

Paremiology in the digital era

Survival, adaptability, and prospects
for proverb scholarship in the 21st century



Luis J. Tosina Fernández

EDITORIAL COMARES



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*A Erin, por su inagotable paciencia,
apoyo y sus sacrificios durante todos estos años.*

*A Lucho, por la motivación que me proporciona
cada día para ser mejor persona.*

*A mi madre y hermanas,
con la esperanza de que estén orgullosas.*

*A mi familia, amigos y compañeros,
por su ayuda e inspiración.*

A mi padre, que no podrá leerlo.

Introduction

This book results from a years-long process of research that started with a senior year essay on the translations of proverbs in the first editions in English of *Don Quixote*. At the time, I found it absolutely fascinating that there were linguistic items that embodied wisdom and culture, proverbs that is, that I had wrongly assumed were quintessentially Spanish. Some of them, I was convinced, were even of a more restricted field of application as I had always assumed they must be witty statements with which someone from my family or acquaintances had come up and which had fossilized and caught on among those family or friends. Progressively, that naïve realization by a college student of English eventually led to a PhD and several publications in the sphere of Paremiology, the academic field that studies proverbs.

To many, proverbs are captivating because they are linguistic materializations of some of the idiosyncrasies of the social or linguistic community to which we belong. And realizing that those idiosyncrasies were not really that peculiar, but they were rather, quite often, commonalities of human nature was mind blowing. Having found a genuine interest in an academic field, what started with yet another essay on the proverbs in *Don Quixote* led to a predoctoral thesis in 2011 for which a collection of proverbs existing in Spanish and English with their etymologies was produced. The inevitable PhD dissertation followed, in my case with an overly ambitious proposal for a universal classification of proverbs. And a few years later, presentations at conferences about proverbs and various publications on Paremiology followed, always with the purpose of contributing to modernizing the discipline and attempting to fill the gaps in it that I kept finding along the way. This book is the result of all these years of compulsively writing down proverbs whenever they came up in movies, TV series, video games, music, comic books, or any other manifestation of entertainment or pop culture to which I have been exposed in the last decade. Thus, after countless text and voice notes on my phone and emails to myself with quotations from TV series or whatever I had been watching/playing/listening to at the time, I had gathered enough materials for a more challenging and satisfying project than anything I had undertaken up to that moment. That is how this project started. Having

developed a clear picture of the status of Paremiology and some of its shortcomings, I realized that there was a whole spectrum of communication and entertainment in which proverbs were being used in more creative and innovative ways than what interpersonal conversation under the usual circumstances allows. Yet, all of it seemed to be going unnoticed by the majority of the most prominent scholars in Paremiology. This became the main foundation for the genesis of this book: to provide a thorough and systematic account of the use of proverbs in modern means of communication and entertainment that grant users unprecedented resources to employ proverbs in ingenious ways, but to which traditional proverb scholarship had not had the opportunity to catch up.

Despite the inevitable lists of examples of uses of proverbs necessary to illustrate the different points that will be made throughout this monograph, this is not a random collection of proverbs gathered over the years. The purpose of this book is manifold but primarily, it intends to prove that proverbs remain in use and relevant to present-day, digital society. To prove this point, a variety of modern, popular media will be surveyed for their use of proverbs. These media have been chosen for their reach and for their prevalence, bearing in mind that our study centers on the English language and its paremiology and, therefore, the cultural manifestations that will be analyzed were originally produced in English, and in many cases, with an English-speaking audience in mind. The evident justification for this is that English is, especially online, the current *lingua franca* and the industry of entertainment in English is the most influential in the world as it is consumed worldwide, especially in the West.

As will be shown, proverbs are everywhere and the possibilities that new means of communication provide cause them to manifest in exceptionally innovative and creative ways. Consequently, new forms of communication and expression find in proverbs a never-ending source of inspiration that will be analyzed here to determine how the expressiveness of proverbs is employed by creators in these new media.

Although some of these platforms and trends have already been dealt with by other authors previously, no publication up to date provides as wide a range of proverb uses in such a variety of modern communicative and artistic manifestations as what will be examined here. Through the scrutiny of such original proverbial practices as the paremiological creativity in video games or TV series, or the visual representation of proverbs in graphic literature, this monograph aims to make a small contribution to the modernization of Paremiology by the application of its precepts to means that have received little or no attention by scholars but which are relevant to develop the discipline further.

