

Carla Spellerberg

Proverbial markers and their significance for linguistic proverb definitions: an experimental investigation

Abstract: Proverbs are notoriously hard to define, and various approaches to this problem are currently in use in the field of paremiology. The discussion in this paper develops a marker-based proverb definition based on linguistic criteria which is suitable for proverb research in linguistic paremiology. The basis of this definition is empirically supported by the results of an experiment with invented German proverbs containing different types of proverbial markers built on the design described in Arora (1984). The results of the experiment show the importance of proverbial markers for the successful identification of proverbs in discourse, thus allowing the establishment of a first hierarchy of proverbial markers. On a methodological level, the experimental design introduced provides insights into proverb structure and the nature of proverbiality. Furthermore, the results underline the fact that proverbial markers are not optional, but should be an essential aspect of every linguistic proverb definition.

Keywords: German proverbs, proverbial markers, proverb definitions, experimental methodology

1 Introduction

Defining what a proverb is and how it is possible to identify a string of words as one has been a central concern for paremiologists since the beginning of the study of proverbs (Mieder 2004: 2). This is a difficult undertaking because proverbs are extremely heterogenous phraseological units (PUs). Individual items belonging to the category of proverbs can, but do not have to, share any structural properties, as seen in (1).

(1)

a. *The early bird catches the worm.*

b. *Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.*

(1a) is a declarative sentence which contains a nature metaphor. Its exact meaning in a respective situation cannot be easily determined without a fixed context. (1b) is an imperative without a metaphorical level and can be easily understood even without it being uttered in a specific context. Both expressions are commonly accepted to be proverbs.

Solely based on their structure, it seems that the expressions in (1) cannot possibly belong to the same class of PUs since they differ completely in this respect. However, both proverbs display structural features commonly found in proverbs, so-called *proverbial markers*, that have been widely described in the paremiological literature (Holbek 1970; Peukes 1977; Röhrich and Mieder 1977; Silverman-Weinreich 1994 [1978]; Steyer 2012; Taylor 1931, to name just a few relevant publications). Instead of possessing a series of characteristics that all members of the set of proverbs share, proverbs rather seem to move along a spectrum of proverbial markers that they may or may not contain. While every proverb contains at least one of these proverbial markers, two proverbs can both contain different subsets within a set of possible proverbial markers without having any one of them in common.

Proverbial markers are well-studied in linguistic paremiology.¹ Proverbs can be built up using specific syntactic patterns such as so-called *proverbial formulae* (Kuusi 1978 [1966]; Peukes 1977; Steyer 2012). In addition, they often contain a metaphor, and may also feature rhetorical devices such as alliteration or rhyme (Arora 1984; Röhrich and Mieder 1977: ch. 6; Silverman-Weinreich 1994 [1978]). They are also often the result of syntactic operations such as clefting or sub-clausal fronting leading to a marked word order (Mac Coinnigh 2015) and may have a generic meaning (Villers 2016). Corpus-based paremiological research has also revealed that there is a prototypical lexical inventory in that there are words that are significantly over-represented in proverbs in comparison to ‘regular’ speech (Lückert 2018: 31).

In the following, I argue for a marker-based definition of proverbs for linguistic purposes that puts structural criteria at the heart of what makes proverbs what they are. While it is obvious that the way proverbs are used in discourse as well as their meaning cannot be neglected if one wants to develop an exhaustive proverb definition, the experimental evidence that I report on here suggests that proverb structure is in fact essential for native speakers to determine whether a string could be a proverb in their native language or not. Expressions need to fulfill certain structural criteria that determine whether they can become proverbs in a second, usage-based step.

1 Concise overviews can be found in Arora (1984) and Mieder (2004), for example.

The definition developed here does not make superfluous other definitions common in paremiology that are based on non-linguistic criteria. On the contrary, my definition is based on earlier research on paremiology and thus draws heavily on previous insights. Nevertheless, it is difficult to develop a linguistic proverb definition based on concepts such as ‘traditionality’, which is why it is desirable to develop a definition that relies entirely on linguistic criteria.

This article is organized as follows. In Section 2, I summarize important definitional criteria of proverbs and previous research on the different structural factors of proverbiality. Section 3 offers a first sketch of a marker-based linguistic definition of proverbs. Next, I present the necessary empirical evidence that supports my theoretical proposal in Section 4 and report on the results of an experiment investigating proverb perception in German. In Section 5, I discuss these experimental results and their implications for the proposed theory. Section 6 concludes the article and gives an overview of further possible steps towards an empirically verified linguistic definition of proverbs.²

2 Proverb definitions and the structure of proverbs

The first part of this section offers a summary of the main criteria that are generally used in definitions and characterizations of proverbs. Next, Section 2.2 introduces six groups of linguistic properties of proverbiality that have been identified in proverbs from different languages and that therefore should be considered in an investigation of the influence of proverbial markers on a speaker’s proverb perception.

2.1 Proverb definitions

Proverbs are extremely complex PUs, and there are various structural, cultural, and usage-based characteristics that can be employed in a proverb definition. Definitions usually stress one or several factors while neglecting others, which

² I would like to thank Dianne Jonas and Manfred Sailer for proofreading and commenting on drafts of this article. The thesis that this article is based on strongly benefited from comments from and discussion with Dianne Jonas, Janina Radó, Frank Richter, Manfred Sailer, and Kathrin Steyer. I also thank two anonymous reviewers whose comments helped to improve the article at hand. I am grateful to all of you for your contributions. All errors are of course my own.

results in proverb definitions generally either being too narrow or too general. The search for the “incommunicable quality” (Taylor 1931: 3) that proverbs possess is ongoing.

