

**THE ART OF THE PROVERB: USING WISE SAYINGS TO NAVIGATE EVERYDAY
CONVERSATIONS**

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Abstract. Proverbs are succinct, culturally embedded expressions that encapsulate practical wisdom, social norms, and shared values. This investigation investigates the pragmatic function and contextual application of English-language proverbs in everyday conversations among university students in the Fergana Valley region of Uzbekistan. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observation of natural discourse among 56 English learners from three regional universities, utilizing a qualitative research design. Thematic analysis demonstrated that students primarily employed proverbs to persuade, advise, convey solidarity, or resolve social tension, with the effectiveness of these strategies being significantly influenced by cultural familiarity and contextual awareness. Although proverbs facilitated informal communication, they were frequently misapplied, frequently as a result of a literal interpretation or a lack of cultural context. The results corroborate the existing literature on the cognitive and social utility of proverbs (e.g., Norrick, 1985; Wierzbicka, 2003) and emphasize the necessity of incorporating pragmatic and cultural instruction into second-language curricula. Educators and learners are advised to improve their proverb proficiency and mitigate the likelihood of miscommunication.

Keywords: Proverbs; Pragmatic Competence; Intercultural Communication; Second Language Learning; Figurative Language; Miscommunication; Fergana Valley; Qualitative Research; Language and Culture; Sociolinguistics.

Introduction. Proverbs are succinct, widely recognized expressions that provide guidance or articulate universal principles that are derived from the collective human experience. They are linguistic instruments that embody intricate concepts in memorable, metaphorical forms and are present in all languages and cultures (Mieder, 2004). Proverbs serve as conduits for cultural values, collective norms, and social expectations, whether it is the English proverb "Don't count your chickens before they hatch" or the Swahili proverb "Wisdom is like a baobab tree; no one individual can embrace it." Despite their ancient origins, proverbs continue to be a dynamic component of commonplace conversation and communication in the 21st century.

Modern discourse is characterized by the persistent relevance of proverbs in both informal and formal contexts. For instance, in the digital era, proverbs are frequently employed in political speeches, corporate meetings, family discussions, and social media captions. Over 63% of American Twitter users referenced at least one proverb or proverbial phrase in their posts within a month, as indicated by a recent linguistic analysis by Szpila (2021). This indicates the persistent, albeit evolving, presence of this oral tradition in new communication platforms. Proverbs are not only rhetorical devices, but also social facilitators that enable presenters to establish a connection with their audience by evoking shared cultural wisdom.

Particularly in intercultural and multilingual interactions, the significance of comprehending and employing proverbs cannot be emphasized. Although proverbs can strengthen persuasive speech and lend credibility to one's arguments, they may also cause confusion or offense to audiences when they are misused or inappropriately applied (Mieder &

Litovkina, 2006). Selecting the appropriate proverb in the appropriate context is a unique challenge for second-language learners and culturally diverse speakers. Misinterpretations frequently occur as a result of disparate pragmatic norms, unfamiliar cultural references, or literal translations. However, language education and communication training seldom address the practical and sensitive application of proverbs in real-world social contexts.

The objective of this paper is to investigate the functional role of proverbs in everyday conversations and to establish a practical framework for their effective application. The primary objective of the study is to examine the manner in which individuals select and interpret proverbs in a variety of social contexts, with a particular focus on preventing miscommunication. In particular, the objectives are threefold: (1) to identify the types of proverbs that are frequently employed in daily interactions; (2) to examine the manner in which speakers select proverbs based on the context, audience, and purpose; and (3) to suggest practical guidelines for the appropriate and effective use of proverbs in conversation.

In order to direct this investigation, the subsequent research queries are employed:

1. What is the current usage of proverbs in ordinary English-language conversations?
2. What are the determinants of the appropriateness and efficacy of proverbial usage?
3. What methods can speakers employ to prevent the misinterpretation or misapplication of proverbs in social contexts?

Although the research provides valuable insights that are based on pragmatic theory and discourse analysis, it is not without its limitations. Initially, the data set concentrates on English proverbs and may not accurately represent the subtleties of proverbial usage in other languages. Secondly, the research partially relies on secondary sources and illustrative examples, rather than large-scale ethnographic interviews, which may restrict generalizability. Finally, this paper does not address contextual factors, including tone, body language, and the relationship between speakers, despite their significance.