It is also relevant to Paremiology, and more specifically, Paremiology in English, the contribution that modern means of communication make to the diffusion of some English proverbs and proverbial ideas beyond the boundaries of the English-speaking world. As will be shown, the impact and potential global reach of some of the items that will be examined are expected to contribute to the cross-linguistic popularization of some already well-established, widely known English proverbs. Eventually, this might lead to the establishment of a universal paremiological minimum, an idea that is supported by the results obtained after a cross-examination of the proverbs found across the

various media analyzed. In this regard, the recurrence of various of the items analyzed in the second part of this book confirms their popularity and currency among speakers. Moreover, the inclusion of some of these proverbs in some of the most popular cultural and artistic instances at present may help further their circulation. Considering this, the seemingly casual reappearance of some of the proverbs analyzed in different media may be indicative of the accessibility of those proverbs of proverbial ideas to the general public. This is particularly relevant for those productions directed to audiences who may not be native speakers of English and whose paremiological competence may be compromised. As a result of this occurrence, some of these recurring paremias may be the germ of an eventual global paremiological minimum.

We must bear in mind that, despite assuming its main principles, this book is a slight deviation from the more conventional means and genres to which Paremiology has traditionally turned in its search for subjects of study, possibly caused by the discipline's long search for academic recognition and acceptance. However, the folkloristic aspect that lies at the core of proverbs justifies and encourages the consideration of other popular, some may consider them "lower", forms of expression and creativity to assess their contribution to the diffusion of proverbial wisdom. If we are allowed to make an opportunist interpretation of the extended belief according to which proverbs are the wisdom of the common people, we would be led to ponder that these are precisely the sources where one should expect to find an abundance of proverbs as they cater for those common people. Moreover, this folkloristic approach challenges the generally accepted premise that folklore is necessarily transmitted by word of mouth in a world in which communication is more accessible and far-reaching than ever but also a world in which we are increasingly communicating in writing.

This new paradigm has brought along the appearance of what is known as digital folklore, motivated by changes in communication trends and the development of new means of communication. Digital folklore has some peculiarities that distinguish it from traditional folklore. One of the most frequently cited ones is its ephemerality; another is its lack of a geographical circumscription. On the other hand, and conversely to traditional folklore, digital folklore has the obvious advantage of providing solid evidence of the existence and currency of a certain item, in this case a proverb, as in the examples of the use of proverbs in social media or in Internet memes. This proves invaluable when attempting to attest the existence and circulation of proverbs, something that, despite having historically been neglected by paremiographers, i.e., compilers of collections of proverbs, is central to our study.

To account for the richness of proverbs and the diversity of the media analyzed, the methodology followed by this study is somewhat eclectic. Thus, whereas in some cases the search for proverbs was conducted by means of deliberate searches for specific proverbs in a text, as in the cases of the uses of proverbs in Internet memes, social media, and music, the use of proverbs in graphic literature analyzed focuses on a specific use that is considered to be worthy of a separate analysis that accounts for the uniqueness of such a use. With regards to this particular use of proverbs, a qualitative analysis is

presented using some meaningful examples that illustrate the connection between the verbal and visual content of illustrated literature.

The analysis of the use of proverbs in music is one of the best examples of the necessity of adapting the methodology to the peculiarities of the subject of study as, contrary to other media, music posed various difficulties that called for a different approach. The most challenging obstacle to overcome was the impossibility to survey every single song released in a given period of time for their use of proverbs in order to determine to what extent proverbs are actually used in music. G. Bryan's posthumously published study on the use of proverbs in music in the 20th century proved to be an inestimable resource that documents how songwriters from a variety of genres have often found inspiration in proverbs. However, apart from various inconsistencies and shortcomings, Bryan's paper only goes through the 90s. To get an idea of the frequency of the appearance of proverbs in modern popular music, the lyrics of the songs featured in the tops charts of various internet sites were inspected for their use of proverbs given the necessity to limit the scope of our analysis. Despite the quantitatively underwhelming findings, there are some remarkable examples analyzed in chapter 8.