Three criteria that are often employed by paremiologists studying proverbs as bearers of culture are: (i) the fact that the proverb’s author is often unknown to most speakers in a speech community (Villers 2016: 377), (ii) that they are traditional (Arora 1984: 1; Mieder 2004: 4), and (iii) that they have didactic content (Norrick 1985: 41). All three criteria are difficult if not impossible to incorporate into a linguistic proverb definition for several reasons. If unknown authorship is a criterion that distinguishes proverbs from related forms such as quotes, a proverb would cease to be a proverb once its creator is identified.³ There are even proverbs such as German *Wer zu spät kommt, den bestraft das Leben* ‘He who is late is punished by life itself’ that exist as quotes and proverbs at the same time (Steyer 2012: 295). Traditionality, which is often described as a mixture of age and currency (Mieder 2004: 4), is also not suitable as a linguistic criterion as it is impossible to tell how old or current a proverb must be to count as one. Although many proverbs are old, new proverbs can be coined in an instant in the age of the internet and mass media, and are then perceived as proverbs by speakers. The notion of currency has its own problems, as will be addressed below. Finally, the ‘didactic’ content of proverbs is evident in proverbs such as *Look before you leap*. However, studies of contemporary proverb usage reveal that the proverb is losing its didactic function and serves nowadays more as an (ironic) comment (Burger 2012: 75). Therefore, didactic function is not a criterion that can be employed to predict the difference between proverbs and other PUs.

The most famous usage-based criterion used to define proverbs is currency, meaning that proverbs “appear with at least some frequency and distribution” (Mieder 2015: 44) in a speech community. While it is certainly true that many proverbs are widely known, it remains unclear how frequent a proverb must be used in order to be considered as current. Corpus studies reveal that the frequency of individual proverbs in a corpus can change radically depending on the search query used (Steyer 2012: 297–299). Proverbial variation and modification impede the determination of absolute frequency. Additionally, making currency a defining factor of proverbs means that old proverbs that are not used contemporarily would not be proverbs anymore. This indicates that there are structural aspects to a proverb that constitute its proverbiality that remain unchanged.

³ This is more likely to happen to modern proverbs, whose creator can be more easily identified than the creators of ancient proverbs.

Besides these cultural and usage-based criteria, there are four structural criteria usually mentioned in proverb definitions. The first structural criterion that every proverb candidate must meet, and that was already pointed out in early linguistic proverb definitions, is that proverbs must be “self-contained” (Norrick 1981: 5). Proverbs must be sentences or sentence-equivalent utterances that can stand on their own, and this is essential for distinguishing proverbs and proverbial phrases (Burger 2012: 46).⁴ The fact that sentence equivalence also proves helpful while identifying proverbs in a corpus (Steyer 2012: 290–291) demonstrates that this criterion is indeed central if we want to make a distinction between proverbs and other PUs.

While sentence equivalence is a useful criterion for a linguistic proverb definition, other structural criteria are problematic in this respect. The “frozen internal structure” (Cram 1994 [1983]: 75) that has often been assumed for proverbs is questionable as there usually exist several regional variants of the same proverb.⁵ Recent paremiological research shows that proverbs can be strongly modified (Litovkina 2015; Mandziuk 2016).

Another criterion that could be helpful to a linguistic proverb definition but that turns out to be problematic is brevity. Brevity and pithiness are commonly accepted proverb characteristics (Röhrich and Mieder 1977: 3). Proverbs must be brief and concise so that they can be memorized by speakers. However, long proverbs do exist, and it is unclear where exactly brevity ends.⁶

The last structural criterion to be discussed here is “poetic form” (Norrick 1981: 7). Many proverbs contain rhetorical devices as well as metaphorical language. However, not all proverbs feature metaphor or rhetorical devices, which leads many paremiologists to the conclusion that poetic form is optional. Poetic form is, of course, not restricted to proverbs and can also be found in slogans, quotes, and related forms, and thus can impede differentiation between these forms (Norrick 1981: 7). Nevertheless, every proverb seems to adhere to so-called “proverbial style” (Arora 1984: 9). Although the individual proverbial markers that a proverb contains differ, this fact cannot be neglected, and this makes it worthwhile investigating these factors of proverbiality further. In the next section, I present proverbial markers described in the literature.

⁴ While paremiologists often employ the term *proverbial phrase*, phraseologists tend to refer to the same kind of PU as *idiom* (Burger 2012: 45).

⁵ See Chlosta and Grzybek (2005) for an exemplary study of regional variation in Anglo-American proverbs.

⁶ An extremely long example can be found in Mac Coinnigh (2015: 115): *When the oak is before the ash, then you will only get a splash; when the ash is before the oak, then you may expect an oak.*

2.2 Markers of proverbiality

Proverbial markers are well-researched, and the paremiological literature regards them as important for speakers' ability to identify an utterance as proverbial (Mac Coinnigh 2015: 112; Arora 1984). A seminal study on the importance of proverbial markers for proverb perception is Arora (1984). Arora asked 46 speakers of Spanish to respond to a questionnaire containing 25 items, two of which were existing proverbs, while the rest of the items were invented proverbs containing different proverbial markers. Ninety-six percent of the study's participants claimed to know *No es oro todo lo que relumbra* 'Everything that glitters is not gold', or stated that they did not know it but nonetheless considered it a proverb. Only 70% said the same of the less frequent proverb *Más vale llegar a tiempo que ser convidado* 'It's better to arrive on time than to be invited'. A total of 12 invented proverbs was rated higher than this 'real' proverb unknown to most Spanish speakers. Nine invented proverbs in Arora's study were rated as (probably) proverbial by at least 75% of the participants, while three invented proverbs paraphrasing proverbial wisdom without containing any proverbial markers received the lowest ratings. Therefore, Arora's results show the impact that proverbial markers can have on proverb perception.

In the next two sections, I present six classes of markers that are commonly accepted to be markers of proverbiality in the literature. I divide these six groups into syntactic and semantic factors, a distinction which mostly serves presentational purposes.

2.2.1 Syntactic factors

While proverbs can be simple declarative sentences, there are three groups of syntactic factors that can be found in many members of the set of proverbs across languages: marked word order, proverbial formulae, and rhetorical devices.

There are several syntactic operations that help to set proverbs apart from the discourse around them, making them stand out, and raising the listener's awareness towards the utterances' proverbiality, such as clefting, left dislocation, and topicalization (Mac Coinnigh 2015: 125–126).

Another widely described proverbial marker is that of proverbial formulae, a term coined in Kuusi (1978 [1966]) (see also Mieder 2004: 6–7; Norrick 1985: 55–56). Proverbial formulae consist of two parts, namely a fixed component and variable slots that can be filled with lexical material. Common formulae are shown in (2).

