list. The list of topics will continue to grow as you and your friends discuss more proverbs. You will add some topics and delete some. Some proverbs will fit well into more than one topic.

Below are lists of topics taken from various collections.

Within each of these nine topics, the Zhuang proverbs are arranged in alphabetical order  
Zhuang, China (Zhou Yanxian 2016).

Chapter 1. Saeh Leix 事理 Truths	1
Chapter 2. Coih Ndang 修养 Morality	47
Chapter 3. Ndaw Ranz 家庭 Family	77
Chapter 4. Gwndaenj 生活 Everyday Life	105
Chapter 5. Doxgyau 社交 Social Life	129
Chapter 6. Guh Hong 生产 Labor	147
Chapter 7. Gwnzbiengz 自然 Nature	197
Chapter 8. Mbanj Ranz 乡土 Customs	209
Chapter 9. Haenh Guek 时政 Politics	215

For a collection of 4,438 Bambara proverbs from Mali, Charles Bailleul created a topical outline that fills nine pages (2005).

<b>E. L'HOMME ET SES SEMBLABLES</b> .....	<b>292</b>
<b>I. De la cohésion en société</b> .....	<b>292</b>
<b>a) Vivre avec ses semblables</b> .....	<b>292</b>
(1) <i>Concorde 2934-2942</i> .....	292
(2) <i>Union 2943-2962</i> .....	293
(3) <i>Palabre 2963-2970</i> .....	295
(4) <i>Amour 2971-2994</i> .....	295
(5) <i>Présence des intéressés 2995-2999</i> .....	297
(6) <i>Ne pas faire aux autres ... 3000-3005</i> .....	298
(7) <i>Bien agir-mal agir 3006-3010</i> .....	299
<b>(a) Perfection impossible 3011-3016</b> .....	<b>299</b>
(i) <i>Perversité-jamais totale / Conversion 3017-3021</i> .....	300
<b>(b) Faute</b> .....	<b>300</b>
(i) <i>Remords 3022-3026</i> .....	300
(ii) <i>Faute-coupable 3027-3029</i> .....	301
(iii) <i>Faute-réparation 3030-3032</i> .....	301
(iv) <i>Fautes-sanctions 3033-3073</i> .....	301
(v) <i>Faute-sanction communautaire 3074-3075</i> .....	305
(vi) <i>Faute-pardon 3076-3085</i> .....	306
(vii) <i>Faute avouée-faute pardonnée 3086-3088</i> .....	307
(viii) <i>Pardon-oubli 3089-3092</i> .....	307
(8) <i>Respect 3093-3097</i> .....	307
<b>(a) Respect dû à l'ancienneté 3098-3100</b> .....	<b>308</b>
<b>(b) Dignité-fondamentale 3101</b> .....	<b>308</b>
<b>(c) Respect-de-soi 3102-3108</b> .....	<b>309</b>
<b>(d) Respect dû aux vieux 3109-3117</b> .....	<b>309</b>
(9) <i>Foule-individu 3118-3133</i> .....	310
<b>(a) Qualité-quantité 3134-3135</b> .....	<b>312</b>

Erika Freidl classified 555 Lur proverbs within the following 13 categories (2015):

<b>I</b>	<b>Lurs, Lurs (1-20)</b> . . . . .	<b>27</b>
<b>II</b>	<b>The Way it is in the Natural Order of Things (21-73)</b> . . . . .	<b>37</b>
<b>III</b>	<b>God is Great and the World is turning (74-113)</b> . . . . .	<b>57</b>
<b>IV</b>	<b>The Old, Death and the Dead (114-139)</b> . . . . .	<b>77</b>
<b>V</b>	<b>A Life of Work and Work as Life (140-183)</b> . . . . .	<b>91</b>
<b>VI</b>	<b>Matters of Food (184-226)</b> . . . . .	<b>109</b>
<b>VII</b>	<b>Heart, Health and Pain (227-270)</b> . . . . .	<b>127</b>
<b>VIII</b>	<b>Full House (271-303)</b> . . . . .	<b>143</b>
<b>IX</b>	<b>Passion, Marriage and what Women say (304-346)</b> . . . . .	<b>159</b>
<b>X</b>	<b>Generosity and Obligations (347-387)</b> . . . . .	<b>177</b>
<b>XI</b>	<b>Wisdom and Knowledge (388-450)</b> . . . . .	<b>193</b>
<b>XII</b>	<b>Beware (451-517)</b> . . . . .	<b>215</b>
<b>XIII</b>	<b>Words, Words (518-555)</b> . . . . .	<b>239</b>

Ryszard Pachocinski collected proverbs from all over Nigeria and arranged them under these 20 topics (1996:v):

Chapter 1: God, Humanity and God's Creation	17
Chapter 2: The Family	31
Chapter 3: The Moral Law	61
Chapter 4: Educational and Behavioral Rules and Principles	83
Chapter 5: The Molding of a Person by the Society	141
Chapter 6: The Individual and Society	173
Chapter 7: The Human Condition	221
Chapter 8: Human Experience	261
Chapter 9: Wisdom	287
Chapter 10: The Religious Life	309
Chapter 11: Life for Others	321
Chapter 12: Human Nature	329
Chapter 13: Human Character	339
Chapter 14: Poverty	349
Chapter 15: Secrets	357
Chapter 16: Bad Luck and Misfortune	363
Chapter 17: Joy and Happiness	371
Chapter 18: Relativism in Life	377
Chapter 19: Figures of Speech	389
Chapter 20: Miscellaneous	411

These examples show different ways of helping readers find certain proverbs. After all the work of gathering, editing, translating and formatting proverbs for a collection, we want readers to be able to use and enjoy the collection as much as possible. Some form of index is a small addition to make the collection more useful.

Different collections of proverbs have used different numbers of topics. One collection used over 1,200 topics, such as “tongue”, “tongue (power of)”, “tongue (taming)”, “tongue (vicious)”. Many of the topics were listed with only one proverb. This makes it harder for readers to search for proverbs that fit topics.

## **3.4 Summary**

Everyone preparing a proverb collection must decide who will read the collection. After they decide who will read it, then they will choose how to translate and explain it. If the collection is only for speakers of the language, then they do not have to translate the proverbs. Your decisions about how to translate the proverbs in your collection will depend your needs.

Every collection of proverbs should be made available to people in an appropriate way. Whether collections are as large as the 22,000 Amharic proverbs gathered by Daniel Aberra (2019), or 4,438 Bambara proverbs gathered by Bailleul (2005), or collection of 35 Maale proverbs by Thubauville (2010), collectors must think carefully how to present, format, translate, and explain the proverbs in the collection. This chapter has shown many ways to do this, giving examples of different ways to arrange collections of proverbs.

### **3.4.1 Research project**

Research projects for this chapter depend on having a large collection of proverbs. The collection may be proverbs you have collected, or it can be a collection of proverbs gathered by other people, or you may combine more than one collection.

If you collect many proverbs, you will have to arrange the proverbs in some way. You may choose to arrange them alphabetically, by topic, or some other method, but you will have to select a method as you list the proverbs you have collected. Select a small number of proverbs and arrange them using different methods. See which method is best for your purpose and your audience.

## 4 Sound-based art

Many proverbs sound beautiful. They have sound patterns that make it easier for us to remember them. The people who created these proverb thought carefully about sound-based art.

Proverbs have been formed with sound-based art since ancient times, as seen in the following titles:

Sumerian and Akkadian: “Literary Aspects of Sumerian and Akkadian Proverbs.” (Alster 1996)

Biblical Hebrew: “A Study of Some Alliterative and Assonantal Features of the Language of [Biblical] Proverbs”. (Kim 1975)

Biblical Hebrew: “Biblical Sound and Sense: Poetic Sound Patterns in Proverbs 10-29”. (McCreesh 1991)

Ancient Greek: “The poetics of the Ancient Greek proverb.” (Russo 1983)

Quranic Arabic: *A Linguistic Study of Selected Proverbs in the Glorious Qur’an*. (Mohamed 2017, e.g. 178, 213, 227)

Many proverbs sound beautiful and poetic. The value of proverbs is both in their wisdom and also in their poetic sounds. Sound-based art in proverbs is often formed with such techniques as alliteration, rhyme, meter (rhythm), assonance, and tone.

Different language communities prefer different artistic techniques to form proverbs. For example, when I studied a book containing proverbs from around the world, I found that rhyme was more common in proverbs from Europe than proverbs from eastern Asia. In that book, proverbs from eastern Asia use tonal art which is not found in European languages. In his book of Badaga proverbs from India, Hockings observed that alliteration is the most common artistic feature “in at least 500 proverbs” of a collection of 1167, but “rhyming is confined to very few proverbs” (Hockings 1988, 19). Each language has certain techniques that it values more than others. What kinds of sound-based art is common in the proverbs of your community?

### 4.1 Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds. Every language can use alliteration in proverbs, but some use it more frequently. Some writers use the word “alliteration” only for repeating sounds at the beginning of words. This kind of alliteration is often found at the beginning of the lines of proverbs that have more than one line. For example, the following English proverb has the same consonant at the beginning of each line and the consonant *-t* at the end of the word:

Waste not,  
want not. (“want” in this proverb means “lack something”)

In the following Alaaba example from Ethiopia, all three words begin with the same consonant, then each word contains the consonant /r/.

bizaareeni buur?eema buuru (Schnieder-Blum 2009, 25)  
“The butter smeared on the bald head.”

In the next example from Alaaba, (Ethiopia) in each half of the proverb the first consonant and also the vowel are the same, *mi-*. This is alliteration of not just the consonant, but repetition of the first syllable of each line. The second syllable of each word begins with what linguists

categorize as a coronal stop, and this followed by *-aa*. And both halves end with the vowel *-a*. This proverb has been carefully crafted for sound-based art.

*mit'aadiitaba'a, midaanoota.* (Schnieder-Blum 2009, 75)  
“It is not for the large griddle, but for the small pot.”

Some writers use the word \**“alliteration”* for the repetition of a consonant anywhere in the word, beginning, middle, or end. When we study proverbs, it is useful to look for consonant repetition anywhere in the word or in the proverb, not just at the beginning of words. In the following Maale proverb from Ethiopia, every word contains *m*, at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the word.

*Malli muke lumamursana k'amen maosase.* (Thubauville 2010, 5)  
“When the drought comes purposely, it doesn't go even if you take your grain out of the barn slowly.”

In the following example from Alaaba, the symbols *t'* stand for a single ejective consonant<sup>11</sup>. There are five examples of this consonant in the proverb, three at the beginnings of words, two at the beginning of syllables within the word. The repetition of this consonant makes the proverb more artistic and memorable.

*hant'aa t'arrantyat'a, kofu t'arrantyu t'uurannos.* Alaaba  
“Strong arms milk the cow having a strong udder.” (Schnieder-Blum 2009, 48)

Notice that there are many examples of *k* in the following proverb. Linguistically, the examples of *kp* are analyzed a single consonant, but the *k* element is still heard. The examples of *k* and *kp* are similar, an example of \*feature rhyme, a topic explained in Chapter 4.8.

*Katirikatiri na ndu ku kporo kpio nganga yo.* Zande, S. Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1963, 110)  
“The wiry one went to the funeral of the robust one.”

In the following example from Shona of Zimbabwe, each of the three words begins with a complex consonant *zv-*. This is an artistic example of \*alliteration:

*zvanga zvisiri zvega.* (Materike and Maparan 2009, 205)  
“It could not remain perfect.”

The following Chewa proverbs shows alliteration of *c* at the beginning of words, but also within a word:

*Culu sicyendera ciswe, ciswe cimayendera culu.*  
“The anthill does not follow the termites but ants go to the anthill.” (van Kessel 2015, 39)<sup>12</sup>

Some proverbs contain alliteration of more than one consonant. Note the repetition of both *w* and *n* in the following proverb from Wayeyi of Botswana.

*Weendisi wuns weeni.* (Kelsey Grulke, p.c. 2022)  
“Traveling, it has discovery.” (If you travel you learn new things.)

Note the repetition of both *b* and *l* in the following proverb from Silte of Ethiopia. Each word begins with *ba(a)l-*.

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<sup>11</sup> Ejective consonants are pronounced with a closure in the glottis.

<sup>12</sup> The English translation is taken not from the book, but website, <https://www.fenza.org/chewaproverbs.php>?

*Baaluny balot baluny balotən.* (Hussein Musa and Awäl Mähämmäd 2015, 77)

“To say that we have them is to say that they have eaten us.”

Similarly, the following Amharic example also shows the alliteration of two different consonants: *z* (at the beginning of each half) and *b* in the second word of each line. In both halves, the first three consonants are *z-m-b*. Clearly, this proverb was created by a person who was aware of sound-based art.

*Zəmm bala af,*

*zəmb ayyəgäbabbätəm.* (Daniel Aberra 2016, 241)

“The mouth that is silent [closed], no fly enters into it.”<sup>13</sup>

In the following proverb from the Kaonde people of Zambia, every word begins with *k*-, except for the final word. Also, the consonant is found three more times within words. It is clear that the person who created this proverb was aware of alliteration and chose words that include *k*.

*Kikupa kya kukokoila mukoyo*

*Kikusha kya kupalula jino.* Kaonde, Zambia (Ganly 1987, 10).

“If you continue to bite on a hard bone, it will break your tooth.”

In the following Somali example, two consonants are used in alliteration patterns. The consonant *dh* (it is spelled with two letters but is one consonant) and the consonant *q* are each repeated four times in this proverb:

*Dhagarqabe dhulkaa u dhaqdhaqaaqa.*

“The ground quakes under a rascal.” (Kapchits 2021, 123)

Alliteration is a sound-based artistic technique used frequently in Somali proverbs. Georgi Kapchits found a clear example of this in an unusual way. He used questionnaires to collect proverbs from Somali speakers. Several people submitted the same basic proverb:

*Nin walba midduu caashaqaa waa u Cambaro-luul.* (Kapchits 2003, 29)

The proverb means, “To every man his beloved seems to be *Cambaro-lul*.” *Cambaro-lul* is a beautiful woman’s name, composed of “amber” and “pearl”. When people wrote their proverbs on the questionnaires, some people listed the same basic proverb, but with different women’s names. All of the alternate women’s names that were elicited began with the same consonant /C/ to match the initial consonant of the word *caashaqaa* earlier in the proverb: “he loves: *Caynabo*, *Canab*, *Cambalow*, *Calmadaa* or *Ceebla*” (Kapchits 2004, 29). It is clear that alliteration was very important in forming all of the variants of this proverb.

## 4.2 Assonance

Assonance is the repetition of vowels in a text. Sometimes total assonance is achieved, using only one type of vowel being used in the entire proverb. Here are examples of proverbs with total assonance:

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<sup>13</sup> This is related to the ancient Sumerian proverb “Into an open mouth a fly will enter” (Pfeiffer 1958, 245). The same proverb is now found in Spanish, Arabic, Italian, Amharic, and other languages.

*Yälämmänä männämännä.* Amharic,<sup>14</sup> Ethiopia (Daniel Aberra 2020, 450)  
“The one who begged grew thin.”

*Az yak palak, Chand handalak.* Tajik, Tajikistan (Bell 2009, 287)  
“From one vine many different melons.”

*Kha ghar lwar day pa sar laar lary.* Pashto, Afghanistan (Zellem 2014, 66)  
“Even if a mountain is very high, there is a path to the top.”

The following examples from Oromo of Ethiopia both have the same meaning and the words are very similar, but both have been formed with complete assonance.<sup>15</sup> The people who created each of these forms carefully crafted them to have complete assonance.

*Kan mana baala, a?laa gala.*  
“A leaf at home, but a camel elsewhere”

*Manaa amma baalaa alaa amma gala.*  
“A leaf at home, but a camel elsewhere.” Oromo, Ethiopia (p.c. Megersa Regassa, June 2021)

The following example from Eastern Tangale of Nigeria also shows complete assonance. Again, we find that almost complete assonance is formed with the vowel /a/.

*Yaag mbáastâm waam dasa.* Eastern Tangale, Nigeria (Jungrathmayr 2006, 72)  
“It is a ‘bad thing’ that killed her.”

The following proverb from the Abagusii of Kenya is built with only the vowel *o*: (Okemwa 2012, 137):

*Obototo bw’omonto*  
“One’s efforts”

Awareness of vowel assonance is so strong in some language communities, even some new proverbs are formed with full assonance, such as this Hausa example from Nigeria, with ten examples of the vowel *a*:

*Banza a banza talaka a APC.*  
“What a nonentity, a poor man in APC [political party].” (Sani 2024, 215)

Even when translating proverbs, some have found ways to artistically craft the proverb into their language using \*assonance. The following two examples are both from Afghanistan. It is not possible to know where the proverb started, but it is clear that it was translated well, with assonance. In Pashto, the proverb has complete assonance, but in Dari it has strong partial assonance.

*La zra na bal zra ta laar shta.* Pashto, Afghanistan (Zellem 2014, 16)  
“From one heart to another there is a way.”

*Dil ba dil raah darad.* Dari, Afghanistan (Zellem 2015, 25)

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<sup>14</sup> The past tense is marked on many Amharic verb roots with the vowel *ä* in two places. Also, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular suffix is marked with the same vowel. In addition, some prefixes also use the same vowel. Therefore, several Amharic proverbs contain total assonance.

<sup>15</sup> I want to thank Megersa Regassa for his help with this proverb.

“From heart to heart, there is a way.”

In my research, (except for the Abagusii example formed with only the vowel o), all of the proverbs that have total assonance have only the vowel /a/. The Amharic example has the vowel symbol /ä/, which is pronounced similarly to /a/ but is pronounced slightly more centrally than [a]. In many languages, /a/ is the most common vowel, but, in Amharic /ä/ is the most common vowel.

In the following Nubian proverb, there is complete \*assonance through the proverb, until the last vowel. The proverb still has nearly-complete assonance, sound-based art.

*Alad ay tannga kaaymun.* Nubian, Egypt (Habbob 2022, 36).

“The ax does not fix itself.”

The following Oromo proverb (Ethiopia) is formed with almost complete assonance. All of the vowels are /a/, except for the second vowel.

*Namni dadaa afaan kaa'an, dagaa afaa nama kaa'a*

“The person who had been fed with butter, feeds you with stone.” (Banti 2011)

Here is another example of a proverb with assonance in part of the proverb. In many proverbs assonance is not total. Instead, a vowel may be repeated many times, but it is not the only vowel in the proverb. In the following example, the vowel *a* is repeated in every syllable of the first part of the proverb and then three more times. (Also, the last two words each begin with *t'*, followed by a vowel, then *-ran-*.)

*Hant'aa t'arranyat'a, kofu t'arranyu t'uurannos*

“The one having strong arms milks the cow having a strong udder.” Alaaba, Ethiopia (Schnieder-Blum 2009, 48)

The following Dari proverb has almost complete assonance, but with one example of /e/ near the end of the proverb.

*Mazaagh, mazaagh, kala-ye zagh.* Dari, Afghanistan

“Jokes, jokes, the crow's head.” (Zellem 2015, 49)

Among the Ondo community of Nigeria, assonance is appreciated in proverbs, the repetition of a vowel “gives it aesthetic beauty” (Akinmade 2009, 130). In the following example, the vowel /o/ is repeated 16 times.

*Onen o mon omi Onen, o mon 'Jesa, onen o mon omi 'Luwa, ugba omi ghon mon n'uli 'Doko i.*

Ondo (Akinmade 2009, 129,130)

“He who drinks water from Oni River, drinks water from Ijesa, but he who drinks water from 'Luwa, drinks water from two hundred sources of water in Idoko's house.”

### 4.3 Vowel patterns

There is another type of sound-based art that repeats vowels. This is a more complex form of \*assonance because it repeats sequences of vowels. I do not know of another author describing these patterns. I use the simple label “vowel patterns”.

In the following example, two vowels are repeated in pairs five times. The pairs of vowels are each separated by a consonant, symbolized by C. The vowels are consistently in the same order: *uCa*.

*Kupha n'kupha, umakumbuka poguza.* Chewa, Zambia (van Kessel 2015, 84)

“To kill, you can kill it, but remember you have to drag it.”

Note in the following proverb, there are six places in the proverb where the vowels /i/ and /o/ appear separated by one consonant, *iCo*. The repeating vowel pattern shows that the proverb was carefully created. Also, the vowel *u* is repeated five times.

*Oula igon gur ikone, seru igon kur ikone, sikak igon javun ikone.* Lur, Iran (Freidl 2015, 134)

“They say that smallpox makes a grave, measles make one blind, chickenpox makes one young.”

In some proverbs, an assonance pattern may use the repetition of two vowels, in separate sequences. In the following proverb, the first three syllables of each half of the proverb all have only the vowel *a* and the last syllable of each half has the vowel *uu*.

*a-a a-uu*

*Banar natuu*

*xabar xatuu.* Buryat, Russia, (Kara 2011, 165)

“The fall is mild / the spring is wild.” (*lit.*, harsh, severe)

There are also proverbs that repeat three different vowels in sequence. Proverbs with this pattern show that the person who crafted the proverb was very aware of sounds. This example from Chewa is built on the sequence of the same three vowels in each of the two lines.

*u-e-i // u-e-i*

*Kuseri kumvenji.* Chewa, Zambia (van Kessel 2015, 85)

“Being around the corner, what can you hear?”

In the following proverb, also, there is a pattern of repeating the same pattern of vowels from the first line in the second line. In this proverb, the vowels in the second and third words of each half of the couplet contain the same vowel. In the Zhuang spelling system, the sequence *ae* is pronounced as one single vowel. This proverb shows the repetition of vowels in the same pattern in each of the two lines:

*o-ae-ae // o-ae-ae (-a)*

*Rom naed baenz,*

*rom caek baenz dah.* Zhuang, China (Yanxian 2017, 124)

“Many grains of rice make a basket, many drops of water make a river.”

In the following Tajik proverb, we see at least two kinds of sound art. The two lines of the proverb each have an identical number of syllables, so the person who created this proverb was aware of meter. Also, the vowels of each line are the same (except for length of the first vowel). This is not classical assonance, but shows that the proverb was formed by a person who was thinking about beauty and vowels.

*u-a-a u-u-u u-oi a*

*Ru:zata furu:shu ru:shnoi: khar,* Tajik (Bell 2009, 32)

*Umrata furu:shu ju:shoi: khar.*

“Sell a day and buy a light. Sell all your life and buy a milk cow.”

In the following Amharic proverb, nouns have been derived from verb roots by adding the suffix *-i*. the result is the same vowel pattern in each of these two words: (a)-a-a-i

*awaqi*

*astarraqi* “A wise one, a peacemaker.” (Daniel Aberra 2019, 307).

In some proverbs, assonance is very strong in only part of a proverb. This is seen in the following Japanese proverb, where the vowel *u* is repeated five times in the second half of the proverb.

*Mimi o ote suzu o nusumu* (Okada 1955, 106)  
“To steal a bell by covering ones ears.”

Similarly, the following Japanese proverb repeats the vowel *o* six times in a row.

*Suki koso mono no jozu nare.* (Okada 1955, 148)  
“What one likes to do one generally does well.”

The following Hausa proverb also shows a strong pattern of assonance, nine examples of *a*, with only two examples of *o*.

*Nada Allah ya kawo rana yabo.* Hausa, Nigeria (Pachocinski 1996, 28)  
“May God not bring the praising day.”

In Builsa proverbs of Ghana, some proverbs repeat an entire word, except for the initial consonant:

*Yòmòà ka sòmòà.*  
“A slave has no friend” (Kröger 2009, 45)

In the following Builsa proverb, in addition to the first and last words being identical except for the first segment, all three words end with *-m*.

*Malim gààm nalim.*  
“A slave has no friend” (Kröger 2009, 45)

## 4.4 \*Rhyme

\*Rhyme is generally defined as the repetition of the same vowel and consonant at the end of two words. This is found at the end of each line in many proverbs:

*A bisl un a bisl,*  
*vert a fule shisl.* Yiddish (Kumove 1999, 214)  
“A little and a little makes for a lot in the pot.”

In the following Assamese proverb of India, the final word in each of the two lines \*rhymes, including the vowel length.

*Tirēē tirēē nōkōbi, tirēē nōhōy bhāāl,*  
*Tirēēr kothāāt mōrisē, rāwān ghōrer pāāl!*

“You can call a woman near you, you can even make her your own, but never tell her the truth.” (Das 2016:91)

Rhyme can also be done with more than one syllable, as seen in the following proverbs:

*Yālāmmānā, mǎnāmmānā.* Amharic, Ethiopia (Abera 2020, 450)  
“The one who begged grew thin.”

*S'bēhet vreshti me urata,*  
*po me shata e lopata.* ([https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albanian\\_proverbs](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albanian_proverbs))  
“The viney is not made with blessings, but with hoes and spades.”

In the following proverb, the vowel *i* appears four times at the end of each half:

*Ayalning ippiti*, Eastern Turki, China (Mahmut and Finley 2017, 319) :  
*ärning zinniti*.

“A woman’s chastity is a man’s reputation.”

Sometimes, to make a proverb rhyme, the poets who created them deliberately did something unusual. They may have changed the word order, they may have used a loan word, they may have used an archaic word, they may have omitted part of a word, etc.

In the following Neo-Aramaic proverb, the creator used two Turkish loan words at the end of the lines to create the rhyme:

*bēs pīre*, (Sabar 1978, 218, 222)

*ula bēs mīre*.

“Wife makes her husband successful, wife makes her husband a good-for-nothing.”

Thomas McCreesh understood that in making proverbs, people often value sound based art, even if the proverb does not follow all the rules of grammar. He said, “Sound patterns take precedence over rules of grammar” (McCreesh 1991, 40).

The following Amharic proverb has a rhyme at the end of each line. The second line ends with an incomplete verb, *alay*. To say “I have not seen”, normal grammar would add two more suffixes: *alayyāhum*. To make a proverb at the end of each line, the proverb creator omitted two suffixes, allowing the verb to rhyme with the first line. The result is a \*rhyme at the end of each line, but the proverb does not fit the grammar of the language.

*Lam allāny bäsāmay*, (Daniel Aberra 2019, 64)

*Wätätwan alay*.

“I have a cow in heaven, but I have not seen her milk.”

The following Samoan proverb is only three words. Each word begins with /a/ and ends with /i/. The proverb is not a grammatical sentence, not even a clause, but the art of the sounds is more important than the grammar.

*Aniui, Anini, Aveavai*.

“The town Anini was burning, and Aveavai said it served them right, for they were thieves; but the fire spread to Aveavai, and they, too, were burned out.” (Pratt 1893, 50)

## 4.5 \*Meter

Many proverbs are crafted to have a pleasing meter, a sense of rhythm. Many examples of this are based on having equal numbers of syllables in two couplets of a proverb. Here are examples of proverbs that have equal numbers of syllables in couplets:

**Table 4: Equal number of syllables per line**

Syllables per line	
4	<i>Yälämmänä mänämmänä</i> Amharic (Aberra 2020, 450) “The one who begged grew thin.”
10	<i>Ru:zata furu:shu ru:shnoi: khar,</i> Tajik (Bell 2009, 32) <i>Umrata furu:shu ju:shoi: khar.</i> “Sell a day and buy a light. Sell all your life and buy a milk cow.”
6	<i>Ma:na ketta me:le</i> Badaga, India (Hockings 1988, 47) <i>ma:le doddile:na.</i> “When her character is spoiled, what if her fame increases?”
6	<i>Abkay doolli dilow</i> Somali (Kapchits 2020, 36) <i>Dad nool maas u daahaa.</i> <sup>16</sup> “My father has killed a mouse, will he fail to kill a man?”

In languages, there may be a pattern that proverbs have one more syllable in one of the couplets. This is found in many Somali and Tajik proverbs, usually with the first couplet having one more syllable than the second couplet.

**Table 5: Different numbers of syllables per line**

7 first 6 second	<i>Aroos lagama raago</i> Somali (Kapchits 2020, 34) <i>lagumana raago.</i> “My father has killed a mouse, will he fail to kill a man?”
6 first 5 second	<i>Baqtiga ma cunee</i> Somali (Kapchits 2020, 42) <i>Fuudkiisaan cabbaa.</i> “I do not eat carrion, I drink the soup made of carrion.”
7 first 6 second	<i>To musofir nashavi,</i> Tajik (Bell 2009, 33) <i>musulmon nashavi.</i> “You won’t be a true Muslim until your travel.”

Some language communities have proverbs that are based on couplet structure, but they may not have many proverbs that have equal numbers of syllables in each half.

## 4.6 Tone

Languages that have tonal distinctions may use them in a way that produces an artistic effect in proverbs.

Jay Moon described an example of tonal art from the Builsa community of Ghana. In the following proverb, mid tone is unmarked, high tone is marked with an acute (rising) accent mark (e.g. *í*), and low tone is marked with a grave (falling) accent mark (e.g. *à*). This proverb has a repeating pattern of mid tones followed by high tones. “This creates a pleasing effect that sounds like a song, as the words *jíí* or *jííb* have elevated tones.”

<sup>16</sup> This proverb has four words that begin with *d-*. This is also a good example of alliteration.

*Popo jíib alaa jíi ngmàzuk jíib.* (Moon 2009, 184)  
(no translation given)

In the following example from Zhuang of China, except for the first syllable, the tones alternate between two tones, 2-3-2-3-2-3. This is done for artistic effect.

*It<sup>1</sup> gi<sup>2</sup> da<sup>3</sup> la<sup>2</sup> gou<sup>3</sup> gi<sup>2</sup> yieng<sup>3</sup>.* Zhuang, China (Yanxian 2017, 29)  
“Play the gong here and people hear it everywhere.”

In the following Zhuang proverb, both halves of the proverb have the same tonal pattern. The identical tones in each half of this proverb are an example of skilled, deliberate tonal art.

*It<sup>1</sup> bae<sup>2</sup> deŋ<sup>1</sup> yaeu<sup>3</sup>,*      Zhuang, China (Yanxian 2017, 28)  
*soŋ<sup>1</sup> bae<sup>2</sup> sim<sup>1</sup> roŋ<sup>3</sup>.*  
“Being cheated the first time you will be clever the second time.”

Understanding that many Zhuang syllable-final consonants indicate tones, we can understand the sound-based art in the following proverb better. The written form of the proverb in the book is *Monzmonz miz loh lohloh miz dou* (Yanxian 2017, 36), but when we read the proverb written without the tone consonants, the proverb is *Monmon mi lo lolo mi dou*. When we read it without the tone consonants, we see more clearly the repetition of the nasal consonants *m* and *n*, the repetition of *l*, and the repetition of the vowel *o*. But, if we look at only the tones of the syllables, marked by *z* and *h*, we again find a type of sound-based art: *z, z, z, h, h, h, z*. This proverb shows signs of deliberate artistic crafting, with vowels, consonants, and tones. But a reader can only understand this sound-based artistry if the spelling system is explained.

In the following Lamang proverbs of Nigeria, Wolff pointed out the “verbal art” using tones. All of the tones are high until the last two syllables. Wolff described this proverb as having a “tonal rhyme pattern” (Wolff 2012, 104)

*Sihá lá-hépoḍ té ghéŋ // Sihá lá-ghábárùkù.*  
HH H HH H H    HH H H LL  
“Some eat the beans, others pass the wind.” Lamang, Nigeria (Wolff 2012, 103,104)

*Másúlá ì tǎv ndǎrdǎ // Tálálǎj ì tǎv éwé.* (Wolff 2012, 104)

HHH L L (L) H // HHH L L (L) hno<sup>17</sup>

“(He has) weak buttocks, (but has a) big mouth.”

In the following Lahu proverb from China, Matisoff pointed out the tonal art in the following proverb. The last three syllables of each line have the same tonal pattern, *hi-mid-low*.

*Ĝâʔ-u há-pi thì,*

*nɔʔ-bâ á-thɔ thà.* Lahu, China (Matisoff 2011, 291)

“An egg smashing a rock; bean curd stopping a knife.”

This proverb is also an example of \*adynaton.

There is an Igbo proverb from Nigeria that was created with an awareness of tone. Some of the tones are marked in Igbo spelling:

*O nwere ihe di iche na ègbè na égbé.* (Ojiakor 2024, 169)

hawk gun

“There is a difference between hawk and gun.”

The words for “hawk” and “gun” differ only by tones.

Jan Vansina observed, “The tones of syllables are used as formal elements in the proverbs of the Luba of the Kasai”, a Bantu speaking group of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Vansina 196, 16).

## 4.7 \*Vowel length:

In many languages, the length of a vowel makes a difference in meaning. Since the vowel quality is the same for long and short vowels, poets<sup>18</sup> and other people who create proverbs sometimes ignore length differences in long and short vowels to create an artistic sound. In the following proverb, notice the length of the vowel *o* and *a* in the first two words.

*Ittonaa ittoona* Kafa Ethiopia (Wodajo 2012, 71)

*kechee kechiye wone.*

“Respect and stew comes out of house, it was said.”

Within each half of the couplet, notice that the sounds are very similar. The first two words differ by vowel length only: *ittonaa ittoona*. The first two words in the second half of the couplet also sound very similar: *kechee kechiye*. Clearly, this proverb was created by someone who was very aware of the similar sounds. It was clearly created with sound-based art.

## 4.8 Consonant length:

In many languages, the length of a consonant also makes a difference in meaning. In these languages, long consonants are actually longer in duration than short forms of the same consonant.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The use of parentheses around the letters indicating tone was not explained.

<sup>18</sup> All people who create proverbs have some awareness of the potential of how to choose words and grammar to sound beautiful.

<sup>19</sup> Speakers of the language may have a different word instead of “length”. For example, in Amharic people refer to consonant length as “tightening” a consonant.

In the following Alaaba example from Ethiopia, the first words of each half are very similar: *moguls* and *moogu*. The similarity of these two words shows an awareness of both vowel and consonant length.

*morgue rosso ?angati,*  
*moogu lenk'eekkitaa.* Alaaba (Schnieder-Blum 2009, 75)  
“The hand which has learned to steal will tremble in the grave.”

In the following example from Eastern Tangale (Nigeria), the dot under the vowels indicates a vowel quality related to Advance Tongue Root (ATR). In this example, it is not the basic vowel features (e.g. roundness, height, backness, nasality) that are shared, but a different feature, the position of the tongue root. Every vowel in this proverb is pronounced with the same tongue root position, this is an example of deliberate sound-based art.

*Sì menùldunò tìllìn!* Eastern Tangale, Nigeria (Jungraithmayr 2006, 75)  
“You should change into an ant-hill for me.”

One of the general principles of proverbs is that they are short. Some proverbs are extremely short. The following proverb from Samoa is just three proper nouns: the name of a place, the name of a person, the name of another place. All three words begin with the vowel <a> and all end with the vowel <i>.

*Aniui, Anini, Aveavai.* Samoa (Pratt 1893, 50)

“The town Anini was burning, and Aveavai said it served them right, for they were thieves; but the fire spread to Aveavai, and they, too, were burned out.”

#### 4.9 \*Feature rhyme:

Sometimes, people create poetically sounding proverbs with sounds that are very similar, but not totally the same. Phonologists speak of “feature rhyme” when sounds are very similar, differing in very few features, usually just one feature.<sup>20</sup> For example, there is an English proverb “A stitch in time saves nine.” An English proverb would be expected to use the number “ten”, but “nine” was chosen because it nearly rhymes with “time”. The final consonants are *-m* and *-n*, both nasal consonants. These two consonants are pronounced in different parts of the mouth, but they sound similar because they are both nasal consonants. This is an example of “feature rhyme”.

In the following Kashmiri proverb, the first and third words rhyme *Teli - yeli*. Then the second and fourth words nearly rhyme *tooš - noš*.

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<sup>20</sup> “Feature rhyme” is a term used by linguists. However, literary scholars use other terms for incomplete rhyme, such as “slant rhyme”.

*Teli tooš yeli nōš gari vaati.*

“Be glad only when the bride reaches home.” Kashmiri (Koul 2006, 67)

The vowel in the fourth word *nōš* is pronounced slightly lower in the mouth than the vowel in *tooš*. (The vowel in *nōš* is the vowel in the English words “moss” and “bought”). The vowels in *tooš* and *nōš* are very similar, so that they are similar enough that they are recognized as artistic. Similarly, the vowels in the last two words are poetic. The first vowels in the words *gari vaati* are the same and the second vowels are nearly the same, a case of feature rhyme.<sup>21</sup>

The next example is from Chewa of Zambia. In Chewa, there is a standard *k* sound. But there is also an aspirated *k*, pronounced with a puff of air. Both sounds are pronounced at the same point of articulation. The difference between these two makes a change in meaning. The aspirated *k* is spelled with a following *h*. The proverb uses both *k* and *kh*,

*Kukhala kokomo kulinda kukhala kuipa.* (van Kessel 2015, 76)

“When everything goes well, you are waiting for things to turn bad.”

Every word in the proverb begins with *ku-* and every word ends with *-a*. This proverb was clearly crafted with sound-based art.

In the following example from Fõn of Cameroon, there is a sequence of three short words that begin with similar consonants. The first two begin with an implosive *d*, the third begins with a modal ingressive *d* (as pronounced in English), all underlined (Dogbeh 2000, 98). Note the alliterative sequence of *d*-type consonants: *dà dě dǒ*.

*E dɔ̃ hwe ténú émi lɛ ká ná wá dà dě dǒ, b ɔ̃ yovo ɔ̃ ká ná wá jé é ji.*

“She asks, ‘When will I produce palm wine myself and sell it to Europeans?’”

Here is a Kaonde proverb that shows alliteration using feature rhyme. Five words begins with *ba-*, a syllable not merely a consonant. One word begins with *pa-*, the consonant sound that is pronounced with both lips briefly closed, the same as *b-*, an example of feature rhyme. It is clear that this Kaonde proverb was created with a high value of alliteration.

*Baja bantu bajila, pakuba baja nwená, baseka.*

“Those who eat people cry, those who eat a crocodile laugh.” Kaonde, Zambia (Ganly 1987, 4)

In the following example from Eastern Tangale (Nigeria), the dot under the vowels indicates a vowel quality related to Advance Tongue Root (ATR). In this example, it is not the usual vowel features (e.g. roundness, height, backness, nasality) that are shared, but a different feature, the position of the tongue root.

*Sì mənũdunò tĩlĩn.* Eastern Tangale, Nigeria (Jungraithmayr 2006, 75)

“You should change into an ant-hill for me.”

#### 4.10 \*Idiophones in proverbs

In most languages of Africa, and also in other parts of the world, idiophones are words that convey meaning, often with an imitation of sound to express an action or a manner of doing.

*Asẹ̀ Ọ̀yọ̀ kì í ró ‘gbà’, àfi ‘múwá’.* Yoruba

“Ọ̀yọ̀’*s* sieve never sounds ‘gbà!’ only sounds ‘múwá’.”

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<sup>21</sup> This analysis of the vowel qualities in this proverb ignores vowel length.

“The two word-plays in the proverb are based on the sound made by the crashing of one thing against another, the sound ‘*gbà!*’. In speech, the word means ‘tale’... The other sound, ‘*múwá*’, imitates the sound of materials being swished around in a sieve” (Owomoyela 2005, 143,144).

*Zəmm bala af*, Amharic

*zəmb ayyəgäbabbätəm*. (Daniel Aberra 2016, 241)

“The mouth that is silent [closed], no fly enters into it.”

In the Amharic proverb, the first word is *zəmm*. The word is an idiophone, not a formal word. It is used to mean “silence” or “inaction”.

*Bandu bandu huisha gogo* Kiswahili

“Chip! Chip! Finishes the log.” (<https://swahiliproverbs.afrst.illinois.edu/constancy.html>)

The Swahili proverb begins with repetition of an idiophone, “*bandu bandu*”. The proverb can be used to mean that a large task can be accomplished by repeated small actions.

*Mememe tezaaza mwojo*. Runyankole, Uganda

“Pampering doesn't produce a son.” (Jonah 2020, 23)

The Runyankole proverb begins with an idiophone, *Mememe* carrying the idea of pampering.

#### 4.11 \*Multiple features

The examples of \*alliteration and \*assonance you have just read show that many proverbs have been crafted with great poetic skill. The people who created them were very aware of the sounds in the proverbs. The proverbs in this section show proverbs that are made with more than one kind of art.

In the following two Balant proverbs from Senegal, each one has alliteration of two consonants in order and vowel assonance:

*bihú bihab* “Beat to death” (Mansaly 2018, 87)

*fdan foda* “Only a big one” (Mansaly 2018, 90)

When a proverb includes multiple types of sound-based art, then the beauty of it is greater. Note the multiple similarities of the first word in each of the two lines of this Alaaba proverb from Ethiopia:

*Woogarreeti minéeni*,

*wongéeti sifáa*. (Schneider-Blum 2009, 92)

“In the house of peace, [even] cabbage is satisfying.” (cf. Bible, Proverbs 17:1)

Some proverbs are formed with words that sound very similar. That is, these proverbs do not have just alliteration or assonance or rhyme, but the total words sound very similar. In the following example, the first word and the last word have the same vowels and consonants, but the consonants are in a different order.

*kəfun əskä kənfu*. Amharic, Ethiopia (Daniel Aberra 2020, 416)

“Destroy evil one to his extreme edge.”

In the following example, note the repetition of words, the rhyming of the final two syllables at the end of each line, and the matching number of syllables in each line.

*Zir tir sorkh berra,*  
*zir zoun sorkh nerra.* Lur, Iran (Freidl 2015, 243)  
“Walk under a hot bullet but not under a hot tongue.”