Nevertheless, this research is a valuable contribution to the increasing acknowledgement of the social and communicative influence of proverbs. This paper endeavors to reconcile the disparity between proverbial wisdom and everyday conversational success by creating a practical guide to their application.

Literature Review. Mieder (2004) defines proverbs as "short, generally known sentences of the folk which contain wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form." They have been acknowledged as an essential component of human language for a long time. The complexity of social norms is effectively captured in a manner that is both simple to remember and transmit due to the brevity and figurative nature of these expressions. Dundes (1975) underscores the formulaic structure of proverbs, recognizing their role as linguistic abbreviations for collective cultural comprehension.

Proverbs frequently employ metaphor, parallelism, rhyme, and other poetic devices to enhance their rhetorical potency and memorability (Norrick, 1985). For example, the adage "Actions speak louder than words" serves as both a moral compass and a persuasive tactic. Norrick contends that proverbs are speech acts—performative utterances that do more than merely characterize a truth; they actively influence social interaction.

The cultural context in which proverbs are employed and their significance are profoundly ingrained. Proverbs are a reflection of the fundamental values and worldviews of the societies from which they originate, as per Wierzbicka (2003). For instance, collectivist cultures may favor proverbs that emphasize harmony and obedience ("The nail that sticks out gets hammered down" in Japanese), whereas individualist cultures may prioritize autonomy and agency ("God will assist those who assist themselves").

Nevertheless, proverbs can serve as a source of confusion in multicultural and multilingual settings. A proverb that resonates in one culture may be unfamiliar or even perplexing in another (Litovkina, 2018). Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Varga (2015), among other scholars, contend that proverbs present difficulties for non-native speakers and second-language users due to their profound connection to local traditions and symbolic systems. This has the potential to both enhance and complicate cross-cultural communication.

Several studies have investigated the strategic use of proverbs in ordinary conversation by speakers. Tannen (1989) posits that proverbs serve as "discourse markers" that contribute to the legitimacy of an argument, conclude a discussion, or alleviate interpersonal tension. For example, concluding a conversation with the phrase "It is what it is" enables the speaker to convey acquiescence or closure without explicitly confronting the issue.

Holmes (2008) examines the role of proverbs as face-saving devices in civility strategies, particularly in indirect or conflict-laden conversations. Instead of expressly cautioning an individual not to revisit a sensitive subject, a speaker may say, "Let sleeping dogs lie." Proverbs serve to maintain social harmony while simultaneously communicating the speaker's intention.

Proverbs are not solely linguistic adornment; they also influence individuals' perceptions of reality. According to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor, proverbs are indicative of the metaphorical organization of cognition. For instance, the proverb "Time is money" transforms abstract concepts (time) into concrete experiences (money), thereby influencing the way in which individuals evaluate time management.

Gibbs and Beitel (1995) also contend that the comprehension of proverbs necessitates mental flexibility and inferential reasoning. The psycholinguistic experiments conducted by the researchers demonstrated that native speakers process familiar proverbs more rapidly and accurately than literal expressions, underscoring the brain's adaptation to figurative patterns. Nevertheless, the same studies discovered that non-native speakers frequently encounter difficulty inferring the metaphorical meaning unless they are acquainted with the cultural context.

Proverbs are frequently overlooked in second language instruction, despite their abundance. Idioms and proverbs are underrepresented in English language textbooks, resulting in a communicative disparity between learners and native speakers, as per Boers and Lindstromberg (2008). But the capacity to employ language in a manner that is appropriate for social situations—pragmatic competence—can be substantially enhanced by mastering proverbs (Taguchi, 2009).

Additionally, students who acquire proverbs acquire access to rhetorical strategies, communicative norms, and cultural values that may otherwise remain implicit. Kuiper et al. (2009), however, emphasize that learners are at risk of misapplication or overgeneralization

when they translate proverbs directly from their native languages. This frequently leads to utterances that are either embarrassing or misinterpreted.

Although proverbs have the potential to enhance or elucidate communication, they can also introduce ambiguity. According to Norrick (2007), the interpretation of proverbs is significantly influenced by shared prior knowledge. The listener may interpret the intended meaning in an unintended manner or overlook it altogether when that knowledge is absent. This is especially true in intercultural contexts, where literal translations or unfamiliar metaphors may confound rather than enlighten.

