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FOUNDATIONS OF SEMIOTIC PROVERB STUDY[1]

The investigation of proverbs in their semiotic aspect is one of the most gratifying tasks for a folklorist.

P.G. Bogatyrev (1937: 366)

1. "Simple Form" Proverb: Text, Context, Function

Although, after all, André Jolles' book *Einfache Formen* has been "more stimulating than clarifying" - as Mohr (1956: 321) put it in a survey of echoes to it - practically any modern investigation of so-called "simple forms"[2] refers to this most influential study.[3] When Jolles, in 1929, published his book, he attempted to investigate the various forms which are part of what had been summarized under the name of *Naturpoesie* by Jacob Grimm in the early 19th century. According to Grimm, *Naturpoesie* was characterized by the process of *Sichvonselfstmachen* as opposed to *Kunstpoesie*, of which the process of individual *Zubereitung* by a particular poet is characteristic. For Jolles, then, *Formbestimmung* and *Gestaltdeutung* are the central morphological tasks of literary scholarship, and in this way he wanted to define the various genres of *Naturpoesie* in a more detailed manner than had been done by his precursor, Jacob Grimm. But Jolles' notion of these terms is, at least from a modern point of view, misleading: although he was very well aware of his innovative approach, Jolles remained caught in the Romantic concept of language. At the same period of time, when, in Russia, for example, the futurists' and formalists' concentration on *The Word as Such* had already passed, when formalism was already converting into structuralism (as, e.g., in the manifest by Jakobson/Tynyanov from 1928), language, for Jolles, was still an "anthropomorphic deity", "Goddess language", as Klemperer (1930: 405ff.) phrased it in his review of Jolles' book. It is exactly for this reason that Jolles himself, who tried to trace back the various simple forms to particular mental impulses or activities (*Geistesbeschäftigungen*), closed the way which might have led to a *Formbestimmung* in the strict sense of this word, in spite of the theoretical-methodological novelty of his question: "Leading back the concrete manifest simple forms to a *Geistesbeschäftigung*, the linguistic poetic code characteristic of these forms is transferred into the metaphysical sphere, and it is made inaccessible to an empirical-poetological investigation" (Kanyó 1981: 75).

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Practically at the same time, a somewhat different line of thought was developed by the two Russian scholars, Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev. In a similar way to Jolles, they too, argue in favor of a predominantly synchronous analysis of folklore in order to determine both common and distinct traits of folklore and literature. As opposed to Jolles, however, they do this with an explicitly functional orientation, strictly rejecting genetic questions. Instead, the notion of the "preventive censorship of the community" is central to their approach: "In a word, in folklore only those forms remain which prove to be operative within the given community" (Jakobson/Tynyanov 1929: 143).

The approach advanced by Jakobson and Tynyanov opened the way for two important perspectives in analysing simple forms: first of all, we obtain the possibility of actually providing a *Formbestimmung* of a simple form's text on a synchronous level (which, of course, implies a notion of language as a basic means of interhuman communication), and secondly, it allows the investigation of its function. Unfortunately, however, Bogatyrev's call for the investigation of proverbs in their semiotic aspect, promoted as early as in 1937, remained practically unheard until the late 1960s.

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Still, these two terms, text and function, should focus the semiotic study of proverbs, if a proverb is to be understood as being a particular text to which a particular function is ascribed or attributed within a given culture.

Proverb research, at the time of Jolles, was still in a relatively poor state. Quite typical is the statement of Archer Taylor, who introduced his seminal book *The Proverb* with the words: "The proverb and related forms have long been objects of general interest and the occasion for many books, but they have attracted little serious and thorough study" (Taylor 1931: vii).

Modern investigations like to refer to Friedrich Seiler's *Deutsche Sprichwörterkunde* (1922) as the first serious philological investigation of the proverb. Interestingly enough, however, it was Jolles himself who argued against Seiler's definition of the proverb as "self-contained sayings current among the people, which are of didactical tendency and of above-standard form", and who rejected this definition as being incorrect and unsatisfying. If a proverb actually has a "didactical tendency", Jolles argues, has one to understand this as being a necessary (obligatory) or possible (facultative) quality? If proverbs are current in the *Volksmund*, how can one then accept Seiler's confession that there may be proverbs which are common in the whole folk, and others, which are known only in a particular village, district, or group? Additionally, and mainly, for Jolles, a proverb is "the form, which concludes an experience", and therefore it is essentially oriented to the past, whereas Seiler ascribed a moralistic-didactical (and therefore future-oriented) tendency to it.

