No que se refere ao fundo do estado da arte delineado, o conceito da variedade do provérbio e a sua relevância será examinada de novo nesta apresentação incluindo as duas abordagens teóricas e os resultados empíricos. Será prestada uma atenção particular à integração do conceito e da importância da variação do provérbio aos outros factores (linguísticos e extra-linguísticos) do acima mencionado conceito da sinergética proverbial.

PROVERB VARIANTS AND VARIATIONS: A NEW OLD PROBLEM ?

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Abstract

In almost any proverb definition given, reference is made, among others, to particular linguistic criteria of the proverb. Among these criteria, which may have been considered to be either optional (facultative) or necessary (obligatory) features, two characteristics have repeatedly been mentioned as being of primary importance: first, a proverb tends to be regarded as a rather (relative) short sentence, and second, as an utterance in a more or less fixed (stereotypical) verbal form.

Both criteria – i.e. length (or rather shortness) and stereotypy – have repeatedly been submitted to analysis, would be that on a narrower linguistic or on a broader paremiological ground. More often than not, however, the relevant research has confined itself to mere illustrations, concentrating on symptomatic descriptions rather than on systematic analyses.

In recent years, however, research has increasingly studied proverb length in a systematic way. This line of research has not only shown regularities underlying the linguistic organization of a given language's (culture's) proverbial stock, but additionally analyzed a number of factors influencing proverb length, such as frequency of occurrence, overall distribution, or familiarity. Even first attempts have been undertaken to integrate these linguistic and extra-linguistic factors into what has been termed a synergetic model of the proverb.

Much less research in this direction has been hitherto undertaken with regard to stereotypy (fixedness) of the proverb and related problems. As opposed to the field of phraseology (i.e. with regard to idiomatic expressions of different kinds), where attempts have been undertaken to distinguish various degrees of verbal frozenness (or phraseological variation, in turn), as well as factors influencing it, paremiology concentrating on proverbs has pursued two closely interwoven ways.

Either has paremiology (particularly in its linguistic orientation) ignored the relevance of variation, or seen (declared) it to be of minor importance. Instead, research has concentrated on what has been considered to be a standard form of a proverb, usually referring to codified versions in lexicographical/paremiographical sources. Or paremiology (or rather paremiography, especially in its folkloristic orientation) has documented the various variants of a given proverb and attributed them to one (alleged) "original", "basic" or "standard" form.

Both approaches tend to be, of course (either implicitly or explicitly) normative and authoritative in orientation, due to the fact that the choice of a specific standard form remains a matter of decision, unless quantitative / frequential aspects are taken into account. This has become obvious with the rise of empirical paremiology, when subjects were asked to complete the verbal beginnings of proverbs in order to test their familiarity with the items presented: as a result, a whole bunch of inter-individual proverb varieties with varying degrees of frequency turned out to be of relevance, asking for adequate methods of classification.

On the background of the state of the art outlined, the concept of proverb variety and its relevance for paremiology shall be examined anew in this presentation, including both theoretical approaches and empirical results. Particular attention will be directed towards an integration of the concept and importance of proverbial variation to other (linguistic and extra-linguistic) factors of the above-mentioned concept of proverbial synergetic.

The proverb and its *ations: towards a closer understanding of proverb variation

Paremiology, the discipline studying proverbs and related forms, has made enormous progress over the last decades, both in theory and in practice. Yet, the lack of a commonly accepted definition of the proverb, despite all attempts, continues to be some kind of paremiological commonplace. Nevertheless, there seems to be some agreement at least as to some general characteristics, according to which proverbs are, among others

- short stereotypes on a sentence level,
- of non-literal or generalizable meaning,
- generally known, and
- handed down from generation to generation.

Interestingly enough, even these seemingly trivial traits, as general as they may seem to be at first sight, clearly illustrate the proverb's semiotic complexity and the close interactions between its syntactic, pragmatic, and semantic dimensions: whereas brevity (which is referred in terms of 'short' and 'sentence level') points to the syntactic dimension, non-literalness and generalization of meaning refers to the realm of semantics, and factors such as stereotypy, general knowledge and generation-wise heritage have to be seen in relation to the pragmatic sphere.