(2)

- a. *Better X than Y (Better late than never).*
- b. *Like X, like Y (Like father, like son).*
- c. *Where there is X, there is Y.*

Proverbial formulae are useful when it comes to identifying proverbs in a corpus (Steyer 2012), pointing towards their identificatory potential. Generally, there are formulae that are mostly used for proverbs, and more general structural patterns that are also used in other PUs (Steyer 2012: 301).

Rhetorical devices such as parallelism (Holbek 1970: 56; Mac Coinnigh 2015: 122; Mieder 2004: 7; Silverman-Weinreich 1994 [1978]: 75), alliteration (Holbek 1970: 56; Röhrich and Mieder 1977: 57; Silverman-Weinreich 1994 [1978]: 79), and rhyme (Arora 1984: 14–15; Röhrich and Mieder 1977: 57; Silverman-Weinreich 1994 [1978]: 78)⁷ are widely documented in proverbs.⁸ Different rhetorical devices are often combined within one proverb. Rhetorical devices are, of course, also common in PUs that are not proverbs. Nevertheless, there is no doubt as to how frequent they are in proverbs in contrast to ‘regular’ discourse.

Besides these three groups of syntactic markers, there are three major groups of semantic markers which I introduce in the next section.

2.2.2 Semantic factors

Among the semantic factors of proverbiality, the most well-known one is metaphor, which is often even seen as a factor that distinguishes proverbs from other PUs (Arora 1984: 12). Although metaphor is frequent in proverbs, there are also non-metaphorical proverbs such as (1b). Metaphorical proverbs can translate a complex social situation that an individual experiences into a simple metaphor

⁷ A reviewer remarks that it would be difficult to assume that all rhetorical devices mentioned here can be labeled ‘syntactic markers’, which I fully agree with. It is indeed a simplification to assume that markers such as rhyme are syntactic markers. The experimental study and theory presented and developed here only offer a very first approximation towards a marker-based definition of proverbs, which makes this rough categorization necessary. Every proverbial marker deserves a study of its own. More fine-grained experimental studies could be conducted in the future, making a more complex categorization of proverbial markers necessary. In any case, only one of the ‘syntactically’ marked experimental items in my study is marked with rhyme (*Das Risiko wagen heißt Erfolg zu haben* ‘Daring the risk means having success’, so rhyme only plays a secondary role in my study).

⁸ This list is by no means complete but documenting all rhetorical devices that can be found in proverbs goes beyond the scope of this paper.

based on everyday experience (Röhrich and Mieder 1977: 52). This is what gives many proverbs their communicative force.

Proverbs also tend to contain a significant number of lexical items belonging to the prototypical lexical inventory. While this notion is not new, and is one that has been pointed out, for example, by Taylor (1931: 135), Lückert (2018) shows that there are lemmas from several semantic fields that are significantly over-represented in proverbs. This includes lemmas from word fields such as life, time, money, relationships, and words like *never* which serve to stress the proverb's universal validity (Lückert 2018: 43–44).

A final proverbial marker featured in proverbs is the fact that proverbs have a generic meaning (Villers 2016: 371). A proverb such as *The apple doesn't fall far from the tree* is not a statement about an individual apple tree, but takes on the properties of a generic statement to increase its general validity. Genericity is pervasive in proverbs for that reason, and it would be a difficult undertaking to identify proverbs that do not have a generic meaning.

The six groups of markers of proverbiality presented here are clearly present in many proverbs, although not all of them appear in all proverbs that exist. This is one of the reasons why proverbial markers are often considered optional instead of essential to proverbiality. The next section explores the theoretical implications of putting them at the center of a linguistic proverb definition.

3 Theoretical implications: towards a marker-based definition

The proverb definition sketched here is not the first attempt to define a proverb linguistically. One important linguistic definition is developed in Norrick (1985). Like the definition proposed here, Norrick's definition is feature-based. His definition consists of linguistic features such as proverbs being a "free conversation turn", but also of non-linguistic paremiological criteria like didactic content and traditionality (Norrick 1985: 73). While Norrick's proposal to use traditional paremiological terminology in a linguistic approach to proverb definition clearly has the advantage that the terminology remains consistent, I will take a different approach here and will, for the moment, abandon traditional criteria. As the experimental evidence discussed in Arora (1984) points towards the fact that structural criteria may be more important to the nature of proverbs than previously thought, here I explore the potential of a definition based on structural considerations.

One reason why structural proverb definitions usually fail is that structure is not the only factor that defines a proverb as such. Proverbs like *A picture is worth a thousand words*, which started out as an ad slogan and later became a proverb, prove that a PU can cross genre boundaries without undergoing any structural changes. I therefore do not claim that a linguistic proverb definition is complete as soon as a proverb's required structural properties are identified. An exhaustive linguistic proverb definition consists of a structural, a semantic, and a usage-based component.

The basis of the central, structural proverb component in my definition is formed by the six groups of proverbial markers introduced in Section 2.2. They should be understood not as a checklist, but as a spectrum along which proverbs move. With regards to structure, I argue that a string of words that qualifies as a proverb needs to be *paremiologically prominent*,⁹ a notion which I define as follows:

Definition 1: Paremiological prominence

A string of words is paremiologically prominent if it is a sentence or sentence-equivalent expression and contains proverbial markers.

Next, the combination of proverbial markers that the expression contains is important. A generic sentence such as *The polar bear is a white animal* is, in my terminology, a paremiologically prominent string, but clearly not a proverb. A string such as *The early bird catches the worm* contains a metaphor and can be generically understood. It is therefore more paremiologically prominent.¹⁰

⁹ I decided to introduce the term *paremiological prominence* instead of adopting the widely-used term *potential proverb* for two reasons. First, paremiologists use this term in many ways denoting different concepts, none of which I am referring to here. Second, not every paremiologically prominent string is automatically a proverb, as explained in this section.

¹⁰ A reviewer remarks that it is important to identify in what way proverbs and other PUs differ and which characteristics they share. It is true that paremiological prominence as defined here is not sufficient to distinguish proverbs from related forms. However, this is also not the intention behind Definition 1. Whether a string is paremiologically prominent as defined here or not only tells us whether a string qualifies as proverb *with regards to its structure*. There are two additional components, namely the content of the string and its usage, which also determine its proverb status. Nevertheless, that proverbs cannot only be defined and distinguished from other PUs by their structure does not mean that we do not need paremiological prominence to define them, as Section 4 shows.

