

PROVERB VARIATION AND JOKES: A RELEVANCE-THEORETIC ACCOUNT

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Introduction

In this paper, I will examine jokes involving English proverbs in some detail. Before going into my main topic, let us first look at some English proverb data. In the existing English dictionaries, there are some variations in English proverb quotation forms. See examples from (1) to (4) for *the company he keeps* (Cf. Takeda 1992).

(1) You can judge/tell a man by *the company he keeps*.

---*Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*, Vol. 2, OUP, 1983

(2) A man is known by *the company he keeps*.

---*The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*. 3rd Edition, OUP, 1970

(3) Men are known by *the company they keep*. --Toda 2003:137

(4) As a man is, so is *his company*.

---*The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*. 4th Edition, OUP, 2003

There is another variation for sentential and verb phrasal proverb forms as you can see in (5) and (6):

(5) Don't count your chickens before they are hatched.

→ to count one's chickens before they are hatched

(6) Don't put all your eggs in one basket.

→ to put one's eggs in one basket

Also, the same proverb forms like 'strike while the iron is hot' and 'kill

two birds with one stone' are jokingly used to refer to the literal meanings as is shown in (7) and (8):

(7) Strike while the iron is hot

〈Proverb meaning: You should make use of an opportunity immediately〉.--〉

Five hundred men walked out of a steel mill while it was still in operation.

The union spokesman said they had to *strike while the iron was hot*.

〈Literal meaning〉

(8) Kill two birds with one stone

〈Proverb meaning: to achieve two things at the same time with one action〉

"Doctor, I'm sorry to drag you so far out in the country on such a bad day."

"Oh, it's all right because I have another patient near here, so I can *kill two birds with one stone*."

〈*KILL* implies that he is a bad doctor and he kills two patients at the same time〉

1. VARIATION TYPES (=FORMS): SUBSTITUTION, CONTRACTION, ANTONYMS AND EXPANSION

According to Black (1999) *The Survival of English Proverbs: A Corpus Based Account* (<http://www.deproverbio.com/DPjournal/DP,5,2,99/BLACK/SURVIVAL.htm>) there are four major types of proverb variation in English which are mainly created by some syntactic distortion.

1.1. SUBSTITUTION: Lexical substitution of one element while the syntactical pattern is unchanged.

(9) Give him an inch and he will *take* a mile. → Give him an inch and he will *run* a mile.

1.2. CONTRACTION: A clause is omitted — usually this is the second clause.

(10) When in Rome, do as the Romans do. → *When in Rome*

1.3. ANTONYMS: A form of the proverb which has the opposite meaning to the original (e.g. by omission or insertion of a negative morpheme).

(11) All that glitters is not gold. → *All that glitters is gold*

1.4. EXPANSION: Another linguistic element is inserted into the proverb

(12) Casting pearls before swine. → Casting *synthetic* pearls before *real* swine

2. A RELEVANCE-THEORETIC ACCOUNT

In this paper I will concentrate on variations of proverbs which make us laugh, that is to say, jokes based on old proverbs. My theoretical framework is Relevance Theory in which an utterance interpretation is based on some resemblance of relations, implicatures (= our encyclopaedic knowledge + inferences), ad hoc concept construction (= concept broadening and concept narrowing) and processing efforts. Relevance Theory is based on two elements, one is processing effort and the other is cognitive effect, which in this paper means humorous effects. Now let's look at four different types of variation from a cognitive pragmatics point of view.

2.1. RESEMBLANCE-BASED JOKES (WHICH ARE QUITE SIMILAR TO ORIGINAL

PROVERBS)

2.1.1. RESEMBLANCES IN SOUND (AND LEXICAL FORM)

ONE-ELEMENT REPLACEMENT CASES (=FORMS)

The first type of resemblance-based jokes is created by resemblance in sound and lexical forms.

(13) *Absence* makes the heart grow fonder.

→ *Nonsense* makes the heart grow fonder.

〈The original proverb says that when you are away from somebody you love, you love them even more〉

〈Resemblance in sound/word form between *absence* and *nonsense*〉

〈Joke comes from the fact that everyone enjoys nonsense, which is quite a different interpretation from the original one [Absence makes you love someone even more].〉

● This type of joke processes the two appropriate interpretations at the same time, that is, the old proverb and its variation, and compare them in order to appreciate the gap between them.