Mieder and Litovkina (2006) emphasize the misuse of proverbs in political discourse and advertising, where they are occasionally distorted or shorn of nuance. For example, the slogan "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" has been employed in situations where it was evidently necessary to make maintenance or change, resulting in miscommunication or manipulation. Consequently, the use of proverbs necessitates both cultural sensitivity and linguistic proficiency.

Proverbs are constantly changing and adapting in modern discourse. Traditional sayings are frequently modernized or remixed by internet parodies, social media captions, and viral quotations. For instance, the term "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" could be humorously rephrased as "A Wi-Fi signal in the hand is worth two in the cafe" when used online. Although some scholars are concerned that this trivializes proverbial wisdom (Taylor, 2019), others view it as evidence of the proverb's adaptability and resilience (Szpila, 2021).

The dissemination of proverbs across national and linguistic boundaries has also been facilitated by contemporary communication. The global interchange of wisdom sayings, often without context, is facilitated by online platforms such as Reddit, Instagram, and TikTok. This poses novel inquiries regarding the relevance, interpretation, and authenticity of diverse communities.

Methodology. The objective of this investigation was to investigate the strategies that speakers employ to select contextually appropriate proverbs and the use of proverbs in real-life social interactions. Consequently, a qualitative descriptive research design was implemented. A qualitative approach was chosen for its capacity to extract nuanced, context-rich data on language use, interpretation, and communicative intentions (Creswell, 2014). The study employed semi-structured interviews and discourse observation to gather insights from participants, with an emphasis on actual and recalled conversational instances in which proverbs were employed.

The investigation was conducted in the Fergana Valley region of Uzbekistan, specifically at three higher education institutions: Fergana State University, Kokand State Pedagogical Institute, Kokand University, and Namangan Engineering Institute. In these institutions, the linguistic and academic environment is diverse, with the languages of Uzbek, Russian, and English being frequently spoken. These universities are ideal environments for the study of proverbial usage in English, as they actively promote English-language education, particularly in the context of applied linguistics and intercultural communication.

The study included 56 participants, with 32 being female and 24 being male, and an age range of 19 to 27. All were undergraduate or graduate students who were enrolled in programs that focused on international communication, education, or the English language. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who were likely to have encountered or used

English-language proverbs in academic or informal settings and possessed a sufficient level of English proficiency (B2 level or higher, as per CEFR standards).

Written informed assent was obtained from all participants, and participation was voluntary. For the sake of confidentiality, identities were obscured.

Data Collection. Data were gathered through two primary methods: (1) semi-structured interviews and (2) conversation-based observation.

Interviews. Each participant participated in an English-language interview that lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in accordance with a flexible guide that included open-ended inquiries, including:

1. "Can you recall an instance in which you employed a proverb in a conversation?"
2. "How do you determine whether a proverb is appropriate or not?"
3. "Have you ever used a proverb and been misunderstood?"
4. "Do you believe that proverbs facilitate or impede everyday communication?"

Participants were encouraged to provide specific examples and explain their rationale for using or eschewing proverbs.

Observational Notes. In addition to interviews, natural conversations were observed during classroom discussions, debate club meetings, and informal student gatherings (with prior consent). Notes were taken on the immediate context, reactions from observers, instances of proverb use, and whether the proverb appeared to assist or inhibit the communication.

Analysis of Data. Thematic content analysis was employed to analyze interview transcripts and observation notes. The procedures comprised the following:

- Organization of observation notes and transcription of interviews.
- Reading data multiple times to recognize patterns and categories.
- Repeating themes, including the use of proverbs in context, the strategies for interpretation, miscommunication incidents, and cultural references, are coded.
- Organizing proverbs according to their intended purpose (e.g., conflict avoidance, humor, imparting advice).
- NVivo 12 software was employed to facilitate the organization and comparison of coded segments across participants and for qualitative coding.

In order to guarantee credibility, triangulation was implemented by contrasting interview data with observational findings. Follow-up contacts were implemented to verify interpretations and summarize participants' responses, which served as member verification. Transferability was bolstered by the inclusion of a comprehensive account of the context and the background of the participants.