In addition, there are restrictions on proverb content which must be further explored in future research.¹¹ The third crucial component of my definition is the set of usage-based criteria that allow a paremiologically prominent string to be uttered in a context which is typical for proverbs.¹²

The structural component of my marker-based definition also includes many members of related genres such as maxims, quotes, slogans, and riddles. The constraints on content and usage finally determine whether a string can be and is used as proverb, or, for example, as quote. However, usage and content constraints still do not constitute a proverb on their own, as the evidence in Arora (1984) and my own experiment, presented in Section 4, suggest.

To sum up, an expression that is paremiologically prominent, has proverbial content, and can be used in a proverbial way is a proverb.¹³ Adopting the view on proverbiality presented in Winick (2003: 586–588), who claims that a proverb becomes one if used as such for the first time, I claim that a string fulfilling my criteria which is being uttered in a proverbial context for a first time is a proverb, no matter how old or how current it is.¹⁴

I acknowledge the fact that paremiologists make a distinction between proverbs that could be coined and well-known proverbs that a huge number of

11 Notions such as *proverb content* must be defined more precisely, as a reviewer points out, and I fully agree. However, the focus of this article is on proverb structure and not on content, and the definition presented here is only a first sketch. Only the first of the three components (structure, content, and usage) can be explored here. For now, I adapt as working definition that what I mean by *proverb content* is what Kuusi (1978 [1966]: 171) refers to as the proverb's "Idée [idea]". It is generally assumed that proverbs contain 'wisdom' or advice but discussing these terms would go beyond the scope of this article. I refer the interested reader to the summary in Grzybek (2015), and studies of the logical-semiotic classification of proverbs such as Chłosta and Grzybek (2000).

12 It is evident that one of the next steps in fleshing out the definition proposed here must include a thorough study of what these usage-based criteria are. Proverb usage is, just like proverb content, not the focus of this article. A working definition of what it means for a string to be used in a proverbial way is given in Burger (2012: 75), who remarks that proverbs nowadays have a generalizing function within an argumentation. I adopt this notion of 'proverbial usage' for now.

13 In other words, proverbs differ from sentence idioms in three respects. First, proverbs must be paremiologically prominent, as suggested in Section 4, which is, to the best of my knowledge, not the case for sentence idioms. They can be paremiologically prominent as defined here, but this is not a requirement. Second, sentence idioms do not have to contain 'wisdom' like proverbs usually do. Third, proverbs have the generalizing function already mentioned, which sentence idioms do not need to have. It follows from my argumentation that if a sentence idiom fulfills all three sets of criteria, that it then can become a proverb or be used as a proverb.

14 I differ from Winick (2003) in one important respect. He highlights the importance of proverbial markers, but still considers them optional as individual markers only show up in a subset of proverbs (Winick 2003: 574).

speakers can name. I would like to call these two (rough) classes of proverbs *lexicalized* and *non-lexicalized* proverbs and argue that paremiology should concern itself with the study of both to learn more about the nature of proverbs. The structural aspects described here can be found in both classes.

The next step towards a valid marker-based definition, as documented in the next section, is the empirical verification of the claims made here.

4 Proverb perception in German

Although the results reported on in Arora (1984) point towards the importance of proverbial markers for proverb perception and proverbiality in general, there has not so far been a great deal of similar research.¹⁵ One of the key insights that Arora's study provides us with is that the Spanish speakers in her study accepted utterances as a proverb if they contained proverbial markers, regardless of whether these expressions were actual, conventionalized proverbs or not, highlighting the importance of paremiological prominence. It is therefore worth investigating whether results parallel to the ones in Arora (1984) can be replicated in other languages.

There are also several questions that were not answered in Arora (1984). For example, the following were not addressed: whether semantic or syntactic factors are more important for proverb perception, or whether the accumulation of markers in a proverb leads to increased proverbiality. To begin answering these questions, I followed Arora's insightful approach and conducted an experiment with invented German proverbs.

Additionally, Arora's study has three major methodological difficulties that I aimed to overcome for my own experimental design. Arora (1984) presented unmarked paraphrases as well as items containing different proverbial markers to her participants, but she did not test one and the same test sentence in different versions with different markers. The effects of single markers on proverb perception can therefore not be compared in her study. The different test items also all contained different wisdoms and other statements, so it is often unclear whether an item was rejected by the participants because of its content or because of its structure. A third problem in Arora's design is that all test items were presented to

¹⁵ The importance of proverbial markers is also emphasized in Fiedler (2002: 121), who points out that newly created proverbs in the constructed language Esperanto usually contain proverbial markers such as the ones introduced in Section 2.2. Speakers subconsciously seem to rely on proverbial markers for the creation of new proverbs.

the participants without context, but only as isolated items. Context facilitates the interpretation of proverbs and could have helped speakers process the test items. The experimental design presented in the next section addresses these challenges.

4.1 Experimental method

4.1.1 Hypotheses

In my experiment, I compare invented proverbs to old proverbs taken from Seiler (1922), a well-known collection of German proverbs. The old proverbs used here have the advantage that they are commonly accepted as proverbs but are no longer salient in contemporary German. This prevented participants in the experiment from judging the sentences' proverbiality not by how a sentence sounds to them, but by whether they know it as a proverb or not. Similarly, I minimized the risk of accidentally assessing proverb knowledge instead of intuitions of proverbiality. This leads to the first hypothesis investigated here.

Hypothesis 1: Invented proverbs containing proverbial markers are as acceptable as proverbs as are old proverbs not salient in contemporary German.

The second question investigated here is the common assumption that the accumulation of proverbial markers increases proverbiality (Arora 1984: 15). This assumption has, to the best of my knowledge, never been empirically verified.

Hypothesis 2: The accumulation of proverbial markers in an utterance leads to an increased acceptability of this utterance as a proverb.

Up to now, it has also, to the best of my knowledge, never been tested whether there are individual proverbial markers that have a stronger effect on proverb perception than other markers. It could be that there are stronger and weaker markers.