● Relevance Theory provides a better account of this type in which there can be two different interpretations in the hearer's brain.

● Processing jokes involving proverbs is less economical than processing of plain, explicit messages. Certain effort-demanding interpretative paths of jokes are favored in exchange for an increase in humorous effects.

● While interpreting the joke which is based on resemblance, the hearer has to process more than one meaning from the encoded message, and this generally involves an additional processing effort that has humorous effects.

(14) *Accidents* will happen.

→ *Occidents* will happen.

〈The original proverb says that when you have an accident, it does not

matter and you should not worry about it.> <resemblance in sound and word form between *accidents* and *occidents*>

Eiji was thrilled when his wife went into labor. Much to his surprise, however, the baby came out with blue, straight eyes, blond hair and light skin. “How could this be?” Eiji exclaimed. “How can my baby be white?” Shrugging, his wife said, “*Occidents* will happen.”—Toyoda (2005)

<Joke comes from the fact that his wife says that a western-like baby was born accidentally, which does not matter and so you should not worry about it. >

(15) All that glitters is not *gold*.

→ With a display of leftover Christmas decorations: All that glitters was not *sold*.

<The original proverb says that not everything that seems good, attractive, etc. is actually good.>

<Resemblance in sound between *gold* and *sold*>

<Joke comes from the proverbial abstract interpretation 【+abstract】 and the existential actual interpretation 【-abstract】>

2.1.2. RESEMBLANCES IN SYNTACTIC AND LEXICAL FORM (=PARODIES)

The second type of variation of resemblance-based jokes comes from resemblance in syntactic forms which is traditionally called parody.

[An X in the hand is worth two in the Y]

(16) A *bird* in the hand is worth two in the *bush*.

→ Mauder: The ring of sincerity was in his voice when he told me of his love.

May: It should have been in his hand. A *ring* in the hand is worth two in the *voice*.

<The original proverb says that it is better to keep something that you already have than to risk losing it by trying to get much more >

【Old X never die, they just Y】

(17) Old *soldiers* never die; they just *fade away*.

→ Old soldiers never die; just *young ones*.

【Don't count your X before they are Y】

(18) Don't count your *chickens* before they are *hatched*.

<The original proverb says that you should not be too confident that something will be successful, because something may still go wrong>

→ Don't count your *checks* before they are *cash*ed.

【What's X for Y is Z for A】

(19) What's *sauce* for *the goose* is *sauce* for *the gander*.

<The original proverb says that what one person is allowed to do, another person must be allowed to do in a similar situation>

→ What's *good* for *General Motors* is *good* for *the country*.

→ What's *Bad For GM* Is *Bad For America*.

2.2. IMPLICATURE-BASED JOKES

In this subsection we shall examine implicature-based jokes.

2.2.1. TWO CONTRARY IMPLICATURE CASES

REPLACEMENT OF TWO-ELEMENTS CASES <FORMS>

The first type is characterized as two contrary implicature cases.

(20) It is a wise *child* who knows its own *father*.

→ It is a wise *father* who knows its own *child*.

Two Contrary Implicature:

The original proverb means that wives sometimes have children by other men, so *a father should know if it's his own child or not*.

The joke proverb implies that *a child does not know if it's his own father or not*. So the joke interpretation comes from the two opposite relations between children and fathers in their implicatures.

(21) People who live in *glass* houses shouldn't throw *stones*

→ People who live in *stone* houses shouldn't throw *glasses*.

The original proverb means that you should not criticize others if you are just as bad as they are.

2.2.2. TWO QUITE DIFFERENT IMPLICATURE CASES

CONTRACTION CASES <FORMS>

The second type is characterised as two different implicature cases.

(22) *Familiarity breeds contempt*.

→ *Familiarity breeds*.

<The original proverb says that knowing something/somebody very well may cause you to lose admiration and respect for them/it>

An Absurd Implicature:

The joke proverb implies that if you know someone very well, you will make someone pregnant.

(23) Money talks.

→ Money talks...*but just to say good-bye*.

<The original proverb says that people who have a lot of money have more power and influence than others>

2.3. AD HOC CONCEPT CONSTRUCTION-BASED JOKES (=EXPLICATURES)

The third type is constructed by concept broadening. (Cf. Wilson

2004)

2.3.1. CONCEPT BROADENING VS. LITERAL MEANING <ANTONYMS (= FORMS)>

(24) Man does not live by *bread* alone. (=People need not just *food*, but also poetry, art, music, etc. to live happily)

→ I'm a man who can live by *bread* alone. *I can't even afford butter.*

In (24) *bread* in the old proverb is interpreted as 'food' by ad hoc concept construction, while *bread* in the proverb variation can be literally interpreted.