In fact, numerous paroemiological studies have been published over the last years with regard to the importance of each of these three dimensions, which should not, of course, be seen in isolation, but only in their interdependence, allowing only for temporary heuristic separation.

Ultimately, this view results in the maximally condensed structuralist credo stating that to say something differently implies saying something different.

It seems worthwhile taking into account this credo not only from a general theoretical point of view, but also from a paremiological perspective. In fact, Vilmos Voigt (1970), in a study on the variation of proverbs, has explicitly emphasized this point, when he stated: "Naturally, if the text itself varies, the meaning changes". In this respect, it seems, however, that the problem of linguistic flexibility of proverbial utterances should be credited even more scientific attention than this has been the case in the last decades. In this context, two essential problems arise: (i) whereas the first concentrates on the question if indeed any linguistic change on a proverb's surface structure must indeed necessarily result in a semantic modification, the second concerns another point, namely, given that even minimal linguistic changes may eventually imply important semantic and / or pragmatic differences, to what degree a proverbial utterance, allegedly stereotypical by definition, may be changed without ceasing to be identified as the given proverb, i.e. before turning into a different proverb, resulting in a genuinely different proverbial utterance, or even ceasing to be a (accepted as) a proverb.

In this context, a whole bunch of different terms have been introduced into the discussion, to denote the processes at work, terms such as proverbial 'variation', 'alter(n)ation', 'modification', 'mutation', 'transformation', and probably some more *ations – not even taking into account the variety of terms for the proverbial results, or products, of these processes (see below).

It goes without saying that there can hardly be a general answer to the question of admissible, or acceptable, *ations; but it would be likely poor to confine ourselves to single case studies, merely describing single occurrences not allowing for any generalization. What can be attempted instead, at least as some starting point, is to provide some general scheme of proverbial variation, an endeavor which reasonably should start with relevant terms and concepts previously discussed in this context.

Among these concepts and terms, which have repeatedly or even traditionally (though rarely systematically) been used in the history of paremiology, and which continue to be used still today, we find, first and foremost, items like the ones presented in Figure 1, which seem to be used most frequently in the field of paremiology:
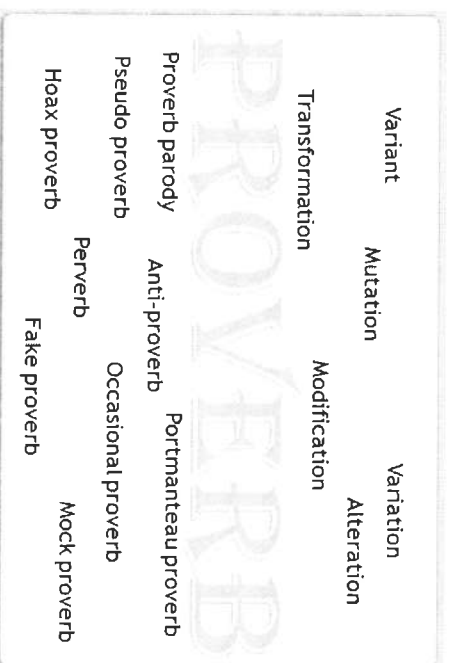
Variant	Mutation	Variation
Transformation	Modification	Alteration
Proverb parody		Portmanteau proverb
Pseudo proverb	Anti-proverb	Occasional proverb
	Perverb	
Hoax proverb	Mock proverb	Fake proverb

Figure 1: A proverbial bunch of terms for proverb variations

As can be seen, there exists a whole variety of names (or terms), related to concepts, which have been in use to refer to very different kinds of proverb *ation. Not all of them have been used distinctively, or with clear definitions, in the history of paremiography or paremiology – and due to the inconsistencies of usage, any attempt to find some a priori systematization is condemned to failure, right from the beginning. This is not to say that all terms lack a clear-cut definition, or that some of them might not be grouped into some larger categories. It seems that, in some first approach trying to provide some kind of survey (if order is not possible), some major categories may be distinguished. Let us tentatively, by way of a first approximation, term them (a) *generation*, (b) *modification*, (c) *transformation*, and (d) *variation*.