Hypothesis 3: Individual proverbial markers are not equally effective. There are stronger markers that have more of an effect on the perception of an utterance as proverbial than weaker markers do.

A detailed investigation of all six groups of proverbial markers would go beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, I partially investigate the third hypothesis by comparing the impact of syntactic versus semantic markers.

4.1.2 Experimental design

Many of the proverbs listed in Seiler (1922) are still known to German speakers today. As a first step, I verified the disuse of the 25 old proverbs used for the

experiment through searching for them in the *Deutsches Referenzkorpus* (DeReKo) via COSMAS (COSMAS II). Examples of old proverbs used in the experiment are given in (3).

(3)

a. *Großer Wind bringt oft nur kleinen Regen.*

‘Great wind often only brings little rain.’

b. *Liebe kann viel, Geld kann alles.*

‘Love can do much, money can do everything.’

I made sure that every old proverb selected has a (partial) synonym conveying the same message in contemporary German, so that it would be certain that the messages that the old proverbs convey would not be unknown to German speakers today. This makes it less likely that they reject a proverb because the ‘wisdom’ that it contains is unknown to them. The synonyms of the proverbs in (3) are given in (4).

(4)

a. *Nichts wird so heiß gegessen, wie es gekocht wird.*

‘Nothing is eaten as hot as it is cooked.’

b. *Geld regiert die Welt.*

‘Money rules the world.’

Every experimental sentence comes in five different variants that are comparable to each other: the old proverb, the unmarked paraphrase, a syntactically marked item, a semantically marked item, and an item containing a combination of a syntactic and a semantic marker.

Common proverbs in German and other languages are paraphrased on the *Sprichwortplattform* created by the project *SprichWort* (SprichWort 2008–2010).¹⁶ Since every old proverb in my study has a synonym in contemporary German, I could use the modern proverb’s paraphrase given on the platform to model unmarked paraphrases for my own experiment. (5) shows the unmarked paraphrases of (4).

(5)

a. *Hinterher ist alles nicht so schlimm wie befürchtet.*

‘In the end, nothing is as bad as suspected.’

¹⁶ A revised and updated version of the *Sprichwortplattform* is the *OWID Sprichwörterbuch* (Sprichwörterbuch 2012-), whose entries could also be used as basis for future experiments.

- b. *Geld hat mehr Macht als alles andere.*
 ‘Money has more power than anything else.’

In the next step, I created the additional three experimental groups out of the unmarked paraphrases. The first group contains only a syntactic marker (a proverbial formula in most cases). The second group contains only a metaphor, and the third group contains both a metaphor and a syntactic marker. Thus, there are five different variants for every experimental sentence. The resulting paradigm for the two sentences used as examples here is given in (6) and (7).

- (6)
- a. *Großer Wind bringt oft nur kleinen Regen.* (old proverb)
 ‘Great wind often only brings little rain.’
 - b. *Hinterher ist alles nicht so schlimm wie befürchtet.* (unmarked item)
 ‘In the end, nothing is as bad as suspected.’
 - c. *Was vorher schlimm aussieht, ist hinterher oft harmlos.* (syntactic marker [proverbial formula])
 ‘What at first looks bad, is in the end often harmless.’
 - d. *Der Wolf ist bei genauem Hinsehen oft nur ein Dackel.* (semantic marker [metaphor])
 ‘The wolf is on closer inspection often only a dachshund.’ (syntactic + semantic markers)
 - e. *Was erst aussieht wie ein Wolf, ist bei genauem Hinsehen oft nur ein Dackel.*
 ‘What at first looks like a wolf, is on closer inspection often only a dachshund.’

- (7)
- a. *Liebe kann viel, Geld kann alles.* (old proverb)
 ‘Love can do much, money can do everything.’
 - b. *Geld hat mehr Macht als alles andere.* (unmarked item)
 ‘Money has got more power than anything else.’
 - c. *Wer Geld hat, der hat auch den Erfolg.* (syntactic marker [proverbial formula])
 ‘He who has got the money, has got the success as well.’
 - d. *Gold hat Macht über alles.* (semantic marker [metaphor])
 ‘Gold has power over everything.’
 - e. *Wer hat das Gold, dem ist gegeben Macht und Erfolg.* (syntactic + semantic markers)
 ‘He who has got gold, is given power and success.’

As it is well-known that context facilitates the interpretation of proverbs, the different variants of every experimental sentence were embedded into a proper context that I found in DeReKo through searching for the contemporary synonyms of the old German proverbs mentioned above.

(8)

*Diese Schweinerei zeigt einmal mehr: **Liebe kann viel, Geld kann alles**, in der Politik, der Wirtschaft, nun auch im Sport. Spiel und Fairness treten immer mehr in den Hintergrund. Wegen einzelner Spieler muss jetzt der ganze Verein leiden. Der Image-Schaden ist riesig.*

‘This mess shows once again: **Love can do much, money can do everything**, in politics, in the economy, and now in sports, too. The game as well as fairness are taking a back seat. The whole club must suffer because of individual players. The damage to the image is enormous.’

The experiment itself was an online questionnaire created with OnExp (Onea and Syring). I distributed the experiment via different Whatsapp directories, mailing lists, and two Facebook groups specialized in online surveys.

For the experiment, every participant saw only one variant of each of the 25 respective items, so that no participant saw two or more versions of one and the same experimental sentence. All participants were asked to rate the 25 items that they saw on a scale from 1 to 7 for their proverbiality. Before beginning the experiment, speakers were informed about the purpose of the experiment (investigating how German speakers perceive proverbs) and that they would be presented with many sentences, some of which were proverbs and others that were not. The instructions then reminded the participants that it would be likely that they had never heard many of the proverbs that they were going to see, so they were asked not to judge the sentences by whether they knew them or not, but by how proverbial they seemed to them.

4.1.3 Participants

Twenty-four native speakers of German whose ages ranged from 20 to 73 years ($M = 42.25$) participated in the experiment. Twenty-two of the twenty-four participants were born in and still lived in Germany at the time of the experiment. The two remaining participants were born and lived in Switzerland.