Many years later, Mathilde Hain, in her empirical "folkloristic-sociological" investigation of the proverb, tried to solve the discrepancy between these two viewpoints by pointing out the general irrelevance of such an absolute dichotomy. Showing that the strict either-or of experience or morale cannot grasp the essence of the proverb, Hain provided evidence for the essential polyfunctionality of the proverb. She did not, however, refer to the theoretical concept of polyfunctionality, as it had been developed in Czech structuralism with regard to language in general, and by Petr Bogatyrev, with regard to folklore in particular. Still, with her empirical orientation, Hain entered a new field at least within the German-speaking area, although Firth, who was later to become a leading representative of functional cultural anthropology, had referred to the importance of proverb context as early as in 1926, when he wrote: "The essential thing about a proverb is its meaning, - and by this is to be understood not merely a bald and literal translation into the accustomed tongue, nor even a free version of what the words are intended to convey. The meaning of a proverb is made clear only when, side by side with the translation, is given a full account of the accompanying social situation, - the reason for its use, its effect, and its significance in speech" (Firth 1926: 134).

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The description of proverb meaning is, as was stated above, not possible without reference to contextual factors. Yet, it seems most reasonable, as Peter Seitel (1969, 1972) argues, to take into consideration the importance of context only as a potential, or virtual factor, and to abstract for heuristic purposes from all contextual elements (such as number, age, gender, social status of the involved persons, etc.), and to outline the "ethic frame" of proverb use. The heuristic model of proverb use developed by Seitel is based on the central assumption that the situation in which a proverb is actually used (the interaction situation) is not identical with the situation inherent in the proverb text itself (the proverb situation), and that both of them are not or need not be identical with

the situation the proverb refers to, i.e., the situation to which it is intended to be applied (the context situation[\*4]). Thus, when uttering a proverb, "the speaker asserts that the relationship between the things in the proverb situation is analogous to the relationship between the entities in the context situation" (Seitel 1972: 147). Therefore, proverb usage is related to two distinct, though closely related processes, namely "the process of relating proverb situation to context situation and the speech act of applying the proverb in an interaction situation" (ibid., 240). The distinction of the different types of situation involved in proverb use can be summarized in the following schema:

Figure 1:

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Partially, such newly created proverbs can be technically generated with the help of a computer. Baevskij (1970) made such an attempt; as his starting-point he chose the logical class  $K = P \_ Q$  on a "semantic" level, syntactic kernel formulae such as 'He ...who', 'Where ...there', and others, on a "morphological" level, and integrated exclusively "traditional Russian" lexical items in form of antonymic verbs with particular metrical characteristics, on a "lexical" level. Thus he indeed got proverbs such as, e.g., As you sow, so shall you reap, and the like. Such a model can only work, however, as long as the semantic oppositions implicit in the second level of signification are realized in an equivalent form on the first level of signification, too. In order to generate proverbs such as A watched pot never boils, and many, many others, one further utopic precondition would have to be fulfilled: The whole stock of all possible and conceivable realia, including all the associations and connotations tied to them, additionally structured in their hierarchy, would have to be included in a thesaurus. Thus one need not agree with Permyakov's assumption that one can easily understand a proverb of any culture without ever having heard it before - this presupposes (in addition to language knowledge, of course) at least the knowledge of all relevant associations and connotations, and also perhaps some knowledge about usage adequate to the relevant situations.

All these considerations, however, go far beyond the question of how proverbs, or proverb situations, are modelled. These considerations are very similar to those which were discussed in the beginning of this article. It turns out to be true that the ultimate meaning of a proverb cannot be predicted from the description of the modelled proverb situation, or, in other words, that the description of a modelled proverb situation cannot adequately grasp all concrete (or possible) meanings of a proverb in a given interaction situation.[7] Yet, one can, retrospectively, subsume all actually realized meanings of a proverb under the model advanced by Permyakov. And this is one of his fundamental achievements, namely to have provided a framework able to describe these possible proverb situations in a consistent system. Further questions may be added.