The following Vietnamese proverb is only three words, but artistically composed. The vowels are marked for tones, though the tones are not part of the sound based art.

*Tham thì thâm.* (Nguyễn Ngọc Vũ 2011, 5)  
“Greed is the root of all evil.”

The following Yorùbá proverb repeats the sequence *agba* four times, with tonal differences. Maybe this proverb also a tongue-twister.

*Àgbàlagbà kì í se lágba-làgba.* Yorùbá (Owomoyela 2005, 51)  
*Àgbàlagbà* (elders) and *làgba-làgba* (unbecoming).  
“An elder should not behave in an unbecoming manner.”

#### 4.11.1 Research projects:

One way to analyze proverbs is to study their sound-based art. First, you will study individual proverbs, analyzing their sound-based art. Then you can categorize the examples that have sound-based art. You may also need to create new categories. Then examine your categories to see which are found most often. This will show which techniques are used more commonly in the language you are studying. For example, is alliteration used in more proverbs than rhyme?

There are many possible ways to study sound-based art. If you find many different kinds of sound-based art in your proverb collection, analyzing and describing these examples may be enough for a dissertation or a thesis. But you may not find enough examples of sound-based art for a full dissertation or thesis. Describing the different kinds of sound-based art in your proverb collection may be an important part of a dissertation or thesis. For a journal article or a chapter for a book, describing some features of sound-based art in proverbs will be appropriate.

Here are some more detailed instructions for studying sound-based art in proverbs. First of all, you will need to study your collection of proverbs carefully. You may know many proverbs, but now you need to study them carefully, thinking about them in new ways. To study your proverb collection for sound-based art, it is helpful to use a chart. Here is a sample chart, but you will change it to be appropriate for the kinds of sound-based art that is common in your proverb collection. Go through your proverb list, looking for examples of sound-based art. When you find a proverb with sound-based art, write the proverb’s number in the left column. Then mark the column for the type of sound-based art. Some proverbs will have more than one kind of sound-based art.

**Table 6: Sample table for studying sound-based art**

Proverb number	alliteration	assonance	rhyme	meter	feature rhyme	other?	

After you have searched your proverb collection for examples of sound-based art, look at the chart where you have marked the examples of sound-based art. Which column has the most examples? Which column of the chart has the least examples?

When you describe the results of your study of sound-based art, please describe your methods. Other scholars will learn from your methods.

## 5 Grammatical patterns and verbal art

Proverbs are formed in a wide variety of grammatical patterns. The grammatical patterns are often part of an artistic effect of the proverb. Different language communities use some patterns more frequently than others. For example, many Mongolian proverbs are formed with parallelisms. You will find more useful ideas about studying grammatical structures of proverbs in two works by Marcas Mac Coinnigh.

Mac Coinnigh, Marcas. 2012. "Syntactic structures in Irish-language proverbs." *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 29, no. 1, 95-136.

Mac Coinnigh, Marcas. 2015. "Structural aspects of proverbs." *Introduction to paremiology: A comprehensive guide to proverb studies*, edited by Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita Aleksa Varga, 112-132.

### 5.1 Imperatives

Many proverbs use imperative verbs, verbs that tell people to do something or not do something. Imperative verbs are a very old form of proverb, found in Sumerian, the Qur'an, and the Bible.

Sumerian: "Do not buy an ox during harvest time." (Alster 1975, 34)

Hebrew (Biblical):

Negative: "Say not thou, I will recompense evil; but wait on the Lord, and he shall save thee." (Proverbs 20:22)

Positive: "Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply thine heart unto my knowledge." (Proverbs 22:17)

Qur'anic Arabic: "Eat and drink, and do not be extravagant." (*Al-'Aaraf* 7:31) This imperative has two positive clauses and one negative clause.

Proverbs are frequently used to give advice indirectly, e.g. the Spanish proverb, "Flies can't enter a closed mouth." This proverb is not a grammatical imperative, but it is used to command people to be cautious in speaking.<sup>22</sup> It does not have an imperative verb, but it is used to tell people to do something.

Here is an English example of a proverb that does not have an imperative verb, "Actions speak louder than words." It gives advice indirectly. It does not say, "Take action" or "Don't just talk, do something," but it is an indirect command to do so.

In all languages that have proverbs, there are some proverbs that are formed with imperative verbs. These proverbs give commands directly, such as the English imperative proverbs, "Look before you leap" and "Keep your eye on the ball."

This chapter is only about proverbs that have imperative verb forms (Novaković and Tomić 2017). That is, they have verbs that are marked linguistically as imperatives. Many writers have written about how proverbs are often indirect. That is, many proverbs give strong advice and

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<sup>22</sup> This proverb is found in many languages around the Mediterranean Sea. It was an ancient Sumerian proverb "Into an open mouth a fly will enter" (Pfeiffer 1958, 245).

commands, even if the proverbs are not formed with imperative verbs. But this chapter is about proverbs that use imperative verb forms.

When speakers use a proverb in a situational context, they may use the imperative proverb in a form that is different from the citation form. For example, the citation of a proverb may be addressed to a singular listener, but a speaker may use the plural form when speaking a proverb to more than one person. For example, the standard form of the following Amharic proverb has an imperative verb (the final word in the sentence) marked for second person, masculine, singular:

*Yäbasä allä, hagərhan attəlqäq.*

Worse exist your-country don't-abandon

“There are worse ones, don't abandon your country.” (Daniel Abera 2019, 491)

If the speaker uses this imperative proverb when speaking to a woman, the speaker can change the citation form of the proverb to indicate second person, feminine, singular, and the last word is changed to *attəlqäqi*.

If the speaker uses this imperative proverb when speaking to a group, the speaker can change the citation form of the proverb to indicate second person, *plural*, and the last word is changed to *attəlqäqu*.

If the speaker uses this proverb when speaking to a person in the polite form, the speaker can change the citation form of the proverb to indicate the *polite* form, and the last word is changed to *ayəlqäqu*.

Proverbs that direct a listener to do something (or not do something) may have an imperative verb. Or they can be “\*deontic”, expressing duty or obligation, without having an imperative verb. A “deontic” proverb may occur in the indicative form, expressing a norm, ideal, permission etc. This function may be indicated by ordinary deontic clues, such as “does not”, “must”, “may”, “must not”, or some other lexical means. This is seen in the following Bemba proverb from Zambia, “One does not despise the old skin.” The English explanation for this proverb uses an imperative verb, “Do not despise old people, they are precious, do not underestimate them” (Carey and FENZA 2021, 28).

Studying Estonian proverbs, Arvo Krikmann concluded a proverb directing the hearer to do something “is mostly formulated as an imperative sentence directed to a concrete addressee, the impersonal ‘you’, occurring rather often in Estonian proverbs and especially frequently in Russian ones” (1998, 4).

In a collection of over 1,400 English proverbs created since 1900 (Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012), Mieder counted “98 (6.9%) proverbs that state their message in the form of an imperative, not a particularly high number to be sure.” Referring to the fact that all of the proverbs in the collection were recently created proverbs, he went on to speculate, “Perhaps this is due the fact that people today are less willing to be told directly what to do or not to do. In other words, the obvious didactic nature of many traditional proverbs appears to be on the decline” among English speakers (Mieder 2012, 147).

In a study of 273 Mongolian proverbs systematically selected<sup>23</sup> from a collection of 1,419 proverbs (Raymond 2010), I classified 41 of them as imperatives. That gives a score of 15% of these Mongolian proverbs being imperatives.

The percentage of imperative proverbs in the collection of English proverbs and the collection of Mongolian proverbs is very different. A comparison of these two studies shows that the Mongolian proverb collection has twice as many imperative proverbs as the English proverb collection. This kind of counting of imperative verbs allows comparison across languages. It would be interesting to know percentages from the Estonian and Russian data that Krikmann mentioned (1998, 4).

It is also helpful and insightful to examine what grammatical forms are used in imperative proverbs. In many languages, the most common imperatives are in the grammatical second person, addressed to the hearer/reader. That is, the proverb is said to a listener, telling the person to do something, or not do something.

Here are examples of 2<sup>nd</sup> person imperative proverbs in English:

“Always drink upstream from the herd.”

“Don’t count your chick before they’re hatched.”

These proverbs are spoken to listeners. In grammar, this is known as 2<sup>nd</sup> person. In most language communities, 2<sup>nd</sup> person proverbs are spoken to one person. In many languages, proverbs are grammatically marked to show that they are spoken to a singular person. In a few languages, the standard form of some proverbs are spoken to more than one person. This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural. In English, imperative verbs do not show a difference for 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular and plural.

Below are two imperative English proverbs, both are positive, they tell a person to do something.

Positive:

“Keep your eye on the ball.”

“Keep your mouth shut and your eyes open.”

Some imperative proverbs are negative, telling a person to *not* do something. Negative imperatives are also called “prohibitives.”

Negative:

“Don’t count your chickens before they are hatched.”

“Don’t shoot the messenger.”

In ancient Sumerian proverbs, imperative clauses were usually negative, positive imperative proverbs were “rare” (Alster 1975, 42). Here are two Sumerian imperative proverbs, both negative:

“When you are drunk, don’t judge.” (Alster 1975, 39)

“Do not buy an ox during harvest time.” (Alster 1975, 34)

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<sup>23</sup> The sample was based on the first proverb on each of the 273 pages in a published collection of Mongolian proverbs (Raymond 2010). The analysis as to whether each proverb was imperative was totally dependent on the English translations in the book.

### 5.1.1 Research projects

To do any research with imperative proverbs, begin by sorting out the imperative proverbs in your collection. Then, count them. How many of your proverbs are formed with imperative verbs? Then, calculate the percentage of imperative proverbs in your collection.

You can sort the imperative proverbs into categories with a table. Some researchers will make a spread sheet and enter many pieces of information about the imperative proverbs. Some will make a table using a word processor. Other scholars will make simple paper tables to enter some points of data.

To study these patterns, it may be useful to chart the patterns using a table like Table 7:

**Table 7 Counting person and number for imperative proverbs**

	Positive	Negative
First person singular		
First person plural		
Second person singular (masculine)		
Second person singular (feminine) <sup>24</sup>		
Second person plural		
Third person singular		
Third person plural		

In the boxes of the table, write the identity numbers of proverbs from your collection that you are analyzing in that row. When you have done this, you will see which categories are the most important.

The Amharic language of Ethiopia can mark imperative verbs for gender in the singular, or it can mark imperative verbs for plural, or it can mark imperative verbs for politeness. The great majority (maybe all?) of Amharic imperative proverbs are formed for speaking to a singular, masculine person. What person and number is most common in your collection?

After you have filled in this table, it will show how many of the imperative proverbs are positive and how many are negative. It is possible that some proverbs have both a positive imperative verb and a negative imperative verb. There has been no study of proverbs with this pattern. Here are two examples of proverbs with both a positive imperative verb and a negative imperative verb. In the first example, the negative imperative is first, followed by the positive imperative. In the second, the positive verb is first, followed by the negative verb:

Yiddish: “Don’t ask the doctor, ask the patient.” (Silverman-Weinreich 1994, 74)

Hebrew: “Buy the truth, and do not sell it not.” (Bible, NASB, Proverbs 23:23)

Working with students, I calculated the percentage of imperative proverbs in seven languages from different parts of the world. The following table shows the variety of percentages of imperative proverbs in these languages.

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<sup>24</sup> Dividing 2nd person imperative proverbs as marked for masculine or feminine is not relevant in many languages.

**Table 8 Comparative results: percentage of imperative proverbs, positive and negative**

Language	Total Proverbs	Percentage imperatives	Positive imperatives	Negative imperatives	Percentage positive/negative
Russian (Mertvago 1995)	1,000	16%	94	70	9% / 7%
Mongolian (Raymond 2010)	273	15%			
Hebrew (Biblical) <sup>25</sup>	546	14%	37	38	7% / 7%
Zhuang (Yangxian2017)	216	13%	25	3	12% / 1%
Marathi (Manwaring 1899)	1,190	11%	112	17	6% / 1%
Vai (Ellis 1914)	114	7%	5	3	4% / 3%
Bemba (Carey & FENZA 2021)	300	7%	15	5	5% / 2%
English (Mieder 2012, 147)	>1400	6.9%			
Nubian (Habbob 2022 )	121	5%	3	3	2% / 2%

The percentage of imperative proverbs in Table 8 ranged from 16% (Russian) of the collection to 5% (Nubian).

The ratio of positive imperative proverbs to negative imperative proverbs varies greatly. The ratio of positive and negative imperative proverbs from Hebrew is almost equal, 37:38. The ratio of positive and negative imperative proverbs from the Marathi proverb collection has many more positive imperatives than negative imperatives 112:17.

In many languages, there are proverbs with two imperative clauses. Here are examples from Marathi of India:

Both clauses are positive: “Cover up the corpse, attend first to the sowing.” (Manwaring 1899, 12)  
 Positive and negative clause: “Give from your own pocket but do not be security for another.” (Manwaring 1899, 78)

From a total of 1,910 Marathi proverbs, 144 contained imperative clauses.<sup>26</sup> Of these 144 proverbs, 72 had one imperative clause: 66 had one positive imperative clause and 16 had one negative imperative clause. This showed a clear majority of positive imperative clauses. Of the 144

<sup>25</sup> I am grateful to Dr. JoAnna Hoyt for her help with Hebrew imperatives. She is not responsible for any errors of interpretation.

<sup>26</sup> I have used the analysis of Marathi proverbs done by Ms. Teresa Harwood, a student from my Oral Traditions course.

imperative proverbs, 62 had two imperative clauses: 46 had two positive clauses, 1 had two negative clauses, 14 had a positive clause followed by a negative clause, and 1 had a negative imperative clause followed by a positive clause.

In the Marathi data, there is a clear majority of positive imperative clauses, both in single clause proverbs and in two clause proverbs.

In some languages, the category of imperative is also used for the grammatical first person and third person.<sup>27</sup> It is often difficult to translate them into usual patterns of English grammar. Here are examples to show the grammatical pattern. In your language it may be much easier or smoother grammar to say these.

**Table 9. Samples of person and number in imperative proverbs**

First person singular	“Let me be a good friend to friends who were good to me.”
First person plural	“Let us be good friends to friends who were good to us.”
Second person singular	“Be a good friend to friends who have been good to you.”
Second person plural	“Be a good friend to friends who have been good to you (pl).”
Third person singular	“Let him be a good friend to friends who were good to him.”
Third person plural	“Let them be good friends to friends who were good to them.”

These can also be formed as negative commands, such as, “Let me *not* be a bad friend to people who were good to me”, “Let us *not* be a bad friend to people who were good to us”, “Do *not* be a bad friend to people who were good to you”, etc.

Some imperative proverbs have more than one imperative clause. This is illustrated in the following proverb of Konkani, India. “Don’t tell a secret to a woman, don’t tell lies to the king, and don’t go against the wishes of the majority” (Chavan 1995, 59). In this example, all three imperative verbs are negative.

If you study the imperative proverbs in your collection, make a table and count which grammatical forms are most common in your proverb collection. The following table shows a simple way to chart the information on imperative proverbs. You can adapt this table to fit the language you are studying.

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<sup>27</sup> Some linguists use the technical term “jussive” instead of “imperative” for 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person forms.

**Table 10. Table to show person and number and positive/negative polarity**

	singular		plural	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
First person				
Second person				
Third person				
Totals				

Are the imperative proverbs in your collection marked as addressed to one person or plural? If they are marked for gender, are they addressed to male or female? Is there a way that imperative verbs can be marked to show politeness? Your language may have some grammatical patterns that require that you modify this table. For example, your language may not mark the differences between singular and plural, or it may have an additional polite form, or there may be different forms to show gender, etc. Modify this table so that it is useful for your language.

How many of the imperative proverbs are positive? How many are negative? Do some proverbs have more than one imperative verb? Do some proverbs have both a positive imperative verb and also a negative imperative verb?

The Amharic language of Ethiopia can mark imperative verbs for gender in the singular, or it can mark imperative verbs for plural, or it can mark imperative verbs for politeness. I have not found any Amharic proverbs that have the citation form marked to indicate politeness. As you study the proverbs in your collection, does your data include imperative proverbs where the citation form is grammatically a polite form?

Are there changes in the way that imperative proverbs are formed now, compared with the past? Maybe imperative proverbs were traditionally addressed to singular males or used the polite forms, but are these patterns changing? Maybe in the past, imperative verbs were addressed to one person, but now do people use the plural form for imperatives? If you want to study changes in proverbs from the past, discuss these questions with older people. Ask if grammar of the citation forms of proverbs are different now. Also, it is very helpful if you can find old collections or articles about proverbs from your community. You can compare the old proverb forms with the way people say proverbs now.

After you have filled out this table about imperative proverbs, you will see what the patterns are in the imperative proverbs of your language. Are there clear patterns? Which forms are most common in your language?

You can do a research project comparing the proportion of imperative proverbs in different languages. A method for charting your data is shown above in Table 10.

Proverbs containing an imperative clause may contain a reason, a motivation for doing (or not doing) the action. For example, there is an Amharic proverb that says: “[Because] There are worse ones, don’t abandon your country” (Daniel Aberra 2019, 491). In this case, the reason for the imperative is given first, then the imperative verb. In other languages, the imperative verb may come before the reason. In your data, does the imperative verb come before the reason? Or does the reason come before the imperative verb? Or does your data contain both? If it has both, how many have the reason first and how many have the reason following the imperative verb?

If proverbs with such constructions are found, note whether the reason is given before or after the imperative verb. For example, is the most common sequence Reason-Imperative as in the following Amharic example: “[Because] there are worse ones, don’t abandon your country”? Or, is the most common pattern Imperative-Reason, as in “Don’t abandon your country, [because] there are worse ones.” To study imperative proverbs and reason clauses, you can make a simple table. Examine the imperative proverbs in your collection and classify each one using a table like this, adding as many rows as needed to write the identity number of each proverb that contains the proverb pattern you are studying.

**Table 11. Reason clauses and negative polarity in imperative proverbs  
sample data from English imperative proverbs**

Identity number of proverb	Reason clause before imperative		Reason clause after imperative	
	Positive imperative	Negative imperative	Positive imperative	Negative imperative
Totals	32	5	0	4

There will be other kinds of subordinate clauses in imperative proverbs, also. For example, there may be conditional clauses, like the following English examples with *if*:

“*If* you can’t run with the big dogs, stay on the porch.”

“*If* at first you don’t succeed, try, try, again.”

“*If* you can’t beat them, join them.”

Of the 1,500 American proverbs in Mieder’s collection (2021), there are 32 proverbs with conditional *if* clauses with a positive imperative verb. All 32 have the conditional clauses before the imperative verb. The collection contains nine proverbs with “if” and a negative imperative. In proverbs where the imperative verb is negative, four had the imperative verb before the *if* clause, e.g. “Don’t do the crime if you can’t do the [jail] time.” The other five *if* clauses with negative imperative verbs had the *if* clause after the imperative clause, e.g. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” This simple study of the clause order in English proverbs with a conditional clause and an imperative verb shows a clear difference in the order for positive and negative imperative clauses.

I studied Mieder’s collection of 1,500 American proverbs (2021) and found seven proverbs that use “before” with an imperative clause, e.g. “Fix the roof before it rains.” All seven of these proverbs have the imperative verb ahead of the “before” clause.

Table 11 is the first documentation that there is a difference in the order of the clauses in English imperative proverbs with *if* clauses. It shows that the order of the clauses differs based on whether the imperative verb is positive or negative. If you are studying imperative clauses for a thesis or dissertation, you could collect all of the imperative proverbs that have conditional clauses and study the word order patterns. You can list all of the imperative proverbs that include conditional clauses together, sorting them by the order of the clauses.

**Table 12: Reason clauses and clause order in imperative proverbs  
sample data from English imperative proverbs**

Reason clause before imperative	Reason clause after imperative
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Positive imperative	Negative imperative	Positive imperative	Negative imperative
32	5	0	4

Studies of proverbs with imperative verbs and various types of dependent clauses can be done with the same type of chart, such as “when”, “even though”, “after”, “while”, etc.

A study of imperative proverbs may not be a big enough topic for a thesis or dissertation, but it can be a chapter. Also, this topic could probably be enough for a journal article or a book chapter.

## 5.2 Quotation Proverbs: wellerisms, dialogue proverbs, and question & answer proverbs

For many years, proverb scholars have studied proverbs that contain quotations. Quotation proverbs are an ancient form of proverb. They are found as far back as ancient Sumerian and the Bible:

- Sumerian “The fox urinated into the Tigris: ‘I am causing the high tide to rise!’ [he said].” (Alster 1975, 212)
- Bible: “The sluggard [lazy person] says, ‘There is a lion outside! I shall be slain in the streets!’” (Proverbs 22:13)

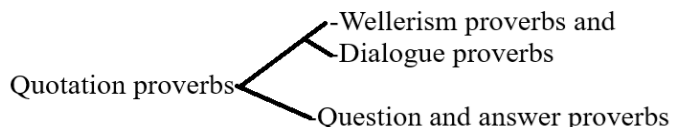
This chapter on quotation proverbs contains three kinds of proverbs with quotations. These are all in the category that I call “quotation proverbs”. The label “quotation proverbs” has been used by previous authors, but without agreement or precision. Here, I explain what types of proverbs are included in my category “quotation proverbs”.

I use the term “quotation proverbs” to include three narrower categories of proverbs:

- proverbs that contain a quotation and identify the speaker, called wellerism proverbs
- proverbs that contain at least two quotations and identify at least one of the speakers, called \*dialogue proverbs
- proverbs that contain a question and an answer but do not identify a speaker, which I call question and answer proverbs

This three-part definition of “quotation proverbs” is new. Many writers have written about the first categories, fewer have written about the second category. Marvin clearly labeled a set of proverbs “question and answer proverbs” (Marvin 1916, 332-342). However, under this label, his list included both dialogue proverbs and questions and answer proverbs.

Very few scholars have used the label “quotation proverbs”. This book groups wellerism proverbs and dialogue proverbs together, then classifies them with question and answer proverbs. As scholars study quotation proverbs in more languages, this classification may be changed.



**Figure 2: Relationships of types of quotation proverbs**

In many languages, there are proverbs that contain a quotation and a speaker. The most common form of these proverbs contain one quotation and a specific speaker, as seen in the following example.

Tiv (Nigeria): “The bat says that there is no difference between standing upside down and upright.” (Pachocinski 1996, 305)

Proverbs that contain one quotation and a named speaker are called “wellerism proverbs”, or simply “wellerisms”.<sup>28</sup> I will use the abbreviation WP for “wellerism proverb”. The following are wellerism proverbs:

WP (Kru, Liberia): “Squirrel says, ‘The dry season cannot have an end.’” (Herskovits and Tagbwe 1930, 234)

WP (Joola, Senegal): “The hyena says she does not know what is inside.” (Diatta and Thomas 1998, 310)

WP (Akan, Ghana): “A woman who loves her husband always says, ‘My love, I look up to you.’” (Mariwah 2009, 11)

Proverbs with two speakers and quotations are called “dialogue proverbs”. I will use the abbreviation DP for “dialogue proverbs”. In dialogue proverbs, at least one of the speakers is identified. Sometimes, the speaker is identified by being spoken to in the first quotation. The following are examples of dialogue proverbs.

DP in Pashto (Pakistan and Afghanistan): “Someone asked a camel, ‘Is ascending better than descending?’ He replied, ‘May both be cursed.’” (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006)

DP in Ibibio, Nigeria: “The piglet asked the mother, ‘Why dig the ground?’ The mother replied, ‘You will know when you have grown up.’” (Udosen, Ekah, Offong 2017, 72)

DP Slovenian: “‘They save money in this country,’ said the water. ‘I haven’t noticed,’ said whiskey.”<sup>29</sup> (Meterc 2024, 124)

In some languages, there are proverbs that are only a question and an answer, but without naming a speaker, as in this example from Nubian. For these question and answer proverbs, I will use the abbreviation Q&A.

Q&A Nubian (Egypt): “‘What did the blind find?’ ‘A basket of eyes.’” (Habbob 2022, 130)

Q&A Hebrew: “‘Who is rich?’ ‘He who is content with what he has.’” (Marvin 1916, 269)

Q&A Abagusii (Kenya): “‘Has the cow some milk?’ ‘Ask Okioi.’” (Okemwa 2012)

Q&A Nubian (Mattokki, Sudan): “‘Who said it? They just said it.’” (Jaeger 2025, 485)

In this book, Q&A proverbs will not be categorized as dialogue proverbs, but will be classified within the category of quotation proverbs along with WP’s and DP’s. I have found no publications that have examined this problem of classifying Q&A proverbs.

In examining the English translation of some proverbs, some have explicit markers that set off specific words as having been spoken, such as “said”. For example, the following proverb from of Togo contains a direct quotation, “Toad said, ‘[I am] King’” (Malaisse *et al.* 2021, 223). Other proverbs are marked in English translations as indirect speech. That is, they use a subordinate

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<sup>28</sup> The name “wellerism” is based on a character named Samuel Weller in a novel by Charles Dickens (1836). Samuel Weller said many things that had this type of grammatical construction.

<sup>29</sup> I take responsibility for the translation, with help from Google Translate.

conjunction, such as “that” and may change the grammatical person. The grammar can be changed so that the proverb can contain the same message, with an indirect quotation, “Toad said that he is King.” Some languages do not have a distinction between these two kinds of quotations. Therefore, the English translation of some proverbs may not show clearly if a proverb has a direct quotation or not. It is not clear how this affects the matter of whether to classify a proverbs as a WP or not.

### 5.3 WP’s wellerism proverbs

Proverb scholars have studied WP’s as a class for at least 150 years (Archer Taylor 1962, 201, 202 and references there). A wellerism is normally made up of three parts:

- a quotation (this may be a question, statement, or an imperative)
- a speaker who says it
- often a phrase that makes the situation quite unexpected or odd (Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Varga 2014, 362,363; see also Mieder 2004, 15)

Here are some examples of WP’s from different parts of the world:

Armenian: “The ass which fell into a grain shed said, ‘It is better here than in our stable.’” (Bayan 1889, 23).

Ganda/Kooki (Uganda) “When a monkey can’t reach the ripe bananas with his hands, he says ‘They are not ripe.’”

Malay: “‘Where there are no eagles’, the grasshopper says, ‘I am an eagle.’” (Lim 2003, 125)

Farsi (Iran): “He could not reach the grape, so he said, ‘It is still not ripe [it is sour]’” (Zekaria 2015, 295)

Bemba (Zambia): “The one who does not hold him (the one who just watches the fight) says: ‘Just throw him down and let’s go.’” (Casey and FENZA 2021, 32)

Latin: “‘You are black!’ as the cauldron said to the pot.” (Paczolay 1997, 318).

Some languages have many WP’s, some have only a few, and some have no WP’s. WP’s are very common in some languages. For example, in the Alaaba language of Ethiopia, from a collection of 418 proverbs about 10% of the proverbs are quotation proverbs (Schneider-Blum 2009, Unseth 2013, 460). In a collection of 356 Nuer proverbs from South Sudan, 10% of them are WP’s (Carlassare 2013).

However, some language communities that have WP’s, have only a very few WP’s. For example, in a collection of over 1,900 recent English proverbs (Doyle, Mieder, Shapiro 2012), there is only one wellerism proverb. Many language have no wellerism proverbs

Some proverbs contain quotations, they are not part of this class of “quotation proverbs”. For example, if the speaker and the quotation are in a subordinate clause, it is not in my category of “quotation proverbs”. For example, the first Kasena proverb below is a WP. But the three variants below it (2-5) are not WP’s. In 2-4, the chameleon’s quotation are not the subject of the main clause. In (5), the chameleon does *not* say something. In (6), the speaker is not identified, the verb of the main clause is in the imperative mood the verb so it is not a WP. Also, there is no named speaker, so I do not call it a WP. I do not know of any scholar writing about WP’s with imperative clause.

Kasena (Ghana):

1. “The chameleon says, ‘When on a tree, assume the color of its leaf’” (Awedoba 2000, 47)

2. “If the chameleon says, ‘When on a tree, assume the color of its leaf,’ it is wise.”
3. “Because the chameleon says, ‘When on a tree, assume the color of its leaf,’ it is wise.”
4. “After the chameleon did not say, ‘When on a tree, assume the color of its leaf,’ it was killed.”
5. “The chameleon does not say, ‘When on a tree, assume the color of its leaf’”
6. “Tell the chameleon, ‘When on a tree, assume the color of its leaf.’”

In a WP, the verb of speaking is not negated. For example, “The chameleon does not say, ‘When on a tree, assume the color of its leaf.’” This is not a WP because the verb of speaking is negated.

In WP’s there is identification of the speaker. If a proverb is simply the words that were said, but the speaker is not mentioned, then this is not a WP. For example, “I lift my head to drink so I can watch for rain” is not a WP. However, people often shorten a proverb when they speak. If people agree that the full form of this proverb is, “The chicken says, ‘I lift my head to drink so I can watch for rain’”, then this is a WP.

In WP’s, the identity of the speaker is specific and it is generally consistent when people quote the proverb. When people use proverbs, they may introduce the proverb with a phrase such as, “The elders say...” or “They say...” (Yankah 1999, 206). These phrases are used to introduce proverbs, but they are not naturally part of the standard full form of the proverbs. The use of such a phrase does not mean a proverb is a WP. If we hear or read, “The elders say, ‘Death dwells among people’, we need to know if “The elders say” is always part of the proverb. The proverb may normally be, “Death dwells among people”. If “The elders say” is not part of the proverb, then it is not a WP.

In a WP, the grammatical subject of the verb of saying is the speaker. Therefore, the following Arabic example is not a WP: “‘He fled, disgrace is upon him!’ is better than ‘He was slain, God have mercy upon him!’” This was included in the section of Marvin’s book, labeled “Quotation Proverbs”; it contains two quotations, but it is neither a WP nor a DP because there is no named speaker (Marvin 1916, 353).

I have begun studying what parts of the world have WP’s. WP’s are found in very many languages of Africa (Unseth et al. 2017).<sup>30</sup> WP’s are also found in many languages of Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus region, southern Asia, and the Caribbean islands. But my research has not found WP’s in languages of China or Mainland South East Asia.

Ma Changshan, a Chinese proverb scholar, heard about WP’s as he had contact with proverb scholars from Europe and Africa. Because there are no WP’s in languages of China, he said that this kind of proverb is “a concept new to me” (2016, i).

In WP’s, animals are often the most common speakers.

### 5.3.1 Animals:

(Lu)Ganda (Luganda) (Uganda): “‘I’ll die for a big thing,’ says the biting ant on the big toe.”  
(Finnegan 1970, 401)

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<sup>30</sup> My impression is that within Africa, the southern areas (approximately from Zambia to the south) do not have many wellerism proverbs, but language communities further north have many more. This is a topic that needs study.

Guji Oromo (Ethiopia): “‘What is our sin?’ said a dog after giving birth to nine blind puppies.” (Jirata 2009, 80 and Jaleta 2004, 85)

Lhomwe (Malawi): “The tortoise said there were two countries when referring to the other side of the anthill.” (Kapyepye 2021, 28)

Kasena (Ghana): “The chameleon says, ‘When on a tree, assume the colour of its leaf.’” (Awedoba 2000, 47)

Balant (Senegal): “When hyena pursued the dog but did not catch it, it said, ‘It’s not good meat.’” (Mansaly 2018, 44)

Also, people are frequently the speakers. They are usually identified in some way, such as “old woman”, “beggar”, member of an ethnic group, “stingy person”, etc.

### 5.3.2 People:

Badaga (India): “In the fifth month [of pregnancy] the child will say, ‘Shall I come out or shall I remain inside?’” (Hockings 1988, 114).

Oromo (Guji): “‘I can see everything now,’ said an old woman after burning her house.” (Jirata 2009, 137 and Jaleta 2004, 80)

Sinhalese (Sri Lanka): “‘It is not that I cannot dance, but the floor is not level,’ said the dancer.” (Senaveratna 2005, 32)

Fon (Benin): “The leper stumbled, fell to the ground and said, ‘Life goes on.’” (Bíao and Atídegia 2018)

Inyi (Nigeria): “The mad man says that when baptizing his child, he pours water on him both front and back because he does not know which direction Christ is coming from.” (Unaegbu 2020, 333)

In the WP’s of some language communities, different kinds of objects speak:

### 5.3.3 Body parts:

Alaaba: “‘Cook me with the hump!’ said the intestines.” (Schneider-Blum 2009, 57)

Antillean Creole French (Martinique): “The ox’s tail says, ‘Time goes, time comes.’” (Hearn 1885, 21)

Afar: “‘If the tongue were not in me,’ the head says, ‘I would not have been cut off.’” (Parker 1971, 283)

### 5.3.4 Plants:

Kigezi and Ankole (Uganda): “‘I am the boss here,’ said the plant which sprouted on top of a dung heap.” (Cisternino 1987, 245)

Kambaata (Ethiopia): “‘The sky is wide,’ said the sorghum plant.” (Treis 2008, 15)

Turkish: “When the axe came into the forest, the trees said, ‘The handle is one of us.’”

### 5.3.5 Inanimate objects:

Oromo (Ethiopia): “‘I am now as I was,’ said the clay griddle while burning along with the house.” (Cotter 1992, 475)

Kigezi and Ankole (Uganda): “When thrown into the sea, the stone said, “After all, this is also a home.”” (Cisternino 1987, 192)

Finnish (Finland): ““Go around me, don’t swear,’ said the stone to the ploughman.” (Lauhakangas 2012).

Yorùbá (Nigeria): “Money says, ‘If I am not at home let no one deliberate in my absence.’” (Osoba 2014, 55)

Turkish: “The soil said, “kill me [plow well] to help you live.” (Shahriari 2018, 56)

Yombe (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, Angola): ““Clan by clan,’ says the drum.” (Visce 2017, 69)

Silte (Ethiopia): ““On my road the stone makes me talk,’ said water.” (Musa & Mohammed 2015, 131)

### 5.3.6 Celestial objects and forces:

Tswana (Botswana): “The moon laughs at the sun, saying, ‘You are white.’” (Campbell 1972, 124)

Kigezi and Ankole (Uganda): ““I haven’t struck you, it’s you yourself who came my way,’ said the lightning to the man at the mountain spring.” (Cisternino 1987, 463)

Jabo (Liberia): “North wind says: ‘If you rise, they will know you are there.’” (Finnegan 1970, 420)

Tsonga: “The night said, ‘I have come.’” (Mathumba 1998, 62)

### 5.3.7 Abstract nouns:

Somali: “Misfortune says, ‘Go wander or get married.’” (Kapchits 2002, 17)

Catalan (Spain): “Death said to the man with the throat cut, ‘How ugly you look!’” (Marvin 1922, 262)

Rendille (Kenya): “The word said, ‘Let me out of your mouth and I will go where I want.’” (Schlee & Sahado 2002, 182)

### 5.3.8 Names of people:

Some WP’s are related to a story, anecdotal proverbs. These proverbs often serve as a conclusion and summary of a story.<sup>31</sup> Using such a proverb assumes that the hearer knows the story that goes with the proverb. The person may be real or fictional.

Irish: ““I won’t keep you long,’ as Henry the Eighth<sup>32</sup> said to his wives.” (Carson-Williams 2010.39)

### 5.3.9 WP’s and \*anecdotal proverbs

Some WP’s are anecdotal proverbs. A speaker says something, but the listener/reader has to know the anecdote, the story, to understand the proverb.

For example, among the Somali, there is a WP that is based on a story: “A snake said, ‘A man is ungrateful’” (Kapchits 2000, 156). It is built upon a story about a snake that saw a man

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<sup>31</sup> See the chapter 7.2 on \*‘anecdotal proverbs’ for more explanation of proverbs that are connected to stories.

<sup>32</sup> Henry the Eighth was a king of England who had six wives. He abandoned some and executed others.

sleeping and did not harm him. When the man awoke, he tried to kill the snake. The snake said, “A man is ungrateful.” This is the story behind this WP proverb.

### 5.3.10 Similar WP’s and non-quotation proverbs

Researchers have found that in a language sometimes the same basic proverb is expressed by a WP and the same underlying proverb also in a proverb form that does not contain a quotation. This is illustrated by the following Finnish example, the same basic proverb is found in two forms, one is a wellerism and the other is not:

Wellerism: “‘Go around me, don’t swear,’ said the stone to the ploughman.”

Non-wellerism: “Pass round the stone, don’t curse it.” (Lauhakangas 2012).

Here is another example of a proverb that is formed as a WP in at least two languages, Latin and Turkish, but the basic proverb is not a WP in Russian:

Latin: “‘You are black!’ as the cauldron said to the pot.” (Paczolay 1997, 318)

Turkish: “One pot tells the other, ‘Your face is black.’” (Paczolay 1997, 321)

Russian: “One pot should not laugh at another as both are black.” (Paczolay 1997, 318)

### 5.3.11 Research projects on WP’s

In some WP’s, speakers “are chosen precisely for the characteristics that illustrate the proverb.” The fact that a chameleon changes to fit a situation is seen in a proverb where the chameleon speaks in a way that embraces opposite actions Chumburung of Ghana, “Chameleon says, ‘Quickly is good and slow is good’” (Hansford 2003, 79). Here are some other examples where the character of the speaker is related to what they say:

Bajju (Nigeria): “A lazy person says, ‘I will do it tomorrow.’” (McKinney & McKinney 2003, 178)

Sidaama (Ethiopia): “While the cat was sleeping a rat moved it slowly saying, ‘Let me see what happens to her.’” (Anbessa Teferra, Personal Communication. 2017)

Rendille (Kenya, Kenya): “The lion said, ‘Although I know my courage, I approach under the cover of trees.’” (Schlee & Sahado 2002, 26)

Tiv (Nigeria): “The bat says that there is no difference between standing upside down and upright” (Pachocinski 1996, 305)

Harari (Ethiopia): “The insolent person says to his mother, ‘You did not give me birth.’” (Abdurahman Qoram 1984, 24)

If you are not sure about the symbolism of an animal speaking in a WP, ask people who are experts with proverbs. If a person does not understand the symbolism of the animal speaking, they do not understand the full meaning of the proverb. For example, the Kafa of Ethiopia have a WP, “‘Do not talk about milk,’ said the cockroach” (Wodajo 2012, 112). Since I am not acquainted with Kafa culture, I do not know if the cockroach is assumed to have an attitude or a behavior related to milk. I cannot fully understand the meaning of the proverb because I do not understand if there is symbolism in the speaker in the WP.

Studying Somali WP’s proverbs Kapchits divided WP’s into those that give a clue as to the character of the speaker and those that did not (Kapchits 2000, 156). If you have many WP’s in your collections, this may be a useful to study. To categorize these speakers of WP’s into these two groups requires a cultural insider’s insights about the stereotypes of various animals.

## 5.4 Dialogue proverbs

DP's have not been studied as much as WP's. The study of DP's basically begins with Archer Taylor's pioneering book *Proverbs*, first edition in 1931. Taylor introduced his readers to \*dialogue proverbs, "a very curious proverbial form which is utterly strange to us" (1962, 156). His examples were from Europe, though he acknowledged that there were also DP's in Arabic. Dundes later published three DP's from African languages (1964). I have since documented that DP's are found widely across Africa (Unseth 2020). There is not yet a study of DP's across Asia.

DP's have not been studied intensively in any language. If the language you study has DP's, this is a good topic to examine. If you want to read more about dialogue proverbs, start by studying my article about DP's, available online (Unseth 2020). The article is about DP's in Africa, but it explains the history of research on DP's, the different kinds of speakers in DP's, their geographic distribution, and gives examples from over 25 languages in Africa.

WP's are found in many languages, but DP's are found in fewer languages. In my preliminary research, I have found DP's in fewer places than I have found WP's. I have not found any DP's in eastern parts of Asia.

DP's contain quotations from two characters having a dialogue. They are similar to WP's because the proverb contains a quotation, but they differ because they have at least two speakers and (at least) two quotations. DP's are an ancient form of proverb. There is record of DP's found on an ancient clay tablet from ancient Sumer, about 4,000 years ago. Part of the tablet is damaged, but scholars are able to read enough to see that is a DP structure: "The elephant boasted about himself, 'There is nothing like me in existence! Do not [...?]' The wren answered, 'But I, in my small way was created just as you were'" (Gordon 1958, 10).

Some DP's identify at least one speaker or hearer with the formula, "X said, 'abc...'" or "They said to X, 'abc...'" In these cases it is clear who is speaking at least one of the quotations. The following DP's are like this, each mentioning at least one of the speakers outside of the quotation.

Alaaba (Ethiopia):

"When he had borrowed oxen and was ploughing near a gorge, they said, 'Why?' and he said, 'The problem is for the elders.'" (Schneider-Blum 2009, 26)

Armenian: "

"They asked the wine, 'Have you built or destroyed more?' It said, 'I do not know of building; of destroying I know a lot.'" (Sakayan 1999, 315).

Ewe (Ghana):

"The hare says, 'Walking slowly leads to death.' The chameleon says, 'Walking quickly leads to death.'" (Knappert 1989, 94)

Bakgatla (Botswana):

"The *thukhui* jackal said, 'I can run fast.' But the sands said, 'We are wide.'" (Mitchison and Pilane 1967; Kebonye and Eze 2018, 3)

Some other DP's identify at least one speaker or hearer by identifying them within a quotation. In these cases it is clear who is speaking at least one of the quotations. The following DP's are like this, each mentioning at least one of the speakers inside of the quotation.

Neo-Aramaic (Kurdistan of Iraq):

"'Go, my donkey, may God be with you.'

‘If my master is with me, God will (also) be with me.’”