4.2 Results

The experimental data were analyzed using the statistics program R, version 3.6.1 (R Core Team). Table 1 gives an overview over the mean ratings for the five experimental conditions.

Tab. 1: Mean ratings (standard deviation, standard error) for the five experimental conditions

Group	Old	Semantic marker	Syntactic + semantic markers	Syntactic marker	Unmarked
Rating	4.14 (1.29, 0.26)	3.88 (1.28, 0.26)	4.27 (1.16, 0.23)	3.53 (1.29, 0.26)	2.66 (1.07, 0.21)

Comparing the means of the five different experimental groups reveals that the mean ratings for the old proverbs, the semantically marked invented proverbs, and the semantically and syntactically marked items are similar. This is not the case for the unmarked paraphrases. The syntactically marked items were not rated as low as the unmarked paraphrases, but also not as high as the remaining three experimental groups. Figure 1 shows the differences in ratings.

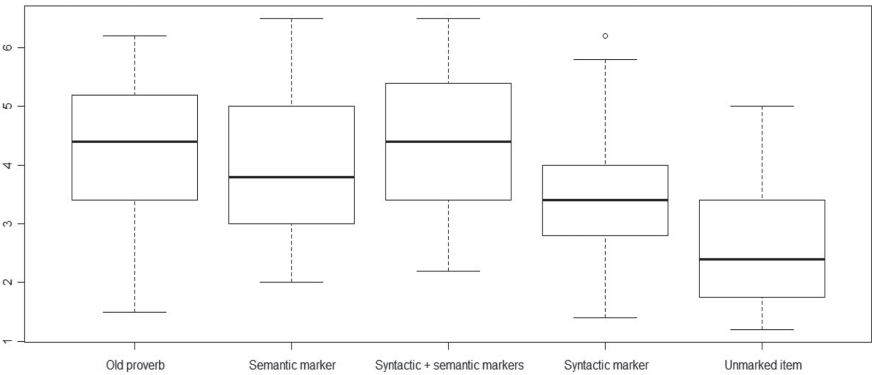


Fig. 1: Boxplot comparing the mean ratings from the five experimental conditions

As a next step, comparisons of the means were necessary to analyze whether the differences between the five groups are statistically significant. I compared the five experimental groups using t-tests for independent samples. An exception to this procedure is the last comparison, the comparison between the group of semantically marked items and the group of semantically and syntactically marked items, for which I used a paired t-test.

The results clearly show that the differences between the mean ratings of the group of old proverbs and the group of semantically marked items are not significant ($t(48) = 0.71424$, $p = 0.4785$). The same holds for the differences between the old proverbs and the group of semantically and syntactically marked items ($t(48) = -0.36852$, $p = 0.7141$), and the semantically marked and the semantically as well as syntactically marked items ($t(24) = -1.3248$, $p = 0.1977$). The difference between the group of old proverbs and the syntactically marked items is an exception to this as it is marginally significant ($t(48) = 1.6905$, $p = 0.09741$). The t-test results therefore show a similar picture to what the boxplot in Fig. 1 shows as they highlight the similarity between the ratings for the old proverbs, the semantically marked items, the mixed items, as well as for the special status of the group of syntactically marked items.

In the next section, I discuss the implications of these results for my previously stated hypotheses and present a refinement of the theoretical proverb definition sketched in Section 3.

5 Discussion of the results

5.1 The impact of proverbial markers on proverb perception

The experiment's results not only provide interesting insights into proverb perception in German, but also offer valuable conclusions about the structural nature of proverbs in general.

Hypothesis 1 can be verified as there is no statistically significant difference between the mean ratings for the invented proverbs with semantic and syntactic markers ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.16$) and the group of old proverbs ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.29$; $t(48) = -0.36852$, $p = 0.7141$). The difference between the mean ratings for the invented proverbs with semantic markers only ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.28$) and the old proverbs is also not significant ($t(48) = 0.71424$, $p = 0.4785$). We can conclude from this that semantic markers alone have a strong influence on proverb perception. Since the only semantic marker used in this experiment is metaphor, the results highlight the strong influence of metaphor on proverbiality. An additional syntactic marker does not seem to raise the proverbiality of an expression significantly. The difference between the mean ratings for the group of semantically marked items and the mixed group items ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.16$) is not significant ($t(24) = -1.3248$, $p = 0.1977$).

The group of syntactically marked items is in fact the hardest class of items to interpret. The difference between the mean ratings for the syntactically marked items ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.29$) and the old proverbs is marginally significant ($t(48) = 1.6905$, $p = 0.09741$); this is much lower than the p-values for the comparative

analysis of the other categories. The effect of syntactic markers on proverb perception is possibly still there, but is much weaker than the effect of the semantic markers. Future research could focus on the influence of individual syntactic markers and compare them to each other. It would be especially interesting to explore whether proverbial formulae have a stronger effect on proverb perception than marked word order, whether there are differences between individual proverbial formulae, and what kind of role rhetorical devices play.

The fact that the difference between the semantically marked items and the mixed marked items is not significant indicates that Hypothesis 2 cannot be confirmed. Quality seems to be more important for proverb perception than quantity. Invented proverbs with semantic markers received similar ratings to old proverbs, and adding a syntactic marker to these proverbs did not change this general picture. Semantic markers alone are sufficient.

The falsification of the second hypothesis raises interesting questions concerning non-metaphorical proverbs, which are clearly also accepted as proverbs. Proverbs such as *Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today* live off an accumulation of syntactic markers and contain semantic markers such as the prototypical lexical inventory. In theory, it should therefore be possible that non-metaphorical proverbs and metaphorical proverbs are equally acceptable if the non-metaphorical proverb contains a sufficient number of other markers. Again, further research on the impact of syntactic markers would be desirable to learn more about the nature of non-metaphorical proverbs.

Hypothesis 3 can, as already mentioned, only be partially explored here. The data presented here still confirms that the influence of the individual proverbial markers is in fact unequal. The impact of metaphor is enormous, which is in line with observations previously made in the paremiological literature. The influence of syntactic markers is relatively weak in comparison with metaphor.