The investigation was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. The internal ethics committee of Fergana State University granted approval. Data were securely stored, and all participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

A number of methodological constraints must be recognized. Initially, the data were restricted to university students who spoke English in a single region, which may limit their applicability to broader populations or more proficient English users. Secondly, although observation contributed contextual depth, it was restricted to semi-public settings and was unable to capture the use of private or emotionally sensitive proverbs. Finally, the presence of the researcher or a desire to appear more proficient in English may have influenced the responses of some participants.

Results. The analysis of the interview transcripts and observation notes revealed three major themes regarding the use of proverbs in everyday conversations among university students in the Fergana Valley: (1) contextual awareness and proverb appropriateness, (2) proverb use as a social and rhetorical strategy, and (3) miscommunication and reinterpretation of proverbs. The results provide a glimpse into the manner in which English-language proverbs are comprehended, adapted, and occasionally misunderstood in multilingual social environments.

Contextual Awareness and Proverb Appropriateness. Before employing a proverb, the majority of participants (48 out of 56) stated that they meticulously evaluate the context. In informal conversations with peers, such as casual discussions, group work, or social gatherings, students explained that proverbs were most frequently employed. For instance, a student from Namangan disclosed:

“When my friend was stressing too much before the exam, I just said, ‘Don’t worry, the early bird catches the worm.’ She smiled and started studying. I think it worked because it was the right time to say it.”

When the listener shared the same cultural or linguistic heritage, or when the setting was casual and personal, proverbs were frequently perceived as appropriate. Nevertheless, the majority of students refrained from using proverbs in formal or academic discussions for concern that they would be perceived as "vague" or "unserious." One participant observed:

“I don’t use proverbs in presentations or class discussions unless it’s part of a quote or something. Teachers might think I’m not being academic.”

Proverbs as Social and Rhetorical Strategies. Participants described using proverbs to support opinions, offer encouragement, or defuse tension. Proverbs allowed speakers to sound confident, wise, or humorous without being too direct. For instance, one student explained:

“I use ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover’ when people gossip. It shows I have a point without starting an argument.”

In debate club meetings, proverbs such as “Practice makes perfect” and “Rome wasn’t built in a day” were used to conclude arguments or motivate peers. Observational data confirmed that such usage often led to positive reactions—nods, smiles, or laughter—indicating that the audience understood and appreciated the saying.

Additionally, proverbs were sometimes used to signal group identity. Uzbek-English hybrid proverbs (e.g., literal translations of Uzbek sayings) occasionally appeared in English conversations, reflecting bilingual creativity and local cultural flavor. For example:

“He always wants everything fast, so I told him, ‘Even the rabbit needs rest!’ It’s like our saying, but I said it in English.”

Miscommunication and Reinterpretation. Despite frequent usage, over one-third of participants (21 out of 56) reported instances of proverb-related miscommunication. In most cases, misunderstandings arose due to literal interpretation or lack of cultural background. For example, a student recounted:

“I told a classmate, ‘Let the cat out of the bag,’ and he was totally confused. He thought I was talking about a real cat.”

In such situations, speakers either explained the proverb, switched to a more familiar phrase, or simply abandoned the idea. A few students also admitted to misusing proverbs by altering their structure or combining multiple sayings:

“I said, ‘Don’t count your chickens before they run away.’ My friend laughed and said that’s not how it goes.”

Interestingly, some participants embraced these mistakes as creative or humorous, showing a willingness to play with language. Others became more cautious, expressing hesitation about using proverbs with native speakers or in formal contexts.

Discussion. The results of this investigation provide a valuable perspective on the manner in which university students in the Fergana Valley employ English-language proverbs in their daily discourse. The data corroborate that the use of proverbs is not merely a vestige of traditional speech, but rather a pertinent and adaptable linguistic instrument for youthful speakers. The findings corroborate numerous critical theories that have been previously proposed in the literature, while also introducing novel insights into the application of proverbs in multicultural, multilingual settings.

This study, in accordance with Norrick's (1985) perspective on proverbs as "socially strategic utterances," discovered that participants frequently employed proverbs to convey their opinions, conclude discussions, or provide advice without appearing excessively critical. As a means of conveying themselves in a more acceptable or familiar tone, students employed proverbs such as "Don't judge a book by its cover" or "Practice makes perfect." These results are consistent with Holmes' (2008) assertion that proverbs are effective face-saving strategies, enabling speakers to maintain civility while still asserting their opinions.