Kabyle (Algeria):

“‘You ox, who is your brother?’

He said, ‘The one whom I plough with.’” (Belkhir 2014, 181)

Kaonde (Zambia):

“‘Owl, why are you so quiet?’

‘I am quiet because of words.’” (Ganly 1987, 41)

DP’s can also include more than two quotations, such as the following examples with four quotations and one with five:

Bamana (Mali):

“‘Speech, what made you good?’

‘The way I am,’ said Speech.

‘What made you bad?’

‘The way I am,’ said Speech” (Kone 1997, 221).

Wolaytta (Ethiopia):

“‘When they asked, ‘Who is an elder?’,

‘I am an elder,’ said the monkey.

When they asked, ‘Who will take the leftover food?’,

‘I am small/young, let me take it,’ said the monkey.” (Tallacchäw and Ammänu 1987, 156)

Kasena (Ghana):

“‘Let me go, Spider!’

‘How can I let go of my meat?’

‘Then get on with it, eat me!’

‘How can I eat a fly?!’” (Awedoba 2000, 236)

Arabic:

“‘They told the *Qadi*,<sup>33</sup> ‘A dog has defiled the wall.’

The *Qadi* said, ‘Knock it down.’

‘But,’ said they, ‘It is the divisional wall between you and us.’

‘Oh!’ replied the *Qadi*, ‘a little water will purify it.’” (Hanki 1897, 63)

Tigrinya (Eritrea and Ethiopia):

“‘Who should tell of a death?’

‘The one who buried.’

‘Who should speak?’

‘The one who was there.’” (Täklä et al. 1985, 58).

Polish:

“‘I have caught a bear.’

‘Bring it here.’

‘It won’t come.’

‘Then come yourself.’

‘It won’t let me go.’” (Taylor 1953, 63)

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<sup>33</sup> A *Qadi* is a judge in an Islamic court/

DP's are less common than WP's. WP's are found in more languages than DP's. Also, if a language has both WP's and DP's, it will have more WP's than DP's.

Some DP's are found in multiple languages. For example, in Ethiopia, at least five language communities have a proverb similar to this: "When they asked her, 'Mule, who is your father?', 'My maternal uncle is a horse', she replied" from the Silte (Hussein Mohammed Musa and Awol Mohammed 2015, 86). The same proverb is also found in Arabic and southwest Asia.

A DP in one language community may be similar to a WP in another language community. This is seen in three languages of South Asia, where a proverb is a WP in Burushaski, but a DP in Pashto and Kashmiri:

WP in Burushaski:

"The camel says, 'Shame on the slope down, shame on the slope up.'" (Tiffou 1993, 79)

DP in Pashto:

"Someone asked a camel, 'Is ascending better than descending?'  
He replied, 'May both be cursed.'" (Bartlotti & Khattak 2006)

DP in Kashmiri:

"O camel, how do you, going up and coming down hills?'  
'Oh, both are a curse.'" (Marvin 1916, 336)

In Ethiopia, from a collection of 418 Alaaba proverbs (Schneider-Blum 2009), I found 10% were WP's. This is the highest percentage I have found so far. In some languages that have WP's, I have found less than 1% of the proverbs are WP's. I have not found any language community that had dialogue proverbs without having wellerism proverbs. I predict that if a language has both WP's and DP's, it will have fewer DP's than WP's.

#### 5.4.1 Question and answer proverbs

In some languages, there are proverbs that are a question and an answer, but there is no verb of speaking, such as "said" or "asked". Because there is no verb of speaking, nobody is identified as the speaker or listener. Also, nobody is identified in the quotation. I abbreviate the name for this category as Q&A.

Hindi: "What is sweeter than sugar?' 'Truth.'" (Marvin 1916, 340)

Tamil (India): "What do you wish?' 'That which I have not.'" (Marvin 1916, 340)

Arabic (Tunisia): "Who pays a visit to the exiled?' 'Only the cat or dog.'" (Yetiv and Bouraoui 1987, 129)

Pashto (Afghanistan and Pakistan): "How are you?' 'I am happier than the husband of two wives.'" (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 208)

Greek (Modern): "Where is this twig [from]?' 'From this shrub.'" (Marvin 1916, 341)

Bemba (Zambia): "What reduces a house? The mouth." (Carey & FENZA 2021, 73).

Amharic (Ethiopia): "How did you bury your former friend?' 'I buried him with great respect, wrapped in a cloth, so that my new friend would not think badly of me and leave me.'" (and Armstrong 2019, 25,26).

There are also examples with two cycles of question and answer, such this one:

Gurage, Ethiopia: "With what did you trade?"

‘With tobacco’.  
 ‘What did you gain?’  
 ‘Coughing.’” (Leslau 1982, 235)

I do not include these proverbs with the DP’s since no speaker is indicated. However, I include these Q&A proverbs in the category of quotation proverbs.

#### 5.4.2 Research projects:

If you have WP’s, DP’s, or Q&A proverbs in your collection, here are some research ideas that you can try.

The first step in researching quotation proverbs is to identify and sort WP’s and DP’s and Q&A’s in your collection. Collect all of the WP’s into one list, the DP’s into another list, the Q&A’s into another list. Count the proverbs in each list. Then calculate the percentage of your collection that are in each of these three categories.

Another step in researching WP’s and DP’s is to study the speakers. Make a list of all of the speakers in WP’s and DP’s. If some speakers (probably animals) speak in many proverbs, make a table showing which speakers are the most common. It is useful to write the number of each of the proverbs from your collection. It will be helpful if you make a separate chart for WP’s and one for DP’s. Here is one way to do this.

**Table 13: Counting speakers in quotation proverbs**

Speakers	The numbers of the proverbs in which these are found	total
Donkey	11, 38, 44, 72, 97	5
Matchmaker	17, 47, 86, 91	4
Snake	8, 50, 69	3
Religious leader	29, 41, 58	3
Tortoise	11, 57, 73	3

As you study the list of WP’s and DP’s and their speakers, are there some speakers that are symbolically or stereotypically closely linked to what they say? If so, write a brief explanation for each WP and DP where you find that there is a close link between the speaker and what they say. For example, are there proverbs where the speaker is a fool? “What does the fool say?” “What does a bride say?” “What does the lazy person say?” “What does the donkey say?”

Examine what they say in WP’s and DP’s. Do the speakers give commands? Do they ask questions? Do they use a negative word to say that something does not happen? Does the statement explain their actions? Do they speak to specific people/animals? Does the quotation tell if they are happy or sad?

Do certain speakers say things that fit the stereotype in the community. For example, do donkeys say foolish things?

Who are the speakers in WP’s and DP’s? In some parts of Africa, a tortoise speaks in many proverbs, such as:

Lhomwe (Malawi): “The tortoise said there were two countries when referring to the other side of the anthill.” (Kapypye 2021, 28)

Also, an old woman speaks in many African proverbs, such as:

Oromo (Guji), Ethiopia: “‘I can see everything now,’ said an old woman after burning her house.” (Jirata 2009, 137 and Jaleta 2004, 80)

Some WP’s and DP’s will be \*anecdotal proverbs, a topic covered in Chapter 7.2. If there are enough WP’s and DP’s that are anecdotal proverbs, it may be interesting and useful to collect the stories that are connected to WP’s and DP’s.

If the proverb collection you are studying contains DP’s, collect all of the DP’s together and analyze them. There will probably not be enough DP’s for a thesis or dissertation, but there may be enough for a section, maybe enough for a chapter of a thesis or dissertation.

In some language communities, there are no WP’s. If you do not find WP’s in your research, it is useful to write in your project (thesis, dissertation, or article) that you have searched for WP’s and you have not found any. It is also useful to write how many proverbs you have examined awhile you searched for WP’s. This will only be one paragraph in your project, not enough for more.

In the proverbs of your collection, do you think that question and answer proverbs are a separate category from DP’s? Do you have some evidence to indicate that they are separate categories in your data?

## 5.5 Rhetorical questions

Many proverbs are questions. But in proverbs, the speakers do not expect answers, these are rhetorical questions. Here is an English example:

“A bird may love a fish, but where would they live?” English (Mieder 2021, 52)

### 5.5.1 Ancient:

Proverbs have been formed with rhetorical questions since ancient days. The following ancient examples illustrate this.

Hebrew (Biblical): “Do not those who plot evil go astray?” (Proverbs 14:22)

Hebrew (Biblical): “How long will you lie there, O lazybones? When will you rise from your sleep?” (Proverbs 6:9)

Sumerian: “The ass was swimming in the river, and the dog clung to him: ‘When will he climb out and be eaten?’” (Alster 1975, 212).

Sanskrit: “After the stream has been crossed what is the use of the boat on the other side?” (Carr 1868, 387)

Arabic (Qur’anic): “Are the blind (man) and the beholding (man) equal or are the shadows and the light equal?” Qur’anic Arabic (Sura Ar-Raa 13:16, Mohamed 2017, 237)

### 5.5.2 Contemporary:

Here are some modern examples of rhetorical questions in proverbs from languages in different places of the world:

“From the mouth of a lion, who has removed meat?” Amharic, Ethiopia (Daniel Abera 2019, 396)

“Where is the Hindu and where is the mulberry tree?”<sup>34</sup> Pashto (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 150)

“A cooked pumpkin you can at least eat, but what can you do with a pumpkin head?” Armenian (Sakayan 1994, 15)

“What does a wild jackal care for the threats of a Police Officer?” Telugu, India (Carr 1868, 8)

“Are all wise men alike in knowledge?” Burmese (Grey 1836, 9)

“What will bring a fish and a tick together?” Hausa, Nigeria (Merrick 1905, 23)

“You come upon the footprint of an imbecile and you do not take some of the soil for your *juju*.  
Where will you find the footstep of a sane person?” Yorùbá, Nigeria (Owomoyela 2005, 20)

“Has anyone ever sold soil or his mother?” Punjabi, India (Ali et al 2018, 91)

“What does heaven care for the cities of the dogs?” Arabic (Burckhardt 1875,26)

### 5.5.3 Sarcastic interrogatives

Charles Doyle has written a book chapter about “sarcastic interrogatives” in English (1977, 2012). He pointed out that this category of proverb is ancient, found in the Bible (Doyle 2012, 22):

“Can the Ethiopian<sup>35</sup> change his skin, can a leopard change his spots?” (Jeremiah 13:23)

Today, these “sarcastic interrogative” are stock questions with glaringly obvious *yes* or *no* answers. These proverbs are only used as a joke or in a sarcastic rebuke. He classified these as “proverbial utterances” (2012, 2). He listed many examples of English sarcastic interrogatives used to answer questions.

Some sarcastic interrogatives anticipate “yes”:

“Does a chicken have lips?”

“Is the Pope Catholic?”

“Can/Does a duck swim?”

“Is grass green?”

“Do birds fly?”

“Does a dog have fleas?”

Doyle pointed out that one sarcastic interrogative has become so commonly used that it has been included in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverb* (2008): “Can/Does a duck swim?” (Doyle 2012, 9).

Some sarcastic interrogatives anticipate “no”:

“Does a snake have knees?”

“Do chickens have lips?”

This is a useful category for English proverbs, but it may not be a useful category for many other languages. I have not seen a study focused on “sarcastic interrogatives” in other languages.

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<sup>34</sup> This is an \*“anecdotal proverb”, with a story about a Hindu who climbed a mulberry tree and ate too many berries.

<sup>35</sup> When this was translated in 1611, “Ethiopian” meant “African”. Some newer English translations use “African”.

#### 5.5.4 Research projects:

Studying rhetorical questions in proverbs begins by studying your collection of proverbs. If your collection is on a computer, you can search for question marks. Collect all of the proverbs with rhetorical questions into one file. How many are there?

There will probably not be enough proverbs made with rhetorical questions for a thesis or dissertation. There may be enough of these proverbs to make a section of a thesis or dissertation. Or, there may be enough proverbs to write an article, as was done with Arabic proverbs by Badarneh (2016).

- How many of the rhetorical questions are imperatives telling the listener to do something?
- How many of the rhetorical questions are imperatives telling the listener *not* to do something?
- Is the assumed answer to rhetorical question proverbs usually negative or usually affirmative?
- Are there some proverbs in your questions that are sarcastic interrogatives? Are these proverbs that are used as a joke or in sarcasm?

### 5.6 Parallelisms

Proverbs from many language communities are formed with parallelisms. \*Parallelisms are formed by two (or more) lines that say closely related things. The two lines may agree, this is a synonymous parallelism. Or, they can contrast, with one line saying the opposite of the other line, this is a contrasting parallelism.

Synonymous: Khasi, India (Barweh 2007, 93)

“Never go back on your promise, your word,  
Once spoken, fulfill it, whether it’s easy or difficult.”

Contrasting: Ronga, Mozambique (Bishop 1922, 407)

“He looks handsome in front,  
But he is ugly behind.”

Parallel structures have been used in proverbs for thousands of years.

Hebrew: (Biblical Proverbs 10:1)

“A wise son brings joy to his father;  
a foolish son is his mother’s sorrow.”

Sumerian: (Alster and Oshima 2006, 51)

“Hand added to hand and a man’s house is built up,  
Stomach added to stomach and man’s house is destroyed.”

“A vizier whose heart is satisfied causes satisfaction, (Alster and Oshima 2006, 55)  
An angered vizier causes anger.”

Grammatically, parallelisms can be indicative, imperative, interrogative. I assume that there are also proverbs that have parallelisms and are exclamatory, but I have not found them yet.

Indicative: Somali (Kapchits 2020, 35)  
“Those who accept a favor are many,  
But those who pay it back are none.”

Imperative: Telugu, India (Carr 1868, 47)  
“Try building a house,  
try making a marriage.”

Interrogative: Yorùbá, Nigeria (Olumuyiwa 2012, 115)  
“Is palm oil so scarce?  
Or is it beyond our means?”

Parallelisms in proverb usually have two parts. However, some proverbs are formed with three lines (or even more). The following example shows three lines of parallelisms.

Yorùbá (Nigeria): (Vidal 1852, 27)  
“Sacrifices were prescribed to the turkey-buzzard, but it refused to offer them.  
Sacrifices were prescribed to the *akalla*-buzzard, but it refused to offer them.  
Sacrifices were prescribed to the pigeon, and it offered them.”

Gə’əz (Ethiopia): (Afework Tareqeny 2008, 27)  
“Let the eye fast.  
Let the mouth fast.  
Let the ear fast.”<sup>36</sup>

Sometimes a proverb is formed with a parallelism, but may have a third line that is not parallel. This is illustrated in the following proverbs:

Kafa, Ethiopia: (Mesfin Wedajo 112, 112)  
“A man feared a tiger,<sup>37</sup>  
The tiger feared the man,  
The road had no traveler.”

Hebrew, Biblical: (Proverbs 11:2)  
“When pride cometh,  
Then cometh shame:  
But with the lowly is wisdom.”

Below are examples of proverbs with parallelisms, collected from many different ethnic groups.

Amharic (Ethiopia): (Daniel Aberra 2019, 175)  
“Having a grudge while praying,  
having a cough while doing burglary.”

Nepali (Inchley 2010, 284):  
“If you need to see a tiger? Look at a cat!

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<sup>36</sup> This form of the Three Wise Monkeys proverb is more like the European version, which differs from the English version, because it is not formed with 2<sup>nd</sup> person negative imperatives. The English form of this proverb contains an innovation, specifically inserting “evil”: “See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil.” The English form is an innovation from the proverb found in Ethiopia, Asia, and Europe, e.g. German “Not hearing, not seeing, not speaking” (Mieder 1987, 164). I am responsible for the translation of this proverb. Sadly, the compiler of the Gə’əz proverb collection did not cite his specific source so it is not clear how old the proverb is

<sup>37</sup> In Ethiopian English, “tiger” is used for “leopard” *Panthera pardus*.

If you need to see an enemy? Look at your brother!”

Yiddish (Kumove 1999, 82):

“A good person won’t be corrupted by the tavern,  
Nor a bad person reformed by a synagogue.”

Mongolian (Raymond 2010, 156):

“A bad dog barks at the livestock.  
A bad man oppresses his wife.”

Dzongkha (Bhutan) (Sørensen and Nidup 1999, 3):

“Never perform all of the thoughts you harbour and  
Never speak whatever comes to your lips.”

Russian (Mertvago 1995, 225):

“Such as the abbot,  
Such is the monk.”

Dari, Afghanistan (Zellem 2015, 150):

“The walls have mice,  
The mice have ears.”<sup>38</sup>

Guji Oromo, Ethiopia (Tadesse Jaleta Jirata 2009, 76):

“Someone knows that he passes a day peacefully,  
But only God knows that he will pass a night peacefully.”

Gã, Ghana (Asmah et al 2015, 9):

“The right hand bathes the left,  
so also the left bathes the right.”

English (Mieder 2021, 54):

“You booze,<sup>39</sup>  
You lose.”

Jibbali (Castagna 2024, 169):

“Only the one with the nice teeth can smile  
and the one with the long hair can show it off.”

Yorùbá (Amolese no date, 104):

“Don’t call the red white;  
Don’t call the white red.”

Some language communities use parallelisms for only a few of their proverbs, but others use parallelisms for very many of their proverbs. I did a very small comparison and found that very many Mongolian proverbs are formed with a parallelism structure (Raymond 2010). In contrast, fewer Bemba proverbs are formed with a parallel structure (Casey and FENZA 2021).

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<sup>38</sup> Proverbs about walls having ears are found in many parts of the world.

<sup>39</sup> “Booze” is a slang term for alcoholic drinks. The proverb means that if people drink too much alcohol, they will suffer loss.

### 5.6.1 Research projects:

The first step in researching proverbs with parallelism structures is to study your collection of proverbs. Identify all of the proverbs that have parallelisms. Then sort them to see what patterns can be found. Here are some questions to help you think of ways to sort the proverbs with parallelisms. As you study your data, you will probably think of other ways to sort the proverbs.

When you sort your collection of proverbs, how many of them are formed with a parallelism?

Calculate the percentage of your proverbs that have parallelism structures, what percent of the proverbs in your collection have parallelisms?

How many of the parallelisms are imperative?

How many of these are both positive?

How many of these are both negative?

How many of these have the first half positive, second half negative?

How many of these have the first half negative, second half positive?

How many of the parallelisms are indicative?

How many of these are both positive?

How many of these are both negative?

How many of these have the first half positive, second half negative?

How many of these have the first half negative, second half positive?

How many of the parallelisms are interrogative?

How many of these are both positive?

How many of these are both negative?

How many of these have the first half positive, second half negative?

How many of these have the first half negative, second half positive?

Do you find sound-based art in both parts of parallelisms in proverbs?

In proverbs built with parallelisms, which parts of the parallelisms change? Do subject nouns change? Object nouns? Verbs? Adjectives? Maybe more than one of these.

You will think of other questions as you study your proverb collection.

A study of parallelisms in proverbs is probably not enough for a thesis or dissertation. If your proverb collection contains enough examples with parallelisms, it will probably be a suitable topic for a chapter. Discuss this with your professor.

If your proverb collection contains enough examples with parallelisms, it may be a suitable topic for an article or a book chapter.

For an article, it may also be appropriate to compare the parallelisms in proverb collections from several language communities. It may be more interesting if you can study proverb collections from other parts of the world, not just collections from one area.

When you calculate the percentage of proverbs with parallelisms, how different are the percentages in the different collections? You can use the list of questions above and compare the

answers for the various questions. For example, what is the percentage of indicative, interrogative, and imperative parallelisms in each collection?

## 5.7 Weather and predicting proverbs

When proverb scholars write about “weather proverbs”, they mean proverbs that make predictions involving weather. Many writers have written articles about weather proverbs (Grzybek 2016, Humphreys 1934, Kanno 2008, Doctor 1986). Some writers have even compiled books about weather proverbs and related sayings (Kingsbury, Kingsbury, and Mieder 19946, Dunwoody, Chase, and Haven 1983).

It is not always clear if predictive sayings about the weather are truly “proverbs”. Alan Dundes said, “Are weather proverbs *proverbs*? I would say emphatically ‘No!’” (Dundes 1984, 45). Grzybek’s opinion (2016) was not so strong but wanted to distinguish different kinds of weather-related sayings. Also, Holbek and Kjaer suggested that weather proverbs should not be included with collections of ordinary proverbs (1969, 16-19). Baran suggested that weather proverbs might be a special category of proverbs (Baran 2016).

Proverbs predicting weather are an ancient form of proverb. Alster cited this proverb<sup>40</sup> from ancient Sumerian, over 4,000 years ago (Alster 1997, 114):

“The northwind is the wind of satisfaction,  
The southwind overthrows the men it hits,  
The eastwind is the wind that brings rain,  
The westwind is mightier than the man living there.”

There is also a weather proverb from 2,000 years ago, spoken by Jesus. He said, “When it is evening, ye say, ‘It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather today: for the sky is red and lowering’” (Matt 16:2,3). This weather proverb is not unique to Israel, but is found in many places, including the English version for sailors:

“Red sky at morning, sailors take warning. Red sky at night, sailors’ delight.”

Sabar said that this proverb about a red sky in the morning as a “weather forecast is universal” (Sabar 1978, 221).

Many, many language communities have sayings about weather (Inwards 1898). Though Dundes objected to calling weather predicting sayings as “proverbs”, proverb scholars of many language communities today classify predictive weather sayings as proverbs, such as “A dull thunder promises a big rain, a loud thunder [promises] a small rain” Zhuang (Yanxiang 2017, 198).<sup>41</sup>

Proverbs about predicting the weather are found in many language communities, including those that speak Slavic languages (Slovenian (Babič 2014), Polish (Matczak et al 2020), Romance languages (Rufat 2021), Germanic (Strauss 2003), Chinese, (Grzybek 2016, 13), Indo-Aryan (Manwaring 1899), and Semitic (Sabar 1978, Hussein and Mohammed 2020).

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<sup>40</sup> This text is included as part of a collection of Sumerian proverbs and Alster classified it with proverbs. Again, we face the question, “What is a proverb?” The ancient Sumerians chose to include this with other texts that are more prototypically proverbs.

<sup>41</sup> Yanxiang’s collection of Zhuang proverbs contains a chapter titled “Nature” (2017, 197-208). This chapter includes many weather proverbs.

In Chinese, there is even a clear label for this category of proverbs: 天氣諺語 literally means ‘weather proverb’ (Grzybek 2016, 13).

In this chapter I divide weather proverbs into two groups:

- proverbs that predict what the weather will be
- proverbs that predict what will happen after certain kinds of weather

That is, some proverbs predict what the weather will be. Other proverbs predict what will happen if there is a certain type of weather. Here are some examples of proverbs that predict what the weather will be. The predictions may be because of the earlier weather or some other sign, such as the behavior of animals:

- “When the cat rolls about [on the ground], go and fetch the cloak and take it with you for it is going to rain very heavily.” Maltese (Aquilina 1972, 547)
- “When the cat coughs, bad weather is coming either from the stern or from the prow.” Maltese (Aquilina 1972, 547).
- “When cattle lie down during light rain, it will soon pass.” English (Inwards 1898, 153)

Other proverbs predict what will happen if there is a certain type of weather. The predictions may be about crops, health, insects, etc.

- “Fish bite the best when the wind is in the west.” English (Inwards 1898, 90)
- “A green Christmas makes a fat churchyard.”<sup>42</sup> (Apperson 1929, 98)
- “If St. Paul’s Day<sup>43</sup> be fair and clear, It indicates plenty;  
If cloudy or misty, much cattle will die;  
If rain and snow fall that day, it presages a dearth;  
If windy, it forebodes wars, as old wives do dream. English (Inwards 1898, 16)
- “When it does not rain in February, neither good grassland/pasture, nor good wetland, nor good ram’s horn.” Portuguese (Martins 2013, 86)
- “If February gives much snow, a fine summer it doth foreshow.” Czech (Honzíková 2023, 3778)
- “As the weather is in June, so it will be in December.” Slovenian (Babič 2014, 151)
- “If it’s sunny on Candlemas Day [2nd February], the bear will go deeper into its den. If it’s foggy, the bear will come out of its den and stay outside.” Slovenian (Babič 2024, 14)
- “If it rains in *otrla* [month], dogs will eat the grain.” Gujerati, India (Doctor 1986, 45)

If a proverb mentions the weather but does not predict something related to weather (such as crops or fishing), it will not be considered a “weather proverb” in this study. For example, there is an Amharic proverb from Ethiopia that mentions “rain” and “cloud”, but the purpose of the proverb is not to predict weather but to affirm that decisions are made by leaders: “Rain from a cloud, decision from a leader” (Daniel Abera 2019, 445). In this book, this is not classified as a “weather proverb” because it makes no prediction; it only mentions “rain”.

Similarly, the following Marathi proverb from India mentions weather, but the meaning of the proverb is about family relationships. “When there is thunder rain falls.” (“When the head of the house is angry there will be tears.”) Marathi, , India (Manwaring 1899, 163). It is clear that this

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<sup>42</sup> A “fat churchyard” means a full cemetery.

<sup>43</sup> St. Paul’s Day is June 29.

proverb uses the image of weather, but its purpose is to explain how people in a house interact, not about weather.

### 5.7.1 Weather as metaphor:

In many proverbs, weather is mentioned, but it is used as a metaphor. This is seen in the following Pashto proverb: “Thunder does not necessarily mean a downpour.” The book’s editors compared this to the English proverb “Barking dogs seldom bite” (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 12). The proverb is not about actual weather. Weather proverbs are a common type of predictive proverb.

Some proverbs mention weather but are metaphors for other things. This is true of many proverbs that mention weather, such as the following proverbs that mention weather:

Ashanti, Ghana: “Though rain beats on a stone it (the stone) stands firm” (Rattray 1914, 168). This proverb mentions weather, but weather is only mentioned in an analogy. It does not predict weather, but advises hearers that people don’t change their character, even when there are changes around a person.

Amharic: “Rain from a cloud, decision from a leader” (Daniel Aberra 2019, 445). The main point of this proverb is that decisions are made by leaders.

English: “It’s always fair weather when good friends get together” (Mieder, Kingsbury, Kingsbury 1992, 647). The message of this proverb is not about weather but is about friendships.

A team in Zambia specifically asked for weather proverbs. They collected at least 11 weather proverbs. Some of these are weatherism proverbs. Here are three:

Zambia (language unspecified): “If people hear a wind sound (spiritual singing) from between two hills, they will have good rain.” (Kanno 2008, 68)

Zambia (language unspecified): “If water does not drop, farmers firstly plant on hill bottom field, and then if it rains plant on slope and hill top fields.” (Kanno 2008, 67)

Zambia (language unspecified): “If it strongly rains and next becomes hot in November, good rainy season comes.” (Kanno 2008, 67)

Kanno wisely noted that not all of the Zambian weather proverbs are used to predict weather (Kanno 2008, 68). Some proverbs mention weather but are metaphors for other things. This is true of many proverbs that mention weather, such as the following proverb that mentions weather:

Chewa (Zambia): “Far away thunder made the in-law run away from the village before the rain started.” The proverb is explained, “Do not run away too soon, first find out what exactly is going on” (van Kessel 2015, 96). This proverb mentions weather, but it is used to give advice about something other than the weather.

### 5.7.2 Crops

Maltese: “A windless May means a stunted harvest.” (Aquilina 1972, 572)

English: “A cold April the barn will fill.” (Denham 1846, 40)

Korea: “Soil becomes hard after the rains.” (Kim and Yang 2018, 74)

German: “Marl [soil] makes rich fathers and poor sons.” (Lütkmöller 2018, 117)

Ashanti, Ghana: “Though rain beats on a stone it (the stone) stands firm” (Rattray 1914, 168). This proverb mentions weather, but weather is only mentioned in an analogy. It does not predict weather, but advises hearers that people don’t change their character, even when there are changes around a person.

### 5.7.3 Soil

In farming communities, people examine the soil and plan their farming to fit the soil. Here are some examples:

Igbo, Nigeria: “A poor soil make cocoyams small.” (Eze, Mbakwe, Okolo 2018, 17)

Korean: “A bundle of grass in the fall will provide an additional bag of rice.” (Kim and Yang 2018, 692)

Korean: “Do not get engaged into a family whose rice leaves are dark green in July.” (If the leaves are dark green in July, it means that too much nitrogen fertilizer has been used and the rice crop will be poor.) (Kim and Yang 2018, 73)

Ireland: “Ploughing during frosty weather and harrowing in the rain are the worst things for the soil.” (Walsh et al 2018, 137)

French: “Where danewort [plant] is born, the land is worth more.” (Romillac 2018, 129)

Italian: *Chi ara terra bagnata,  
Per tre anni l’ha dissipata.* (Capra, Ganga, Vacca 2018, 143)  
“Whoever plows wet soils will lose them for three years.”

The above proverb has a two-syllable rhyme at the end of each line: *-ata*. All kinds of proverbs can be formed with artistry.

### 5.7.4 Evaluating livestock

In groups that have livestock, it is common to find proverbs that predict the quality of animals. This is seen in the following

Lahu proverb: “To gauge the strength of a horse, look at the size of its nostrils.” (Matisoff 2011, 278)

Kazakh: “If you raise livestock, raise sheep; it is profitable.” (Omarbekova and Aasland 2023, 212)

### 5.7.5 Deaths

Maltese: “When the moon has a halo around, be prepared for news of someone drowned” (Aquilina 1972, 572).

English: “A green Christmas makes a fat churchyard.”<sup>44</sup> (Apperson 1929, 98)

### 5.7.6 Research projects:

Study your data to see if there are possible weather proverbs in your collection of proverbs. Study them carefully to see if they are making predictions related to weather or if they are for advising people about a different topic.

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<sup>44</sup> A “fat churchyard” means a full cemetery.

You can also ask people for more proverbs about weather, such as proverbs about “rain”, “drought”, “wind”, “thunder”, etc.

If you find many weather proverbs in your collection, proverbs that make predictions related to the weather, this may be enough material for an article. The first step is to sort your weather proverbs. You can divide predictive weather proverbs into two groups:

- Proverbs that predict the weather.
  - Estonian: “If on Lady Day,<sup>45</sup> the night is cold, it will be cold for 40 more nights.” (Baran 2016, 322)
- Proverbs that predict other things because of the weather.
  - English: “Fish bite the best when the wind is in the west.” (Inwards 1898, 90)

You may find many proverbs that use words related to weather, but they are not really about weather. The following example uses words related to weather, but this is a metaphor for other something else. In your collection, are there weather words that have a consistent metaphorical meaning? For example, in the following proverbs from different languages, “thunder” refers to a strong person.

Marathi (India):

“When there is thunder rain falls.” (“When the head of the house is angry there will be tears.”) (Manwaring 1899, 163)

Chewa (Zambia): (van Kessel 2015, 193)

“If you get married to the thunderbolt, you should not be afraid of the lightning.” (“You choose the thunder, don't complain about lightning. Accept the consequences of your choice in marriage.”)

Do other weather words have consistent metaphorical meanings? For example, is “rain” used in different proverbs to mean “wealth” or “difficulty” or “tears”? Is “sunshine/sunny weather” used to mean “happiness”? What weather words are used metaphorically and symbolically?

Are there proverbs that predict other things, not just weather?

Are there proverbs about what kinds of cows give most milk? Or when is the best time to breed cows? Or when is the best time to go fishing? Or how to tell when to plant?

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<sup>45</sup> Lady Day is a religious holiday for St. Mary.

## 6 Contents of proverbs

The contents of proverbs are also part of the artistic effect of proverbs. As with sound-based art and grammatical patterns, there are different preferences seen in the proverb collections of different language communities.

### 6.1 Animals: frequency and symbolism

Many proverbs use symbolic and metaphoric language. Animals are a logical way to use culturally embedded symbols and metaphors for creating proverbs. Animals are found in the proverbs of languages around the world.

The oldest living proverb in the world mentions an animal, a dog. Alster has described this Akkadian proverb as having “a longer history than any other recorded proverb in the world,” going back to “around 1800 BC” (1979, 5). Other animals mentioned in ancient Mesopotamian proverbs include dog, fox, bird, ox, sheep, pig, dog, hyena, wolf (Richardson 2019). Animal proverbs are also found in the Biblical book Proverbs: sheep (27:23), snake, horse, donkey, hyrax (coney), ants, locusts, lizard, lion, goat, rooster (cock) (Proverbs 30:19-31).

In ancient Greek proverbs, animals were mentioned to represent certain traits. Romero listed “animals that represent stupidity... the donkey, of course, and also the sheep and the ox, and likewise the pig, the prototype of ignorance, and the birds which represent thoughtlessness and unconsciousness” (Romero 2022, 27). It is interesting that in listing animals that represent stupidity, Romero commented, the “donkey, of course”. Donkeys also symbolize stupidity in other places, also, such as the Amharic proverb, “The donkey went to the funeral of a hyena” (Daniel Aberra 2019, 273). Daniel Aberra’s collection of Amharic proverbs includes 111 proverbs that begin with “donkey” (2019, 271-274).

Proverbs in every language will include some animals, especially animals that are common in the area. For example, proverbs from central Ethiopia often mention chickens, mice/rats, cattle, sheep, donkeys, hyenas. Because the region is far from the ocean, there are no proverbs that mention a “whale” at all. But in the proverbs of Palaun, spoken in a nation of Pacific islands, there are proverbs about whales and fish, such as “To make a minnow of a whale” (McKnight 1968, 3).

Proverb scholars have often studied animals in proverbs (Krikmann 2002, Babič 2024). They have usually done this in one of two ways. Some have counted the total number of proverbs that mention a certain animal. Some have studied the symbolism of different animals in their culture and proverbs.

Counting animals in a large collection is not very difficult, at the beginning. You can use a computer or a sheet of paper with lines for each animal. If you know there are many proverbs about certain animals, leave extra lines. Then go through the collection and look at each proverb. If it mentions an animal, write down the number of that proverb. If your collection of proverbs is keyed into a computer, you can have the computer find all of the proverbs that mention each animal.

There are two points that make counting animals a little difficult. First, if you use a computer to search proverbs for animal words, you have to think carefully about what word you search for. In many languages, some animal names have a plural form that is different than the singular form. The difference may be a prefix, a suffix, or an irregular word. If you search your collection using a computer, think carefully about what terms you search for. For example, you have to search twice through a collection of English proverbs to find all the forms for “calf/calves”. Many other languages have some irregular plurals for common animals.

**Table 14 Examples of animals with irregular plural forms**

language	gloss	singular	plural
English	‘calf’	<i>calf</i>	<i>calves</i>
German	‘goose’	<i>Gans</i>	<i>Gänse</i>
Amharic	‘lion’	<i>anbässa</i>	<i>anabäst</i>
Hindi	‘bear’	<i>bhaalu</i>	<i>bhaluon</i>
Majang	‘cow’	<i>taŋ</i>	<i>togi</i>
French	‘horse’	<i>cheval</i>	<i>chevaux</i>
Arabic	‘camel’	<i>jamal</i>	<i>jimāl</i>
Greek	‘fox’	<i>alepou</i>	<i>alepoudes</i>

The second point that is a little difficult for counting animal proverbs is deciding how to count words for different examples of the same (or similar) animals. For example, in areas where people raise livestock, they usually have one word that is generic for the species. They also have different words for the same animal, but distinct for age and sex. For example, English has the generic word “horse”. But there are different words for horses of different age and sex, seen in the table below:

**Table 15: Words for horses**

Mare	Adult female
Stallion	Adult male
Foal	Young horse, either sex
Filly	Young female
Colt	Young male
Gelding	Castrated male
Cob	Short legged, strong horse
Pony	A small type of horse

As you examine your proverb collection, you will have to decide how to count these. For example, in a collection of English proverbs, should proverbs about “stallion”, “mare”, “foal”, “filly”, “colt”, and “gelding” be counted separately, or should they all be included under “horse”? For example, if there are many proverbs about a “stallion”, should these proverbs be counted separately from proverbs about a “horse”? But if there is only one proverb that mentions “stallion”, it should probably be included with proverbs that mention “horse”.

There is a similar question for other animals, also. For example, in many languages there are proverbs that mention “bird”, and also other proverbs that mention specific species of birds, such as “hawk”, “dove”, and “sparrow”. You will have to decide if you will count proverbs that mention “hawk”, “dove”, and “sparrow” together with proverbs that mention “bird”. The same question may arise with other kinds of animals. Think carefully. You may change your decision later. Explain to your readers how you have counted these.

I studied a collection of 356 Nuer proverbs from South Sudan and found that 64 of them mentioned animals (Carlassare 2013). The most frequently mentioned animals are seen in Table 16.

**Table 16: Nuer, South Sudan, 64 of 356 proverbs mention animals**

hyena	10
cow	9
dog	5
stork	4
birds	4
monkey, goat, calf	3
lizard, frog, crow	2

After these animals were counted, “hyena” is found in 10 proverbs, more than any other animal. However, there are questions to be answered. For example, there are nine proverbs that mention “cow(s)”. But there are additional proverbs that mention “calf” (3), one that mentions “bull” (1), and another that mentions “ox” (1). If all of these words for various kinds of cattle are counted together, then there are 14 proverbs that mention cattle. There are four proverbs that mention “stork”, four more mention “bird(s)”, and two that mention “crow”, one that mentions “pigeon”. Different kinds of birds are found in a total of 11 proverbs. Study your data and make your decision carefully. Write clear explanations for how you decided such matters.

At the beginning, make your list using the specific words. See which animals are the most frequent. Then, try grouping some together -- do you think it is helpful? Are the results clearer?

In a large collection of Egyptian proverbs, nearly 14% of the proverbs included animals (Matta 2021). In this proverb collection, the most common animals are listed below, with the number of proverbs that contain the animal.

1. Dogs = 50
2. Donkey = 50
3. Camels = 35
4. Cats = 28
5. Monkeys = 24
6. Chickens = 21
7. Horses = 18
8. Snakes = 18
9. Goats = 14

When you look at your list, are the most commonly mentioned animals domestic animals? How frequent are dangerous animals?

In many collections, the most common animals are domestic animals that people own, or small animals that are common around people’s homes. For example, in a study of a large collection of Tajik proverbs, the four most common animals were: ‘donkey/ass’, ‘cow’, ‘dog’, and ‘horse’ (Bell 2009). All of these are traditionally common domesticated animals among the Tajik people.

Some animals are so important in proverbs that people have written articles about specific animals in the proverbs of a language, such as an article about dogs in Chinese proverbs (Hatalová

2007), about donkeys in Ethiopia (Bekele 2004), about the northern ground-hornbill bird in Ethiopia (Asefa 2021), and an article about horse, cow, buffalo and donkey in Indonesian proverbs (Mirahayuni and Garnida 2017).

It is also useful to ask people about the symbolism of animals. For example, in the following Alaaba proverb from Ethiopia, “chicken” is symbolic. “When the land is lost (in war), a chicken does not know it. (The chicken represents a person who spends his days out of the house, doing nothing.)” (Schneider-Blum 2009, 21).

### 6.1.1 Research projects:

Examine your collection of proverbs and count the proverbs that mention each kind of animal.

A second way to study animals in proverbs is to study symbolism and stereotyped features of the animals in the proverb collection. What are the cultural assumptions about each kind of animal? There may be no clear cultural assumptions about some animals, but some animals will have strong cultural stereotypes. For example, in Amharic-speaking culture, snakes are dangerous, lions are strong, partridges are alert, leopards get angry, chameleons are unpredictable and changeable (Wolk 2009).

As you study your proverb collection, do you find enough examples to explain how some proverbs are based on characteristics of certain animals.

Are there proverbs that include more than one animal? For example, in Amharic of Ethiopia there are several proverbs that mention both a donkey and a hyena such as “The donkey went to the funeral of a hyena” (Daniel Aberra 2019, 273). Among the Pashto of Pakistan and Afghanistan, there are several proverbs that mention both donkeys and mules.

If you have access to collections of proverbs from other languages, especially proverbs in your area, you can compare the frequency of animals in the proverbs of different languages.

You will want to discuss the symbolism of animals in proverbs with experts in the culture, both scholars and elders.

Listing the proverbs that mention animals, plus discussing the symbolism of animals, will probably not be enough material for a thesis or dissertation. It could be a chapter in a thesis or dissertation. However, in a language community may have enough proverbs about animals that it might be adequate for a thesis or dissertation. If you are a student thinking about writing about animal proverbs for a thesis or dissertation. Ask your professor for advice.

## 6.2 Body parts

Proverbs often mention parts of the body. Some proverbs mention parts of the human body, other proverbs mention the parts of animals.

There are ancient proverbs that mention body parts. For example, there is an ancient Sumerian “A scribe without a hand (is as impossible as) a singer without a throat” (Alster 1975, 208). Many proverbs in the Bible also mention body parts, “As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to them that send him” (Proverbs 10:26).

In many proverbs, body parts are mentioned as symbols. For example, there is a Bemba proverb that mentions “hands”: “Your mother never has dirty hands” (Carey & FENZA 2021, 185). It is clear that this proverb is saying something more important than discussing dirt on mother’s

hands! The book explained that the proverb means, “Never criticize your mother, ignore her failings. Even if your mother has a sickness, care for her.”

Body parts of animals can also be used symbolically. For example there is a proverb about elephants and their tusks across much of Africa, e.g. Swahili: “An elephant never fails to carry its tusk” (Kalugila 1977, 21). In this proverb, “tusk” represents responsibilities for family members.

In many proverbs “mouth” refers to what people say. Here is an example from Bemba of Zambia that uses the word “mouth”, a question and answer proverb: “What reduces a house? The mouth” (Carey & FENZA 2021, 73). In the book, *ng’anda* “house” is explained as including “marriage/a household”, not just a building the family lives in. In other words, what people say can destroy a marriage.