Permyakov's system has suitably been called a "Mendeleevian proverb table" (Khari-tonov 1969) - a formulation which adequately points out both the general character of this model and the scientific exactness which it aims at. On the other hand, Permyakov's conception has been called a "hocus pocus system" (Krikmann 1971, Kuusi 1972), and it has been opposed to Kuusi's classificational schema which has been termed a "God's truth system". Such an evaluation has been derived from Permyakov's claim to describe all actually existing and all possible (conceivable) proverbs within the framework of his model (Permyakov 1968: 42), and from the existence of so-called "free cells" within this system. Such "free cells", however, are well-known in linguistics, in particular in the field of phonology (cf. Martinet 1955; Revzin 1978: 109ff.). The juxtaposition of "God's truth

systems" and "hocus pocus systems" originally has been promoted in linguistics, too. Householder (1952: 260) characterized this juxtaposition as follows: "On the metaphysics of linguistics there are two extreme positions, which may be termed (and have been) the 'God's truth' position and the 'hocus pocus' position. The theory of the God's truth linguists [...] is that language 'has' a structure and the job of the linguist is (a) to find out what the structure is, and (b) to describe it [...]. The focus pocus linguist believes that a language (better, a corpus, since we describe only the corpus we know) is a mass of incoherent formless data, and the job of the linguist is somehow to arrange and organize this mass, imposing on it some structure [...]."

Roman Jakobson has repeatedly pointed out that such a controversy is ultimately useless, and that the reason for its discussion has to be seen in the fact that phenomena of language have to be described with its own means, i.e., meta-linguistically (Jakobson 1962: 276). Householder (1952: 260), too, admits that ultimately it seems to be rather a question of ideological-philosophical differences in approaching one and the same question, partially arriving at identical results, and he confessed, "it may be that these two metaphysical viewpoints are in some sense equivalent." That this observation directly concerns Permyakov's and Kuusi's models, too, has been pointed out by Voigt (1977: 167): "Kuusi directly departs from the given material, and he tries to arrive at the same results as Permyakov has, with the help of the deductive method."

One may discuss how far Permyakov's approach actually is a deductive one: firstly it has been developed out of the merely practical need to work out a consistent system of organizing a proverb collection, and it has been constantly verified, modified, developed; secondly, his system is based on the analysis of more than 50,000 proverbial sayings of more than 200 cultures. In his approach, as in any scientific approach, deductive and inductive ways of developing scientific models cannot be strictly separated, and they have to complement each other. Scientific models, however, are secondary modelling systems too, being superimposed on natural language, and the question of which model finally turns out to be the "more correct" one, is ultimately a question of adequacy and consistency, which can only be proved when applied to the phenomena being modelled. The adequacy of Permyakov's theory then, being a model of (proverb) models, will have to be verified in investigations to come. In any case, due to the consistently semiotic approach in Permyakov's works (or in the works inspired by him), Permyakov has, on the one hand, succeeded in solving many questions in an innovative way, and, on the other hand, he has brought up another set of questions, the answer to which we will (hopefully) get only in the course of the years to come, but, probably, not without reference to Permyakov's work.

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## 5. Notes

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2. The present text was originally published in German as the introduction to the *Semiotische Studien zum Sprichwort - Simple Forms Reconsidered I* (Grzybek, ed. 1984). An updated version of that text was then published in English in *Proverbium. An International Yearbook of Proverb Scholarship*, vol. 4 (1987); 39-85; I am sincerely grateful for David Beal's friendly help in "anglicizing" that text.- Except for minor stylistic changes, the English text has been deliberately left mainly unchanged for the present edition. The text thus basically reflects the author's view as it was at that time. Those few necessary alterations which imply either essential modifications or additions, have been marked by an asterisk [\*] throughout both the text and the footnotes, and they may easily be recognized.

3. Due to convention, the German term "Einfache Formen" has been translated as "simple forms" throughout this paper, although Taylor's (1962) proposal "primary form", ultimately, seems to be more suitable.

4. Cf., for example, *Sprichwörter - Analyse einer einfachen Form* (Kanyó 1981), *Simple Forms - Einfache Formen* (Kanyó, ed. 1982), *Semiotische Studien zum Sprichwort - Simple Forms Reconsidered I* (Grzybek, ed. 1984), *Semiotische Studien zum Rätsel - Simple Forms Reconsidered II* (Eismann/Grzybek, eds. 1987), *Simple Forms. An Encyclopaedia of Simple Text-Types in Lore and Literature* (Koch, ed. 1993).

5. On the basis of this standpoint, it is easily possible to explain why a proverb such as *Rolling stones gather no moss* can "actualize" rather heterogeneous connotations in different cultures (cf. Milner 1969a,b; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1973; Ruef 1983).

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