2.3.2. CONCEPT LOOSENING VS. LITERAL MEANING <EXPANSION(=FORM)>

(25) *Blood* is thicker than water.

→ *Blood* is thicker than water *and much more difficult to get out of the carpet.*

<The original proverb says that family relationships are stronger than any others>

<The joke proverb implies that there is no family relationship because of some killing within the family.>

In (25), *blood* in the original proverb is loosely interpreted as 'family relations', while *blood* in the joke case is literally interpreted.

2.4. PROCESSING EFFORT-BASED JOKES

The final type of variation for proverb jokes is related to processing effort.

<Contraction> (=form)

Proverbs are stored in our brain as an entity and are easily accessible expressions. Incomplete semantic representation needs a lot of processing effort. Implicatures to be inferred also need a lot of processing effort.

(26) *The fastest way to a man's heart is through his stomach.*

→ *The fastest way to get a man's heart* is to open his chest with a sharp knife.

This joke is a variation of an old proverb: *The fastest way to a man's heart is through his stomach*. It means that the best way for a woman to get a man to fall in love with her is to become a good cook. But in the joke proverb *the fastest way to a man's heart* refers to the literal operation just like a surgeon.

3. SOME PROBLEMATIC CASES

In this section I will briefly touch upon some residual problems.

3.1. PARTIAL USE AND ITS VARIATION—RESEMBLANCES IN SYNTACTIC FORM (SCOPE: NOUN PHRASE AND SO ON, NOT THE WHOLE PROVERB)

(27) *The early bird catches the worm*

〈The original proverb says that the person who takes the opportunity to do something before other people will have an advantage over them〉

→ “Why did the worm oversleep?”

“Because he didn't want to be caught by *the early bird*.”

→ Oh, if you're a bird, be an early bird

And catch the worm for your breakfast plate.

If you're a bird, be *an early early bird*

But if you're a worm, sleep late.

In the original proverb, *the early bird* is a subject NP, while in the proverb variation examples shown by →, *the early bird* and *an early early bird* can implicitly refer to the original whole proverb.

3.2. EXPANSION OR REPLACEMENT

(28) While there is *life*, there is hope.

→ While there's *life insurance*, there's hope.

〈The original proverb says that in a bad situation you must not give up hope because there is always a chance that it will improve〉

In (28) *life insurance* can be analysed both as an expansion of *life* and as an replacement of *life*.

3.3. REPLACEMENT OR EXPANSION

(29) Actions speak louder than words

→ *Empty glasses* speak louder than *empty words*. 〈Ad for Heineken Beer〉 --*Fortune* 1990. April 23

〈Joke comes from the tasty beer of Heineken, because of people want more beer showing their empty glasses〉

In (29), *empty glasses* and *empty words* in the proverb joke can be regarded as the replacements of *actions* and *words* in the original proverb respectively. Also *empty words* in the proverb joke can be created by the expansion of *words* in the original.

3.4. ANTONYMS

(30) A man is known by the company he *keeps*.

→ A man is known by the company he *avoids*.

〈The original proverb says that a man is known by the people who

somebody spends time with>

In this example, verbs *keep* and *avoid* show the oppositeness, that is lexical antonyms.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have argued that Relevance-Theory can provide a good tool for explaining why these variant proverbs can be used as jokes. Jokes can be captured by a variety of resemblance relations: resemblance in sound, resemblance in syntactic and lexical form and a joke which comes from two contrary implicatures. I have shown that some jokes involving proverbs create two appropriate interpretations at the same time. One is the original proverb interpretation which is triggered by linguistically encoded insufficient semantic representations which must be inferentially enriched before they can be taken to represent some well-known proverb. The other is a joke proverb interpretation. And then the original proverb interpretation is discarded and the hearer appreciates the gap or difference between the two. According to Relevance Theory, joke proverb examples can be classified as 2.1. Resemblance-based Jokes 2.2. Implicature-based Jokes 2.3. Ad Hoc Concept Construction-based Jokes 2.4. Processing effort-based Jokes. And in section 3, I have briefly touched on some residual problems.

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