In many African proverbs, a “single stick, one finger, and the single bracelet are metaphors for an individual member of a community. Showing the individual’s inability to solve big challenges alone, traditional African communities advocate the benefits of cooperation” (Mehari Yimulaw Gebregeorgis 2015, 236). This is seen in the following Kamba proverb from Kenya, “One finger alone cannot kill a louse” (Kitunda 221, 101). I have found this basic proverb is found in at least 50 language communities across Africa. The logic of the metaphor is not difficult for people to understand. A similar proverb is found among the Lahu in China: “With a single finger you can’t pick up a single bean” (Matisoff 2011, 282).

There may be some body parts that are not referred to literally, but a euphemism is used, a polite way to talk about topics that the community does not want to talk about clearly. The following examples show a proverb that is found in many places in Africa. In almost all of the examples, the proverb has the word “anus”. But the form from Trinidad has a euphemism. (It is not clear if the euphemism was used by the community, was used by the person who told it to the researcher, was inserted by the people who told it to a researcher, was inserted by the researcher who wrote it down, or inserted by the editor who prepared the book.)

“If an elephant is not sure of its anus, it does not swallow whole coconuts.” Yorùbá, Nigeria

“The elephant is measuring its anus before swallowing the palm nut.” Mampuruli, Ghana

“If the elephant didn’t know he had big guts, he wouldn’t have swallowed the calabashes.” Trinidad

### 6.2.1 Research projects:

There are different ways to study body parts in proverbs, but all begin with identifying the proverbs that include words for body parts.

The first kind of research project about body parts in proverbs is not difficult: make a list of proverbs that use body parts and count the number of proverbs that mention each body part. This will show which body parts are most frequently used in proverbs. Use a chart to do this so that you have the identity number of each proverb that mentions a body part. That will make deeper study easier.

The next steps in studying body parts in proverbs follow the counting just mentioned as the first kind of research on body part proverbs. Using the list mentioned above, make a list of proverbs that use body parts literally, using a chart. This is shown in Table 17. (This will not be enough for a chapter or a thesis or dissertation and it is not enough for an article. But it can be a part of a larger description of proverbs.)

The second way of counting is more interesting, it is the study of body part proverbs and their metaphorical use of body parts. Make a chart of body parts found in proverbs and also metaphors. This takes more time to do, but it gives more insights than merely counting literal uses. This involves counting the number of times that each body part is used metaphorically. For example, in the proverb “One finger alone cannot kill a louse”, the word “finger” is not literal. The proverb reminds people that one person alone cannot work alone. There may be other proverbs that use “finger” literally.

For all three kinds of counting (counting total body part proverbs, literal uses of body parts, and counting metaphorical uses of body parts), you can use the same kind of basic chart. Table 17 is a sample chart that can be used to identify proverbs that mention body parts. For the first type of counting (simply counting the number of times body parts are mentioned in proverbs), you only use the first two columns on the left. For the second type of counting (counting only the proverbs that mention body parts literally), you will use the three columns on the left. For the third type of counting (counting separately the proverbs that mention body parts literally and metaphorically), you will use all four of the columns.

As you study body-part proverbs, you will make changes to the chart for your language. For example, you may not find some of the body parts that are listed in the sample chart. Also, you may want to add some body parts to the chart. Some proverbs mention more than one body part, as seen in the Yorùbá proverb, “‘Not all the eyes see’, the mouth says” (Pachocinski 1996, 291).

**Table 17: Human body parts used in proverbs**

Body parts	Proverb numbers	Literal	Metaphor: briefly explain the metaphor
Eye			
Hand			
Finger			
Mouth			
Tongue			
Heart			
Head			
Liver			
Foot			
Ear			
Euphemism			
Other...			

You can use a chart like the one used for human body parts. You can also create a separate chart like this for body parts of animals, such as “tail”, “wing”, “claw”, “hoof”. You can count animal body parts and see if there are interesting uses of animal body parts in proverbs.

When you count the uses of body parts metaphorically, it may be that the same body part is used with different metaphorical meanings in different proverbs. For example, “head” might be

used in a proverb to represent elders/parents and in the same language it might be used in a different proverb to represent wisdom. Or, “hand” may represent a family in harmony in one proverb, but in another proverb may represent working.

I searched for body parts in the 1,500 proverbs in Wolfgang Mieder’s collection of American proverbs (2021). The most common body part mentioned in this collection is “mouth”. Six more body parts are listed below, showing their order of frequency.

“Mouth” 10  
“Eye” 8  
“Hand”<sup>46</sup> 8  
“Foot/feet” 5  
“Head” 5  
“Ear” 2  
“Finger” 1

The use of body parts in proverbs will probably be similar to body part idioms that are commonly used in ordinary speaking (not just in proverbs). The following chart shows a way to collect body part idioms in your language (building on the methods of Darryl Wilson 1990 and Marlin Leaders 1991). For example, does the phrase “good hand” have an idiomatic meaning? What about “clean hand”, “black hand”, “dirty hand”, “small hand”, “strong hand”, “shaking hand”, “weak hand”?

Think about other body parts in your language. If you have many proverbs that mention color words with body parts, what are the objects that have this color? Are there examples with body parts?

The following chart will help you think about body part proverbs. Use it to find more idioms used in proverbs in your language. To use the chart, take the first word on the left side, then put it with each of the words in the columns, e.g. “Good hand”, “evil hand”, “dirty hand”, etc. Then you can do this with the next word on the left column. Add words to the left column if you find more useful words.

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<sup>46</sup> This count of eight proverbs with “hand” counts only nouns. It does not include proverbs that use the word “hand” as a verb. You should think about this type of question as you count body parts in your collection.

**Table 18: Sample table for studying body part idioms and symbolism**

	good	bad/evil	dirty	clean	large	small	black	white	other?
Hand									
Finger									
Mouth									
Tongue									
Heart									
Head									
Liver									
Foot									
Other?									

In some proverbs, some body parts are referred to by euphemisms. This is different than a metaphorical use if it is simply for another literal, non-symbolic, non-idiomatic body part.

If you have enough examples of body parts in proverbs and can write a rich analysis of their use (including idioms, symbolism, and euphemisms), this may be a big enough topic or a thesis or dissertation. It is very likely that body part proverbs will be a big enough topic for a chapter in a thesis or dissertation. Discuss this with your advising professor. Body part proverbs will usually be a rich enough subject for a journal article or a book chapter.

### 6.3 Color symbolism

In many communities, certain colors have symbolic values. For example, in many places, black is a color associated with death and bad things, people wear black to funerals. But in China, the opposite is true and some people wear white to funerals.

China has a strong system of color symbolism. For example, green is associated with health and healing, red symbolizes happiness and good fortune, orange is associated with good fortune and abundance, blue is associated with trust and long life.

In the following Georgian example, black and white are used with clear symbolism, for good and bad: “White tooth and black heart.” It means that a person’s mouth says good and kind words (white), but the person’s heart is black (evil) (Mosiashvili 2015, 303).

If you are studying proverbs from your own cultural community, you may not be aware that people from other cultures do not understand the color symbolism of your community. Also, as you hear or read proverbs from another culture, you may not understand the significance of color in some proverbs. If you are not sure about color symbolism in the culture of the proverbs, discuss this with elders.

However, proverbs in some languages use colors without symbolism. In a collection of over 1,000 Chewa proverbs of Zambia, there are six proverbs that use “white” in their translation. It is not clear to me if the word “white” carries symbolic significance in any of these proverbs. The phrase “white ants” in a proverb seems to be only a reference to a kind of ant. This would require discussion with wise Chewa elders.

- “When you say, ‘It’s rubbish’, you will die with your teeth still white.”
- “The *dooli* mice died because they loved the white sand.”
- “The gluttonous son-in-law poured the fat of winged white ants away against the pole.”
- “You leave a white feather in the place you leave and in the place where you go to.”
- “The one who is white with ashes or dirty (not having put oil) should be asked for oil, he might have it.”
- “(The one who said) ‘Let it be plenty first’ waited for the white ants.”

If you study color symbolism in proverbs, expect that the most frequently mentioned colors will be white and black. The next most common color is usually red. Table 19 is chart showing the number of proverbs with five color terms from some proverb collections, some of the collections were small.

**Table 19: Sample table to compare use of colors in proverbs of multiple languages**

	black	white	red	blue	green	?	total proverbs
Guji Oromo (Jaleta (2009))	3	2	1	0	0		310
Chewa ( van Kessel 2015)	2	6	1	1	2		1,164
Kafa (Wedajo 2012)	1	0	0	0	0		130
Pashto (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006)	9	7	1	0	1		1,350
Amharic <sup>47</sup>	1	9	7	0	0		c. 22,000
Persian (Aliakbaria and Khosravian 2013)	26	15	5	0	5		4,710
Marathi (Manwaring 1899)	12	4	3	0	2		1,190

### 6.3.1 Research projects:

To help you study color symbolism in your proverb collection, the first step is to count the number of proverbs that mention color and collect them in a separate list. Create a chart showing the frequency of each color in proverbs. If there are collections of proverbs from nearby communities, you may decide to compare the percentage each color between collections. Do color

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<sup>47</sup> The color terms in the Amharic collection were counted by searching alphabetically for the first word of each proverb. The total count would be much larger than just the examples with color words as first words (Daniel Aberra 2019).

words in the proverbs of your collection have a significantly different percentage than color words in collections from other communities?

For each proverb in your list, decide if the color term is symbolic or simply describing something literally. This chart can help you study colors in your collection. For each proverb with a color word, put the proverb’s number in the second row “Proverb number”. Next, decide if the color term is literal or symbolic. If it is literal, put a mark in the third row “Literal”. If it is symbolic, explain the symbolism in the fourth column “Symbolic”. If a color word is used symbolically, briefly explain the symbolism in this row.

**Table 20: Colors used in proverbs**

	Black	White	Red	Blue	Yellow	?
Proverb number						
Literal						
Symbolic						

If you find many proverbs, discuss their color symbolism with elders and people who are wise about proverbs.

It may not be useful to count a color word if it is used as part of the usual name of an animal or plant, such as “white ant” or “black hawk”, if the name simply describes the animal or plant by its color, or is the color term symbolic? It may be that the standard name for a species includes a color term, such “white ant”, etc.

A study of color symbolism in proverbs may be a useful topic for a chapter of a thesis or dissertation, but not enough for an entire thesis or dissertation. If you have found enough proverbs that contain color terms, it may be a good topic for a journal article.

## 6.4 Numbers in proverbs

Around the world, many proverbs mention numbers. As you study your proverb collection, there may be interesting uses of numbers in proverbs. This is slightly different from the use of numbers in “enumerating proverbs” in a different chapter of this book.

Often, large numbers have been used in proverbs to indicate large, hyperbolic<sup>48</sup> numbers in proverbs since ancient times.

Biblical, Proverbs 17:10: “A reproof entereth more into a wise man than a hundred stripes in a fool.”

Latin (Ovid, 2,000 years ago): “It [rumor] has a hundred tongues, a hundred mouths, a voice of iron.” (Riley 1891, 205)

Latin (Horace, 2,000 years ago): “Though your threshing floor should yield a hundred bushels of corn, your belly will hold more than mine.” (Riley 1891, 205)

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<sup>48</sup> “Hyperbolic” means exaggerated but known to be exaggerated. That is, if a proverb says “1,000”, it probably does not mean exactly “1,000”, but simply means a very large number. Adynaton and hyperbole are not lies because people understand that they are not meant literally.

Malay: “The turtle lays eggs by the thousand and nobody knows of it; the chicken lays a single egg and the whole town is acquainted with the fact.” (Hui 2010, 64)

Here are some points that have been noted when numbers have been studied in proverbs.

In many language communities, certain numbers have symbolism. For example, in much of Europe, 13 is believed to be an unlucky number. Similarly, in China, 4 is believed to be an unlucky number, but 8 is believed to be a lucky number. “In Uzbek folklore, the numbers seven and three are symbolic,” (Bafoyev 2021, 323).

In many languages, there is a number indicating a large amount of things. This is illustrated below:

“One enemy is too many and 10,000 friends are not enough.” Zhuang, China (Yanxian 2017, 130)

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Japanese (Falef 1987, 5)

“A hundred strikes by a goldsmith, one strike by a blacksmith.” Dari (Zellem 2015, 4)

In a study of very large numbers in proverbs in multiple languages, Brdar-Szabó, Brdar and Xi, observed that when large numbers are used in proverbs, usually the number is “a round one... containing number one and a number of zeroes. This probably serves as one of the most obvious clues of the intended non-literal meaning” (Brdar-Szabó, Brdar, Xi 2024, 371).

In your collection of proverbs, is there a large number used to symbolize very many? In your speech community, are there special beliefs about certain numbers? Are there some numbers that are lucky/unlucky or symbolic? Ask elders in your community about numbers and about numbers in proverbs.

In many ethnic groups, there are some numbers that are used in many proverbs. When numbers are used in many proverbs, they may have a symbolic value.

**Table 21: Numbers in Japanese proverbs**

Language	Number	Proverb
Japanese	Three	“The <u>third</u> time tells the truth.” (Okada 1955, 138)
Japanese	Three	“ <u>Three</u> men together and there is Monju’s wisdom.” (Okada 1955, 139)
Japanese	Seven	“ <u>Seven</u> falls and eight rises.” (Okada 1955, 115)
Japanese	Seven	“Search <u>seven</u> times before you suspect anyone.” (Okada 1955 115)
Japanese	Eight	“Lookers-on see <u>eight</u> points more than players.” (Okada 1955 126)

In a study of Tajik proverbs, Evan Bell found the following numbers in proverbs (2009, 61 ff). The numbers 100 and 1,000 are both found in proverbs, twenty proverbs with 10 and seven with 1,000.

**Table 22: Numbers in Tajik proverbs**

Number	Frequency	Comments
1	58	15 times paired with 100
2	13	3 times used to mean excess
3	2	“3 days is too many”
5	2	5 fingers
7	1	7 days in a week
9	1	9 months of pregnancy
40	4	40 day traditional celebration
100	20	15 times contrasted with “one”, large quantity
365	1	365 days in a year
1,000	7	A great number, e.g. “a thousand excuses”

There is a study of numbers in Circassian proverbs from Turkey and Russia (Qardenghwsch’ and Jaimoukha 2009). It contains no examples with “ten”, but there are seven proverbs that contain “nine”, such as “One man with nine fur coats, and nine men with no fur coats” (Qardenghwsch’ and Jaimoukha 2009, 116). Also, the collection has seven proverbs that contain the number “seven”, such as “Garlic is a cure for seven ailments” (2009, 99). This shows that the uses of numbers in proverbs can vary a lot between different language communities.

#### 6.4.1 Large numbers

In the proverbs of many communities, there are often large numbers that are used hyperbolically. That is, the numbers are known to be exaggerated, but the large numbers are the standard words in proverbs.

**Table 23: Large numbers in proverbs**

Language	Translation	
Hungarian	“One fool makes a <u>hundred</u> more fools.”	(Brdar-Szabó, Brdar, Xi 2004, 372)
Hungarian	“An example is better than a <u>hundred</u> lectures.”	(Brdar-Szabó, Brdar, Xi 2004, 377)
Arabic	“A <u>thousand</u> cranes in the air are not worth one sparrow in the fist.”	(Burckhardt 1870, 2)
Arabic	“As if she was one of the water-heels of Djyze, her back teeth fell out, and one <u>hundred</u> oxen were killed by her” (with the work).	(Burckhardt 1870, 192)
Sanskrit	“Happiness attends a living man even after a <u>hundred</u> years.”	(Carr 1868, 391)
Nubian	“One is like a <u>hundred</u> and a <u>hundred</u> is not equal to one.”	(Habbob 2022, 110)
Yorùbá	“One does not gather <i>olú-orán</i> mushrooms in haste; <u>two</u> <sup>49</sup> <u>hundred</u> of them are not enough to make a stew.”	(Owomoyela 2005, 146)
Japanese	“ <u>Fifty</u> paces of one and a <u>hundred</u> paces of the others.”	(Okada 1955, 48)
Japanese	“Hearing a <u>hundred</u> times is not so good as seeing once.”	(Okada 1955, 64)
Japanese	“I will go forward against <u>thousands</u> and tens of <u>thousands</u> .”	(Okada 1955, 143)
Amharic	“A <u>hundred</u> may betroth you, but only one will marry you.”	(Daniel Aberra 2019, 166)
English	“A picture is worth a <u>thousand</u> words.”	

In a collection of over 5,000 Yorùbá proverbs (Owomoyela 2005), there are 37 proverbs that mention the unit “hundred”. It is surprising that only six of these mention “one hundred”. The most common number of hundreds is “two hundred”. There are seven proverbs with “thousand”.

- 100 - 6
- 200 - 24
- 300 - 4
- 400 - 2
- 800 - 1
- 1,000 - 7

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<sup>49</sup> This Yorùbá example is unusual, with “two” instead of “one” hundred.

These descriptions of numbers in these different languages illustrates that the proverb collections of different language communities show very different uses of large numbers.

### 6.4.2 Research project:

As you study your list of proverbs, do you find any numbers that are used more frequently? Are there proverbs that use symbolic numbers? Or are there some numbers that are not used at all? This will not be a wide enough topic for a dissertation or thesis, but it could be part of a broad description of proverbs. If there is enough interesting data about numbers in your proverb collection, it may be enough data for an article.

To study numbers in proverbs, you can make a chart similar to table 23 to study numbers in the proverbs of your collection. What numbers will you need for your chart? Insert the numbers you need for your collection? Add more columns if you need them.

**Table 24: Sample table for studying numbers in proverbs**

Proverb number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	?	10	?	?	?	?	?	?	?

After you have used this chart to study the number in proverbs of your collection, total the numbers for each column. Which numbers are most common? Describe any patterns that you see. It is probably not important to discuss some numbers that are found only a single proverb. In the proverb collections of some languages, numbers are important and interesting. In some languages, numbers in proverbs are not very interesting.

I used a chart like this and did a count of Amharic proverbs that had numbers as the first word in the proverb (Daniel Aberra 2021).<sup>50</sup> The results, though incomplete, showed that no proverbs began with “hundred” but there was one that began with “hundred and two”. This proverb should be studied and discussed with wise people. There were 10 that began with “fifty”, but none that began with “twenty”, “thirty”, “forty”. There were no proverbs that begin with “six”, but twelve that began with “seven”. There were no proverbs that began with “eight”, but eleven that began with “nine”, and eight that began with “ten”. As I did this, found that there were proverbs based on numbers that should be counted separately, proverbs that began with “first”, “second”, “third”, etc. This kind of data should be discussed with elders to understand. They may explain which numbers are symbolically important.

In your collection of proverbs, is there a large number used to symbolize very many? In your speech community, are there special beliefs about certain numbers? Are there some numbers that are lucky/unlucky or symbolic? Ask elders in your community about numbers and about numbers in proverbs.

Diana-Viorela Burlacu compared the use of numbers in English proverbs and Romanian proverbs (2016). This research project had two steps. First, she analyzed the use of numbers 1-10 in

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<sup>50</sup> It is clear that I did not find many proverbs with numbers that were not the first word in the proverb. This discussion is only to show the method, not to explain Amharic proverbs.

the proverbs of each of the languages. Then she compared the results, showing similarities and differences between them.

After you have studied the use of numbers in proverbs in the proverbs in your collection, you can study the use of numbers in proverbs in two or more languages. Then you can compare your analyses of the use of numbers in the proverbs of more than one language, as was done by Diana-Viorela Burlacu (2016).

## 6.5 Grouping proverbs: enumerative and listing

In some languages, there are proverbs that cite a group of items. Here are examples from Somali and from Zhuang of China. Both of these examples have groups of three types of people.

“Of all men, **three** types are the worst: he who is not skillful, he who is not reasonable, and he who is not thrifty.” Somali (Kapchits 2020, 50)

“A man does not choose his road when hasty, he does not choose his food when hungry, he does not choose his clothes when he is cold.” Zhuang, China (Yangxian 2017, 126).

In the first example, the number “three” is included. I will use the label “enumerative proverbs” for this type of proverb, following Doctor’s example (Doctor 1993). The second proverb also includes three items, but it does not mention the number of the items. I will label this type of proverb “listing proverbs”. This category, “listing proverbs”, is a new idea. It is not yet clear if it is a useful distinction to distinguish them from enumerating proverbs.

I use the broad label “grouping proverbs” to include both “listing proverbs” and “enumerative proverbs”. If proverbs include a list and include the number, I will label them “enumerative proverb”. If proverbs include list items but do not use a number, I will label them compiled lists of what he called “grouping proverbs” from across the world. In this category, he included both “enumerative proverbs” and “listing proverbs”, though he only used the term “grouping proverb”. I “listing proverbs”.

I have found very few studies about this category of grouping proverbs, the most helpful being by Doctor (1993) and Kapchits (2018).

Marvin (1916, 265-283) have adopted his label “grouping proverbs” for the broad category of proverbs that list groups. Doctor used the label “enumerative proverbs” as he described examples from India (1993), so I have adopted his term “enumerative proverbs”.

Enumerative proverbs are an ancient form of proverb,<sup>51</sup> found in ancient Attic Greek, Sanskrit, and the Babylonian Talmud:

Greek (Attic) “Sea and fire, and woman is the **third** evil thing.” (Lazaridis 2007, 265).

Sanskrit “**Three** emptinesses are to be feared: life without knowledge, a country without relatives, a house without sons”. (Doctor 1993, 53)

Hebrew (Babylonian Talmud): “On **three** things the world stands: on judgment, on truth and on peace.” (texts written at least 1,500 years ago, Babylonian Talmud, Pirkei Avot 1:18)

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<sup>51</sup> In the book *Proverbs* in the Bible, there are proverbs that are built on a pattern built on both “three” and “four”. For example, “There are three things which are too wonderful for me, four which I do not understand: The way of an eagle in the sky, The way of a serpent on a rock, The way of a ship in the middle of the sea, And the way of a man with a maid” (30:18,19). This chapter does not discuss this type of grouping proverb.

When a proverb is a group of items (whether it is enumerative or simply listing), it is sometimes done to highlight one item, usually the last in the list. That is, it is sometimes the last item that is surprising, and important. Examine the following two enumerative proverbs:

“By **three** things may a person’s character be determined: By his cup, by his purse, and by his anger.” (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 65b)

“Keep **three** things clean: your body, your clothing, and your speech.” Amharic, Ethiopia (Daniel Aberra 2019, 157)

In both of the examples just given, the proverb begins by listing two outward items. But the real point of the proverb is not the two *outward* items, but rather it is the third item, the *inward* item. The purpose of the proverbs is to warn listeners about anger and to remind them about the importance of clean speech, not merely to wash their body and clothes. It is not the second item in the list that is important.

The following enumerative proverb warns of three evil things, in the Mediterranean context. The sea and fire are obvious evil things. The point of the proverb was the surprising third item, warning that a woman can be a great danger, also:

“Sea and fire, and woman is the **third** evil thing.” Greek, (Attic) (Lazaridis 2007, 265)

The following Irish enumerative proverb also warns of three evil things. The first two are common warnings about large animals. But the third is the main purpose of the proverb, a warning to beware of the Anglo-Saxons, people from England. Ireland was ruled by the Anglo-Saxon British when this proverb was collected.

“Beware of the hoof of the horse, the horn of the bull, and the smile of the Saxon.” Irish (Marvin 1916, 269)

## 6.6 Listing proverbs

Many proverbs list items with no number specified. I have found them in European, Asian, and African language communities. These lists do not include a word for a number, but it is very common that many of the lists contain three items.

“Let the eye fast, let the ear fast, let the ears fast.”<sup>52</sup> Gə’əz, Ethiopia (Afāwārq Tarāqāny 2008, 79)

“A generous man is nigh unto God, nigh unto men, nigh unto Paradise, far from hell.” Arabic (Marvin 1916, 266)

“A swan is out of place among crows, a lion among bulls, a horse in the midst of asses, and a wise man among fools.” Burmese (Gray 1886, 7)

“A man does not choose his road when hasty, he does not choose his food when hungry, he does not choose his clothes when he is cold.” Zhuang, China (Yangxian 2017, 126).

“A girl, a vineyard, an orchard, and a bean field are hard to watch.” Portuguese (Marvin 1916, 266)

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<sup>52</sup> This Gə’əz proverb is related to the famous Three Wise Monkeys proverb. The English form of this proverb contains an innovation, specifically inserting “evil”: “See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil.” The English form is an innovation from the proverb found in many other places in Ethiopia, Asia, and Europe, e.g. German “Not hearing, not seeing, not speaking” (Mieder 1987, 164). I am responsible for the translation of this proverb. Sadly, the compiler of the Gə’əz proverb collection did not cite his specific source so it is not clear how old the proverb is.

- “A man of thirty years of age is like a lion, a man forty years old is like a torn, worn mat, and a man sixty years of age is a fool.” Kashmiri (Marvin 1916, 266)
- “Of women, misfortunes, and gherkins [pickled cucumbers], the smallest are always the best.” Hungarian (Schipper 2003, 68)
- “Of land, fields; of sleeping places, a bed; greatest of all, grace.” Amharic, Ethiopia (Daniel Aberra 2019, 369):
- “Lokman Hekim said, ‘He who wants long life has a cool head, a clear heart, and a light foot.’” Turkish (Erişkin 2023, 223)
- “Sandals on the day of travelling; weapons on the day of fighting; arrows on the day of hunting.” Swahili, Kenya (Knappert 1985, 16)
- “The flea, louse, and nit each die under the fingernails.” Tibetan (Tsewang 2012, 152)
- “Earthquakes, thunderbolts, fires, fathers.” Japanese (Galef 1987, 48)
- “Sitting-without-getting-up, speaking without-waiting-for-responses, walking people on their way and not turning back: unpleasantness is what they breed.” Yorùbá, Nigeria (Owomoyela 2005, 54)

## 6.7 Enumerative proverbs:

Raymond Doctor has labeled this type of proverb “enumerative proverbs” (1993), writing about proverbs from India. Writing in Somali, Kapchits labeled a chapter of enumerative proverbs *Tiroley*, translated approximately as “Counting”.

Here is a collection of enumerative proverbs from different parts of the world, from different language families

- Arabic (Sudan): “Beware **three** things: travelling in the rainy season, eating unhealthy food, and marrying the daughter of a light-headed man.” (Ahmed 2005, 189)
- Arabic: “**Four** days for **four** occupations: a day of cloud for the chase, a day of wind for sleep, a day of rain for entertaining guests, and a clear (sunny) day for trade.” (Robertson 1932, 156)
- Borana Oromo (Kenya, Ethiopia): “If an old man insists on something, he may have **three** reasons: A right, a share, or a truth.” (Shongolo and Schlee 2007, 41)
- Burmese: “There are **three** kinds of mistakes: those resulting from lack of memory, from lack of planning, or from misguided belief.” (Becker 1995, 185)
- English: “Nature, time, and patience are the **three** great physicians” (Bohn and Ray 1859, 457)
- Gujerati, India: “There exist **three** persons who have to be obeyed: the father, the mother, and the guru.” (Doctor 1993, 56)
- Irish: “**Three** enemies of the soul: the world, the devil, and an impious teacher.” (Meyer 1906, viii)
- Italian: “To preserve a friend, **three** things are required: to honor him present, praise him absent, and assist him in his necessities.” (Bohn and Ray 1855, 542)
- Japanese: “There are **three** misfortunes in life: in youth, to lose a father; in middle age the death of a wife; in old age, to have no children.” (Marvin 1916, 279)

Kashmiri (India): “A young man without work, a mother dying and leaving a baby, the wife of an old man dying -- these **three** are terrible misfortunes.” (Marvin 1916, 269)

Somali: “Do not make friends with **three** [kinds of] men: he who does not allow anyone to be ahead of him, he who does not leave food for anyone, and he who does not talk to anyone.” (Kapchits 2020, 15)

Welsh: “**Three** things for which every one ought to be thankful: invitations, warning, and compliment.” (Jones 1784, 81)

Zaghwa (Sudan & Chad): “**Three** things are bad: knowing not, having not and seeing not.” (Norein 2006, 12)

It is very easy to notice that most of these enumerative proverbs are based on the number “three”.<sup>53</sup> In my study of enumerative proverbs from many places, “three” is the most common number in enumerative proverbs in all of the languages I studied. In a collection of 294 Somali enumerative proverbs, 223 are based on lists of “three”, 76%. However, “three” is not the only number used in enumerative proverbs. In the collection of 294 Somali enumerative proverbs there are 15 examples with “four”, six examples with “five” (Kapchits 2020).

Somali “A man has **four** guests: his strength, his wealth, his name, and his fruit.” (Kapchits 2020, 340).<sup>54</sup>

Persian, Iran: “**Four** things everyone has more than he knows: sins, debts, years, and foes.” (Marvin 1916, 270).

Sanskrit, India: “He who brought you forth ; he who invested you with the sacred thread ; he from whom you received instruction ; the giver of food ; he who saved you from danger—these **five** are to be remembered as fathers.” (Carr 1868, 406)

Sanskrit, India: “Perseverance, daring, courage, wisdom, strength, and valour; where these **six** are, there is God.” (Carr 1868, 387)

Sanskrit, India: “A fly, the wind, a harlot, a beggar, a rat, the head of the village, and the village accountant -- these **seven** are annoying to others.” Sanskrit, India (Marvin 1916, 265)

Sanskrit, India: “In this world, there are **eight** sacred objects: a Brahmin [caste], a cow, fire, gold, clarified butter, the sun, the waters, and a king as the eighth.” Sanskrit, India (Champion 1944, 162)

In analyzing listing and enumerative proverbs, you may find examples of sound-based art in the list of items. For his Gujarati data, Doctor wrote that ““enumerative proverbs’ more than any other rely heavily on \*alliteration as a mnemonic device in order to ensure that the enumerative element is successfully retained in memory.” As an example, he cited the following untranslated Gujarati example with alliteration in the second half (1993, 60):

*Tran cij evi ke kajiyana ghar:  
jamin, joru, jar.*

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<sup>53</sup> Many authors have written about the number “three” being used in folklore, e.g. the humorous and insightful article “The Number Three in American Culture” (Dundes (1980). This present chapter does not attempt to explore or explain why “three” is common, it only notes that it is the most common number in enumerative proverbs, from a wide variety of language communities.

<sup>54</sup> I am responsible for the translation of this Somali proverb, aided by Google Translate.

In the following enumerative proverb from Gujarati, the final syllable of each word in the proverb ends in *-an*, except for one word that ends with *-am*, which has a similar sound. (This is an example of “\*feature rhyme” , as explained in the Chapter 4.8

*Tran jan besharam:*  
*daryan, gadheyan, sarvan.*

In addition, notice that almost all of the vowels in the proverb are *a*, with only two examples of vowel *e*, an example of \*assonance.

Doctor also gave more Gujarati examples where the phrase introducing the list had sound-based art, built with nearly complete assonance (1993, 61). The article did not give a translation for this proverb.

*Tran kaca sara,*  
*tran paka sara,*  
*tran gayla sara,*  
*tran avela sara.*

Georgi Kapchits has also pointed out that sound-based artistry is found in Somali enumerating proverbs. Here is an enumerating proverb from Somali that also shows sound based art, with root-initial *h-* in three words.

*Saddex lama raaco: ma-horreeye, ma-hambeeye iyo ma-haasaawshe.*

“Do not make friends with three men: he who does not allow anyone to be ahead of him, he who does not leave food for anyone, and he who does not talk to anyone” (Kapchits 2020,15).

### 6.7.1 What kinds of items are listed in enumerative proverbs?

There are various kinds of items that are listed in enumerative proverbs. Here are some categories of items that are listed in enumerative proverbs, with examples:

Abstract nouns: “**Three** things on this earth are accounted precious: the **three** are knowledge, grain, and friendship.” Burmese (Gray 1886, 102)

Types of people: “There exist **three** persons who have to be obeyed: the father, the mother, and the guru.” Gujarati (Doctor 1993, 56)

Possessed items: “By **three** things may a person’s character be determined: by his cup, by his purse, and by his anger.” (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 65b)

Negated verbs “**Three** things are bad: knowing not, having not, and seeing not.” Zaghawa, Sudan and Chad (Norein 2006, 12)

Actions not to do: “One who desires another's friendship must not do **three** things — quarrel, enter into partnership with him, and pay attentions to his wife.” Burmese (Gray 1886, 86)

One noun with different modifiers: “A wise man should give utterance to speech of **four** kinds,— good speech, right speech, loving speech, and truthful speech.” Burmese (Gray 1886, 145)

Infinitives and object nouns: “To wear clogs, to get by graft, to take a squeeze.” Japanese (Buchanan 1965, 63)

### 6.7.2 Enumerative proverbs in riddles

Raymond Doctor explained that enumerative riddles in India can also be used as riddles. He gave this example (1993, 61):

“There exist **three** things which increase on increasing and which decrease on decreasing.”

The answer to the riddle is found in the full proverb:

“There exist **three** things which increase on increasing and which decrease on decreasing: sleep, sloth, and appetite.”

What kinds of grammatical moods are used in enumerative proverbs?

This is a topic that has not been examined in studying enumerative proverbs. Is the grammatical mood of enumerative clauses indicative, imperative, or interrogative? Most of the enumerative proverbs I have examined have been in the indicative mood, they state something. Some enumerative proverbs are imperatives, they give a command.<sup>55</sup> I have not yet found any enumerative proverbs in interrogative sentences.

Here are illustrative examples of enumerative proverbs in indicative and imperative grammatical moods. I have not found interrogative enumerative proverbs, but I expect that they exist in some language community.

*Indicative:* “There exist **three** persons who have to be obeyed: the father, the mother, and the guru.”  
Gujerati (Doctor 1993, 56)

*Imperative:* “Keep **three** things clean: your body, your clothing, and your speech.” (Daniel Aberra 2019, 157) Amharic:

### 6.7.3 Research projects:

Examine your proverb collection to see if there are examples of enumerative or listing proverbs. If you find these kinds of proverbs, put them in separate lists, one list for enumerative proverbs and one list for listing proverbs. Then study each list.

- How many of the proverbs in your collection are enumerative proverbs?
- How many of the proverbs in your collection are listing proverbs?
- What is the most common number in your list of enumerative proverbs?
- What is the most common number of items in your listing proverbs?
- Is the last item in a list the most important?
- Is the last item in a list unexpected?
- How many of these proverbs are indicative? How many imperative? Any interrogative?
- What kinds of items are found in enumerative proverbs?
- What kinds of items are found in listing proverbs?
- Do you find examples with sound-based art?

## 6.8 Family and relatives in proverbs

Every language community has certain expectations about how relatives should treat each other. Proverbs have talked about family and relatives from ancient days:

Biblical Hebrew: “My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother.”  
(Proverbs 1:8).

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<sup>55</sup> It is useful to remember that in many languages the imperative mood is also used with first person and third person verb forms. Some scholars use the term “jussive” for third person imperatives.

Demotic Egyptian: “A man who is weak, his wife is as a lioness before him” (El-Din 2001, 161).

Ancient Chinese: “The father conceals the misconduct of the son.” *Analects of Confucius*, Chapter XVIII.

Every language community has certain expectations about how relatives should treat each other. There will be proverbs about fathers, mothers, children, wives, husbands, and so on. These proverbs will reflect the culture’s expectations for people in these relationships. Proverbs about relatives will reflect the culture’s expectation about different kinds of relatives. The following example, from an old Japanese proverb, shows the traditional assumptions about mother-in-law and daughter-in-law: “The daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law are like a dog and a monkey [they do not get along well]” (Storm 1992, 171).

Some proverbs about family and relatives are very clear, they use clear words, like “mother”, “father”, “sister”, etc.

- “Clever father, clever daughter; clever mother, clever son.” Russian (Mieder 1986, 151)
- “The father acquires wealth, the son destroys it.” Tamil, India (Mieder 1986, 152)
- “Who the daughter would win, with the mother must begin.” German (Mieder 1986, 99)
- “Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are a tempest and a hailstorm.” English (Mieder 1986, 336)
- “Brothers and sisters are like hands and feet.” Vietnamese (Mieder 1986, 48)
- “Even if your cousin be a donkey, don’t ride him.” Pashto (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 133)
- “A *charsi* [drug addict] is no son.” Pashto (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 151)
- “Once a maternal uncle, nine-generation’s maternal uncle as well.” The author explained that this proverb is about the long-lasting importance and involvement of a maternal uncle (*zhang*) in relation to the younger relatives. (Bendi Tso et al 2023, 104).

Instead of mentioning relatives, many proverbs about family use metaphors that refer to family members. For example, there is a Pashto proverb that does not mention any family members, does not mention any people, but the proverb is about how children are like their parents, “As the flour mill, so will be the flour” (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 207,208).

There is a proverb found across Africa, that an elephant’s tusk or an ox’s horn is not too heavy. This is understood that family responsibility is not too heavy.

Here are other examples of proverbs that do use the word for any relative, but the meaning of the proverbs are about family members.

Bukusu (Kenya): (Barasa and Opande 2017, 163)

“A house does not leak because of a blade of grass that has been removed.”

Explanation: The absence of a woman is not a big loss to a household.

Bemba (Zambia): (Carey & FENZA 2021, 996)

“A dog does not die at the hands of its master.”

Explanation: “A father should not be too severe for his son.”

Bemba (Zambia): (Carey & FENZA 2021, 178)

“A cow will not abandon her calf.”

Explanation: “A mother will never abandon her child.

Chewa (Zambia): (van Kessel 2015, 32)

“However dirty it is, it is your own.”

Explanation: “Even if your relatives or children are not good, they are nevertheless yours.”

Chewa (Zambia): (van Kessel 2015, 108)

“The pumpkins are underdone, though there is fire.”

Explanation: “Even if your relatives or children are not good, they are nevertheless yours.”

In the last twenty years, there have been dozens (maybe hundreds) of articles, theses, dissertations, and books written proverbs and cultural values about women, (e.g. Schipper 2003, Hussein 2004, Kochman-Haľadyj 2020, and Lomotey 2019). Most of these publications quote some proverbs that give a low value to women and then conclude that their culture has a low view of women, e.g.:

- “Many sons, many blessings of God; many daughters, many calamities.” German (Schipper 2003, 95)
- “Women learn how to weep in order to lie.” Rumanian (Mieder 2003, 544)

Many of the authors do not think about the fact that even if their community has negative proverbs about “women”, they often have positive proverbs about “mothers”.

- “Of mothers and water, there is none that is evil.” Amharic (Ethiopia)
- “Though your mother be poor, she is still your mother.” Ovambo (Schipper 2003, 336)
- “There is no such thing as a bad mother.” Yiddish (Mieder 2003, 336)

There is a mistake, an important mistake, that is commonly found in studies of proverbs about women. In discussions about these studies, Wolfgang Mieder explained to me that almost all proverbs are old, they are traditional. Therefore, proverbs about women (and other subjects!) may represent *former* cultural values, values that are changing. This is a mistake commonly found in studies of women in proverbs. For example, the following English proverb speaks harshly about women, but it is from 1586.

“A woman, a spaniel [type of dog], and a walnut tree; the more you beat them the better they be.”  
English (Apperson 1929, 703)

This proverb is documented in 1878, but has not been in use for many decades.

Former cultural values about women are changing in many parts of the world. For example, in Ethiopia, Dereje Haile Mamo found that among the Wolaita, attitudes toward some traditional proverbs that demeaned women were changing. “Interviewees told me that the change that equally treated men and women in sexual matters came because of the influence of Biblical ideologies after the conversion of Wolaita society into Christianity... [the attitude about women] is improving because of the Biblical teachings” (2018, 102).

There is another group of proverbs that mention relatives. Some proverbs use the label for relatives metaphorically, such as this Yorùbá example:

“The eye, father of the body: nothing is as valuable as the eye.” (Owomoyela 2005, 80)

Some proverbs mention relatives, but they are not about actual family relations:

“The thought is father of the deed.” English

“Necessity is the mother of invention.” English

### 6.8.1 Research projects:

When you study proverbs that mention family members, think about two ways that this is done.

First, study the proverbs that clearly mention family words for members. Make a chart, writing down the family roles that are important in your community. As you fill in the chart, you may find more family roles to include. Here is a sample chart, but you will need to change it to fit your needs. For example, some languages have separate words for “older sister” and “younger sister”. For those languages, add columns for each word. Use the words that are important for your language community.

Be alert for proverbs that use the labels for relatives, but do this metaphorically, such as the Yorùbá example, “The eye, the father of the body; nothing is as valuable as the eye.” This proverb should not be included in this chart. It is interesting to have a list of relatives that are used metaphorically. Make a chart of words for relatives that are used metaphorically. Are there consistent patterns of meaning for labels for relatives? For example, does the use of the word “mother” usually/always refer to a source, or the provider of care?

Read through your collection of proverbs and look for words for family members. This is much easier if you can search the list with a computer. For each proverb that mentions a family member, write the proverb’s number in the box, as shown below. Some proverbs will mention more than one relative, such as this proverb from the Badaga of India: “He rejected his father’s advice and became a pig, he neglected his mother’s words and became a dog” (Hocking 1988, 369). It may also be useful to classify each example as positive, negative, or neutral about each relative.

**Table 25: A sample of how to count relatives in proverbs**

father	mother	husband	wife	Sister	brother	daughter	son	mother-in-law	father-in-law	grandmother	grandfather	etc
21	18	32	70	52	19	99	28	39				
39	29				86							

Table 25 is only an illustration, it does not show data from any language.