The weak impact of the syntactic markers used in my experiments can, however, only partially speak for all syntactic markers that are there. Other proverbial formulae than the ones used here as well as rhetorical devices could have stronger effects on proverb perception. The conclusion that syntactic markers are weaker than metaphor should not be arrived at too hastily, before syntactic markers are extensively researched in similar experiments. Additionally, the group of syntactic markers contains an outlier ($M = 6.2$), which is the sentence in (9), for which there seems to be no satisfactory explanation at present.¹⁷

¹⁷ A reviewer suggests that the existence of a German proverb with a similar meaning (*Zeig mir deine Freunde, und ich sag dir, wer du bist* 'Show me your friends, and I'll tell you who you are') could have influenced the speakers' judgments, which is indeed a possible explanation.

(9)

Kennst du die Freunde eines Menschen, weißt du, wer er ist.

'Know a person's friends, and you know who he is.'

There are several possible explanations for the weak impact of proverbial formulae on proverb perception, one of them being that many of these formulae are not used exclusively for building proverbs. As Steyer (2012: 301) states, several of the patterns that serve as proverbial formulae are also more abstract structural patterns that are used for building other types of expressions. The same conclusion holds for marked word order, which is used for all kinds of (information-structural) purposes in daily speech and is not reserved for proverbs. It is likely that native speakers do not associate these syntactic markers with proverbial speech only.

Metaphorical speech is, of course, not only used in proverbs. Metaphor, however, provides a stronger deviation from the surrounding context than proverbial formulae or marked word order do. Metaphorical utterances must be metaphorically interpreted by the listener so that they can understand what the speaker wants to say and so they must identify the 'out of context'-usage of the metaphorical image as a precondition to understanding the utterance.

A few words should be said about the two proverbial markers that I have not discussed so far: genericity and the prototypical lexical inventory. While inventing proverbs, it is impossible to eliminate these two markers from the experimental items. Both markers are needed if one wants to create even 'unmarked' paraphrases such as the ones I introduced here. It is not possible to avoid prototypical words such as *tomorrow*, *always*, and *better* while creating proverbs, and, analogically, it is impossible to prevent generic readings. I therefore assumed for the purpose of the experiment that these two markers are present in all experimental items as base markers, even in the unmarked paraphrases. Since the unmarked paraphrases still received very low ratings, I conclude that the two markers do not have much of an impact on proverb perception in German.

On the methodological side, my experiment highlights how fruitful Arora's (1984) use of invented proverbs is in the investigation of proverb perception. Invented proverbs allow the experimenter to make sure that speakers do not rate a proverb based on whether they know it or not. The potential of the experimental design developed here based on Arora (1984) is not yet exhausted. It could be used to learn more about the nature of proverbs in the future, not only about proverb structure and individual proverbial markers, but possibly also about content and brevity constraints on proverbs.

5.2 Implications for the marker-based definition

The experimental results presented here offer a first insight into how individual proverbial markers can be ordered, and, therefore, into what it means for an utterance to be paremiologically prominent.

Genericity and the prototypical lexical inventory are the two markers that are almost always present in paremiologically prominent utterances. Genericity is deeply connected to proverbiality as proverbs aim to sound as generally plausible as possible. The low ratings that the ‘unmarked’ paraphrases in my experiment received suggest that both genericity and the prototypical lexical inventory do not have much of an impact on proverbiality, although both markers are generally present in proverbs. I therefore regard them as obligatory base markers.

The experiment’s results also suggest that a syntactic marker alone is not sufficient to turn an unmarked paraphrase into a proverb. This might explain why non-metaphorical proverbs tend to accumulate syntactic markers to sound more proverbial. Nevertheless, the experiment presented here offers a first glimpse of the effects of syntactic markers on proverb perception which could be investigated more thoroughly in the future. A tentative conclusion is that in metaphorical proverbs, syntactic markers can support proverbiality, but do not cause such an interpretation.

Metaphor is clearly the strongest proverbial marker investigated in my experiment. Metaphors turn an unmarked paraphrase into a proverb without any effort and strongly signal deviation from the surrounding discourse to the listener.

Summing up, we have two base markers (genericity and the prototypical lexical inventory), syntactic support markers (in the case of metaphorical proverbs), and metaphor as the most powerful proverbial marker examined here. Based on this first hierarchy, it is possible to investigate the relationship of paremiological prominence and proverb content, usage, and brevity constraints. This step-by-step verification then helps to establish a linguistic proverb definition based on empirical facts.

6 Conclusion and outlook

Defining proverbs has always been, and remains, a challenging task. In this paper, I have proposed a marker-based definition of proverbs based on linguistic criteria. The definition introduced here is especially helpful if one wants to study proverbs from a linguistic perspective, but other paremiological disciplines could also benefit from the insights gained here. The empirical evidence presented in

Section 4 shows that proverbiality is measurable and can be researched using experimental methods. The results also suggest that structural aspects of proverbs are in fact crucial to proverb perception. Proverbial markers are therefore neither optional, nor should they be neglected in proverb definitions in general. Paremiological prominence can be embedded into an overall proverb definition, as the analysis in Section 3 shows.

On a methodological level, the experimental design introduced here could be used as a blueprint in future research to learn more about proverb perception and the importance of individual proverbial markers. Apart from structural aspects, extensions and adaptations of this design could be used to further explore the perception of proverb content and possibly answer the question of how brief or concise a proverb ideally should be. Embedding experimental items into different contexts of usage could reveal more about the contexts in which proverbial speech is most often used by native speakers and/or is most acceptable, and could allow us to learn more about proverbs as speech acts. This way, experimental methods might be able to answer some long-standing questions in linguistic paremiology.