For other media, though, the collection of proverbs took place prior to the composition of this volume while consuming those media over the years, as in the cases of the TV series or video games presented. Eventually, this amounted to a vast catalog of proverbial references across several titles. To avoid bias, the media analyzed were not chosen over other possible candidates based on the author's personal taste or their profuse use of proverbs but on the perceived cultural relevance and impact. This criterion is difficult to assess objectively and, sometimes, it goes hand in hand with the commercial success of the item under scrutiny. However, there are cases, such as with the video game franchises or the television series dissected, whose media coverage, and even the publication of academic works dealing with them, supports their suitability as illustrative cases of the main purpose of this book: to document the survival, adaptability, and resourcefulness of proverbs as a communicative and narrative device. When the choice was made, the transcripts of all the media were combed through for proverbs to complete the notes that had already been taken.

It is important to emphasize that the specific titles under scrutiny are not the result of cherry-picking in relation to their frequent use of proverbs but have been chosen for their cultural and social relevance, which transcends linguistic and geographical boundaries, and their proved level of diffusion under the premise that these conditions facilitate the spread of the proverbial wisdom present in them. Should the intention have been to artificially overrepresent the actual presence of proverbs in the media, other titles might have been more suitable to achieve that purpose.¹ Despite the efforts to keep an aseptic

¹ HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014) comes to mind as a show with a frequent use of proverbs which received nowhere the interest nor the accolades of public and critic that *Stranger Things* enjoyed.

and scientific approach, which demanded an unprejudiced choice with regards to the examples that were to be used in our analysis, they all evidence a reasonably frequent use of proverbs, often with a creative turn, particularly in relation to humor. As will be shown, the possibilities that the chosen media grant can hardly be paralleled by other traditional platforms.

This heterogeneous analysis seems the only effective way to captivate the multi-faceted character of proverbs, especially when analyzing how they manifest in an even more varied array of media. All these media and the specific examples of each analyzed in this book have the purpose of displaying some original uses of proverbs and provide an overview of how proverbs are being used at present. To achieve this and to provide our analysis with greater depth, some conscious choices were made that do not only illustrate the use of proverbs but challenge some widely-accepted misconceptions about them, such as their alleged association with older generations, which, to a large extent, is challenged by the use of proverbs in children's literature and adolescent or early adult entertainment such as certain TV fictions or video games.

To sum up, the first three chapters of this book provide the theoretical framework for a more practical approach in the remaining 7 chapters. Throughout the book, attention is paid to how proverbs are used in multiple ways to convey meaning in various media. This demonstrates how proverbs continue to be present and relevant in different types of texts, how they serve different narrative and communicative purposes, such as a characterization device for authors or their comic and illustrative power, and how their pithiness is most effectively employed in modern means of communication and entertainment, as in the case of social media and Internet memes, in which brevity is highly prized.

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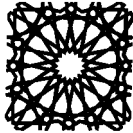
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Dirigida por:
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This book is the result of almost a decade of paremiological research that has led to the realization that, as will be shown, proverbs are everywhere and, contrary to popular belief, they enjoy as good health as they ever have. What is more, with the appearance of new means of communication and entertainment, proverbs have become a never-ending source of inspiration for creators across a variety of media. In this book, we analyze how proverbs are used in some of the most popular forms of entertainment at present, from TV series to Internet memes, but also video games, popular music, or graphic literature, among others, to determine how these modern media employ pieces of traditional wisdom with different purposes. Furthermore, and in order to set the theoretical framework for the volume, a definition of 'proverb' is provided, which revisits some of the most frequently quoted and most highly-regarded definition attempts provided by some of the most prestigious scholars in the field of Paremiology. Additionally, and apart from the specific chapters devoted to the analysis of the use of proverbs in the mentioned media, a brief review is made of the main outlets for paremiological research, both as scholarly publications and conferences. Finally, an overview of several tools that use artificial intelligence is presented to determine how these might benefit paremiological research but, also, how the inclusion of paremiology may be beneficial for the development of AI.

This book intends to be of relevance not only to readers, whether academic or not, with an interest in proverbs and traditional wisdom, but also to a readership from a variety of disciplines such as Discourse Analysis, Media Studies, or Literary Criticism, among others, who will find on its pages a well-documented account of how proverbs find their way into new forms of expression, developing new uses and purposes.

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