After you have studied all of your proverbs and filled in the chart, count how many proverbs mention each type of relative. List the relatives in order, showing which relative is mentioned most often and which are mentioned the least often.

The second way to study proverbs about family is to look for metaphors that refer to family members. Among the Chewa people, there is a proverb “What is fat comes out of the egg” (van Kessel 2015, 38). This proverb does not mention “parents”, but the meaning given in the book clearly refers to the parents, “If you are fat, long, tall, short, it is because of your parents.”

Here is another Chewa proverb about family members, “You should not love the watermelon, but the anthill (where the watermelon grows)” (van Kessel 2015, 201). This proverb means that a son-in-law should treat the mother-in-law well, not just the daughter (his wife).

To study how proverbs use metaphors to refer to family members, you can make the same kind of chart as Table 26 for studying proverbs that clearly mention relatives. A possible example is shown below:

**Table 26: Beginning of sample table to study kinterm symbolism**

father	mother	husband	Wife	Sister	brother	daughter	son	Mother-in-law	Father-in-law	grandmother	grandfather	etc
tall tree	flower	bench	basket	knife	rope	cup	axe	blanket				
house post	bowl	field	orange						bird		tree	

When you study metaphors about relatives, instead of simply writing the proverb identity number for each proverb, it is useful to write the words of the metaphor in the box.

If you study values that are changing in your community, you should investigate how often the proverbs about those values are being used. You will find useful suggestions about how to measure if certain proverbs are used by younger people in Chapter 8.1 on testing how well proverbs are known and used. When you study proverbs about family, kinship, and relatives, think carefully: “Do these proverbs reflect current values in the community?” Also, ask community members if they agree with the values of traditional proverbs about relatives.

If you study proverbs about family and relatives, it may be useful to count which words are used in the most proverbs. Also, think about what these proverbs tell us about the society’s values in the past and in the present.

As you study your proverb collection, if you find enough proverbs about relatives, it may be enough for a thesis or dissertation. If you think you may have data for a dissertation or thesis, ask your advisor for advice.

The results from your study of relatives in proverbs is probably enough to write a journal article or a chapter. Here is an example of an article about family relationships and proverbs:

Degener, Almuth. “Family Relationships in Proverbs from Northern Pakistan”. *Proverbium* vol. 39 (2022) 1-28. doi:10.29162/pv.39.1.56.

## 6.9 Persons names in proverbs

In some language communities, names of people are found in many proverbs. Sometimes, these names are related to characters found in multiple stories. Sometimes certain names are associated with some characteristics, such as wisdom, bravery, boldness, foolishness, selfishness, etc.

In many languages, there are proverbs that include personal names. The proverbs of some language communities include examples that mention some names in many proverbs. For example, there are so many Spanish proverbs that mention the name “Pedro”, that Ángel Iglesias-Ovejero wrote a 30 page article about these proverbs (2018).

Some names are mentioned in only one or two proverbs in a collection:

For example, in Yorùbá, there is a proverb, “Falana look to your own affairs.” In a footnote, it is explained that “Falana is a proper name that has come to be associated with uninvited intrusion into other people’s affairs” (Owomoyela 2005, 68).

Sometimes, names have no special significance, they are just names. For example, there is a Jibbali proverb “Gaidam came, Gaidam died.” The author did not explain any special significance to the name (Castagna 2024, 49).

Sometimes, names of famous legendary or historical people are used in names. For example, there is a Dari proverb that mentions a person named “Rostam”, “Rostam’s name is better than Rostam.” Rostam is a legendary Persian hero and athlete. “This proverb is used when a person’s name or reputation is better than his actual abilities” (Zellem 2015, 161).

In anecdotal proverbs, the names of people in stories may also be mentioned in proverbs. For example, there is a Japanese proverb that mentions the name Yuranosuke, “Too late was Yuranosuke” (Okada 1955, 132). The reason that his name is included in the proverb is that this anecdotal proverb refers to the character Yuranosuke in a play.

The use of names in proverbs is different from using proverbs as names. In several African language communities, mostly Bantu language speaking communities, names are made from proverbs (Abubakari and Issah 2024, Unseth 2024). For example, among the Venda people of South Africa, there is a name *Nyadzawela* “Trouble”, derived from the proverb *Nya Dzawela Vhanwe na sea matshelo zwi do ni welavho* “Mock someone who is trouble and you will be next to suffer” (Simelane-Kalumba 2014, 50). Similarly, among the Mamprusi community of Ghana and Togo, there is a name *Zori* “Gold” taken from the proverb *N’yela salema zori nwon ban dubo o-ni pae sa lema* “I am the golden hill; he who knows how to climb will get gold” (Davis 1992, 65). This chapter is not about such names derived from proverbs, but about standard personal names used in proverbs. If a language community creates names from proverbs, a collection and analysis of these names and their proverbs could be an article or a chapter of a thesis.

### 6.9.1 Arabic:

The name “Goha” is found in many Arabic proverbs. “Goha is a known figure in folklore as a wise fool with many stories told about him” (Matta 2021, 189). There are a number of Arabic proverbs that include the name Goha. It is noteworthy that three of these are \*dialogue proverbs.

“‘Oh Goha, count your sheep!’ He said, ‘One is standing and one is sleeping.’” (Smyslova 2015, 503)

“‘Where is your homeland, Goha?’ He said, ‘Where my wife is.’” (Smyslova 2015, 503)

“‘Oh, count the waves of the sea, Goha.’ Goha said, ‘The comings are more than what passed.’” (Online)

“Goha went up the palm tree, carrying his slippers.” (Online)

### 6.9.2 Greek:

The name “John” is found in many Greek proverbs. Again, it is noteworthy that one is a dialogue proverb.

“‘Good day, John.’ ‘I am sowing beans.’” (Negris 1831, 64)

“‘All day, good John, but at night, bad John.’” (Negris 1831, 91)

“We have not seen the child and we have called him John.” (Negris 1831, 133)

The following website listed more Greek proverbs that contain the name John:  
<https://medium.com/slackjaw/20-greek-sayings-about-the-name-john-82ce15709194> (viewed October 2024)

“John is afraid of the beast, and the beast is afraid of John.”

“Everyone talks about the chariots and John talks about the pie.”

### 6.9.3 Spanish:

There are also many Spanish proverbs with the feminine names “Maria” and “Maruja”, e.g. “María has a sister named Ana” (Gallarín 2018, 129). Ángel Iglesias Ovejero has written at least six articles about proverbs that have various names, such as Francisco/Paco. Articles about names in Spanish proverbs have been written for other names, as well. Spanish researchers have published a number of studies on the use of names in proverbs (Iglesias-Ovejero 1980, 1987, 2002, Sánchez-Escribano and Pasquariello 1959). The masculine name “Pedro”, and forms of it, are found in many Spanish proverbs. There are so many proverbs using the name “Pedro” that Ángel Iglesias-Ovejero wrote a 30 page article in Spanish about these proverbs (2015). From my small collection, two of the proverbs with “Pedro” are \*dialogue proverbs.

“‘Add soup, Pedro.’ ‘And did you give bread?’” (Iglesias-Ovejero 2015, 85)

“Now that I have sheep and sheep, everyone tells me: – ‘It’s a good time for you, Pedro.’” (Iglesias-Ovejero 2015, 85)

“To whom God gives it, Saint Pedro blesses it.” (García 2008, 35)

“San Pedro is doing well in Rome.” (García 2008, 51)

### 6.9.4 English:

In the past, many English proverbs have used the name “Jack”. Kornieva studied the used of names in English proverbs, not just proverbs with “Jack” (Kornieva 2021, 59).

1605 - “Good Jack makes a good Jill.” (Apperson 1929, 259)

1669 - “Good Jill may mend a bad Jack.” (Apperson 1929, 259)<sup>56</sup>

1659 - “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” (Apperson 1929, 8)

1712 - “Covetousness breaks the Jack.” (Apperson 1929, 117)

1865 - “Black Jack rides a good horse.” (Apperson 1929, 52)

Apperson’s collection of English proverbs includes over 30 proverbs containing the name “Jack” (1929).<sup>57</sup> But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, no new English proverbs were created with the name “Jack” (Doyle, Mieder, Shapiro 2012).

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<sup>56</sup> The last two proverbs are \*counter proverbs.

<sup>57</sup> I counted examples of “Jack” in English proverbs by accessing the book on archive.org.

### 6.9.5 Belorussian:

Belorussian scholars have found enough proverbs about names to make them a topic of study (Kotova and Boeva 2023).

### 6.9.6 Polish:

There are Polish proverbs with proper names. Iwona Steczko, has written an entire article on the name “Anna” and related forms, “proverbs where names Anna, Hanka, Anulka symbolize a common rural girl” (Steczko 2015, 189)

### 6.9.7 Turkish:

There are a number of Turkish proverbs that mention names. Some proverbs use the names of characters that are known from stories. The name Lokman Hekim is common in proverbs. “He is a controversial religious man who is reported to be given wisdom in the Qur’an and is a prophet. In Turkish folklore, he is referred to as a physician,” that is, *Hekim* (Erişkin 2023, 223).

“Lokman Hekim said, ‘He who wants long life has a cool head, a clear heart, and a light foot.’” (Erişkin 2023, 223)

“If Lokman Hekim comes, there will be no cure.” (Erişkin 2023, 223)

“What should Lokman do in desperate trouble? In desperate trouble, no one can do anything, even Lokman Hekim.” (Erişkin 2023, 223)

“Consider every night as powerful, everything you see as Hızır.” (Erişkin 2023, 223)

“Consider it as Hızır to those who come to your door, and be ready for whatever you give.” (Erişkin 2023, 223)

Another name found in Turkish proverbs is “Mehmet Ağa/Efendi”. It is the name of a character in stories and who has been the subject of many proverbs and idioms” (Erişkin 2023, 223).

“The pleasure is yours, but the vineyard belongs to Mehmet Agha.” (Erişkin 2023, 224)

“Mehmet Agha (Effendi) in yellow boots.”<sup>58</sup> (Erişkin 2023, 224)

### 6.9.8 Ukrainian:

There are also proverbs using names in Ukrainian, [<https://gigafox.ru/en/pregnancy-planning/poslovicy-i-pogovorki-s-imenem-sofya-sobstvennye-imena-v/>].

“Arinushka Marinushka is no worse.”

“Good daughter Annushka, if mother and grandmother praise.”

“Grandfather Mosey loves fish without bones.”

“Ephraim loves horseradish, and Fedka loves radish.”

### 6.9.9 Russian:

Russian scholars have also studied proverbs with personal names, e.g. (Wanjun, Korneyeva, and Markova 2020, Sergeevich 2022). In Russian, the name “Avdey” is a “kind-hearted, humble

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<sup>58</sup> This is an \*‘‘anecdotal proverb’’, based on the story of someone searching for a man wearing yellow boots.

person”. The following proverbs are found on a website (<https://status-lady.ru/en/russkie-poslovice-i-pogovorki-sobstvennye-imena-v-poslovicah-i-pogovorkah.html>).

“Stupid Avdey’s neck was stabbed.”

“Emelya went, still waiting for him a week.”

“Yermoshka is rich: he got a cat and a cat.”

“Hungry Fedot and empty cabbage soup in the hunt.”

“Each Alenka praises her cow.”

“Grandmother Varvara was angry at the world for three years; with that she died, that the world did not know.”

### 6.9.10 Jibbali:

A collection of 300 Jibbali proverbs contains four proverbs with personal names. The first two of these proverbs are anecdotal proverbs, the names in the proverbs being drawn from their stories.

“You, Kieza, wake up. You have no husband and no *baydhah*.” (Castagna 2024, 109)

“The mirror of Damoon.” (Castagna 2024, 131)

“Gaidam came, Gaidam died.” (Castagna 2024, 49)

“Neither Sa’ad nor Masa’oud is better.” (Castagna 2024, 117)

The book of Jibbali proverbs did not explain any significance to these names. These names were not explained as having particular significance in these proverbs.

### 6.9.11 Research projects:

To study names in proverbs, you begin by studying your collection of proverbs. Look for names of people in your proverb collection. At the top of each column, write the names that you find in proverbs. Then, write the number of each proverb that contains the name. Table 27 shows you one possible style of chart. You can do a spread sheet or a table in a document. Choose a method depending on your computer skills, keying the number of names in your data, etc.

**Table 27: Sample table to study names used in proverbs**

	Name 1	Name 2	Name 3	Name 4	Etc.
Proverb number					
Proverb number					
Proverb number					
Proverb number					

After you study the results in your table, do you find a large number of proverbs include personal names? Do you find that a single name (or a very few names) is found in many proverbs? What symbolism or stereotype does the name have?

Are there character qualities that are associated with people with the same names? Wise, brave, bold, foolish, evil, lazy, liar, selfish, has many children, rich, fearful?

The study of names may not be a large enough topic for a dissertation or thesis, but may be enough for a chapter. If there are several proverbs that use the same name, this could be a topic for an article.

## 6.10 Metaproverbs

A metaproverb is a proverb about proverbs. In many language communities have proverbs about proverbs. Two famous metaproverbs are known from Nigerian authors. Wole Soyinka wrote, “Proverbs are the horses of speech, if communication is lost we use proverbs to find it”, in *Death and the King's Horsemen*. Chinua Achebe quoted, “Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” in *Things Fall Apart*.

In Mieder's bibliography of proverb studies, there are twelve publications listed as describing metaproverbs (Mieder 2009, 1050). Meta proverbs have been documented from Africa, Asia, and Europe. Other metaproverbs include:

Afar, Ethiopia: “Proverbs are the cream of language.” (Parker 1971, 283)

Alaaba, Ethiopia: “Proverbs finish the problem.” (Schneider-Blum. 2009) )

Arabic, Egypt: “A proverb does not lie.” (Mahgoub 1968, 76) )

Igala, Nigeria: “Whoever has seen enough of life will be able to tell a lot of proverbs.” (Pachocinski 2000, 206)

Igbo, Nigeria: “When a proverb about a ragged basket is mentioned, the person who is skinny knows that he/she is the person alluded to.” (Pachocinski 2000, 391)

Igbo, Nigeria: “When my proverbs finish, that is when my talking will finish.” (Emezue 2021, 93)

Kambaata, Ethiopia: “A hasty man talks without using a proverb.” (Desalegn Haile Arficho 2020, 104) )

Kirgiz, Afghanistan: “A proverb is the quintessentially active bit of language.” (Dor 1982, 67) )

Kirundi, Burundi: “He who has a father knows the proverb of grandfather.” (Nibafasha 2013, 59) )

Mongolian: “Proverbs are in the heart, light rain is in the clouds.” (Наранчимзг and Чимзгсайхан 2021, 168)

Oromo (Guji and Arsi), Ethiopia: “One proverb gives rise to a point of discussion and another ends it.” (Jirata. 2009, 36 and Yullu 2008, 43)

Oromo, Ethiopia: “A conversation without proverbs is like stew without salt.” (Cotter 1990)

Russian: “A saying is a flower, a proverb is a berry.” (Mertvago 1995, v)

Tibetan: “Honey is sweet to the mouth; proverb is music to the ear.” (Tsewang 2012, 2)

Turkish: “The wisdom of the proverb cannot be surpassed.” (Gözpınar 2014, 3)

Yorùbá, Nigeria: “Bereft of proverbs, speech flounders and falls short of its mark, whereas aided by them, communication is fleet and unerring.” (Owomoyela 2005, 12)

Yorùbá, Nigeria: “If a proverb has no bearing on a proverb, one does not use it.” (Owomoyela 1988, 178)

Zhuang, China: “The purest water is spring water, the most concise speech is proverb.” (Yangxian 2017, xxiv)

Yombe, Zambia, Angola, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo: “We speak clearly to the fool, but to the wise we speak in proverbs.” (Visce 2017, 35)

### 6.10.1 Research Projects:

Some language communities have a notable number of metaproverbs. For example, Gözpinar listed over a dozen metaproverbs in Turkish (Gözpinar 2014, 3). Examine your collection for metaproverbs. If your collection is digital, you can search for the word “proverb” or “proverbs”. Also, ask people who know many proverbs, ask them to think of proverbs that mention “proverb/proverbs”.

A collection of metaproverbs, even a few, can be part of a thesis or dissertation. If you have enough, they might be the basis for a journal article.

## 6.11 Riddle proverbs

In the beginning of this book, there is a discussion of the definition of “proverb”. In some language communities, one word includes what English calls “proverbs” and also what English calls “riddles”. For example, from the Efik of Nigeria the word *nye* can include the English concepts of “story, riddle, tongue-twister, proverb” (Finnegan 2012, 413, fn. 2).

The blurring of the boundary between proverb and riddle is said to be found in the ancient Biblical book Proverbs. Proverb 21:1 is translated by Alter as,

“Water-stream, a king’s heart in the hand of the Lord,  
Wherever He desires, He diverts it.”

In a footnote, Alter explains, “The proverb is also cast in riddling form: What could it mean that a king’s heart is streams of water in God’s hand (or power)?” (Alter 2019, vol 3, 416 fn. 1).

Finnegan has rightly observed that in Africa, riddles are often very closely related to proverbs. Riddles are expressed briefly and concisely, and involve analogy of meaning, sound, rhythm, or tone. The two forms are closely connected. They are often very closely related to proverbs. Like proverbs they are expressed briefly and concisely; they involve analogy, whether of meaning, sound, rhythm, or tone; and the two forms are sometimes even combined in the ‘proverb-riddle’” (Finnegan 2012, 413). A saying that in one context may be considered a proverb can also be used as a riddle in another context.

In Malagasy, Haring explained that “The precedent of this riddle is well known in Madagascar as a proverb”, “One finger cannot catch a louse? - One person cannot do all the work” (Haring 1985, 174).

For example, "One finger cannot catch a louse? -One person cannot do all the work" (Kuusi 1974:68-69). The precedent of this riddle is well known in Madagascar as a proverb;

Finnegan gave an example of a riddle proverb from the Anang Ibibio (Nigeria), “The vine grows along the edge of the pit.” The answer was another proverb, “He is made to speak in public” (Finnegan 2012, 418).

Finnegan also cited an example found in communities speaking Central Bantu languages, “Something I threw over to the side of the river.” The answer is “eyes”, based on the proverb “The eye crosses a full river” (Finnegan 2012, 418).

Matti Kuusi said that among the Ovambo people of Namibia,<sup>59</sup> some sayings are used “as both proverbs and riddles”. The following proverb can be used as a riddle, “A long millet [stalk] brought birds to the field”. The answer is another proverb, “A long entranceway brought war (quarrels) to the house” (1969, 306). On one occasion, somebody said an answer is “Beautiful girls bring young men to the house.”

From India, Raymond Doctor observed that almost all “enumerative proverbs’ function both as proverbs and riddles” (1993, 62). He gave this example:

Riddle: “There exist three things which increase on increasing and which decrease on decreasing.” (Doctor 1993, 61,62)

Answer: The answer to this riddle is found in a proverb: “There exist three things which increase on increasing and which decrease on decreasing: sleep, sloth, and appetite.”

### 6.11.1 Research project:

In your community, are riddles and proverbs separate categories emic? That is, do people in the community think of these as separate categories? If they are not separate categories, then the topic of riddle “proverbs” may not be a useful category for you to research.

As you study your collection of proverbs, think about whether they can be used in riddles. Talk to elders and those who are experts in folklore. Ask them if they can think of riddles that use proverbs. It may be useful to ask the question reversed: can they think of any proverbs that can be used as riddles.

If you find proverbs that can be used as riddles, or riddles that can be used as proverbs, collect them and describe their structure. This may be enough for a chapter of a thesis or dissertation, but not the main topic for a thesis or dissertation. It may be enough for an article or book chapters or journal articles.

### 6.12 Average words per proverb:

Proverbs are different from normal speech in several ways. For example, they are often formed with poetic features and non-standard grammatical features. Across languages, proverbs are shorter than sentences in normal conversation or written prose. This is one of the reasons that proverbs are difficult for outsiders to learn, because some words or parts of words are not included in some proverbs.

Studying English proverbs, Mieder noted “the average length of a proverb consisting of about seven words” (Mieder 2004, 7). Villers (2022, 11) calculated the average length of English proverbs as 6.1 words. For Czech proverbs, Czermák determined an average length of 4.7 words for proverbs in the Czech National Corpus (Norrick 2014, 22). In Tajik, Bell calculated that the average proverb is 5.6 words (2009, 107). In other languages, the average number of words per proverb will be different.

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<sup>59</sup> Kuusi cited a missionary named T.A. Tirronen as the source of this data (1969, 306).

### 6.12.1 Research projects:

To count the average number of words in proverbs, you must have a large collection of proverbs. I estimate that it requires at least 300 proverbs, hopefully more, to calculate the average number of words per proverb.

If you have some linguistic or grammatical training, you can study some of the reasons that proverbs are short. For example, are some words or parts of words left out of some proverbs? When proverbs are formed with parallelisms, sometimes neither half is a full grammatical clause. Sometimes each half is only a noun, as in this Amharic example, “A wise person is a peacemaker”:

*“Awaqi, astaraqī”.*

Wise-one peacemaker

Some researchers have counted the proverbs in a language collection. I do not know if any scholar has calculated the average number of words per proverb in several languages. To do this, you must have large collections of proverbs from different languages. Calculate the average number of words per proverb for each language. Compare the average for each language and discuss the similarities and differences. It will be interesting to compare the average number of words in languages are related and also compare the average number of words in unrelated languages. This is a project that has not been done before.

The calculation of the average words per proverb can be a part of a thesis, but not enough for a thesis or dissertation. However, it could be a useful part of a thesis or dissertation, but it would be enough for a journal article. A comparison of the average in multiple languages may possibly be enough for the foundation a thesis or dissertation.

But you will have to study the grammatical differences between several the languages. For example, Chinese has very short words, but Malagasy has long words. The average number of words per proverbs will be different in these two languages because of the grammar.

## 7 Figures of speech in proverb

Proverbs are not simply statements. They are often formed with a variety of figures of speech. This is only a short list of the many kinds of figures of speech in proverbs.

### 7.1 Adynaton

Adynaton is the statement of something that is impossible. For example there is a modern Greek adynaton proverb, “The fly is eating iron” (Marketos 1945, 125). Over 2000 years ago, Herodas and Seneca mentioned the Greek proverb “The fly is eating iron” (Papademetriou 1970, 96,96). This adynaton proverb has continued in use for over 2000 years. It is not possible for a fly to eat iron, so this is adynaton.

Adynaton proverbs are an ancient form of proverb. They were also found in ancient Sumerian: “From 3600 oxen there is no dung” (Gordon 1958, 15). One is found in the Bible: “Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Can one go upon hot coals, and his feet not be burned?” (Proverbs 6:27-28). The concept of adynaton as a literary device is ancient, mentioned by the ancient Roman, Lactantius Placidus, who died about 400 AD (Rowe 1965, 387).

Some proverbs state things that are completely impossible. Adynaton is similar to hyperbole, but it is more extreme. It is not always possible to distinguish hyperbole from adynaton. Hyperbole is generally a statement of an extreme situation, but something that might possibly be true. Adynaton, on the other hand, is something that is absolutely not possible. Sometimes, it may be more helpful to think of adynaton and hyperbole as two points on a continuum.

An adynaton proverb says something that is impossible. Examples from a variety of languages show that adynaton is a figure of speech that is used in the proverbs of many different languages:

Kafa (Ethiopia): “A greedy boy grows teeth inside the womb.” (Wodajo, 73)

Uyghur (China): “To avoid hurting my friend’s feelings, I got pregnant (said by a male).” (Fiddler 2017, 6)

French: “When hens have teeth.”

Telugu (India): “The hen he has caught has four legs.” (Marvin 1916, 171)

Karbi, (India): “Do not argue; a bear lays eggs.” (Sharma 2016, 183)

Sumerian: “My ox will provide milk for you.” (Gordon 1958, 15)

Amharic (Ethiopia): “If a blackbird turns white, a donkey will grow a horn.” (Daniel Aberra 2019, 174)

Hausa (Nigeria): “What is sought for has been gotten, for the itinerant trader’s wife has given birth to a donkey.” (Usman 2014, 894)

Nubian (Mattokki, Sudan): “Just now the donkey’s horn grew.” (Jaeger 2025, 317)

Krio (Sierra Leone): “Salt has climbed the hill.” (Kamara 2006) :

Japanese: “Rice cakes grow on trees.” (Galef 2000, 56)

If a proverb says that something impossible does not happen, that is not adynaton. This is illustrated by the following Nubian proverb from Egypt. “A hand does not cover the sun” (Habbob

2022, 44). This proverb says that an impossible thing does not happen. If “not” is removed from the proverb, then the proverb would be an example of adynaton, “A hand does cover the sun”.

The word “\*adynaton” is a Greek word. When referring to more than one example of adynaton, some authors use the Greek plural form of the word, “adynata”. Adynaton has been studied in proverbs by very few scholars. Mieder’s 2009 bibliography of proverb studies lists only two articles under “Adynaton”, articles by Grambo (1970) and by Opata (1987). His 2023 bibliography lists only one, by Rowe. Because proverb scholars have not written much about adynaton proverbs, I have created and written some categories and some ideas that are original and speculative.

Grammatically, adynaton proverbs can be indicative, interrogative, or imperative. These three categories are listed below:

Indicative: Chichewa, Zambia, “When bad luck hates you, a tortoise changes into stone.” (Kessel 2015, 186)

Interrogative: Behar, India, “Can a dead horse eat grass?” (Christian 1891, 73)

Imperative: Korean, “Drive an ox into a rat hole.” (Ha 1970, 119)

In my research, it is my strong impression that most adynaton proverbs are indicative, then interrogative proverbs are second in quantity, and least common are imperative proverbs. These rankings by frequency are a general statement based on study of several languages. However, in a specific language this may not be true.

### 7.1.1 Indicative

Proverbs that contain an indicative statement that is not possible must be understood by the hearers. That is, hearers need to know that these proverbs are not lies, but deliberate statements of something that is impossible. Many of these talk about the actions of animals.

Bengali, Bangladesh: “Being a dwarf and hoping to grab the moon.” (Ferguson & Preston 1946, 379)

Chichewa, Zambia: “When bad luck hates you, a tortoise changes into stone.” (Kessel 2015, 186)

Chinese: “The sun will come out from the west.” (Jiao and Stone 2014, 4)

Chinyanja, Malawi: “The hoe handle is bleeding.” (Chakanza 2000, 232)

Gonja, Ghana: “It is the puny frog that begets the elephant.” (Tanko 2020, 123)

Hassāni, Western Sahara: “A tick carrying a camel.” (Baba 2014, 147)

Herero, Namibia: “I have drunk the moon deeply.” (Kavari 2013, 38)

Japanese: “Even a stone Buddha will say something on occasion.” (Buchanan 1965, 74)

Japanese: “A kite [bird] may breed a hawk.” (Okada 1955, 158)

Lahu, China: “An egg smashing a rock, bean-curd stopping a knife.” (Matisoff 2011, 291)

Lur, Iran: “She cried so hard that stone turned to water.” (Freidl 2015, 175)

Luyia, Kenya: “Two geniuses will successfully roast a fly.” (Wambunya 2005, 7)

Marathi, India: “The crow a hundred years; the cobra a thousand years.” (“They are supposed to live this time.”) (Manwaring 1899, 41)

Mongo Democratic Republic of Congo: “The hen pushed the elephant.” (Korse 1984, 149)

Multani, Pakistan: “A string of camels is passing through the needle’s eye!” (O’Brien 1881, 119)<sup>60</sup>

Nubian (Egypt): “Finally, the donkey has climbed palm tree.” (Habbob 2022, 113)

Nubian, Egypt: “As if the rooster lays an egg a year.” (Habbob 2022, 126)

Šironga, Mozambique: “I will work when chickens have grown teeth.” (Bishop 1922, 402)

Arabic, Sudan: “The dung beetle’s marriage to the moon.” (Zaki and Wyatt 2015, 32)

Tamil, India, Sri Lanka: “When an ass climbs a ladder, we may find wisdom in women.” (Kuttikat, George, George 2022, 71)

Tatar, Russia: “His castrated stallion will give birth.” (Mukhtarova, Tsyganova, and Radionova 2020, 44)

Tatar, Russia: “Their bull is going to calve.” (Mukhtarova, Tsyganova, and Radionova 2020, 44)

Yiddish: “Two corpses go dancing!” (Kumove 1984, 136)

### 7.1.2 Interrogative

Some adynaton proverbs that are interrogatives have been called “sarcastic interrogatives” (Doyle 2012).

Amharic, Ethiopia: “Who will remove meat from the mouth of a lion?” (Daniel Aberra 2019, 396)

Babylonian: “Does a woman conceive when a virgin, or grow great without eating?” (Dendy 2015, 53)

Badaga, India: “Will a cow become food grain, will the utensils be of any profit?” (Hocking 1988, 385)

Behar, India: “Can a frog catch cold?” (Christian 1891, 73)

Behar, India: “Can a goat eat nine *maunds* (37 kilos) of flour?” (Christian 1891, 73)

English: “Does a snake have knees?” (Doyle 2012, 2)

Hebrew: “Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Can one go upon hot coals, and his feet not be burned?” (Proverbs 6, 27-28).

Malay, Malaysia: “Can a dead elephant be covered with a sieve?” (Maxwell 1883, 42)

Tumbuka, Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania: “Can one lip take meat from a lion?” (Sanderson 1952, 45)

Yorùbá, Nigeria: “Who has caught a fish in the river with mouse-trap, who has seen the vulture in the hairdresser’s salon?” (Raji-Oyelade 2012, 103)

### 7.1.3 Imperative:

In my research I have noticed very few \*adynaton proverbs that are imperatives.

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<sup>60</sup> This is similar to the adynaton statement of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew 19:24 “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.”

Bengali, Bangladesh: “Have you no cow, then milk the ox.” (Morton 1832, 10)

Eastern Tangale, Nigeria: “You should change into an ant-hill for me.” (Jungraitmayr 2006, 75)

English: “Bite the wall.”

Korean “Drive an ox into a rat hole.” (Ha 1970, 119)

Nubian, Egypt: “Take a part of the bread and put it back complete.” (Habbob 2022, 32)

Wolof, Senegal: “Wait until the chicken grows teeth.”

(<https://graceinsenegal.wordpress.com/2016/10/25/wolof-proverbs-101/>)::

#### 7.1.4 Research projects:

Study your collection carefully. Mark the proverbs that you think may be examples of adynaton. Make a list of these proverbs that say impossible things.

Examine the adynaton proverbs in your collection, sorting them into these three categories: indicative, interrogative, imperative proverbs. Which of these three grammatical categories has the most proverbs?

**Table 28: Using a table like this can help you organize your adynaton examples.**

	Proverb numbers
Indicative	
Interrogative	
Imperative	

Discuss these proverbs with others. Do people think that these are impossible situations? Ask how these proverbs are used. Ask why they think the proverb uses an impossible situation. When do people use a proverb that says something is not possible? For example, the Mongo people have a proverb “The hen pushed the elephant”. “It is said when an unimportant person accuses a very powerful man” (Korse 1984, 149).

Are adynaton proverbs used sarcastically? As a rebuke? As a plea?

\*Adynaton proverbs are too small a topic for a thesis or a dissertation. However, if a language has enough of them, they could be the topic for a section, or maybe even a chapter, of a thesis or dissertation. If you find enough adynaton proverbs in your collection, they may be the basis for an article in a journal or a chapter in a book.

#### 7.1.5 Anecdotal proverbs: proverbs related to events or stories

In many languages, some of the proverbs are based on specific events or stories. To understand the proverb fully, the listener must know the event or story. The story is not said as part of the proverb. Some of these proverbs are from the last line of stories.

For example, there is a Chewa proverb from Zambia about a rat, but the proverbs is only understood when a person knows the story that is the foundation for the proverb. The proverb is “The rat heard the first words.” Van Kessel explains the story behind the proverb, “Someone said, ‘The rat is eating my tomatoes, tomorrow I will put a trap.’ But then [later] he said, ‘I will put a trap today.’ The rat heard only the first statement, and got caught. Listen well, get the whole story” (van Kessel 2015, 146).

The use of anecdotal proverbs is both widespread and ancient. There is an example from a proverb in the Bible about King Saul. Because Saul had once prophesied, “Therefore it became a proverb, ‘Is Saul also among the prophets?’” (1 Samuel 10:12).<sup>61</sup>

Another ancient \*anecdotal proverb is from Attic Greek, 2,400 years ago. A man named Hippoclidides offended the father of his fiancé so the father cancelled the wedding. Hippoclidides’ calm reaction led to the Greek proverb, “Hippoclidides does not care” (Lelli 2023, 26).<sup>62</sup>

There is also at least one anecdotal proverb based on the Islamic *Hadith*, “Aren’t I free to do whatever I want in my place?” (Mohamed 2017, 58). In the story, a sea traveler dug under his feet but others rebuked him. The traveler replied with this sentence which has become a proverb, “Aren’t I free to do whatever I want in my place?”

Proverbs in several languages are based on an anecdote in Aesop’s Fables. A fox could not reach the grapes on a vine, so, “The fox said, ‘The grapes are sour’.” This basic anecdotal proverb is now found in many languages, with slightly different plants, such as Swedish: “‘Sour,’ said the fox about the rowanberries” (Lauhakangas 2012).

Writers from Africa, Asia, and Europe have used the term “anecdotal proverb” for proverbs that are based on stories (Dathorne 1966, Monye 2008, 52-54, Badalkhan 2000, 64 fn. 38, Odebunmi 2006, 166, Basset 2013, Lelli 2023). To understand these anecdotal proverbs, the listener/reader must know the story that is linked to the proverb. It does not matter if the story is true or not. An important chapter on anecdotal proverbs is “Like Proverb, Like Tale: On the Interrelationship of Bulgarian Proverbs and Folktales” by Hrisztova-Gotthardt (2014). (The book can be freely downloaded.)

\*Anecdotal proverbs as a class have not been the focus of much study. In Wolfgang Mieder’s two-volume *International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology* (2009), there is only one item indexed under “anecdotal proverbs”, and it is only two pages.

Since then, Bérengère Basset has written about anecdotal proverbs in European history, e.g. “Le proverbe au crible de l’anecdote: la source plutarquienne dans les Adages d’Érasme” (Basset 2013).

In at least one language, there is a special word for proverbs that are based on stories. The Balochi (Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan) have a separate label for proverbs that have associated stories (Badalkhan 2000, 43). That is, most proverbs are called *batal*, but “proverbs with background stories are called *basittuk*” (2000, 43). One of the Balochi *basittuk* proverbs with a background story is, “Keep always an aged person with you.” The proverb is based on the story of a long journey into the land of darkness by King Solomon. An old man was the only person who knew a way they could find their way out to escape back to the land of light. As a result, King Solomon said that they should always have an aged person with them (Badalkhan 2000, 56).

Anecdotal proverbs may be based on historical events or on fictional stories. There is a famous Russian proverb based on a fable “Swan, Pike and Crab”, by Ivan Krylov. In this story, three animals were pulling a cart but could not agree on which way to pull it, each choosing their

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<sup>61</sup> King Saul prophesied, again, and this second incident was also linked to the proverb, 1 Samuel 19:24.

<sup>62</sup> Lelli wrote that by writing this story, Herodotus is the “first author known to us to dwell on the genesis of an apophthegmatic expression turned into a proverb” (Lelli 2023, 26). However, the Biblical anecdotal proverb about Saul is significantly older.

own direction, so each went away, leaving the cart behind. The last line of the story has become a proverb, “The cart is still there.” To understand this proverb, the hearer must know the story behind the proverb.

In collections of proverbs from many language communities some proverbs are described as being based on a story, a real event or a fictional one. The examples below show that this pattern of “anecdotal proverbs” is widespread. These examples of proverbs are from Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and Europe.

### 7.1.6 Africa:

Fancy Chepkoech Soi (2014) presented 30 Kipsigis proverbs from Kenya and for at least seven she explained the story that is the foundation for the proverbs. It is not possible to understand these proverbs without knowing their stories, such as “Idling around will lead to *Seroi* being eaten.” In Kipsigis, this is an anecdotal proverb about a cow named *Seroi*. This proverb is based on a Kipsigis story about a man and his wife who had only one cow. “One day this couple went out idling and only to find out at the end of the day that the cow had given birth and had eaten the placenta. They ended up butchering their only cow to eat because it died. This cow was named *Seroi*. The proverb therefore is an allusion to this story and is meant to warn people against idleness as it leads to depletion of wealth” (Soi 2014, 59,60).

Georgi Kapchits explained a Somali proverb that is based on a story: “A snake said, ‘A man is ungrateful’” (Kapchits 2000, 156). The story tells that the snake had refrained from biting a man. Later, the man attacked the snake and the snake’s complaint is this proverb, “A snake said, ‘A man is ungrateful’.” If a person does not know the story, the person cannot understand the proverb.

There is an Ndebele proverb of South Africa, “He made me hold the stone”. A lion caught a monkey and was ready to eat it. The monkey pointed to a rock above them and told the lion that they had to stop it from falling. The monkey told the lion to hold the rock while he ran to get others to help, which was a lie. Another animal found the lion and asked why he was pushing against a rock. The lion replied with this sentence that has become a proverb, “He made me hold the stone” (Pelling 1977, 57).

### 7.1.7 Asia:

In Japanese, a line from a play has become an anecdotal proverb, “Too late was Yuranosuke” (Okada 1955, 132). People who hear the proverb need to know the story. In the play, the character named Yuranosuke arrived just too late to say farewell to his master; the master had just committed suicide.

There is a Behar proverb from India: “Take one and give two” (Christian 1891, 7,8). To understand the proverb, the hearer needs to know the story about how a tortoise tricked a greedy man, refusing to repay two favors for only one.

Among the Marathi of India, this proverb is used: “‘What a beauty!’ ‘What a voice!’” To understand this, the listener must know that it is about a donkey and camel. The donkey flatters the camel and the camel replies flattering the donkey. The proverb is used to talk about people who give undeserved compliments (Manwaring 1899, 15).

From the Badaga people of India there is also a proverb that requires knowledge of a story: “The Kota of Ketti falling flat under [the other’s] feet says, ‘My feet are still on top!’” (Hockings 1988, 357). The story is that there was a wrestling match between a Kota man from Ketti town against a Badaga wrestler. The Kota man was thrown to the ground but raised his feet above the

other man's feet and claimed that he was not defeated, 'My feet are still on top!'" Hockings adds, "Essentially the same proverb also occurs in Gujarati, in reference to" other ethnic groups (1988, 357). To understand this proverb, in Badaga or Gujarati, a person needs to know the anecdote about the wrestling match.

In Pashto of Afghanistan and Pakistan, there is a proverb about heads and tails, "Though there may be many tails there should be but one head" (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 324). The proverb does not mention snakes, but a person can understand the proverb only if they know the story about the two snakes. One snake had one head but 100 tails. The other snake had 100 heads and only one tail. When the forest was burning, the snake with 100 heads could not decide which path to follow and it was burned. The snake with one head chose a path and escaped. It is a good proverb, but the hearer must know the story.

### 7.1.8 Pacific:

On the island of Tonga, there is a proverb which is a son replying to his mother's complaints, "What a lot of talk, cry to be barren, cry to have children" (Collocott 1925, 211). A person hearing this proverbs need to know the story, that the speaker's mother had complained that he was working so hard that he was shaking the island.

In the Samoan community of the island of Samoa in the Pacific, there is a proverb that is made of three proper nouns: *Aniui*, *Anini*, *Aveavai*. The story behind this proverb is this: "The town Anini was burning, and Aveavai said it served them right, for they were thieves; but the fire spread to Aveavai, and they, too, were burned out" (Pratt 1893, 50). Note the sound-based art in this proverb, each word begins with *A-* and ends with *-i*.

### 7.1.9 Europe:

In the Greek of 1,900 years ago, Zenobius recorded a wellerism that Lelli identified as \*anecdotal, "As wordless Hipparchion said, 'According to our fathers'" (Lelli 2023, 118, fn. 215). Since the speaker is described as "wordless", it is a memorable proverb.

Basset has also discussed anecdotal proverbs in Europe, crediting Erasmus as being instrumental in spreading some of these in his collection of proverbs published in Latin (2013).

Several \*anecdotal proverbs from Aesop's Fables. For example, various forms of "sour grapes" are found in proverbs in a number of European language communities, including French (Flonta 2011), Sorbian (Slavic in Germany) (Hose and Mieder 2004, 56), Danish (Brøndegaard 1970), Finnish (Lauhakangas 2012), Norwegian (Grambo 1972, 102), Swedish (Lauhakangas 2012).

### 7.1.10 Research projects:

There has been very little scholarly mention of anecdotal proverbs as a category. I am sure that anecdotal proverbs are found in very many (probably all) languages, but nobody has studied this question broadly, so there is no clear, previous methodology to guide you. When you discuss proverbs with local elders, ask about proverbs that are based on stories. Here are some ideas of what you can do in studying anecdotal proverbs.

Read through your collection of proverbs. Some proverbs cannot be fully understood without knowing a story. Mark and count the proverbs that are related to history and stories. To do this well, you will need to discuss proverbs with elders. When there is a story for the proverb, write down the story for each of these proverbs. You will have to explain you are looking for stories

related to the creation and meaning of a proverb, not looking for stories of how the proverb has been used. Count the number of the anecdotal proverbs in your collection, that is, proverbs related to a story.

After you have identified the anecdotal proverbs in your collection, you can test how many people know the anecdotes that are linked to each anecdotal proverb. This would require testing people of different ages. Combining a set of anecdotal proverbs together with testing people's knowledge of the stories may be enough for a thesis or dissertation.