References

- Arora, Shirley L. 1984. The perception of proverbiality. *Proverbium* 1. 1–38.
- Burger, Harald. 2012. Sprichwort und Redensart: Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede – theoretisch und textuell, synchron und diachron betrachtet. In Kathrin Steyer (ed.), *Sprichwörter multilingual. Theoretische, empirische und angewandte Aspekte der modernen Parömiologie*, 45–78. Tübingen: Narr.
- Chlosta, Christoph & Peter Grzybek. 2000. Versuch macht Klug?! Logisch-semiotische Klassifikation bekannter deutscher Sprichwörter. In Peter Grzybek (ed.), *Die Grammatik der sprichwörtlichen Weisheit von G.L. Permyakov. Mit einer Analyse allgemein bekannter deutscher Sprichwörter* (Phraseologie und Parömiologie 4), 169–199. Baltmannsweiler: Schneider Verlag Hohengehren.
- Chlosta, Christoph & Peter Grzybek. 2005. Varianten und Variationen anglo-amerikanischer Sprichwörter – Dokumentation einer empirischen Untersuchung. *Essener Linguistische Skripte_elektronisch* 5(2). 63–145. http://peter-grzybek.eu/science/publications/2005/grzybek_ch_2005_varianden-variationen.pdf (accessed 1 June 2022).
- COSMAS II: *Korpusrecherche- und analysesystem*. No date. Mannheim: Institut für Deutsche Sprache, <https://www.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2/> (accessed 22 February 2021).
- Cram, David. 1994. The linguistic status of the proverb. In Wolfgang Mieder (ed.), *Wise words. Essays on the proverb*, 73–97. New York & London: Garland. Reprinted from: Cram, David. 1983. The linguistic status of the proverb. *Cahiers de lexicologie* 43. 53–71.
- Deutsches Referenzkorpus. No date. Mannheim: Institut für Deutsche Sprache, <https://www1.ids-mannheim.de/kl/projekte/korpora.html> (accessed 22 February 2021).
- Fiedler, Sabine. 2002. Sprichwörter im Esperanto. *Proverbium* 19. 113–148.

- Grzybek, Peter. 2015. Semiotic and semantic aspects of the proverb. In Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Hrisztalina & Melita Aleksa Varga (eds.), *Introduction to Paremiology*, 68–111. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.2478/9783110410167/html?lang=de> (accessed 1 June 2022).
- Holbek, Bengt. 1970. Proverb style. *Proverbium* 15. 54–56.
- Kuusi, Matti. 1978. Ein Vorschlag für die Terminologie der parömiologischen Strukturanalyse. In Wolfgang Mieder (ed.), *Ergebnisse der Sprichwörterforschung (Europäische Hochschulschriften I/192)*, 171–176. Bern: Peter Lang. Reprinted from: Kuusi, Matti. 1966. Ein Vorschlag für die Terminologie der parömiologischen Strukturanalyse. *Proverbium* 5. 97–104.
- Litovkina, Anna T. 2015. Anti-proverbs. In Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Hrisztalina & Melita Aleksa Varga (eds.), *Introduction to Paremiology*, 326–352. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.2478/9783110410167/html?lang=de> (accessed 1 June 2022).
- Lückert, Claudia. 2018. The lexical profile of modern American proverbs: Detecting contextually-predictable keywords in a database of American English proverbs. *Yearbook of Phraseology* 9. 31–50.
- Mac Coinnigh, Marcos. 2015. Structural Aspects of Proverbs. In Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Hrisztalina & Melita Aleksa Varga (eds.), *Introduction to Paremiology*, 112–132. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.2478/9783110410167/html?lang=de> (accessed 1 June 2022).
- Mandziuk, Justyna. 2016. “A proverb a day keeps boredom away.” Anti-proverbs, twisted proverbs, perversbs and other animals. *New Horizons in English Studies* 1. 21–30.
- Mieder, Wolfgang. 2004. *Proverbs. A handbook*. Westport & London: Greenwood Press.
- Mieder, Wolfgang. 2015. Origin of proverbs. In Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Hrisztalina & Melita Aleksa Varga (eds.), *Introduction to Paremiology*, 28–48. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.2478/9783110410167/html?lang=de> (accessed 1 June 2022).
- Norrick, Neal R. 1981. *Proverbial linguistics: Linguistic perspectives on proverbs*. Trier: L.A.U.T.
- Norrick, Neal R. 1985. *How proverbs mean. Semantic studies in English proverbs*. Berlin, New York & Amsterdam: Mouton Publishers.
- Onea, Edgar & Alexander Syring. No date. *OnExp*. Göttingen: Courant Research Center “Text Structures”, <https://onexp.textstrukturen.uni-goettingen.de/> (accessed 22 February 2021).
- Peukes, Gerhard. 1977. *Untersuchungen zum Sprichwort im Deutschen. Semantik, Syntax, Typen*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag.
- R Core Team. No date. *R: A language and environment for statistical computing*. Vienna: R Foundation for Statistical Computing, <https://www.R-project.org/> (accessed 3 November 2019).
- Röhrich, Lutz & Wolfgang Mieder. 1977. *Sprichwort*. Stuttgart: Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung.
- Seiler, Friedrich. 1922. *Deutsche Sprichwörterkunde*. München: C. H. Beck.
- Silverman-Weinreich, Beatrice. 1994. Towards a structural analysis of Yiddish proverbs. In Wolfgang Mieder & Alan Dundes (eds.), *The wisdom of many. Essays on the proverb*, 65–85. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press. Reprinted from: Silverman-Weinreich, Beatrice. 1978. Towards a structural analysis of Yiddish proverbs. *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science* 17. 1–20.

- SprichWort. Eine Internet-Lernplattform für das Sprachenlernen*. 2008–2010, <http://www.sprichwort-plattform.org/> (accessed 22 February 2021).
- Sprichwörterbuch. 2012-, <https://www.owid.de/wb/owid/start.html> In *OWID – Online Wortschatz-Informationssystem Deutsch*. Mannheim: Institut für Deutsche Sprache. (accessed 15 December 2021).
- Steyer, Kathrin. 2012. Sprichwortstatus, Frequenz, Musterbildung. Parömiologische Fragen im Lichte korpusmethodischer Empirie. In Kathrin Steyer (ed.), *Sprichwörter multilingual. Theoretische, empirische und angewandte Aspekte der modernen Parömiologie*, 287–314. Tübingen: Narr.
- Taylor, Archer. 1931. *The proverb*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Villers, Damien. 2016. Proverbiogenesis: the phases of proverbial birth. *9th Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs – Proceedings*. 369–380.
- Winick, Stephen D. 2003. Intertextuality and innovation in a definition of the proverb genre. In Mieder, Wolfgang (ed.), *Cognition, comprehension, and communication. A decade of North American proverb studies (1990–2000)*, 571–601. Baltmannsweiler: Schneider Verlag Hohengehren.