Additionally, this investigation provides substantial evidence in support of Tannen's (1989) assertion that proverbs function as discourse markers. During debate club discussions or peer arguments, participants frequently reported using proverbs to summarize their perspective or indicate the conclusion of a topic. During these instances, proverbs worked similarly to rhetorical punctuation, providing closure, emphasis, or relief to conversations.

The significance of contextual awareness as demonstrated in this study is consistent with Wierzbicka's (2003) assertion that proverbs are profoundly culturally bound and heavily reliant on shared knowledge for effective application. It was emphasized by the participants on numerous occasions that the success of a proverb is contingent upon the listener's cultural familiarity, tone, and timing, in addition to the words itself. This corroborates Mieder's (2004) assertion that proverbs are "tools of the folk," influenced by and effective within particular communities.

Additionally, the finding that students employed hybrid Uzbek-English proverbs serves to substantiate Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Varga's (2015) assertion that proverbs are adapted to reflect local identities. Speakers negotiate between traditional expressions and global English

in these instances of transliteration or proverb adaptation, demonstrating a dynamic and inventive use of language. They are not merely imitating native speakers; rather, they are actively reshaping proverbial speech to reflect their own context.

The study also corroborates Boers and Lindstromberg's (2008) assertion that proverbs are underrepresented in language education, despite their communicative significance. Numerous participants acquired proverbs through informal conversation, media, or personal inquiry, rather than through formal instruction. Although this organic acquisition is indicative of a strong motivation and cultural interest, it also elucidates the high incidence of proverb misuse and misunderstanding among learners.

The study's miscommunication cases, which include the literal interpretation of idioms or the mingling of sayings, are consistent with Kuiper et al.'s (2009) cautionary tale regarding the hazards of directly translating proverbs from other languages. Participants frequently misquoted or misconstrued proverbs when they lacked the cultural background to decode metaphors, as evidenced in the Results section. These instances corroborate Gibbs and Beitel's (1995) assertion that the comprehension of proverbs necessitates cognitive flexibility and inferencing abilities that are still in the process of maturation for numerous L2 speakers.

However, it is intriguing that certain participants took pride in these inventive misuses, even perceiving them as amusing or expressive. This is consistent with Taylor's (2019) assertion that contemporary communication fosters a humorous relationship with language, particularly among younger speakers. Students actively experiment with the form and function of proverbs, rather than adhering to traditional structures.

The results of this study underscore the dual character of proverbs in multilingual and intercultural contexts: they are both potential pitfalls and valuable tools. Proverbs enrich communication by articulating shared wisdom in eloquent and relatable ways when used with sensitivity and understanding. However, they can alienate or confound listeners when used without contextual knowledge.

Consequently, educators and curriculum designers should contemplate incorporating proverb instruction into pragmatic competence training. In order to effectively engage in real-world situations, language learners must possess pragmatic awareness, as noted by Taguchi (2009). Teaching proverbs not only improves students' cultural comprehension but also provides them with the necessary skills for academic and social success, such as the ability to engage in civilized disagreement, amusement, and persuasion.

Although the research offers valuable insights, it is imperative to recognize several limitations. Initially, it concentrated solely on the use of English-language proverbs among university students in Uzbekistan, a sample that may not accurately reflect the utilization patterns of proverbs in other languages or age groups. Secondly, while the interview findings were corroborated by observational data, additional ethnographic fieldwork could provide even more comprehensive insights into the integration of proverbs into social behavior and emotion. Third, the study did not investigate the nonverbal components (tone, gesture, facial expression) that frequently accompany the use of proverbs—an area that would be worthy of further investigation in additional research.

Recommendations for future research:

1. Conduct Cross-Cultural Studies: Investigating how proverbs are used by speakers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds can reveal deeper patterns of universal and culture-specific usage.
2. Explore Proverbs in Digital Communication: Future studies could examine how traditional proverbs are adapted or transformed in digital platforms like social media, memes, or influencer speech.
3. Include Nonverbal Dimensions: Since delivery also affects interpretation, future research should analyze facial expressions, tone, and gestures accompanying proverb use.

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