Ask your professor for advice. If you are writing a thesis or dissertation, one section of your analysis could be a group of anecdotal proverbs with their explanation stories. If you have a large number of anecdotal proverbs, you could test people to see how many of the people know the stories. Do young people know fewer stories?

If you are studying proverbs and hoping to write an article for publication, a group of \*anecdotal proverbs may be the data for an article. The title could be "Stories needed to understand some proverbs from X" or "Anecdotal proverbs from X".

If you have a large collection of proverbs and many of them are \*anecdotal proverbs, this might be interesting as a booklet for local people. The title could be something like "Stories about our proverbs".

If you have enough proverb collections from nearby language communities, you can do a comparative study of anecdotal proverbs. Are some anecdotal proverbs found in multiple languages, as was mentioned above, where the same basic anecdotal proverbs is used by the Badaga and Gujarati, as was mentioned above. (Hockings 1988, 357)? It will probably be impossible to decide which group had the proverb first.

For doing a comparative study of \*anecdotal proverbs, read through collections of proverbs from different languages and count the number of anecdotal proverbs. (Make sure that you are reading collections of proverbs that you know the anecdotes or collections that include explanations for anecdotes.) Compare the percentage of anecdotal proverbs in the different languages. Nobody has studied and compared how many anecdotal proverbs there are in any language. To do this, you will need access to large collections of proverbs. If language communities are close neighbors, do they have some of the same anecdotal proverbs?

Count the \*anecdotal proverbs in nearby languages and calculate the percentage of anecdotal proverbs in each language. Do the language have similar percentage of anecdotal proverbs? Or, you may compare the percentage of anecdotal proverbs from languages that are far apart. Do some languages have a higher percentage of anecdotal proverbs and other languages have a lower percentage of anecdotal proverbs? These ideas have not been studied. Ask your professor for advice. If you do this kind of research, you will be doing original research. Please explain your methodology carefully.

## 8 Thinking about proverbs

As you think about the proverbs in your community, which proverbs are known by the most people and your collection? Are there some proverbs that show the community's cultural values? Are there some proverbs that people are no longer using?

### 8.1 Paremiological minimum, the most common proverbs

In every language community that uses proverbs, there will be some proverbs that are known by all adults in the community. Even children will know many of these common proverbs. But there will also be some proverbs that are known by only a few of the adults. The core set of proverbs that are known by the adults of a community is called the “paremiological minimum”, abbreviated “PM”. The PM has been defined as: “1. A set of proverbs that all members of society know; 2. A set of proverbs that an average adult is expected to know or is to be familiar with” (Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Varga 2014, 358). Others have proposed additional definitions (Đurčo 2014).

For those who read English, these are a key sources about the paremiological minimum. The idea of “paremiological minimum” was created by Permjakov, the described in English by Mieder (1993), with a more recent discussion by Đurčo (2014).

Permjakov, G. L. 1989. On the Question of a Russian Paremiological Minimum. *Proverbium* 6, 91-102.

Mieder, Wolfgang. 1993. “‘Proverbs everyone ought to know’. Paremiological minimum and cultural literacy.” Wolfgang Mieder, ed., *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season: Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age* pp. 41-57. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mieder, Wolfgang. 1992. “Paremiological Minimum and Cultural Literacy.” In *Creativity and Tradition in Folklore: New Directions*, edited by Simon J. Bronner and W. F. H. Nicolaisen. Provo, UT: Utah State University Press.

Another very useful source about “paremiological minimum” is freely available online:

Đurčo, Peter. 2024. “Empirical Research and Paremiological Minimum.” In *Introduction to Paremiology. A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies*, edited by Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita Aleksa Varga, 183–205. Berlin: De Gruyter Open.  
file:///C:/Users/abby\_farmer/Downloads/10.2478\_9783110410167.8.pdf.

This useful concept of paremiological minimum was originally developed by Grigorii Permjakov sometimes spelled Permiakov (1989). He did careful testing to determine that the Russian, PM was 538 proverbs . Permjakov found that 538 proverbs were known by 90% of adults. Later, he selected 300 of proverbs to be translated for \*bilingual proverb collections (Đurčo 2014, 184). He did careful testing to determine that the Russian PM was 538 proverbs, but he created a second, smaller list of 300 for a specific purpose. Because he used two different numbers (538 and 300), we can see the flexibility of the concept of PM. This shows that different sizes and different definitions of the PM can be useful for different purposes.

If you collect many proverbs in a language community, you hope to include the proverbs that are the paremiological minimum in your collection, and also other proverbs. If you are collecting a small number of proverbs, it is likely that all of the proverbs in a small collection are part of the paremiological minimum.

Studies of the paremiological minimum have been done for several language communities, including from Europe (e.g. Ukrainian, Spanish, Hungarian), also communities from Asia (e.g. Gujarati, Nepali, Chinese), and Africa (only Somali).

It is very useful to think of the paremiological minimum as we study proverbs. Proverb scholars do not agree how to precisely define the paremiological minimum. But it is still a useful concept even if it is not precisely defined.

All agree that the paremiological minimum is the set of proverbs that adults in the language community will know. But how should this be *precisely* defined? Is it the proverbs known by 95% of the adults over the age of 35? Or is it the proverbs known by 90% of the adults over 40? The proverbs claimed to be used by 90% of the adults over 25? The 100 proverbs that are known by 85% of the adults over age 30? If you do research on the PM in a language community, you will have to create your definition of the PM. You will probably try different definitions and compare the size of the lists of proverbs. When you write about your results, explain your definition and your methodology carefully.

It is important to know the (approximate) age of people you test. Older people know many proverbs, children will not know as many. Also, people who are educated in colleges and universities may know fewer traditional proverbs, especially if they are educated in a different language than the community usually uses (Grotjahn and Grzybek 2000).

There is no percentage or number that is agreed upon in determining the paremiological minimum. It may be more useful to think of the project as ranking the most commonly known proverbs. It may be appropriate to simply identify the 100 most widely known proverbs. This not exactly the same as defining the PM, but it can be a similar useful research project.

It is more useful (and easier) for researchers to speak of ranking the “relative familiarity” of the proverbs in a speech community. By “relative familiarity”, I mean that the scholars can measure which proverbs are the more familiar to people and which proverbs are less familiar. A researcher does not have to say that a certain group of proverbs is the precise PM. Instead, the researcher can show which proverbs are more commonly known and used. This requires that the researcher provides a clear explanation of the methodology used to decide which proverbs are the most common.

No scholar has created a reliable way that can be used for all language communities to measure exactly which proverbs are the paremiological minimum. Therefore, instead of spending much time writing about the exact definition of the PM, here are different methods to compile a list of the most commonly known proverbs in a language.

We have seen that previous studies have not established a clear threshold for determining which proverbs belong in the paremiological minimum and which proverbs do not. Therefore, you should not feel you must determine the *exact* number of proverbs in the paremiological minimum for a language community. Rather, researchers can be satisfied to rank the familiarity of proverbs. A researcher may limit the research to identifying the most common 100 proverbs in a language community, or 150 or 200 proverbs.

### 8.1.1 Research projects

Some researchers have used a list and asked only if people are familiar with each proverb. Others have asked people to give a score about how familiar they are with each proverb. For example:

1. I do not know the proverb
2. I know the proverb but do not hear or use it often
3. I know the proverb well and I hear it and use it

Others have used more choices in the questionnaire.

1. Regularly used (heard or used at least once a month)
2. Frequently used (heard or used at least every two months)
3. Often used (heard or used at least four or five times a year)
4. Occasionally used (heard or used at least once a year)
5. Rarely used (hear or used only a few times in their lives) (Raymond 2010, vi)

Proverb scholars in different countries have used different methods to determine which proverbs are in the paremiological minimum. There is no single method that scholars agree on. If another scholar has studied the paremiological minimum in your region or country or in a nearby related language, you should study the methods they used. If you use the same method that other scholars working in your area have used, then your results can be easily compared to theirs. But, if you think that you have a better method, carefully explain why you did your study differently.

A study of the Czech paremiological minimum resulted in a list of the 100 most familiar proverbs in a large collection of Czech language material (Ďurčo2014, 184). The number 100 shows that the total number was chosen arbitrarily. With different definitions of PM, tests of German proverb familiarity produced very different-sized sets of familiar proverbs: 77, 65, and 300 proverbs (Ďurčo 2014, 185, 186). This shows that the PM is not a firmly defined concept.

A study of proverbs in India measured people’s frequency of proverb, using three categories: “commonly used”, “often used”, “rarely used” (Singh and Dorjey 2004, 278). The authors did not explain how these three categories were calculated.

Here is how one proverb researcher described the results of this kind of testing among the Lugbara community of Uganda, using a prepared list of proverbs. The people tested each marked how well each proverb is known in the community. They had a choice of four different levels (Dalfovo 1991, 50).

**Table 29: Classifying proverbs which are used more often in Lugbara**

1	well known by all Lugbara	41%
2	known by the majority of the people	51%
3	known only in some large areas or by a considerable group of people	5%
4	little known, though promptly recognized as proverbs by many	3%

A proverb project in Mongolia used a list and asked readers to rate how often they heard and used each proverb (Raymond 2014). The people doing the test were given five choices, as seen the following table of Mongolian data. You may want to reduce the choices to only four or even three. During their interviews, they asked people their age. For each proverb, during the interview, each person decided how often they hear the proverb and then marked one number. Later, the team members totaled the score for each proverb. Then the total scores for each proverb showed which

proverbs were used the most. I modified this chart from the work of the Mongolian project’s, adding a separate column to mark if the person *heard* the proverb or *spoke* the proverb.

**Table 29: Classifying Familiarity of Mongolian proverbs (Raymond 2014:vi,vii)**

			heard	spoke
5		Regularly (at least once a month)		
4		Frequently (at least once every other month)		
3		Often (at least four or five times a year)		
2		Occasionally (at least once a year)		
1		Rarely (only a few times in their lives)		

In a similar way, a team studying proverbs in China studied frequency of use (Jiao and Stone 2015:xi,xii). They interviewed 902 university students from different parts of China, asking about a class of Chinese sayings called *suyu*. They used a list of *suyu* in questionnaires to ask students about hearing and using each of these *suyu*.

**Table 30: Classifying Familiarity of Chinese *suyu* proverbs (Jiao and Stone 2015:xi,xii)**

	I have never heard this <i>suyu</i> before
	I occasionally hear others (not counting my family, relatives, friends, classmates, colleagues, or instructors) use this <i>suyu</i> colloquially
	I have heard this <i>suyu</i> used colloquially by someone close to me (including my family, relatives, friends, classmates, colleagues or instructors).
	I believe I can use this <i>suyu</i> appropriately
	I have used this <i>suyu</i> either in written or spoken form

This procedure revealed that there were big differences in how commonly people heard certain proverbs. It is noteworthy that young people and old people reported hearing the same proverbs with very differing frequency. Also, older people and younger people heard and used different proverbs. This is evidence that young people and older people may know different proverbs, not just know different amounts of proverbs. Therefore, if you test people to measure how much they use or how well they know proverbs, this shows that it is important to think carefully about what ages of people are tested.

### 8.1.2 Studying submitted proverbs:

Studying the paremiological minimum has usually been done with the help of published collections of proverbs that were already available. Discovering the most common proverbs can also be done while collecting proverbs. There is no exact definition of the “paremiological minimum”, but it is useful and interesting to count which proverbs are submitted the most often.

Some proverb researchers have asked community members to gather proverbs. These collection efforts are described in greater detail in Chapter 2. In Ireland, school teachers were told to tell students to collect proverbs from their families. Over 5,000 schools submitted collections of proverbs from their students (Carson-Williams 2018, Lysaght 2021). It was a huge amount of data.

An Ethiopian teacher told me that he asked students to ask their parents for 10 local proverbs. The students wrote the proverbs and then the teacher collected them all together. The teacher was interested in making a large collection, but the lists from the students also showed which proverbs were the most commonly known and listed by the parents. Because the students submitted only short lists, the data would have shown only a small number of the most common proverbs.

Using digital communications, Edward Zellem (2014) developed a method of gathering and studying proverbs that can give insight to the paremiological minimum of a language. He invited speakers of Pashto (spoken in Afghanistan and Pakistan)) to send in proverbs via a website or Twitter. His goal was to collect many proverbs and also interest Afghans in their proverb heritage.

It was not his original goal, but the digitally submitted data could also be used to propose a list of proverbs for the paremiological minimum. By counting which proverbs were digitally submitted the most often and which were retweeted the most often, he was able to calculate the most commonly-cited proverbs (2014:vi,vii).

### 8.1.3 Research projects:

The paremiological minimum is the best known proverbs in a language community. Here are some ways to study the PM in a language community. Many have written about the “paremiological minimum”, but few tell how to identify the set of proverbs that are in the paremiological minimum. In this section, I describe some methods to study the paremiological minimum.

In most of the research projects that I describe, I refer to a collection of proverbs in your language. If there is not a collection of proverbs already available, I describe ways to collect proverbs in Chapter 2 of this book.

By following one of these methods explained here, the researcher does not have to claim that they have discovered the exact PM, but only say that they have shown the ranking of the most commonly known proverbs in a language community. A researcher may go so far as to say that they have identified the 100 most commonly known proverbs among the sample population. That does not mean that these 100 proverbs, and only these 100 proverbs, compose the PM.

When you study the paremiological minimum, the most common proverbs, there are several possible ways to do it. Read about these different methods, then choose which method you will follow. Describe your methods very clearly when you write your results.

### 8.1.4 Writing proverbs that people remember

The first method is very simple. Choose the group you will research. Then ask people to write down all of the proverbs they can remember. (If some cannot write, provide a person to write for them.) This will need a time limit, less than half an hour, maybe as short as 15 minutes. This will produce short lists, but all the proverbs that people remember and write for this test will be very familiar proverbs. This will give you a short list of very common proverbs. It is important to know the age, education, and sex of each person. This may show differences by grouping. That is, it may show that people who are educated know fewer proverbs, or maybe that women know more

proverbs than men know, etc. It can be useful to do this sort of testing, followed immediately by more systematic testing to determine the paremiological minimum. Compare these short and longer lists and see how many of the proverbs in their shorts lists are in the paremiological minimum.

To prepare for testing to determine the PM, first a long list of proverbs is needed for the use of the people being tested. That is, the test must use a list of proverbs much longer than the expected result.

To reduce a large collection of proverbs to a usable size, one or (hopefully) more persons with a good knowledge of the proverbs in a community reads<sup>63</sup> through the collection of proverbs and marks down the ones that they think many people know, the ones that are the most common. This list must include familiar proverbs, but also some that are less familiar. If you are planning to identify the 100 most common proverbs, your questionnaire list should be at least 300 proverbs.

Note that this should not be the proverbs that they think everybody *should* know (that is the PD), but you want them to identify the proverbs that people *actually* do know. If the proverbs will be tested with a group of young people as research subjects, such as college students, then a college student should be one of the readers who helps prepare the list of proverbs and selects the ones they think may be most familiar. If the list is to be tested with older people, than at least one older person should help prepare the list.

How many proverbs should be used in the lists to be tested? You and some people who are wise about proverbs can sort through your long list of proverbs. The list you use for testing must be at least twice times as long as the list you plan to produce by the answers to the testing. If you are working to identify the 200 most common proverbs, then your testing list should have at least 600 proverbs, much longer than if you are working to identify the 100 most common proverbs. The proverbs used in the test list should include all the proverbs that you (and your team) think are the proverbs that many people will know, and also proverbs you think may be less well known.

Another method of measuring the relative familiarity of proverbs is to have people go through a list of proverbs and then indicate how often they have heard or used each proverb.

You will first decide how many proverbs you will use in the test list. (If you are a student doing this for a thesis or dissertation, it is very important that you talk to your advising professor about the size of the testing list.) After you<sup>64</sup> have prepared the test list of proverbs, ask many people how often they heard each proverb. This will show how often each proverb is used is used in the community. Here are the ways that some proverb researchers have collected information about how often each proverb on the list. After you read and compare these different ways of collecting data, you may want to change a method to fit your situation. For example, do you think that people's age, religion, education, or location may be important factors? Add a question to your questionnaire if you think you need more information about each person.

It is useful to sort the scores by the age of the people answering the questions. Do the older people hear and use more proverbs regularly, more than younger people? Which proverbs are more commonly used by older people? Which proverbs are more commonly used by younger people? Also, are there proverbs that only the young people use, but older people never say these proverbs?

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<sup>63</sup> If people are not able to read well, another person can read the proverbs for them.

<sup>64</sup> I wrote "you", which can be singular or plural in English. I assume that you (singular) will have people from the community helping you.

What age groups are useful in dividing your results? Is it helpful to break the people into more age groups? What are the best ways to divide people into age groups? Maybe people who are not yet married, people who are married but do not have a child old enough to work in a field, people who have grandchildren? These are some ideas. What are the best ways to categorize people in your community?

Asking people to score each proverb for frequency is often done with a questionnaire . It can be done with interviews, paper questionnaires, using a website, or by e-mail. If people cannot read (because of eye problems or lack of literacy), you can read the list of proverbs to people and write their replies. If data is gathered only online, it is likely to exclude the more traditional members of a language community since the more traditional people are usually not as active in using the Web.

It may be useful to ask people to answer separately about how often they *hear* each proverb and how often they *speak* each proverb. This information could be gathered by having more columns on the chart.

Any attempt to determine the paremiological minimum must be done with a large group of people.

Calculate the scores for the proverbs reported by men and women. Women may know some different proverbs than men know Also, calculate the scores for older people and younger people. Do you find a difference in the numbers of total proverbs that are known by these groups? Assume that older people always know and use more proverbs than younger people.

Whether people submit proverbs in person, by post, or by the internet, you must create a way to tabulate how often each proverb is submitted. You will also have to decide what to do if people submit slightly different versions of a proverb: is it the same proverb or a different proverb?

If you count the most common proverbs that are collected, this will be interesting to those who study the paremiological minimum. When you write your results, explain your methodology clearly.

A team of scholars created a dictionary of 500 Chinese proverbs and arranged them in frequency (Liwei Jao and Stone 2020). This was done for a language that has thousands of proverbs documented.

### 8.1.5 Analyzing proverb frequency in a written corpus:

The word “corpus” in this context means a large amount of textual material. A digital web-based corpus of language texts has been prepared for many languages. *Corpus* is Latin for “body”, here it means a “body” of text. The Latin plural for *corpus* is *corpora*.

For many languages that are each spoken by millions of people, there are large collections of texts that have been digitized. Each collection of text is called a “corpus”, Latin for “body”.<sup>65</sup> Each corpus is prepared a bit differently, for different purposes. You may need advice on how to use a text corpus that is available for the language you want to study.

You may read about corpora of written English, German, French, Russian, Finnish, Estonia, Spanish, Dutch, Norwegian, Basque, etc. But there are now corpora of texts available in many non-European languages from around the world, including Kurdish (Sorani) , Nepali, ArabicAmharic,

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65 The plural of “corpus” is often spelled as “corpora”, the Latin plural for “corpus”.

Hindi, Hausa, Zulu, Thai, Japanese, Swahili, Oromo, etc. You can study these corpora to examine the use of proverbs in these languages.

If there is an adequate digitized corpus available for the language you are studying, you can analyze this corpus to identify the most commonly used proverbs. František Čermák analyzed a digital corpus of Czech language texts. He searched through the corpus for proverbs and produced a list of 100 Czech proverbs that are most commonly used in written text (Čermák 2003).

If there is no formal, academic corpus of the language, you can also study a smaller digital source, such as social media messages in a language. For example, Joseph Kariuki of Kenya studied the frequency of proverbs in Maasai social media in Kenya (2014) ([https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/wp-content/uploads/2008/11/ebooks\\_maasai.pdf](https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/wp-content/uploads/2008/11/ebooks_maasai.pdf)). He compiled his collection from social media, especially Facebook. Then he studied the proverbs he found. This was a clever way to study Maasai proverbs in use and proverbs known by younger people, not just studying Maasai proverbs in old books. His publication does not indicate how many times each proverb was used. Proverb researchers who collect proverbs from a digital source can make their work more useful by counting and writing the number of times each proverb is used. There were not enough examples to show which proverbs were used most commonly, but it is a way of showing that these proverbs are used by those using Maasai in social media, probably younger people.

As you study the data, you may want to identify those proverbs that are quoted in their usual citation form, and then identify anti-proverbs, those that are changed from their usual forms.

If you find a corpus of language data, you have to evaluate if it is suitable (Kljajević and Šarić 2025). There are at least three ways that a corpus must be evaluated. First, is the content suitable? For example, a team built a corpus of Korean Twitter texts. Since Twitter messages are very short, the short texts in this corpus may be too short to contain many proverbs. If you consider studying a corpus, make sure it has enough variety of longer texts. The second way to evaluate a corpus is to try to use it to search for proverbs. Are you able to use the corpus successfully, or is it not suitable for your research? Thirdly, the corpus must be large enough for you to find many proverbs.

If you have found a corpus that is suitable for your proverb research, practice searching for proverbs in the corpus. You will find three kinds of results. First, you will find many examples of traditional proverbs quoted in their citation form. You can search for a few words of a proverb, instead of the entire proverb. For example, if somebody is studying English proverbs, they may search a corpus for “Don’t judge a book” This search string will find many examples of “Don’t judge a book by its cover.”

There is a second kind of result they will also find: \*anti-proverbs that twist the standard proverb, such as “Don’t judge a book by its movie”, built on the traditional “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” You will have to decide at the beginning how you will classify these anti-proverbs; will you classify them as quotations of the proverbs or as a separate category?

Also, you will find third kind of result, where some authors refer to a proverb, but not completely. They quote only part of a proverb, knowing that readers will know the entire proverb. For example, an author may write, “We know how we should not judge a book, but should we use the same rule to judge a person by the clothes they wear?” This includes a part of the proverb, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.”

Practice searching your corpus before you begin your actual research. How will you classify each of these kinds of examples?

1. Quoting the traditional proverb

2. Making an anti-proverb from the traditional proverb
3. Referring to a proverb without fully quoting it

Maybe you will classify them all the same, since the text is written with knowledge of the proverb and the author assumes that the reader will recognize the proverb. Or, maybe you will count both #1 and #3 as referring to the proverb, but classify #2 as a separate category. Decide this while you are practicing with the corpus, before you begin your serious research on the corpus. Then write a clear explanation of your system of classification in your document.

## 8.2 Paremiological desideratum

I have a new term and concept for proverb studies as we categorize and classify proverbs in a collection. Studies of the PM are *descriptive*, they describe which proverbs people know. It is a different question to ask which proverbs people *should* know. The list of proverbs in the paremiological desideratum is *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive*.

Within a speech community, people will feel that there are some proverbs that people in a language community *should* know. I call this list of proverbs the “paremiological desideratum”.<sup>66</sup> “Desideratum” means something that is strongly desired, something that is needed. The “paremiological desideratum” for a language community is the list of proverbs that people in a language community think people *should* know. I will use the abbreviation “PD” for paremiological desideratum.

Within any language community, different groups of people will have different ideas about which proverbs should be in the list of proverbs that people *should* know. For example, older men and younger men will produce different lists of proverbs that people should know, and their lists will be different from younger women. Maybe well-educated people will produce a different list than people with little education. But how different are these lists?

The PD (\*paremiological desideratum) is similar to the PM (\*paremiological minimum) because both of them are imprecise. But both can be researched to produce a list of 100 proverbs, or 150, or 200, etc. That is, in researching the PM, a researcher can determine the 100 most widely known proverbs. In researching the PD, a researcher can determine the 100 proverbs that members of the community think that people *should* know.

The “\*paremiological minimum” is well established in proverb studies. My concept of “paremiological desideratum” is new, so nobody has done this research yet. The paremiological desideratum is the set of proverbs that the community believes that people *should* know. My concept followed the wisdom of Wolfgang Mieder who pointed out that the list of English proverbs compiled by Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil (1988) was prescriptive rather than a study of the American paremiological minimum based on usage studies. Ďurčo also (2014:188) noted that studies of well-known proverbs can be either descriptive or prescriptive. That is, it can be a list of the proverbs that people know or a list of proverbs that people think community members *should* know.

Because a study of the paremiological desideratum has not been done before, there is no methodology that has been tested. As with other types of proverb research, you can choose to use questionnaires (paper or web-based) or interviews.

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<sup>66</sup> My ideas to create the category “paremiological desideratum” have been fed by the writings of Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil (1988), Mieder (1993 and 1994), Titelman (1996), Haas (2008), and Ďurčo (2014:185).

It is important that people understand that you are asking for proverbs that people should know and use, not just proverbs that people do know. That is, members of the community think these are the proverbs people should use.

The difference can be illustrated by telling people a local proverb that is well-known, but a proverb that supports a bad cultural value. For example, in English there is a proverb, "Might makes right." It means that strong people can do anything they want. Strong people say it to justify their bad actions. This is not a good proverb. This is a proverb that people should understand, but it is not a proverb that people *should* use. I do not want my children or grandchildren to use this proverb. It is my opinion that this should not be part of the paremiological desideratum.

### 8.2.1 Research projects

To study the PD, you can interview individuals or groups. You should choose a group carefully. You should decide if you want to study a homogeneous group, such as older women, younger men, school teachers, etc. Then you will test many people from that group. If you want to study the PD for the whole community, you will choose people from different groups of the community, a mix of people by age, sex, education, etc. It may also be important in some communities to study proverb preferences with different religious groups. Does one religious group prefer different proverbs? It may be possible to meet after a celebration, a service at a church, mosque, temple, or other religious gathering.

If you have time, you may also study the PD of groups that are different, such as older women and young women. Choose two groups that you think will have differences. Maybe the relevant differences are between urban and rural men, or maybe college graduates and rural elders. You can study the PD for each group, and then compare their lists of proverbs in their PD with another group. How similar or different are their PD lists?

As I suggested for studying the PM, you can begin studying the PD by asking people to tell proverbs that they think people in the community should know. This should be done with some sort of time limit. It would be interesting to compare these lists with the results of a larger questionnaire.

To begin your research, you will choose a goal for the number of proverbs for your PD. How long a list of proverbs do you want people to include in the PD? I recommend it not be larger than 100 proverbs. Some people may say that people need to know many more proverbs, but try to explain you are compiling a shorter list, a list of the proverbs they think are the *most* important.

For a topic such as PD, which is about community values, instead of working with smaller groups, it could also be done with groups of people discussing the list of proverbs. The process may take longer, but the community may be happier with the results. You will have to make a decision about how many people in the group you will count as agreeing that a proverb is in the PD. For example, if there are 8 people discussing proverbs, do you include a proverb in the PD if four accept it? Or, would you accept it only if 6 agree to accept? Discuss this with your professor and with the community members in your discussion.

Then select a collection of proverbs to test. The list should be at least two times as large as the PD you are creating. If you are interviewing people, you can read the list to the people. If this is being done with questionnaires (paper or on a computer), you will have to write the proverbs for the questionnaire. When you select the proverbs to test do not simply take them all from one part of your collection. You will probably need expert help as you choose the proverbs in the list for the questionnaires and interviews. It will be easier if each proverb has a number. When people say a

proverb should be in the PD, simply write the number of the proverb. The general procedure is the same, whether you are interviewing individuals or groups.

Ask different groups which proverbs they think are important for people to know. This is different from the paremiological minimum. Some people in the community may think this list is more important than simply the list of proverbs that people know.

If you are writing a thesis or dissertation, testing people to produce a list for the PD may be a suitable topic. It has never been done before, so it is important to discuss this with your advising professor. If you are writing an article, then you could test a small number of people and/or produce a smaller PD.

If you write about analyzing the PD, your writing must clearly explain three points. First, you will have to write a clear explanation of the concept of *paremiological desideratum* (PD) since this is a new concept for proverb studies. Secondly, you will have to write a clear description of the methodology you used in your research. Third, you will have to describe the group of people you tested and how they were chosen.”

### 8.3 People, occupations, religions, ethnic and caste groups in proverbs

Every language community has some stereotyped beliefs about certain groups of people. Some of these beliefs are positive, some are negative. People may be categorized by age, by sex, by occupation, by religion, by caste, by ethnic group, by wealth/poverty, by physical features, etc. As you study your proverb collection, do you find proverbs that mention some groups of people?

For this section, it is not enough that a proverb simply mentions type of person. This section is about stereotypes of people. For example, in Ethiopia, people who scrape and tan animal hides are often despised. The following proverb shows this attitude about scrapers/tanners:

“Among hide scrapers/tanners, there is no wise one.” Amharic, Ethiopia (Daniel Aberra 2019, 621)

This proverb describes a negative attitude toward hide scrapers/tanners. However, sometimes, a proverb mentions a group but is not expressing an attitude about the group (neither positive nor negative). The following Amharic proverb that mentions scrapers/tanners, but this one does not reflect the negative stereotype, it is only contrasting occupational groups, showing that each has its skills:

“Scrapers/tanners do their hides, carpenters do their wood.” Amharic (Daniel Aberra 2019, 21)

Below are examples of proverbs about groups of people with stereotypes. The examples are taken from many different communities around the world, demonstrating that these types of proverbs are found in many different communities.

#### 8.3.1 Ethnic groups:

Pashto: “The Khattak would never have become old had he not been worrying about the problems of others. (Khattak tribe is famous among the Pashtun for their kindheartedness.)” (Barlotti and Khattak 2006, 231)

German (sixteenth century): “Beware of a red Italian, a white Frenchman, and a black German.” (Başgöz 1993, 130)

Armenian: “The Turk said: ‘Eat first and speak afterwards’. The Armenian said: ‘Eat and speak at the same time’.” (Başgöz 1993, 137)

Pashto (Pakistan & Afghanistan): “The faithfulness and appearance of the Sikh are in his hair.” (Barlotti and Khattak 2006, 266)

Burmese: “If you meet an Arakanese and a poisonous snake, first kill the Arakanese.” (Minahan 2002, 169)

Yiddish : “Clever things come from the German -- yet they themselves remain fools.” (Kumove 1999, 249)

Georgian: “A Tatar<sup>67</sup> was caught for stealing a pig.” (Shurgaia 2014, 136)

Tibetan: “When the Tibetans are happy, they dress themselves in [festive] Chinese attire; when the Chinese are desperate, they [start to] speak Tibetan.” (Cüppers and Sørensen 1998, xxiii)

Badaga (India): “The Badaga wants mutton, the Kota beef, the Toda grazing, the Kurumba honey.” (Hocking 1988, 102)

Nuer: “The thoughts of a Dinka cannot be grasped.” (Carlassare 2013, 14)

Inside of Germany is a community speaking Sorbian, a Slavic language. The Sorbian community has felt oppressed by the German-speaking community. The Sorbians have many old proverbs that complained about the Germans (Hose and Mieder 2004). These six proverbs, from a collection of 630 Sorbian proverbs, shows that the Sorbians had very strong negative opinions of Germans:

“If the Devil wants to punish a Sorbian village, he sends a German.”

“The Germans among the Sorbs are like mice droppings in cereals.”

“It is seldom that boys return from Germany improved.”

“To preach to a Sorb in German means to take heaven away from him.”

“Praying in German will not help.”

“A Sorb will not better himself when he supports the German language.”

Some proverbs show that the proverbs of a language community can be critical of their own communities. Ask elders for advice. It is not clear to outsiders if these proverbs are meant to be serious or meant to be jokes, or some of each:

“Don’t let a Lur into your house – he covets your wife.” Lur, Iran (Freidl 2015, 34)

Sometimes the proverbs that people tell about their own community may give different, contrasting views of the community. The following two Jewish Yiddish proverbs from the Jewish community show both positive and negative views of Jews.

Positive: “A Jew, wherever he is, he’s no fool.” (Kumhove 1999, 175)

Negative: “Ten washings cannot cleanse one of Jewish talk.” (Kumhove 1999, 177)

### 8.3.2 Castes:

In several countries, people are identified by castes or clans. Castes are most widely known from India. Since caste identity has been such an important part of society in India, it is not

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<sup>67</sup> The Tatar are Muslims, so they do not buy or eat pigs.

surprising that there are articles about proverbs that mention castes in India (e.g. Srivastava 1969, Upadhyaya 1965, 1966, 1968a, 1968b). In other parts of the world, also, there are castes and or social groups that are similarly stratified. If you are studying proverbs among a community that has social classes that are labeled, ask for proverbs about these groups. Proverbs that mention a caste usually refer to stereotypes about that caste. Here are some examples of proverbs that mention castes.

Badaga, India: “The untouchable’s [person of lowest caste] word is a lie, and the *Toreya*’s [caste] word is immoral.” (Hockings 1988, 438)

India: “A silent [person from] bard caste ruins his household.” India (McNeil 1971, 5)

Tamil, India: “One can believe a donkey, but not a *Kammalan* [caste].” (John 2015, 57)

Nuri, Sudan: “Tinkers [caste], nomads, lepers, and mice, may God keep their homes far from us.” (al-Shahi 1972, 102)

India: “A low caste man is like a musk-rat, if you smell him you remember it.” (Risley 1908, 146)

India: “In old times men looked to caste when they married their children, now they look only to money.”<sup>68</sup> (Risley 1908, 46)

Behar, India: “The barber [caste] and the boatman [caste] are the only people who recognize their caste fellows.” (Christian 1891 111)

Behar, India: “The *Pāñre* [caste] would teach others, but he himself stumbles.” (Christian 1891, 110)

Tamil, India: “A *Parayan* [caste member] can cheat a village of *Pallans* [caste members].” (John 2015, 56)

Sanskrit, India: “Take an excellent woman even from a bad caste.” (Carr 1868, 438)

Amharic”, Ethiopia: “Among hide scrapers/tanners, there is no wise one.” (Daniel Abera 2019, 621)

Tukolor, Senegal: “As many weavers [caste] die from stupidity as die by the will of Allah (from natural causes).” (Dilley 2000, 153)

In the following proverb, the caste is not mentioned, but it is understood to refer to blacksmiths. In northern Cameroon, “Even blacksmith’s children are people whom everyone avoids because a common Kapsiki proverb says that: ‘A small snake has sometimes more venom than his parents’” (Kodji 2009, 49). The proverb does not explicitly mention the blacksmith caste, but people know that this is the meaning of the proverb.

### 8.3.3 Religious leaders:

Yorùbá, Nigeria: “Wherever one finds the chief priest of the *egúngùn* cult, there his secret grove is.” (Owomoyela 2005, 484)

Armenian: “Outside a [Orthodox] priest, inside a beast.” (Sakayan 1994, 284).

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<sup>68</sup> The proverb shows a change in values between the past and the present. This proverb means that caste is not so important if the low caste person has money.

Lur (Iran): “Nobody has seen a snake’s feet, a chicken’s milk, a Mullah’s bread.” (Freidl 2015, 43)

English: “Beware of the forepart of a woman, the hind part of a mule, and all sides of a priest.”  
From 1591 (Apperson 19, 47)

English: “Take heed of an ox before, of a horse behind, of a monk on all sides.” From 1640  
(Apperson 1929, 479) <sup>69</sup>

Tibetan: “All with shaven heads are not *monks*; all with saffron robes are not *lamas*.” (Tsewang  
2012, 48)

### 8.3.4 Cities

Spanish: “The noble man of Guadalajara, what he says at night, he does not do in the morning.”  
(Nuessel 2004, 281)

Amharic, Ethiopia: “A person from Addis Ababa [Ethiopia’s capital city] does not religiously fast,  
does not eat, does not rest, does not work.” (Daniel Aberra 2019, 414)

Yiddish: “In Posen [Polish city], women wear the pants.” (Kumove 1999, 250)

### 8.3.5 Occupations:

Lur, Iran: “A thief who steals from another thief is a smart thief.” (Freidl 2015, 226)

Lur, Iran: “Expensive or cheap, the shepherd’s lunch is nine flatbreads.” (Freidl 2015, 110)

Yiddish: “A bookseller is no scholar, a money changer is no millionaire, and a gravedigger no  
saint.” (Kumove 1999, 63)

Dari, Afghanistan: “A hundred strikes by a goldsmith, one strike by a blacksmith.” (Zellem 2015, 4)

Yorùbá, Nigeria: “The most one can expect of the blacksmith is confined to the smithy.  
(Owomoyela 2005, 86)

Pashto, Pakistan and Afghanistan: “The ignorant thieves broke into the mosque.” (Bartlotti and  
Khattak 2006, 333)

Pashto, Pakistan and Afghanistan: “To retrieve the dried trunk of a mulberry tree the carpenter  
jumped into the river.” (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 57)

Yorùbá, Nigeria: “There is no butcher who slaughters the vulture for sale.” (Owomoyela 2005, 220)

### 8.3.6 Leaders (king, chief, emperor, president, etc.)

Chewa (Zambia): “The king is like a rubbish heap.” (“The chief must deal with everything, hard or  
pleasant. All is thrown at him, all is told to him.”) (van Kessel 2015, 115)

Bemba (Zambia): “Whatever comes from the chief is never too small.” (Carey & FENZA 2021, 70)

Amharic (Ethiopia): “If the king is angry, go out quietly.” (Daniel Aberra 2019, 268)

Yorùbá (Nigeria) “The assembly is for the people; to the king belongs the crowd.” (“The populace  
may gather, but only the king can unite them.”) (Owomoyela 2005, 312)

Chewa (Zambia): “A quarrelsome chief does not build a village.” (van Kessel 2015, 115)

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<sup>69</sup> The last three proverbs about religious leaders are listing proverbs. Notice that they all contain three items and that the last item is the important item.

Chinese: “The heavens are high and the emperor is far away.”

Pashto (Pakistan and Afghanistan): “When a man informed a prince that there was a famine in the kingdom, he received the reply, ‘Why don’t they eat butter oil and rice like I do?’” (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 263)

### 8.3.7 Social roles:

Dari, Afghanistan: “A neighbor is closer than 100 relatives.” (Zellem 2015, 95)

Zhuang, China: “One enemy is too many and 10,000 friends are not enough.” (Yanxian 2017, 130)

Pashto (Pakistan and Afghanistan): “He who calls himself a Khan is never a Khan.” (Khan is a title of respect, a person of power.) (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 166)

### 8.3.8 Age groups:

Borana Oromo, Kenya: “A *hayyu* [wise elder] does not tongue-slip, but when he does, the talk ends.” (Shongolo and Schlee 2007, 60)

Sorbian, Germany: “Youth has no reason.” (Hose and Mieder 2004, 131)

Borana Oromo, Kenya: “The shoulder cannot go above the head.”<sup>70</sup> (Shongolo and Schlee 2007, 49)

Igbo, Nigeria: “What the elder sees when sitting down, if children climb a tree top, they will not see it.” (Oyeka and Nnabuihe 2024, 97)

People from a certain province or city or place:

Spanish: “The noble man of Guadalajara, what he says at night, he does not do in the morning.” (Nuessel 2004, 281)

Amharic, Ethiopia: “A person from Addis Ababa [Ethiopia’s capital city] does not fast, does not eat, does not rest, does not work.” (Daniel Abera 2019, 414)

Yiddish: “In Posen [Polish city], women wear the pants.” (Kumove 1999, 250)

### 8.3.9 Handicapped people:

Bemba, Zambia: “The blind who does not see may step on it. (Luck may also help the impaired: a blind person may find thing.)” (Carey and FENZA 2021, 103)

Akan, Ghana: “If a cripple does not know anything else, he knows how to clap his hands.” (Moasun and Mfoafo-M’Carthy 2021, 919)

Akan, Ghana: “Poverty makes us marry a hunchback.” (Moasun and Mfoafo-M’Carthy 2021, 921)

Njak, Nigeria: “The blind person will not allow his or her bambara nuts to be burnt twice in the fire.” (Pachocinski 1996, 263)

Samia, Uganda: “The deaf one carried it (feces) to his in-laws.” (Oscar 2020, 17)

Nuer: “The blind person cannot lead another blind.” (Carlassare 2013, 16)

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<sup>70</sup> In this proverb, “head” represents an elder.

### 8.3.10 Research projects

Study the proverbs in your collection and you will notice certain categories of people are found several times. Write the labels for these groups in a chart. Think about the proverbs in your collection and think about your community's values. Use the words/labels for social roles that are most useful for studying the proverbs of your community. Then write the number for each proverb that matches a category.

**Table 31: Sample table for sorting proverbs that mention categories of people**

	Proverb numbers for mentions	Proverb numbers for symbolization
Blacksmith		
Trader/merchant		
List other relevant occupations:		
Rich person		
Poor person		
Political leader		
Religious leader		
Matchmaker		
Old men		
Old women		
Children		
Blind		
Crippled		
Ethnic group #1		
Ethnic group #2, etc.		
Caste #1		
Caste #2 etc.		

If your research finds many proverbs that mention a category, then you should study the proverbs found in that category. Do the proverbs reinforce the culture's stereotypes and assumptions? For example, it may be useful to list the proverbs about castes and explain the cultural stereotypes for each caste. Other categories may be useful and presented in this way, also.

Depending on the goal and scope of your research, the data you write into this table for analysis may be enough data to analyze for an article. This sort of research, studying sets of proverbs related to categories of people and places, can be the basis for an article. This has been done by John (2015) and H. Upadhyaya (1965, 1966, 1967, 1968) and K. Upadhyaya (1983). Also, if you are preparing a large research project, such as a thesis or dissertation on proverbs, this type of material may be a part of such a larger project. Or, it may be part of a research project on culture (Sinha and Sinha 1967).

## 9 Proverbs and the Analysis of Cultural Values

Many proverb scholars claim that studying the traditional proverbs of a culture can give insights into the values of a culture. The assumption is that proverbs provide a window into local values, ethics, ideals, and traditions that direct interviewing will not. It is claimed that a collection of proverbs will show that certain traits and behaviors are valued and other traits are generally frowned upon.

Many authors believe that the proverbs of their community express their community's values so that outsiders can learn these values by studying their proverbs. This is seen in the title of the book by Awedoba about his own Kasena community, *An Introduction to Kasena Society and Culture Through their Proverbs* (2000). Similarly, a Vietnamese scholar titled his doctoral dissertation *Vietnamese Cultural Patterns and Values as Expressed in Proverbs* (Te 1962). An author from Iran subtitled her book on Persian proverbs *Learning Language and Culture Through Commonly Used Sayings* (Habibian 2002).

Outsiders have also researched worldview by studying proverbs. Again, their titles show their use of proverbs to explore the worldview of the language communities. Niemeyer wrote about the Bemba and Shona communities, *Proverbs: Tools for World View Studies An Exploratory Comparison of the Bemba of Zambia and the Shona of Zimbabwe* (1982). McKinney & McKinney spent years with the Bajju community of Nigeria and wrote "Worldview reflected in Bajju proverbs" (2003).

However, many proverbs are found in multiple language communities (Paczolay 1997, 2005). Grauberg (1989) believes that since many proverbs are so widely circulated, they are reflections of broad human experience, not any one group's viewpoint. For example, a nearly identical proverb has been documented from ancient Babylon (Pfeiffer 1958, 245), a proverb of the general form "A fly does not enter a closed mouth" or "A fly enters into an open mouth". The lesson and image of this proverb is appreciated by communities around the world.

Also, within any given language community, we find conflicting, contradictory proverbs (e.g. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" and "Never too old to learn"), which could support the conclusion that that proverbs are not trustworthy indicators of a community's worldview.

A researcher working with the Builsa community of Ghana classified proverb according to the cultural values and themes that the proverbs supported. The number of times that a particular theme was noted was taken to be an indication of how important this value is in Builsa society of Ghana (Moon 2009, 134). He listed the ten main core values (broadly defined), these ten values being touched on in 92% of the proverbs in his collection of 365 proverbs.

1. All have problems – learn how to manage them.
2. Do not boast and try to be independent; rather become a member of the community.
3. Small mistakes can lead to big problems and small acts of kindness can lead to greatness.
4. Life is full of unexpected and unexplainable events – adjust accordingly.
5. Poverty and laziness bring problems; therefore, work hard.
6. Honor those in authority since they can help you.
7. You cannot hide your character or actions from those close to you – it will be found out.
8. There are underlying meanings to things and events.
9. Use what you have today since tomorrow is uncertain.
10. God is the chief and he gives people what they need.

Bell studied Tajik proverbs and their values. The result is a list of cultural values, together with proverbs that support each value. His list of values includes “Things will go unavoidably wrong”, “Work hard!”, “Lies and liars are bad”, and “A family’s integrity must be well maintained” (Bell 2009, 162,163).

Nussbaum has used 10 proverbs to illustrate and explain American cultural values (Nussbaum 2005). He did not use these proverbs to discover American cultural values, but to document and illustrate cultural values, such as:

“You can’t argue with success.” (Be a success.)

“Live and let live.” (Be tolerant.)

“Time flies when you are having fun.” (Have lots of fun.)

“Shop till you drop.” (Buy more things.)

Cultural values can change when there are big changes in the culture or if people from the culture move to another place.

Every community will publicly say it has certain values. There will be proverbs that support these values. However, there are often proverbs that contradict these values. For example, in America, people will say that marriage is the union of two people who love each other and treat each other well, citing such proverbs as “Marriages are made in heaven.” However, there are proverbs that express an opposite value, e.g. “Life is a bitch, then you marry one” (Doyle, Mieder, Shapiro 2012, 141).

### 9.1.1 Research projects:

It is difficult to study the proverbs of a community to discover firm evidence of values that differ from other language communities. I do not recommend doing this for a thesis or dissertation.

Instead of studying a collection of proverbs to *discover* the values of a community, I recommend using proverbs to *illustrate* the values of a community. To do this sort of research project, you need to compile a list of cultural values in the community. To compile this list, you will do different kinds of research. Here are some ideas for how to compile a list of community values:

- Ask elders what they think are important local values
- Read what scholars have written about the values of your community
- Study what has been written about neighboring communities to get ideas about what local values may be, or not be

Discuss community values with elders:

- Ask elders how their values differ from the values of other communities
- Ask elders which values are changing
- Ask elders which values should not change
- Ask elders which values are important

What are cultural values? Here is a list of some cultural values from different places. This list will give you more ideas about the cultural values in your community:

- Family relationships are more important than your own gain
- A person should take care of himself before helping family members
- Truth is more important than friendship

- Friendship is more important than truth
- Hard work gives good results and prosperity
- Luck and other people gives good results and prosperity
- Gossiping is harmless
- Gossiping causes disharmony between people
- Young children should be carefully taught to obey
- Young children cannot know how to obey
- Religious practices are very important
- Religious practices are not important
- Careful planning is important for success
- Careful planning may be useless
- Bad things happen to people because they have done bad things
- Bad things happen to people even if they have done nothing bad
- Women and men are equal
- Women and men are not equal
- Husbands and wives are equal
- Husbands and wives are not equal
- It is important to follow traditions
- It is not important to follow traditions
- Obeying government officials is very important
- Obeying government officials is not so important
- Old people should be respected and honored
- Old people can be ignored or mocked
- Judges are expected to be honest and impartial
- Judges are expected to take bribes
- Being jealous of other people is very bad
- Being jealous of other people is not bad
- Sex should only be between married people
- Women should have sex only with their husbands, but men have no rules

After you have compiled a list of community values, for each of the values in your list, try to match proverbs from your collection that support these values.

The first step for this kind of research is the difficult part. You will create a list of the values of the culture you are studying. There are several ways to find cultural values to add to your list. Research cultural values in many ways.

- Ask wise people about cultural values. You can use the list above to help the elders think about their cultural values. They will give you more ideas for cultural values. Wise people may disagree with each other, so write down what they say and decide later. The elders may tell you traditional proverbs that support traditional cultural values.
- Ask the elders if any of their cultural values are different than nearby communities.
- Read your proverb collection carefully and see what values you see in the proverbs.
- Read what other scholars have written about the culture's values. You may disagree with some of what scholars have written, but reading their writings will give you some ideas.

- Read what has been written about other communities in the area. See what values you see mentioned.
- Read about cultural values (or worldview) and see what has been written. It may give you more ideas about your community.
- Ask elders what values they see are changing. They may say that young people no longer follow certain values. This may lead to interesting discussions of the values of different generations.

After you have prepared a list of cultural values, look for proverbs that support each cultural value. Since proverbs are often indirect, proverbs do not usually mention a cultural value directly. For example, if a culture values family unity and obligations, they may use a proverb like “No matter how affected one’s finger is, one cannot cut it off” Kamantan, Nigeria (Pachocinski 1996, 50). The proverb does not mention family, but that is the theme of the proverb. Expect to find proverbs that support important cultural values.

You may also want to discuss cultural values and proverbs with young people. They may have some different cultural values than the elders. When this happens, there may be new proverbs that support the new values. Some of these proverbs may be anti-proverbs, proverbs that are created by changing traditional proverbs. For example, there is a traditional Kazakh proverb: “A house with children is like a bazaar, a house without children is like a grave.” This proverb supports the value of having children. However, young people have twisted this to their values of today’s, “House with WiFi is a club, a house without WiFi is hollow” (Omarbekova and Aasland 2023, 183).

After you have discussed and studied the community’s cultural values, compile a list you will use. Then, for each of the cultural values, choose proverbs that support the value. If your list of cultural values is correct, there will be proverbs that support the values.

If your project is a thesis or dissertation, a study of proverbs and cultural values may be part of a thesis or dissertation. If you can interview enough people, it is possible that this can be the core of a thesis or dissertation. It can also be a topic for a journal article. Whatever your project, it probably will include the following sections:

- How you created the list of the community’s cultural values, and the final list that you created
- The list of values with the proverbs that they support
- Some proverbs that suggest values that do not seem to fit the culture
- Suggestions for others who are interested in doing this kind of research

In addition to these sections, you should think about whether these sections will be useful and helpful:

Maybe you want to include a section about changes in cultural values and new proverbs or anti-proverbs.

As you studied community values and proverbs, were there surprises? Maybe you will decide to describe these changes.

The study of proverbs and cultural values logically touches religious value. A number of proverb researchers have analyzed proverbs and the local religion. In many communities, they have found many proverbs that are cynical about religious leaders, gently mocking the religion of the people.

Proverbs are not always clear and consistent. Many proverbs contradict other proverbs. Sometimes proverbs about religion give different views on a subject, \*contradictory proverbs and \*counter proverbs. This is seen in the following pair of Nepali proverbs:

- “Religion is victorious and sin erodes.”
- “Religion erodes and sin is victorious.”(Inchley 2010, 378)

Tajik proverb about Islam: “Do as the mullah says, not as he does.” (Bell 2009, 130).

Indian proverb about Hinduism: “[Only] When in distress, a man calls on Rama.” (Gurdon 1895 16).

Armenian proverb about Orthodox Christianity: “Outside a priest, inside a beast.” (Sakayan 1994, 284).

Elders may not agree that these cynical proverbs are good proverbs. They may say that these do not express the true values of the community. But if there are proverbs that are cynical about their religion, maybe you will include these in your research.

## 9.2 Attitudes about proverbs change: do people agree with every proverb?

Attitudes about proverbs change: do people agree with every proverb? Which proverbs do they agree with? Which proverbs do they disagree with?

A community’s opinions and values change over time. Also, the inventory of their proverbs will change, old ones being lost and new ones being adopted. This chapter will guide you in methods to study how people in your community agree or disagree with traditional proverbs and new proverbs.<sup>71</sup>

Some communities have many traditional proverbs. Proverbs contain the traditions of the community, but a community’s values change, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly. For example, in English, there is an old traditional proverb “A woman’s place is in the home.” This proverb was used to say that women should not go to college or have a job outside of her home. (I heard it as a child, but I do not hear it now.) This proverb does not express a value that is widely held in English speaking society. Now, it is not used very much.

Because most proverbs are old, they will express ideas from the past. Some people will reject some of the values and ideas in some of their community’s traditional proverbs.

Many of the old proverbs contain great wisdom that people still agree with. For example, there was an English-language proverb that says, “A fool and his money are soon parted.” It was used as early as 1573. It has continued to be used and is still a widely-used proverb in English. But there are some old proverbs that all people now reject, such as “A fair wife brings but two good days, her wedding day and her death day” used as far back as 1560 (Apperson 1929, 684). This proverb is not used by English speakers today. There are also new proverbs that have been created and adopted. For example, in the USA there is now a higher value for trying new ideas, for creative thinking. This is reflected in the new proverb, “Think outside the box,” first documented in 1971 (Doyle, Mieder, Shapiro 2012, 25).

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<sup>71</sup> Many of my ideas on this topic were inspired by Jay Moon (2009), who wrote about how the leaders of a language community in Ghana discussed whether they now agreed with the values of their traditional proverbs.

But not everybody will agree about new values, new ideas, new proverbs. The community's values may change about education, women, marriage, money, cooperating with relatives, religion, raising children, respect for leaders, etc. Because of this, communities may stop using some traditional proverbs. Also, they may create new proverbs expressing new different values. For example, an Akan leader in Ghana created a new proverb for the increasingly digital world, "If WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram say this is their time, then they should know that they came to meet radio and TV" (Wiafe-Akenten 2021, 150).

Many have said that proverbs serve as a window into a culture, allowing outsiders to see inside and understand a culture more deeply. Jay Moon pointed out that proverbs can be a mirror for insiders (Moon 2009, 125), showing the insiders what their own culture values.

A church community of the Builsa ethnic community in Ghana gathered together to discuss their proverbs and the changes in their society and attitudes (Moon 2009, 87ff). First, a group of elders studied a list of over 500 traditional proverbs. Then they selected some proverbs to discuss at a large public meeting. At the meeting, people discussed whether they wanted their children and grandchildren to continue using these proverbs. They discussed one proverb at a time, asking whether each proverb expressed values that they wanted their community to maintain. For some of the proverbs, the community strongly agreed that they should continue using these proverbs. For some of the proverbs, they agreed that they did not want their children and grandchildren to use these proverbs. For some of the proverbs, there was much discussion, even disagreement. This group discussion of proverbs opened the door for rich discussions of their cultural values. After a discussion of traditional proverbs and local problems (witchcraft, drunkenness, disharmony in polygamous families), one elder said, "Our ways are changing" (Moon 2009, 178).

In the last 20 years, many proverb researchers from many countries have studied proverbs about women. In many language communities there are proverbs that are negative about women. Most of these studies have been based on the study of traditional proverbs. Therefore, because these proverbs are old and were formed by the values of the past, some of these proverbs may not represent the values of people today.<sup>72</sup> I have read studies about proverbs from many language communities that list proverbs that are negative about women. But I have not read any study that tested people to see if people agree with these proverbs from the past. One study in Ethiopia found that attitudes about women were improving quickly because of the teaching in churches. Women said "that the issue of women's rights is primarily improving because of the Biblical teachings" their society have adopted (Mamo 2018, 102). Dereje Haile Mamo also wrote an article "Positive Images of Women in Arsi Oromo Proverbs" (2019).

If there is more than one religion in the community you are testing, it may be important to ask people to identify their religion.

This is an opportunity for researchers to do a new kind of proverb research. Testing opinions about proverbs that express negative views of women is a topic that can easily be tested. Many other topics can also be tested.

### 9.2.1 Research projects:

To measure community attitudes about the values expressed in their traditional proverbs, you start by selecting a specific set of proverbs to study. Select some older proverbs that you think

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<sup>72</sup> I am grateful to Wolfgang Mieder for his wisdom on this.

some people will now reject. Also, select some traditional proverbs that you think people will agree with. Discuss this with people who know proverbs well.

Sometimes, there are specific proverbs that you know some people do not like. You may choose to research this set of proverbs.

Or, you may choose to research proverbs about specific topic(s), such as respect for elders, views about women, etc. To help you choose a topic, there may already be some proverbs that people discuss, arguing if the ideas in a proverb are still good values. First, think about what values are changing in your community. Choose a topic, or topics, that you will study in this research, such as respect for leaders, the value of education, roles of women, marriage, money, cooperating with relatives, etc. Then, select proverbs that are about this topic(s). You may also choose other values to test. Discuss this with your professor and wise people in the community.

To find proverbs about your topic(s), you should study your lists of proverbs, but also ask people who know proverbs well. Ask older people about proverbs they remember about this topic. For example, if you are studying proverbs on the topic of education or the importance of family, ask wise people to suggest proverbs about this value.

Also, ask them if they know of any new proverbs on the subject. Also, ask younger people if they know of any new proverbs on the topics (but the young people may not realize that some proverbs are new). A proverb may be new, but express a value that was traditional. For example, there is an Amharic proverb that mentions a “cassette tape”, so that means the proverb is no older than 40 years, probably newer. “Women and cassettes deserve a smack” (Wubie, Mekonen, Tegegne 2022, 217). This proverb is clearly new, but the value that this proverb expresses may not be a strong value today. If a team in Ethiopia is using Amharic proverbs to test Amhara people about their attitudes towards women proverbs in Ethiopia, they should use this recent proverb, as well as old, traditional proverbs.

You will examine your list of proverbs and think about your topic(s). Include proverbs that you think some people will reject, proverbs that express values that are not accepted now. Select some proverbs that you think everybody will accept the proverbs’ values. Also, select some proverbs that you think some people will accept their values, but you think other people will reject.

You may want to change your topic(s) if you do not have enough proverbs about a topic. If you are a student, discuss this with your professor and older members of the community. Discuss your list of proverbs and community values with people who are wise about proverbs.

After you have chosen the topic and proverbs that are related to the topic, then you will decide if you will ask people about the proverbs in a group discussion (as Moon explained from Ghana (2009) or if you will ask them individually.

When discussing proverbs, either in a group or with individuals, it is best if the discussion is done in the same language as the proverbs.

How will you invite people to be part of a proverb discussion group? You should discuss this with local leaders, asking them for advice. Here are some groups that may be relevant for you: People who work together? People who worship together? People who are in a funeral association together? People who live near each other?

If you will ask people individually about their attitudes about proverbs, you will need to prepare a questionnaire. Use this questionnaire to ask people if they agree with the values expressed in each of the proverbs. Before you test many people, test your questionnaire with a few people. See

if there are points that are not clear. Then you will improve your questionnaire. You do not want the questionnaire to be too long. If it is long, people will get tired and not fully concentrate.

When you prepare your questionnaire, some people may realize that all of the proverbs are about one topic. Some may object to the questionnaire; they may think you are trying to change their values. If you think it is important that people do not realize that you are measuring people's opinions on a traditional value, you can insert extra proverbs about other topics into the questionnaire. You can insert other traditional proverbs that are not related to the topic you are evaluating. For example, if you are evaluating people's opinions about family cooperation, you can add proverbs that are on other topics, such as gossip, death, wasting resources, etc.

It is important to know the age of each person that answers your questionnaire because age is often an important factor in how people view traditional values. What other factors should you also ask? Many questionnaires also ask for information such as age, sex, what town they are from, their religion, level of education, etc. As you think about these questions, ask for advice about what groups are important. Do you think people with more education may answer differently? Do people think that people from different religions may answer differently? If so, plan to test people from different religions and have a place on their questionnaire for people to mark their religion. In dividing scores by age, how should you divide the age brackets? You want to test older people and younger people, but what age is "older", what age is "younger"? Do you want to have a middle age bracket: older, middle, younger? If so, how do you divide the ages? Do women know some different proverbs than men know? If you are a student, discuss these questions with your professor/advisor.

Decide how you will ask people the questions: will you ask people by using paper questionnaires, interviews, or a web-based questionnaire? Prepare the test and try it on a few people. You may find some small problems in your questionnaire. Is the list of questions too long or too short? Maybe the instructions are not clear for the people, or you may find that people think one of the proverbs is written wrong, etc. After you are satisfied with your questionnaire, then you will use it for testing people's attitudes about the values expressed in their proverbs.

If you will ask people to discuss traditional proverbs in groups, first you will think about what kinds of people you want in the group(s). Do you want all older people, or all women, or all educated people, or all from one religion, or do you want a mix of people? Will you discuss proverbs with only one group, or with more than one group?

Here are some possible ways to ask people about the values expressed in proverbs. Write your question in a way that is appropriate in your area. This is a traditional English language proverb that means family links are stronger than links of friendship.

**Table 32: Sample table for asking about attitudes about a proverb**

	Yes	Unsure	No
Is this a good proverb today?			
Do most people agree with this proverb today?			
Do you want your children to use this proverb?			
Should young people follow this proverb in their lives now?			
What kinds of people agree with this proverb?			
What kinds of people disagree with this proverb?			

After you have collected the answers from people, you will total the scores to show the opinions of the different groups. You may find out that older men have different ideas than younger women. Or you may find that most men disagree with most women. Carefully write down what you do in your testing and write how you do it, because others have not done this sort of detailed research. Because there is no standard way to do this kind of research, a description of your methods and your scores will be interesting to academic readers.

Calculate separate scores for the men and women. Also, calculate the scores for older people and younger people. Create a table and write your scores in the table. Create a table that includes all the categories you are testing. Here is one sample table. It will be helpful if you use software for statistical calculations.

**Table 33: A sample table used to total scores about people's attitudes about a proverb**

	Men			Women			Total for rows		
	yes	unsure	no	yes	unsure	no	yes	unsure	no
Total for columns									
Older (religion 1)									
Older (religion 2)									
Younger (religion 1)									
Younger (religion 2)									
Total for columns									

### 9.3 Analyzing the results

After you have collected and totaled all of the scores, what differences and similarities do you see between the groups? Do older men have the same opinions as older women? Do religious

groups disagree with each other? The differences may not be large. You will want to know if the results are “statistically significant”.<sup>73</sup>?

In your discussion of the results, do not make statements that are not based on the data. If the scores are only a little different between older and younger people, do not write “younger people have rejected traditional values.” Some younger people may agree with different proverbs, but this will not be strong enough data to claim that “younger people have rejected traditional values.” Do not make a claim stronger than the data.

You should also say that this sort of test methodology is new, therefore testing procedures are still being developed. I hope that your study will contribute to improving this kind of testing of changing community values and proverbs.

## 9.4 Ambiguous proverbs

Some proverbs can have significantly different, even opposite, meanings.

This is different from multiple applications of a proverb. Many proverbs can be used in more than one type of situation or context. For example, there is an English proverb “haste makes waste”. This can be used to accuse a person who has hurried and done a job poorly. It can also be used by people who are doing a job slowly, used to explain why they are doing it slowly. In both cases, the proverb means that going slowly is a good thing. This proverb has the same meaning, but can be used in different situations.

There is another group of proverbs, a small group. Some individual proverbs can mean very different things. That is, just one proverb can be interpreted with very different meanings. It’s not merely that they can be applied to different situations. Rather, the form of the proverb is ambiguous, allowing different meanings.

This is shown here with examples from several language communities.

The first example is from Nubian of Egypt (Habbob 2022, 45): “The silo knows who opened it.” This proverb has “two meanings: everyone knows their own advantages and disadvantages; a girl/woman who knows who took her virginity” (Habbob 2022, 45).

The following ambiguous proverb is also Nubian, Egypt (Habbob 2022, 135): “He who looks at you with one eye, look at him with two.” It has “two meanings: advice to be good to those who are good to you and harm back those who harm you; [or] to be better to someone who is good to you and to double down on abuse” (Habbob 2022, 135).

There is also an English language proverb that has two opposite meanings, though many people only know one of the meanings: “A rolling stone gathers no moss.” In Scotland, the proverb is understood by many as encouraging innovation and movement. The idea is that if a person should “roll”, looking for new opportunities, moss symbolizes laziness and slow habits. Further south, in England this proverb is understood by many as encouraging continuing in a job and staying in one place, moss symbolizing wealth and comfort.

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<sup>73</sup> You may need advice from somebody who knows how to do statistics to help you understand if the differences in the scores between groups is statistically significant.

Among the Tajik, there is a proverb “One hand cannot clap.”<sup>74</sup> It has two very different interpretations. Most Tajik understand the proverb as promoting teamwork. However, others understand it to mean that an argument requires two people (Bell 2009, 158).

The following Amharic proverb from Ethiopia is a question and answer proverb. It has two opposite meanings. “This proverb has two very different possible explanations, one positive and one negative. It begins with a question, then the answer involves a piece of cloth. One explanation speaks of a respectful parting, but the second speaks of mocking and deceit. The honorable parting is explained as, ‘How did you bury your former friend? I buried him with great respect, wrapped in a cloth, so that my new friend would not think badly of me and leave me’. The second meaning has the opposite connotation, mocking the dead friend, ‘How did you fool or get rid of your former friend?’ ‘I gave him a lot of meaningless statements (cheap cloth) to get rid of him without losing my present friend’” (Demoze and Armstrong 2019, 25,26).

Yemenite Jews, have a proverb that has two possible contradictory meanings. “Father and mother are guests in this world” can have a positive meaning or a negative meaning: “As the parents will soon leave this world, use the opportunity to take care of them as long as they are with you; or the opposite... if parents are a burden to you, then don’t worry. They will die soon anyway” (Heda Jason, quoted by Lieber 1984, 427).

Arora explains that a Spanish proverb has two contradictory interpretations of the proverb: *El muerto al hoyo y el vivo al bollo* “To the grave with the dead, and them that live to the bread.” One meaning of the proverb, what Arora calls “positive”, is “approving or recommending a certain attitude or action: despite sorrow for the departed, one must take food and return to the tasks of life.” The other contrary interpretation, the “negative” interpretation, “is also used to censure those who are too quick to forget the dead” (1980, 224).

In a proverb from the Pohnpeian/Ponapean) community of the Caroline Islands in the Pacific, there is a proverb that has both a positive interpretation and a negative one: “A chief is a hibiscus in the wind.” The shoots from the side of a hibiscus tree bend easily in the wind. The positive interpretation is that this means chiefs are to respond to the needs of all. The negative interpretation is that chiefs give favors to those who give them gifts (Reisenberg and Fischer 1955, 15).

From the Palauan community in the Pacific, there is a proverb with two opposite meanings: “Like Ngiraidechiel’s first, small drop of feces.” It can refer to either “delayed rewards” or “the worst is yet to come” (McKnight 1968, 13).

There is a Kamba proverb that has two “different interpretations”: “Come face-forward, the back is for firewood” (Kitunda 2021, 38). “Among youth, it means romantic cuddling is enjoyable when done face to face.” Also, in conflict situations, this proverb is used to warn an opponent.

#### 9.4.1 Research project:

You may know that you have some ambiguous proverbs in your collection. Put these together in a group so that you can write about the possible interpretations. Also, you should ask elders if they know other proverbs that may have two different interpretations. It may not be easy to think of proverbs that have two different meanings, so be patient. You will not find enough

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<sup>74</sup> This proverb is found very widely across Asia. However, it is not included in Paczolay’s book of the 106 most common proverbs in Europe (1997).

ambiguous proverbs for a thesis or dissertation, but you may find enough for a section of a thesis or dissertation, and maybe for a journal article.

## 9.5 Foreign and bilingual proverbs

Proverbs are usually used in the main language(s) of a community. However, in some bilingual communities there are some proverbs in a language that is not the main language of the community. Also, some proverbs are not entirely in the main language(s) of the community.

It is easy to grasp the idea of translating proverbs from one language into another. For example, German immigrants in America brought their German proverbs. They brought the traditional German proverb, *Ein fauler Apfel stecht hundert gesunde an (macht zehn)*. They translated this into English, “One bad apple spoils the bunch.” This became a standard English proverb in America. The proverb is now spoken in English and is fully adopted as an English language proverb.

There are two ways that foreign and \*bilingual proverbs are used in a language community.

First, people may use a proverb in a language that they may not know well, but people in the community know the basic meaning of the proverb. That is, they use the proverb in a different language, even if they do not understand every word in the proverb.

As an example, here are some proverbs that many English speakers recognize, but most do not know the meaning of each word or understand the details of grammar.

*C'est la vie*. French, meaning “Such is life”, laughing at problems.

*Carpe diem*. Latin, meaning “Seize the day”, urging people to use an opportunity.

*Caveat emptor*. Latin, meaning “Let the buyer beware.”

*Que sera sera*. Many English speakers assume it to be Spanish, “What will be, will be”, a cheerful resignation to fate.<sup>75</sup>

*Tempus fugit*. Latin, meaning “Time flies”.

Many English speakers know the Latin proverb, *Tempus fugit*, “Time flies.” This has been humorously twisted by some people into a mixed bilingual form, “*Tempus* is *fugiting*.”

In the Palauan language community, they say *Yasai bune*. It is Japanese for “vegetable boat”. Under the Japanese government, boats had traveled around the islands selling vegetables. In Palauan, it is now a proverb meaning “unreliable news or rumor” (McKnight 1968, 7).

Proverbs have been quoted in another language for thousands of years. In the Jewish Talmud, written in Hebrew, there is a Persian proverb: *kar hazdr gund*. “(Does your) donkey have a thousand colors?” (Sanhedrin 98a, cited by Sabar 1978, 217).

Instead of being entirely translated, some proverbs contain words of more than one language. This type of proverb can be called \*bilingual” or “macaronic” proverbs. Such proverbs, containing a mix of words from two or more languages, are documented from more 3,000 years ago. Simons described and analyzed a proverb that mixed words from Sumerian, Akkadian, and another unidentified language. Simons concluded that using the foreign “words seems to have been

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<sup>75</sup> Americans believe it to be Spanish, many knowing it from a song. However, the proverb is not proper Spanish, or any other language (Hartmann 2013).

motivated by the assonance and consonance \*[alliteration]” created by using these words (Simons 2022, 1-3).

In Armenian there is a \*dialogue proverb with a loan word from the adjacent Azerbaijani language community.

“They asked the cat, ‘Who is better, your father or your mother?’ She said, ‘*Na-o, na-o.*”

In Armenian, “*na-o*” is the sound that a cat makes. In the neighboring Azerbaijani language, “*Na-o, na-o*” means “Neither he nor she” (Sakayan 1999, 316). Understanding (the humor hidden in) the proverb requires that the hearer understand both languages.

Using a proverb with foreign words is very different from translating or quoting a proverb from another language. If a proverb is borrowed and completely translated from another language, that is different from saying a proverb in a foreign language or a proverb mixing two (or more) languages.

**Table 34: Analyzing mechanisms for borrowing proverbs**

Mechanism of borrowing	Proverb	Description of form
Borrowed foreign proverb	<i>Tempus fugit</i>	No translation, proverb used in the original Latin form.
Proverb includes some foreign words mixed into the main language	<i>Tempus is fugit ing</i>	A bilingual proverb, mixing Latin and English.
Proverb translated into local language	“Time flies.”	Entire proverb is in the local language.

There is another way that people use proverbs that are not fully made from the main languages of the community: they borrow words.

An Ethiopian friend told me a story about an Oromo proverb with English loan words: “‘*Moni toksi, ’ jettee Jamboni.*” This was an \*‘anecdotal proverb.’ The Jamboni person who lost in court thought that the judge had been bribed. The complaint by the Jamboni was later repeated as a proverb. The man complained, “Money talks”, an English proverb, but “money talks” was quoted with the accent of the Jamboni person. The proverb ended with Oromo words, *jettee Jamboni* “said the Jamboni”.

Among the speakers of Neo-Aramaic from Zakho (“Iraqi Kurdistan” ), many were adequately multilingual so that Sabar included among their Neo-Aramaic proverbs some complete proverbs that he labeled as Kurdish or Arabic. Also, he included among the Neo-Aramaic proverbs two bilingual proverbs that include loan words that make the proverb rhyme, both underlined below.

*kud dānsız* (Sabar 1978, 226) The last words of the lines are Turkish, chosen to rhyme.  
*gibēle xa ’imānsız.*

“Each faithless one needs an impious (to worst him).”

*bēs pīre*, (Sabar 1978, 218) The last words of the lines are Kurdish, chosen to rhyme.  
*ula bēs mīre*.

“Wife makes her husband successful, wife makes her husband a good-for-nothing.”

Giuliano Castagna studied Jibbali proverbs from Oman. One of his examples of a bilingual proverb is the following:

*a-ğar’ə-gīd yətabri* “The good speech breaks me down.” (p. 105)

In the above proverb, “The verb *yətabri* ‘breaks me’, for example, is the normal form for ‘it breaks me’ in the neighboring Mehri [language]” (2024, 105,106). Castagna credited the scholar al-Shahri, who had observed, “This proverb is a mixture of the Mehri and Shehri languages” (2024, 105).

Castagna identified other Jibbali proverbs with loan words, including: *ɔ šek ɔ safi b-ɔ dafi* ‘You have neither someone to strive (for you) nor to speak out (for you).’ He explained, “The two terms *safi* and *dafi* are clearly Arabic loanwords.” The Arabic words were likely borrowed because they rhyme. Castagna gave additional examples of \*bilingual Jibbali proverbs (2024, 143, 148, 177, 204).

In a community of Georgian speakers surrounded by Persian speakers, Surgaia has documented many Persian words in Georgian proverbs (2020, 565ff).

*Gedayas t’el pur ar ejerebiso*. (Georgian)

“A beggar can’t believe being given a whole loaf of bread.”

The first word in the Georgian proverb is Persian, *gedā*.

### 9.5.1 Research projects:

As you study your collection of proverbs carefully, look for proverbs that are in another language. Also, look through your collection for proverbs that use words from another language.

Do you remember any proverbs that are used in your language community, but the proverbs are from another language? Or, do you remember a proverb that uses loan words?

Ask elders and your friends if they have used or noticed others using proverbs that are not fully from your language community. Ask if they know any proverbs that are from another language or proverbs that use some words from another language.

You will probably not find enough examples of proverbs that are foreign or \*bilingual for an entire thesis or dissertation. However, this topic may be part of a chapter. If you find enough proverbs that are in other languages or use words from other languages, you may find enough data for an article.

## 9.6 Religion

Proverbs are often about serious topics, such as family relationships, reconciliation, fulfilling responsibilities, etc. Therefore, it is natural that proverbs also touch religious topics. There are many publications about proverbs and religions. Publications about proverbs and religion often fit into one of two categories. Some collect and study the local proverbs that mention the local religious community. The other category of publications about proverbs and religions is a comparison of local proverbs with the teachings of their codified and organized religion.

The most famous publication about proverbs and religion is *The Eleven Religions and Their Proverbial Lore: A Comparative Study. A Reference Book to the Eleven Surviving Major Religions of the World* (Champion 1947). Publications like this study the proverbs used by people following their religion. There are entire books about the proverbs of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Confucianism, etc. Religions have used proverbs to instruct people from ancient days, including the book “Proverbs” in the Bible, as well as proverbs supporting the Egyptian religion of 2,000 years ago (Lazaridis 2007). Some publications also study religions and their proverbs today, sometimes in communities that are not widespread, “The Proverb: A Preserver of Shona Traditional Religion and Ethical Code” (Masaka and Makahamadze 2013).

There are also publications that study how local proverbs compare with religions. In Muslim contexts, examples include “The Relationship of Islamic Values and Sundaneseness in Sundanese Proverbs as Da'wah Messages” (Sukayat 2023) and “National and cultural features of religious proverbs in Arabic and Uzbek” (Umida 2022). In Christian contexts, examples include “The Use of Malawian Proverbs in Moral Instruction” (Mphande 1996) and *Proverbs and the African Tree of Life: Grafting Biblical Proverbs on to Ghanaian Eve Folk Proverbs* (Akoto-Abutiate 2014).

It is easier to study proverbs in the first category that was mentioned above, studying local proverbs that mention the local religious community. To study proverbs in this way, it is useful to identify proverbs about religious keywords related to religion. Possible keywords include local words for a building for religious worship, religious leaders, ceremonies, religious holidays, pilgrimage, and religious books.

Proverbs are not always clear and consistent. Many proverbs contradict other proverbs. Sometimes proverbs about religion give different views on a subject, contradictory proverbs and \*counter proverbs. This is seen in the following pair of Nepali proverbs:

- “Religion is victorious and sin erodes.”
- “Religion erodes and sin is victorious.”(Inchley 2010, 378)

### 9.6.1 Religious leaders:

Across religions, many proverbs that mention religious leaders are negative and cynical. There are some proverbs that are positive, but negative proverbs are more common about religious leaders.

### 9.6.2 Islam:

“Do as the mullah says, not as he does.” Tajik (Bell 2009, 130) and Uzbek (Ergashev and Niyozov 2006, 18)

“The Mulla listens to ‘Take it’ and not ‘Give it.’” Pashto, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 330)

“Nobody has seen a snake’s feet, a chicken’s milk, a Mullah’s bread.” Lur, Iran (Freidl 2015, 43)

“The Mullah’s turban is so big, it needs four quarts [liters] of fabric.” Lur, Iran (Freidl 2015, 70)

“Put away the opium stuff, I brought a girl.” [said about a group of mullahs smoking opium, an \*anecdotal proverb] Lur, Iran (Freidl 2015, 71)

### 9.6.3 Hinduism:

“The disciples beg and the priest eats at his ease.” Hindustani, Hindi in India, Urdu in Pakistan (Fallon 1998, 54)

“Before the *Brahmin* [high caste] is in want, the king’s larder will be empty.” Sanskrit (Champion 1944, 151)

#### 9.6.4 Christianity:

“Outside a priest, inside a beast.” Armenian (Sakayan 1994, 284)

“God created women and men, but who created those clergymen?” Armenian (Sakayan 1994, 16)

“Whatever the priest tells you to do, do it; what you see him do, do not.” Greek (Mieder 1986, 389)

“Priest and vulture speak by what they eat.” Amharic, Ethiopia (Daniel Abera 2016, 176)

“A preacher’s son is often bad.”<sup>76</sup> English (Mieder, Kingsbury, Harder 1992, 481)

“Priests love pretty wenches.” [English, from 500 years ago, unused for centuries.] (Apperson 1929, 512)

There are so many Spanish proverbs mocking Catholic clergy that there is even a book containing over 800 of them, *Refranero Anticlerica* (Esteban 2011).

#### 9.6.5 Buddhism:

“If the lama’s own head does not come out cleanly, how will he do the drawing upwards of the dead?” . The proverb is “used for deriding the immoral life of the lamas.” Ladakhi, India (Francke 1900, 142)

“Everything shiny is not gold, every monk is not a teacher.” Mongolian (Raymond 2010, 91)

#### 9.6.6 Judaism:

“The rabbi is a giant when surrounded with small people.” Yiddish (Kumove 1999, 248)

“Rabbis and doctors get rich only from women.” Yiddish (Kumove 1999, 247)

“The rabbi drinks up the wine and orders his followers to have a good time.” Yiddish (Mieder 1986, 399)

#### 9.6.7 African Traditional Religions:

“A witch really cries loudly.” [It is explained: “A witch shows a lot of tears and mourning to hide his/her true identity.”] Chewa, Zambia (van Kessel 2015, 114)

“The fetish priest tells of his victories, but not of his defeats.” Ashanti, Ghana (Rattray 1916, 33)

“An outspoken man is a witch.” Mamprusi, Ghana (Plissart 1978, 262)

#### 9.6.8 Religions and their followers

“One barrel of wine can work more miracles than a church full of saints.” Italian

“The hyena failed to become a Muslim.” Chewa, Zambia (van Kessel 2015, 129)

“Someone who can lead himself can lead *qallu* (the traditional priest), it was said.” Guji Oromo (Jirata 2009, 73)

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<sup>76</sup> I am a son of a preacher, so I find this proverb interesting. Sadly, it is sometimes true, but not about my brothers and myself.

- “[Only] When in distress, a man calls on Rama [Hindu God].” Assamese, India (Gurdon 1895, 16).
- “For the sake of his friend, the Hindu has eaten the beef of the cow.” [Most Hindus do not eat meat and for them cattle are sacred.] Pashto, Afghanistan & Pakistan (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 271)
- “The Sikhs won their battle far away, but the Hindus here cocked their turbans in pride.” Pashto, Pakistan and Afghanistan (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 295)
- “Shias [Muslim group] with Shias and Miyas [Hindu group] with Miyas.” Kashmiri, India (Knowles 1885, 197)
- “The Hindu cannot be considered a man, as the donkey cannot be considered an animal.” Pashto (Pakistan and Afghanistan) (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006, 334)

### 9.6.9 Holy sites:

- An African Traditional Religion: “Mt. Zuqalla, those far away reverence it and those who live near plow its sides.” Oromo, Ethiopia
- Hinduism: “*Avanashy* is indeed better than *Benares*.”<sup>77</sup> [*Benares* is a more important religious site, but *Avanashy* is closer and cheaper.] Badaga, India (Hockings 1988, 167)
- Buddhism: “Ride past the temple on a horse.” Zhuang, China (Yanxian 2017, 22)

### 9.6.10 Holy books:

- Judaism: “Torah [most important of Jewish Scriptures] may be the best of wares, but don’t treat it like mere merchandise.” Yiddish (Kumove 1999, 283)
- Christianity: “The Bible is printed in 610 different languages<sup>78</sup> and read in none.” English (Mieder, Kingsbury, Harder 1992, 50)

### 9.6.11 Celebrations:

- Judaism: “On the eve of Yom Kippur [Day of Atonement, most important Jewish religious holiday] all thieves become pious.” Yiddish (Kumove 1999, 156)
- Christianity: “Christmas cannot be celebrated every day.” Bulgarian (Sedakova 2005, 481)
- Islam: “Whoever ate (during) Ramadan, his bones have shriveled.” Morocco (Buitelaar 1991, 59)
- Hinduism: “In a house where there are black she-buffalos; every day is a day of Diwali a festival.” (Singh 2012, 4)

### 9.6.12 Religious relations

- Dari: “Jesus to his religion, and Moses to his.” This is explained: “All people who have the right to choose what they do, think, or feel.” (Zellem 2015, 25)

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<sup>77</sup> Benares is today known as Varanasi.

<sup>78</sup> The number is significantly higher now, but the point of the proverb is still sadly true, that people have access to the Bible but do not read it.

I have just shown how some proverbs mention the local traditional religious community. Now, I shift to comparing local proverbs to the teachings of a religion. Clearly, these two categories are not entirely separate. They are a matter of emphasis.

At the beginning of this chapter, I stated that publications about proverbs and religion often fit into one of two categories. Some publications study the local proverbs that mention the local religious community. The other category of publications about proverbs and religions is a comparison of local proverbs with the teachings of a codified and organized religion. Clearly, these two categories are not entirely separate. They are a matter of emphasis, but they are useful ideas as we think about proverbs and religions.

Some writers have described how the traditional proverbs of a community compare with the values of a codified religion. In Muslim contexts, examples include “The Relationship of Islamic Values and Sundaneseness in Sundanese Proverbs as Da'wah Messages” (Sukayat 2023) and “National and cultural features of religious proverbs in Arabic and Uzbek” (Umida 2022). In Christian contexts, examples include “The Use of Malawian Proverbs in Moral Instruction” (Mphande 1996) and *Proverbs and the African Tree of Life: Grafting Biblical Proverbs on to Ghanaian Eve Folk Proverbs* (Akoto-Abutiati 2014).

In a Christian context, the African Proverbs Project was conducted in the 1990's. Its goal was “to promote collection, publication and study of African proverbs with particular attention to their relationship to Christian mission, their role in modern Africa and their significance for a number of academic disciplines” (Mbiti 2002, 257,258). In the many publications that were produced from this project and the many that were inspired afterward, authors wrote about many ways to study local proverbs and compare them to religions. This topic is discussed more in Chapter 9 of this book. Also, read about Cultural Values in Chapter 8, which discusses proverbs community cultural values.

### 9.6.13 Research projects:

Examine the proverbs in your collection, looking for keywords related to religion. Possible keywords include local words for a building for religious worship, religious leaders, ceremonies, religious holidays, pilgrimage, religious holidays, etc. Also ask wise people to tell you more proverbs about these words.

If there are proverbs about two or more religions, maybe you need to separate proverbs about each religion. Think about this carefully.

Then sort these proverbs by keywords. Put proverbs about religious leaders in one section, proverbs about buildings for worship into another section, etc. Some proverbs will contain more than one of the keywords and may fit in more than one section.

After you have sorted proverbs by keywords, now you will sort the proverbs for each keyword into three categories:

- Proverbs that are positive about the religion
- Proverbs that are negative about the religion
- Proverbs that are neutral about the religion

After you have sorted your proverbs that include keywords about religion, examine the proverbs for each of the keywords. Which keywords have the largest percentage of proverbs that support the religion? Which keywords have the smallest percentage of proverbs that support the religion? For example, maybe most of the proverbs about religious holidays and ceremonies are

positive, but most of the proverbs about religious leaders are negative. Make a chart with the keywords, categories, and the percentages. What patterns do you find about proverbs and religion?

Summarize and explain your results for your readers. These ideas about how to study proverbs about religion are new. Maybe you will make important changes in the methodology described here. Describe the methodology you use, whether you followed the ideas of this book or if you changed the methodology. Make it clear for others who may want to do a similar study.

If you find many proverbs about religion and can write about how these proverbs affect and reflect cultural values, it may be enough for a thesis or dissertation chapter. If you follow the methods of this chapter, you will probably have enough material for an article or a book chapter. Ask your professor for advice.

# 10 Application of proverb studies

After you have collected and studied proverbs from your culture what can you do with the results? The assumption from many academics is that we publish our collections for the local community, write a thesis or dissertation, write articles, present our findings at conferences.

But I want to suggest a more practical, and probably more challenging, application of our findings. How can we apply the results of our research to help the people of the community? After all, the proverbs are the community's, and some members of the community have been kind and patient enough to help us understand these beautiful parts of their culture. I believe we should help people apply their proverbs for the community's benefit.

But before you can engage in any application of proverbs in the community, you need a written collection of proverbs. It may not matter whether it is collected orally or from written sources, or how large it is, but to apply proverbs requires a collection that can be thoughtfully examined.

Local people may think of using traditional proverbs in new ways. If they do not think of the power of using traditional proverbs in new ways, tell them some ideas about what has been done in other places. This may stimulate local people and promoters to think about how to use proverbs in new ways in their own community.

Here are some examples of ways that traditional proverbs have been used to benefit a community.

## 10.1 Community solidarity

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, there is a traditional proverb, "When one tries in good works, he reaches heaven; but when he abandons it halfway, all his efforts lays waste." This has been altered into a form that is more positive, encouraging helpfulness within the community, "When one tries, he reaches heaven; if he gets weary, let his brother assist him" (Ojiakor 2004, 164).

In Vietnamese, there is a proverb that reminds people that they benefit from what past generations have done, "When you eat a fruit, think of the person who planted the tree" (Tran 2021, 96). This also reminds people that they have an obligation to do things for future generations.

## 10.2 Public health programs

Proverbs have been used in public health programs. When new ideas are introduced, familiar proverbs remind people of the new ideas. Many proverbs give useful reminders about health, such as the English proverb, "An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure."

### 10.2.1 Malaria prevention:

A team in east Africa made a calendar with a photo of a mosquito net that had been treated by insecticide. By the photo was a local proverb that had been carefully chosen to support the effort to use nets to prevent malaria, "A person who is not disciplined cannot be cautioned."

The text on the calendar is important, "Making healthy choices to prevent malaria." The photo of the mosquito net is also helpful. But the local proverb is important to help people remember and apply the message about the importance of mosquito nets.

### 10.2.2 Promoting mothers naturally nursing their babies:

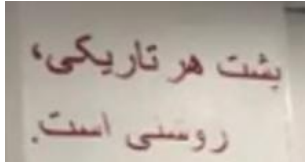
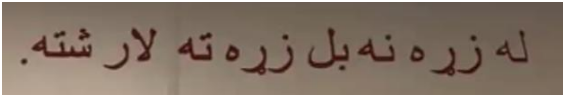
In Kenya and Tanzania, many women wear colorful *kangas* as wrap around skirts, pieces are about 1 meter by 1.5 meters. They are colorful and are used in many ways, including worn as a skirt, to carry a baby on the back, or used to carry bundles. Each *kanga* has a text, usually a proverb (Beck 2005, Healey 2005).

An organization was working in Kenya to encourage mothers to nurse their babies naturally, instead of buying powdered formula and feeding the baby with a bottle. They chose a traditional Swahili proverb to print on kangas: *Maziwa ya mama ni tamu* “Mother’s milk is sweet.” The meaning is that brothers and sisters have a close relationship because they drank milk from the same mother. Therefore, their relationship with each other is sweet. They used the literal meaning of the proverb to remind mothers that their milk is sweetest, better than the manufactured powdered milk.

### 10.2.3 Encouraging proverbs on hospital walls

In a hospital in Afghanistan, an American physical therapist used traditional Afghan proverbs to encourage his Afghan patients (Randy Green, e-mail 2018). For example, *Sar zenda baasha, kolaah besyaar ast* means “As long as there is life in your head, there are many hats you can wear.” A badly wounded patient said that this proverb improved his outlook, he became focused on the future, even planning his wedding.

Later, carefully selected Afghan proverbs were put on hospital walls to encourage patients (Mogli, Stevenson, Unseth 2022). This was done with an awareness of language prestige and preferences, so the Afghan team chose half of the proverbs from Dari and half from Pashto.

	<p>“After every darkness, is light.” <i>Pushte har tareequee, roshanee ast.</i> (Dari proverb)</p>
 <p>Photos by Rachel Stevenson</p>	<p>“From one heart to another, there is a way.” <i>La zra na bal zra ta laar shta.</i> (Pashto proverb)</p>

**Figure 3: Dari & Pashto proverbs on hospital walls in Afghanistan**

## 10.3 Counselling

Patrick Bennett has investigated using traditional proverbs for marital counselling in the Bemba community of Zambia (1995, 1997). Most proverbs carry the wisdom and authority of generations of people in a culture. Instead of the voice of one person speaking to a couple, the use of proverbs means the voices of many.

Amedeo Cottino, an Italian addiction scholar, explained ways to use traditional proverbs in counseling Italian alcohol addicts (1995).

## 10.4 Thoughtful reflection on local culture and values

Thinking thoughtfully about traditional proverbs helps a community to think about their traditional values. Moon described how community members can better understand their own culture, its strengths and its weaknesses, by studying their own proverbs. (2009).

Many writers have said that proverbs serve as a window into a culture, allowing outsiders to see inside and understand a culture more deeply. Jay Moon pointed out that proverbs can be a mirror for insiders (Moon 2009, 125), showing the insiders their own culture's values.

A church community of the Builsa ethnic group in Ghana gathered together to evaluate their proverbs and the changes in their society and attitudes (Moon 2009, 87ff). First, a group of elders studied a list of over 500 traditional proverbs. Then they selected some proverbs to examine at a large public meeting. At the meeting, people talked over whether they wanted their children and grandchildren to continue using these proverbs. They considered one proverb at a time, asking whether each proverb expressed values that they wanted their community to maintain. For some of the proverbs, the community strongly agreed that they should continue using these proverbs. For some of the proverbs, they agreed that they did not want their children and grandchildren to use these proverbs. For some of the proverbs, there was much talk, even disagreement. This group debate of proverbs opened the door for rich discussions of their cultural values. After this thoughtful evaluation of their traditional proverbs and local problems (witchcraft, drunkenness, disharmony in polygamous families), one elder said, "Our ways are changing" (Moon 2009, 178).

## 10.5 Language and culture preservation for the community

In many communities, their languages are endangered as more and more people stop using the traditional language and shift to another language. In such situations, some community members have collected proverbs and published books of proverbs to help teach them to younger members of the community. Here are two examples.

A Dinka man, originally from South Sudan, collected traditional proverbs and riddles to teach Dinka children the language and culture. He wrote the book especially for Dinka young people who are living outside of the traditional Dinka homeland. The man now lives with his family in Australia where his children are not speaking Dinka well. He wrote, "I have to admit that I wrote this book *Meek ku këj ke Jiëëj* for my own children" (Deng 2018, 14). In the book, the proverbs and riddles are printed only in Dinka, with no translation or explanation in another language. This requires that young people discuss the proverbs while speaking the Dinka language (Deng 2018).

Members of other language communities have also collected and prepared traditional proverbs so that younger members of the community will know them. Almost all of these projects have included translations into another language. For example, a family of Tetela speakers from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) wanted to document and foster the use of their language among younger family members as they became scattered to Europe and the USA. Therefore, they collected and published 283 Tetela proverbs with explanations in Tetela, French, and English (Mukanga et al. 2020). Similarly, a member of the Lhomwe-speaking community in Malawi compiled and published a book of 200 proverbs because he did not want this important part of the culture to be lost (Kapyeye 2021). Also, Simin Habibian from Iran collected 1,001 proverbs, wanting to keep younger and older generations of Iranians in America connected to each other by knowing proverbs (Habibian 2002, 11ff).

## 10.6 Conflict resolution

Around the world, there are proverbs that tell us we should be reconciled and live in harmony. Most proverbs about peacemaking and conflict resolution do not have imperative verbs. Proverbs for peacemaking and conflict resolution are usually indicative sentences that address a problem indirectly, such as:

“Running away cannot bring a matter to an end.” Tiv, Nigeria (Udu and Shagba 2018, 185)

Or, if the proverb has an imperative verb, the proverb may be metaphorical and indirect:

“Don’t dig trenches for others, but if you must dig, don’t make them too deep; you don’t know whether it will be you who will fall in.” Somali (Baare 2010, 127)

Proverbs have been used for conflict resolution from the family level all the way to national level. It is easy to think about using proverbs to bring conflict resolution between family members or neighbors. It is more difficult to think about using proverbs for conflict resolution and peacemaking between larger groups.

An ethnic Somali scholar in Kenya was very aware of the importance and value of proverbs among Somali people. When local elders were conducting a peacemaking effort, he knew they would use many proverbs. He attended these meetings and took careful notes (Baare 2010). He used this for his doctoral thesis, writing about which proverbs were mentioned and how they were used in the efforts to bring peace and reconciliation.

Many authors have written articles about using proverbs for peacemaking and reconciliation. Here is a short list of titles for writings about proverbs for conflict resolution. These titles will show some of the variety of approaches that researchers have followed to build peace and reconciliation:

- Aciro, Betty. 2019. The role of Acoli proverbs and folktales in conflict resolution among the Acoli in northern Uganda. Kyambogo University, Uganda: PhD dissertation.
- Ademowo, Adeyemi J., and Ahmad Nuhu. 2017. “Indigenous knowledge and conflict management in Africa: A study of proverb use in conflict management among Hausas of Northern Nigeria.” *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies* 3, no. 4, 36-44. .
- Barre, Muktar Haji Aden. 2011. “Proverbs as Artistic Discourse Strategy in Conflict Resolution among Kenyan Somali.” PhD diss., Jomo Kenyatta University.
- Ibeh, Florence Uju, and Patrick Ik. Umezi. 2022. “Igbo Pacification Proverbs and Wellerisms in African Philosophy: Tools for Peace and Conflict Resolution.” *Ochendo: An African Journal of Innovative Studies* 3 (2): 130–43.
- Kosa, Obsa Mamo and Ketema Tafa Biratu. The Role of Proverbs in Peace Building among Oromoo: The Case of Bale Zone of Oromia Region. *American Journal of Sociological Research* 2020, 10(1): 22-28.
- Khasandi-Telewa, Vicky, Makarios Wakoko, Jane Mugo, Evelyn Mahero, and Francis Ndegwa. 2013. “‘What an Old Man Sees While Sitting a Young Man Cannot See While Sitting down’: Utilizing Senior Citizens to Achieve Peace.” *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, 44–49.
- Olajuyin, Oyebanji Anthony. 2019. “Congruent Proverbs: The Concept and Roles in Conflict Resolution.” *AFRREV LALIGENS: An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies* 8 (2): 45–58.
- Sibanda, Nhlanhla. 2015. “An Analysis of the Significance of Myths and Proverbs as African Philosophies of Peace and Justice: A Case of the Ndebele, Shona and Tonga Tribes

from Zimbabwe and the Igbo from Nigeria.” *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* 20 (4): 1–6.

- Udessa, Elfneh. 2020. “Applying Orature to Embed the Gada Values into Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation: The Case of the Guji Oromo Gada System.” *Journal of Indigenous Knowledge and Development Studies* 2 (4): 25–47.
- Udu, Terver T. and Esther Iveren Shagba. 2018. “The Efficacy and Relevance of Tiv Proverbs in Conflict Resolution.” *Journal of The Linguistic Association of Nigeria* 21 (2): 173–87.
- Van Heerden, Willie. 2003. “The Rhetoric of Using Proverbs in Conflict Situations: The Cases of a Biblical Text and an African Proverb.” *Old Testament Essays* 16 (3): 730–44.

## 10.7 Literacy and Education

Proverbs have been used in education, for both children and adults. In a number of countries, proverbs in dominant languages are taught as part of the curriculum.

When adults are learning to read, they want to read something interesting at an adult level. To provide adult level reading material for new readers, collections of local proverbs have been published to support adult literacy in a number of language communities.

In Ethiopia, a textbook has been prepared to teach Amharic proverbs. After each chapter of proverb lists, there are there are multiple choice questions for students to choose the correct words to fill in blanks , Figure 4. Also, lessons contain multiple choice questions for students to match proverbs with explanations, Figure 5.

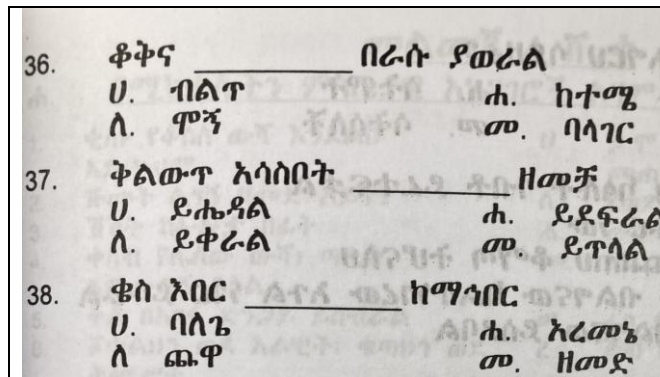


Figure 4: Amharic exercise matching words to fill blanks to complete proverbs. (Däbbäbä 2006, 125)

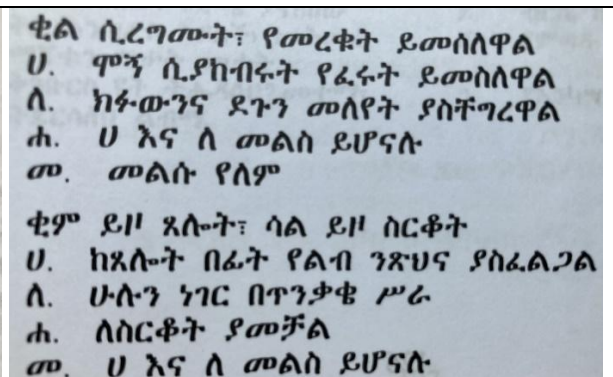


Figure 5: Amharic exercise matching proverbs with explanations. (Däbbäbä 2006, 125)

Also, some authors have used traditional proverbs in curriculum that they say is designed to support decolonializing and non-hegemonic efforts in education (Wane, Muruatetu, and Kipusi 2023).

A collection of vernacular proverbs can also be used in education and literacy programs. There are at least two reasons that local proverbs can make good literacy material, especially for adults. First, it is critical to make literacy materials as meaningful as possible. Literacy materials for adults should be as cognitively stimulating as possible. Proverbs fulfill this, being much more cognitively engaging than many beginning literacy materials.

Secondly, proverbs are useful for adult literacy since they are generally familiar to the reader. The familiarity of the proverbs makes it easier for literacy students to guess at the rest of the word or sentence. For example, if an adult English reader reads “Look before...”, they will likely be able to guess that the rest of the sentence is “...you leap.”

Also, since proverbs in many languages often contain rhyme and alliteration, they can also be used to help teach specific letters, such as the letter *z*, *m*, and *b* in the Amharic proverb:

*zəmm balä af, zəmb aygäbabbätəm*

“The mouth that is silent, no fly enters it.”

Proverbs are not merely useful for initial teaching materials. Small published collections of proverbs have been important contributions to ongoing literacy in many places. After proverbs are collected and edited for study, preparing them for publication is relatively simple.

Among the Chumburung people of Ghana, a team preparing materials for literacy and education collected proverbs and produced a book of 230 traditional proverbs. The Chumburung man who led in preparing the proverb book wanted to prepare a book for literacy and education, but also “that proverbs need passing on to the next generation with their meanings” (Hansford 2003, 62,63).

For literacy and education in local languages, using proverbs in schools can also be a way to involve traditional elders in educating the young. The elders can explain not only the meaning of traditional proverbs, but also teach about traditional values. Elders can also teach about when and how proverbs are used, and by whom.

## 10.8 Religious Ministry

The group of people that has been most focused on finding ways to apply local proverbs to touch the community is Christians in ministry, whether they be themselves part of the community or outsiders. Using local proverbs is an ancient application, done by Jesus himself, at least twice:

- “He answered and said unto them, “‘When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’” Matthew 16:2)
- “And he said unto them, ‘Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, “Physician, heal thyself’.” (Luke 4:23).

A group of Catholic scholars in Kenya has sponsored over 50 local scholars to each collect 100 traditional proverbs from their language communities. These e-book collections then add explanations to these lists of 100 proverbs. The collections each contain a Swahili translation for each proverb, then a translation into English, and in French for some. This is followed by the “Teaching” of the proverb, an explanation of the proverb’s application. Each entry closes with a passage from the Bible that has a similar meaning or a passage that corrects the teaching of the proverb. These e-books are hosted on the website Afriprov.org, hosted by Tangaza University, (<https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/>

For Christians in these language communities, this is a valuable resource. For people from other language communities, it is a useful example of how traditional proverbs can be applied in a Christian context. Here is an example from a book prepared for the *Ganda/Kooki* community of Uganda (Ishiabwe 2019).

76. Oluliimi lwa mukabalo lukaawa.

**Swahili:** Ulimi wa wake wenza ni mchungu.

**French:** La langue de coépouse est la amère.<sup>79</sup>

**English:** The tongue of co-wife is bitter.

**Teaching:** This proverb warns about jealousy and lack of appreciation of others. It encourages people to live in harmony without suspicion of each other. We should cohabit within a community and respect each other.

**Bible parallel:** Colossians 3:13 “Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

Alexandre de Rhodes (1591-1660) was an early French missionary in Vietnam. He used Vietnamese proverbs to explain Christian teachings. Vietnamese had a proverb “Birth is temporary, death is returning home”. Rhodes showed that this is similar to the Christian concept of earthly life and eternal life. He also used the proverb “All people have their fatherland or ancestral land.” Tran explained that “Rhodes took advantage of the spirit of patriotism and the desire to live in the ‘ancestral homeland’ of the Vietnamese people to talk about the true homeland in heaven” (Tran 2021, 53).

Tran explained the possible use of the proverb, “When you eat a fruit, think of the person who planted the tree” (Tran 2021, 100). This proverb can be used in many situations. Sometimes, it is used to remind people to remember their parents’ and grandparents’ merits and good deeds. On another occasion, it expresses the students’ gratitude for the teacher. It is also used to express gratitude to the heroes and martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the nation. Finally, it also talks about the relationship of fidelity between the benefactor and the beneficiary”. It could also be used alongside the following Bible verse, “The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him”<sup>80</sup> (Galatians 6:6).

“Regarding the listeners, including the focus group and the entire congregation, the observer found that most listeners looked directly up to the preacher with intense concentration. They also showed excitement whenever the preacher recited proverbs or folk poems. After each proverb was cited, the listeners seemed to discover something new, and they seemed so happy with that. One interviewee wondered, ‘How could the preacher find such proverbs and folk poetry that fit perfectly to the idea of the homily?’” (Tran 2021, 179).

Why did they not realize the close relationship between proverbs and folk poetry with the Gospel message as the preacher figured it out in his homily? The observer himself commented: “Most of the audience was excited and listened attentively. I believe the level of understanding of the congregation was very good. They were captivated by the preacher’s voice and the melody of

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<sup>79</sup> I have edited the spelling.

<sup>80</sup> This Bible verse is not quoted from King James Version, but a different English translation, the New American Standard Bible.

proverbs and folk poetry.” In general, listeners had very positive reactions and excitement to this style of preaching (Tran 2021, 179).

“Amazingly, most of the attendees were able to correctly recite one or two proverbs that had been used by the preacher earlier in his lecture” (Tran 2021, 181).

There is a Yoruba proverb that has a similar message to a Biblical saying. The Bible contains the following: “flee youthful lust” (Timothy 2: 22). In Yoruba there is a proverb with a similar message, “For the eyes to see no evil The legs are the medicine” (Owomoyela 2005, 13).

Similarly, there is a Japanese proverb similar to a Biblical saying. The Bible contains the following: “No man can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24). In Japanese, there is a similar proverb, “A loyal vassal does not serve two masters” (Okada 1955, 48).

Sometimes a local proverb may be very similar to a proverb from the Bible or the Qur’an. For example, among the Enuani of Nigeria, there is a proverb “A good name is better than money.” (I. Onwueme and M. Onwueme 2019, 184). This almost the same as a proverb from the Bible, “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches” (Proverb 22:1). In this situation, if the community claims the proverb as their own, it does not matter if their proverb was borrowed from or inspired by the Bible. If a community claims a proverb that is similar to the Bible, it can be used in local teaching.

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, there is a traditional proverb, “When one tries in good works, he reaches heaven; but when he abandons it halfway, all his efforts lays waste.” This has been altered into a form that is more positive, encouraging helpfulness within the community, “When one tries, he reaches heaven; if he gets weary, let his brother assist him” (Ojiakor2024, 164).

The idea of using local proverbs that supported similar ideas from the Bible inspired George Cotter working in Ethiopia. He worked with Oromo friends to produce a collection of thousands of Oromo proverbs with English translations, *Salt for Stew* (1990). Then, working with Oromo friends and colleagues, he prepared a list of traditional proverbs that teach a similar idea with the verses of the Gospel text. He took the text of the four Gospels from the Oromo Bible and prepared them in a two-column format for each page. Then, beside the Gospel text, he inserted these relevant traditional proverbs (Cotter 1991), as seen below, translated into English in Figure 6:

<p>6 Then Jesus said unto them, “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.” 7 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “It is because we have taken no bread.” 8 Which when Jesus perceived, he said unto them, “O ye of little faith, why reason ye among yourselves, because ye have brought no bread?”</p>	<p>(6)</p>	<p>575 <b>Ibiddi / nama itti a-anu guba</b>  Fire, people who are near, burns.  Be careful when near a bad person or bad situation.</p> <p>1518 <b>Jabboti hiida nyaachu waal irra baraatti</b>  The calves, the leather strap, learn from each other to chew.  People learn bad things from each other.</p>
<p>9 Do ye not yet understand, neither remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets ye took up?”</p>	<p>(9)</p>	<p>1230 <b>Ijaan bal-laan karaa hinargu / yaadaan bal-lan dubbii hinargu.</b>  The half-blind person, the road, does not see; the half-blind thinker speech does not perceive.  The person who is mentally slow does not understand much.</p>

**Figure 6: Sample of Gospel page in Oromo, with relevant Oromo proverbs**

This sample from the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew’s Gospel uses an English version of the Scripture in the left column, but the rest of the sample is the same as Cotter’s book (1990). The text of the Scripture is in the left column, with a number at the beginning of each verse. In the center column is the number of a verse that matches the proverbs in the right column. In this sample, there are proverbs for verse (6) and verse (9). For verse six, there are two proverbs. In the right column, each proverb has three parts. The first part is the number of the proverb in the Oromo proverb collection, then the proverb in the Oromo language, printed with bold letters.<sup>81</sup> The second part is a literal translation of the proverb. The grammar is quite different than English because the translations usually follow the word order of the actual Oromo proverb. This puts the verb at the end of the sentence. The third part is an explanation in English. Some of the pages in his book have no Oromo proverbs, others have as many as 10 proverbs.

## 10.9 Preparing to translate proverbs in the Bible:

In some language communities, teams of people are working to translate (parts of) the Bible into their traditional language. The Bible contains a book called *Proverbs*, and there are also proverbs found in other parts of the Bible. To prepare to translate proverbs in the Bible, teams have studied collections of their traditional proverbs. They have analyzed the forms of their traditional proverbs and compared them with the structure of proverbs in the Bible. Then they applied their knowledge of their own proverbs’ patterns to translate Biblical proverbs (Pluger 2015, Unseth 2006a,b).

<sup>81</sup> Cotter’s book was printed before the current Oromo *Qubee* spelling system was adopted.

The first step to prepare to translate proverbs in the Bible is to have a collection of traditional local proverbs. If there is no collection available, this may require collecting proverbs. Then the translation team studies the proverbs. They can establish categories of proverb structures, such as parallelism, imperatives, reason-result, rhetorical questions, etc. Becoming consciously aware of the structures of their own traditional proverbs, translators can translate Biblical proverbs and weighty sayings into more natural forms.

The importance of studying the normal patterns of local proverbs is seen in the following example (Unseth 2006b, 166). A translator was working on the proverb in Proverbs 14:13.<sup>82</sup> The translator automatically translated the two lines of the proverb following the original order of the clauses:

“Wisdom abides in the mind of a man of understanding,  
but that which is in the midst of fools is made known.”

Another member of the translation team remembered their study of normal clause order in proverbs and realized the order of the two lines in this translation did not fit the usual pattern of their proverbs. After they thought about it, the team changed the order of the two clauses

“Wisdom it is not known in the heart of a fool,  
but it abides in the mind of a man of understanding.”

By studying the forms of their traditional proverbs and writing down their discoveries, they were able to use this knowledge to translate proverbs in ways that sound natural.

## 10.10 Working with refugees

The books of Dari and Pashto proverbs from Afghanistan (Zellem 2014, 2015) were used in many places to help welcome Afghan refugees. These books were used as part of a program to teach Greek to Afghan refugees in Greece. Marina Mogli identified some proverbs that were similar in Afghanistan and Greece. The adult students were motivated to learn Greek proverbs as part of their language learning (Mogli, Stevenson, Unseth 2022).

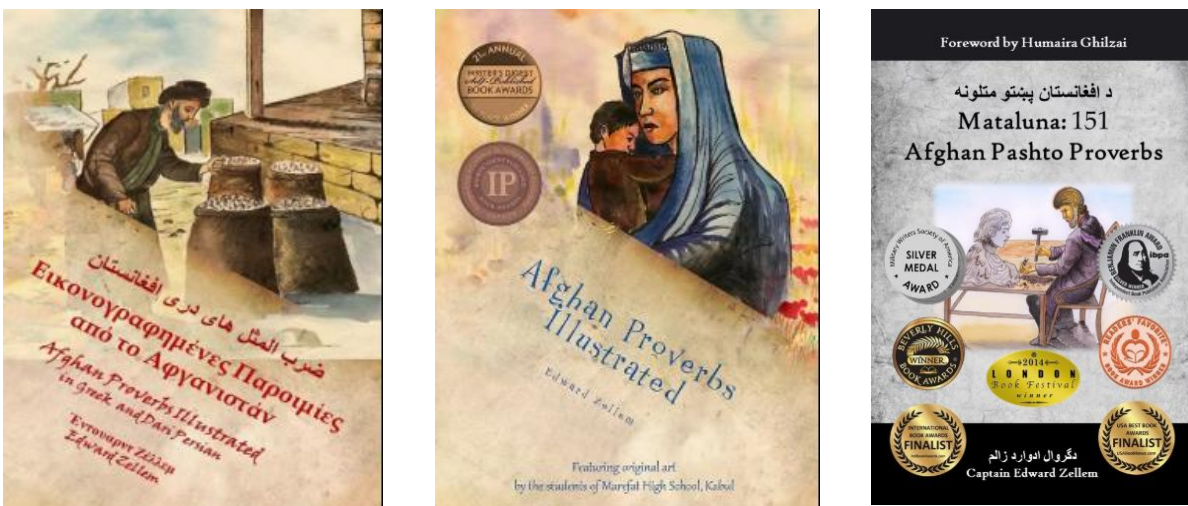


Figure 7: Books of Afghan proverbs prepared by Zellem

<sup>82</sup> This Bible verse is from the Revised Standard Version, quoting from the version in the article.

Zellem had also collected paintings by Afghan students and two of these were used to create posters to welcome refugees. He chose a proverb that was common in both of the major languages of Afghanistan, Dari and Pashto. These posters were used to welcome and encourage Afghan refugees in apartments, offices, schools, community centers, etc. These two posters, seen in Figure 8, are freely available from the Web: <https://www.afghansayings.com/>.

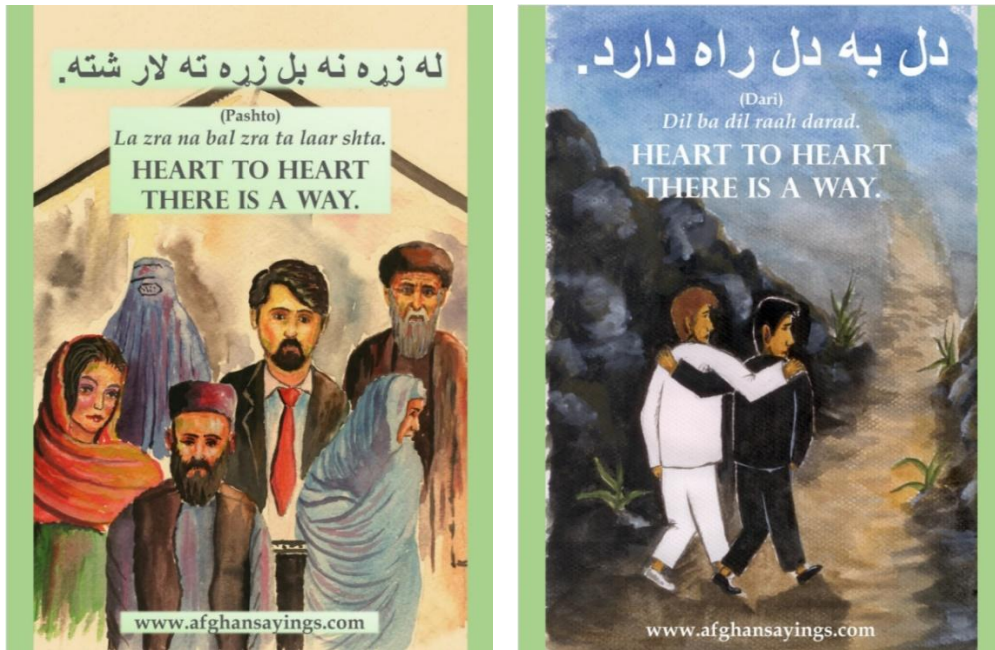


Figure 8: Posters with a proverb in two Afghan languages.

## 10.11 Negative applications

Sometimes, proverbs have been applied for negative purposes. The most studied examples are from the Nazis. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazis propaganda minister, knew the value of using proverbs because they are easy to understand and familiar to people, “We must speak the language which the folk understands, whoever wants to speak to the folk must... pay heed to folk” (quoted by Mieder 1982, 436).

The Nazis used and abused existing German proverbs that attacked Jews (Mieder 1982, 439).

“The Jew corresponds to the human as the wolf to the flock.”)

“Even though the Jew has a human body, he is lacking the inner character of humans.”

They even took a Biblical saying that was meant to limit injury in revenge and used it to speak of increasing the injury of revenge. Speaking of the Jewish community, a Nazi said, “We don’t say: ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’, no, he who knocks out our eye will have his head cut off, and he who knocks out our tooth will have his jaws smashed” (Mieder 1982, 442).

This may be the single most famous, and infamous, use of applying a proverb for evil purposes. At the entrance to Nazi death camps and slave labor camps, there was a sign addressed to incoming prisoners, mostly Jews:

*Arbeit macht frei*  
“Work makes you free”



Andrew Shiva / Wikipedia / [[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Czech-2013-Theresienstadt-Arbeit\\_Macht\\_Frei\\_\(detail\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Czech-2013-Theresienstadt-Arbeit_Macht_Frei_(detail).jpg)] [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

**Figure 9: Sign over entrance to Nazi concentration camp “Work makes you free”**

In the barracks where the Nazi’s slaves of their concentration camp were kept, there were more proverbs meant to mold them into complacent slaves, such as “Speech is silver, silence is gold” (Mieder 1997, 12).

### 10.12 Research and application projects:

When you think about doing research for application of local proverbs, it is a little different from the kind of research you do when studying structures or metaphors.

As you read about the different categories for application in the last few pages, was there a topic that you thought might be useful in your community? Talk to wise people and community leaders and see if they agree about a possible topic.

Even if community leaders have not agreed on a topic for proverb application, you can choose some topics and start collecting appropriate proverbs for these topics. For example, you can ask elders for proverbs that may be useful for community reconciliation, encouraging parents to have their children vaccinated, encouraging young people to respect their parents, protecting local resources, stopping the sexual practices that spread AIDS, etc.

# 11 Conclusion

This book has explained many ways to study proverbs, many topics, and many methods for studying them. Nobody will be able to study all of these topics. Nobody should try to study all of them.

I hope some of these ideas are useful for you as you study proverbs.

I will be very grateful if you tell me ways I can improve this book.

This is the first edition of this book. I will make many improvements in the future. *Please* send me your suggestions about how I can make this book better.

The future editions of this book will also be available on the Web for free downloading. If you want to be notified when a new edition is posted on the web, please e-mail me and ask to be notified.

If the ideas in this book are helpful to you, I will be very grateful if you send me copies of publications that you write.

Peter Unseth

pete\_unseth@diu.edu

## Glossary:

Some of the entries are derived from the glossary of *Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies* (Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Varga 2014, 353-363).

**Adynaton:** A proverb that states something that is impossible, for example “The fly ate iron.” (Greek) (Marketos 1945, 125).

**Alliteration:** The repetition of the same (or similar) consonants for artistic sound. It is most prominent at the beginning of words, but can be found anywhere in words.

**Anecdotal proverb:** An anecdotal proverb is one that requires that the hearer know a story that is related to the proverb.

**Anti-proverb:** “An intentionally changed proverb with a new meaning. It often has a humorous or satirical effect, including the possibility of becoming a new proverb” (Mieder 2004, 281). Some writers use the term “postproverbial proverb”.

**Assonance:** The repetition of same or similar vowels for artistic effect of sounds, e.g. *Az yak palak, Chand handalak*. “From one vine many different melons.” (Tajik, Tajikistan) (Bell 2009, 287)

**Bilingual proverb:** In this book, the label “bilingual proverb” is used for proverbs that require some knowledge of another language. Some bilingual proverbs are quoted in another language, but they are still adequately understood in the community’s main language. Other bilingual proverbs borrow some words from another language and insert them into proverbs that are formed from the community’s main language.

**Contradictory proverb:** Proverbs that contradict each other. Each is used when it is appropriate. For example, the following pairs of English proverbs are contradictory: “He who hesitates is lost” and “Look before you leap”. See “Counter proverb”, “Paradoxical proverb”.

**Counter proverbs:** Counter proverbs are pairs of proverbs that have similar structure, but state opposite ideas. Many counter proverbs are recognized as genuine proverbs by the community that uses them. They may have started as anti-proverbs, but they have become established as known proverbs. The following pair of Nepali proverbs are counter proverbs: “Religion is victorious and sin erodes” which contradicts “Sin is victorious and religion erodes” (Inchley 2010, 378). See also “Contradictory proverb”.

**Deontic:** A deontic clause expresses an obligation or duty, but the verb is not an imperative verb. The following proverbs are examples of deontic clauses:  
“You must fight one battle at a time.”  
“If you dance with the devil, you will get burned.”  
“You never get a second chance to make a good impression.”

**Dialogue proverb:** A proverb that has at least two quotations, with at least one speaker identified, for example “Someone asked a camel, ‘Is ascending better than descending?’ He replied, ‘May both be cursed’” (Pashto) (Bartlotti & Khattak 2006). See also “quotation proverb”, “wellerism proverb” and “question and answer proverb”.

**Diaspora:** People who do not live in the traditional area of the ethnic group, they are the diaspora.

**Emic:** The emic perspective is the insiders' view of something. Insiders understand their definitions of proverb and other related genres. Outsiders view something through an *etic* perspective, seeing differences and similarities differently than the insiders and their emic view. Both views are helpful, neither view is complete.

**Enumerative proverb:** Proverbs that include a number and list of items that match the number, e.g. "Three things on this earth are accounted precious: the three are knowledge, grain, and friendship" Burmese (Gray 1886, 102). In this book, "enumerative proverbs" are categorized as a sub-type of "Grouping proverb".

**Etic:** The etic perspective is the outsiders' view of something. Outsiders view definitions of proverbs and other related genres through an *etic* perspective, seeing differences and similarities differently than the insiders and their *emic* view. Both views are helpful, neither view is complete.

**Feature rhyme:** Consonants may sound similar to other consonants and vowels may sound similar to other vowels, based on some shared phonetic features. But they may not be exactly the same. Some proverbs contain examples of feature rhyme to create sound-based art.

**Grouping proverb:** A grouping proverb is a proverb that groups items together. The group may be nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. There are two kinds of grouping proverbs: \*enumerative proverbs and \*listing proverbs.

**Idiophone:** "A word describing a situation, or a state of affairs, or a set of actions – all in one word." Some idiophones are similar to onomatopoeia (Mvalo 2015, 4).

**Imperative:** A clause that gives a command, telling a person to do something. It may be positive (e.g. "do this") or negative (e.g. "do not do this").

**Keyword:** First or most meaningful component of proverbs, generally the first noun, adjective or adverb. The concept of "keyword" is relevant if a collection is organized and alphabetized by keyword.

**Listing proverb:** A proverb that lists a group of words or phrases. For example, "A generous man is nigh unto God, nigh unto men, nigh unto Paradise, far from hell" Arabic (Marvin 1916, 266). In this book, "Listing proverbs" are categorized as a sub-type of "Grouping proverb".

**Literal translation:** A translation that shows the grammar and vocabulary of the original, including the literal meaning of figures of speech.

**Metaproverb:** Proverbs about proverbs. The following proverb, for example, is about how a proverb should be used in an appropriate conversation: "As a boy should resemble his father, so should the proverb fit the conversation." Afar, Ethiopia (Parker 1971, 276)

**Parallelism:** Similar lines (usually two) are used, one after the other, explained in Chapter 5.4. Here is an example proverb with parallelism, from Telugu, India (Carr 1868, 47):

"Try building a house,  
try making a marriage."

**Paremiographer:** A person who collects proverbs.

**Paremiography:** The collection of proverbs. See also "Paremiology".

**Paremiological desideratum:** A set of proverbs in a language community that people think everybody *should* know.

Paremiological minimum: The paremiological minimum refers to the proverbs that people know. There are three slightly different definitions.

Paremiologist: A person who studies proverbs. It does not require a college degree, just an interest in proverbs. See also “Paremiographer”.

Paremiology: The study of proverbs. It does not have to be done by professionals. See also “Paremiography”.

Postproverbial proverb: See “anti-proverb”. The term has been introduced by Aderemi Raji-Oyelade. “‘Postproverbials’ are twisted and hybrid speech acts, re-creations of the traditional and conventional proverb medium; they are transgressive sayings both in sense and in structure when compared to traditional proverbs” (Raji-Oyelade 2004, 7). See also Raji-Oyelade 1999, 2004, 2012, 2022, and his edited book of chapters, 2024.

Proverb: A saying that is meant to convey wisdom. Definitions of “proverb” are discussed in chapter 1.1.

Question and answer proverb: A proverb that consists of a question and an answer, but the speakers are not identified, for example “‘What does a scorpion give birth to?’ ‘Small scorpions.’” Nubian (Fadijja), Egypt (Habbob 2022, 23). See also “quotation proverb”.

Quotation proverb: A proverb that includes at least one quotation. In this book, “quotation proverbs” includes \*wellerism proverbs, \*dialogue proverbs, or \*question and answer proverbs.

Rhetorical question: A question that is asked, but does not expect an answer, for example “From the mouth of a lion, who has removed meat?” Amharic, Ethiopia (Daniel Abera 2019, 396)

Rhyme: A basic form of rhyme is the vowels and final consonants of a syllable. For example, *tan* and *pan* rhyme. Many proverbs that have parallelisms have rhyme in the final words of each line.

Riddle proverbs: Proverbs that are used as riddles, explained in Chapter 6.9. Also called “proverb riddles”

Variants of proverbs: Specific verbal variations, derived from the same basic proverb.

Wellerism proverb (see also dialogue proverb): A type of proverb that consists of a named speaker and a short quotation. See also, “Dialogue proverb”, “Quotation proverb”.

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