For the first two of them, i.e., *generation* and *modification*, it seems that the terms **'anti-proverb'** and **'proverb parody'** have become commonly accepted as unspecific umbrella terms; they are based, in one way or another, on some kind of humorous or ludistic play (including, though not restricted to, word play), and they either go back to some kind of intentional modification (or are perceived as such) of either a concrete proverb or of the proverbial genre as such. As compared to this, the third and fourth categories contain rather "ordinary", not consciously intended, variations of concrete traditional proverbs. These variations are not intended to be humorous inventions or ludistic mutations, and they do not tend to be understood as such intentional modifications; rather, we are concerned here with "natural" linguistic variations in the everyday use of a given proverb.

It goes without saying that there can hardly be a formal distinction between these categories, and that there will be fluent transitions between them. Therefore, before turning to the third and fourth categories in more detail, some brief comments on the first two categories and the various names used for them seems to be in order.

1. The first category of *ations* – which tentatively has been sub-summarized under the term 'generation' above (and which, in one way or another, might also be understood to be some kind of 'invention') – concerns less the variation of specific, individual proverbs, rather than the proverbial genre as a whole, or imitations of the proverbial structure as such. Although this knowledge can be acquired only by way of experience with concrete individual proverbs, these are not in the focus of attention here. In this category, we find terms such as 'pseudo proverb', 'fake proverb', 'hoax proverb', 'mock proverb', and probably some more. All of these terms have their own history; which cannot and which, in fact, needs not be reconstructed here. Looking at the literature, one would find items such as the following ones in this category:

(1)   *A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle,* or

(2)   *A man of his word, a woman of her Thesaurus.*

Whereas, at first sight, the attribution of such items to this category might seem to be quite plausible – since we are likely to perceive them as newly "made-up" items without any concrete source reference to the traditional proverbial stock –, such attributions may turn out to be problematic at second sight. First of all, there can be no knowledge of the proverbial genre without knowledge of individual proverbs, and secondly, it may well be simply a question of time, or of usage over time, that newly invented proverbs become increasingly established, within a given culture. And to understand items like (1) and (2) in terms of, e.g. «Women are autonomous» or «Women are talkative», respectively, is, after all, a matter of proverb definition, rather than of paroemiological classification or sub-categorization.

2. The second group of modifications contains and, in fact, obligatorily presupposes concrete references to *individual* proverbs. Quite obviously, these must be rather well-known referential items because otherwise, their ludistic modifications would not be perceived as such and therefore, as a consequence, would turn out to be inefficient. In this category, we would, first and foremost, find terms like 'proverb parody' and 'anti-proverb', notwithstanding the fact that the application of these two terms has been extended to the first category mentioned above, too. In this category, we also find names like 'perverb', among others. Whereas there seems to be no particular need to deal with

the concept of anti-proverb in this context – which has been meticulously documented and described mainly by Wolfgang Mieder, but also by other paroemiographers following his tracks – the term 'perverb' might deserve to be commented upon at some more length.

As to the origin of this term, it seems that it is closely related to the French literary group OULIPOU – an acronym for the French *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* [= Factory of Potential Literature]. This group, founded in 1960, used (and probably invented) the term 'perverb' (French: 'perverbe') as a portmanteau word of "*perverse proverb*", and defined it as the "combination of the 1ˢᵗ half of one proverb with the second half of another" [réunir la 1ère moitié d'un proverbe avec la deuxième moitié d'un autre] (Comp. p., 206).

Examples of this technique would be

(3)   *A stitch in time gathers no moss.*

(4)   *Absence speaks louder than words.*

(5)   *An apple a day is worth two in the bush.*

(6)   *He who laughs last is lost.*

(7)   *It never rains, but the flesh is weak.*

(8)   *It takes all sorts to tango.*

(9)   *Once bitten, three's a crowd.*

(10)   *One good turn is another man's poison.*

(11)   *Strike while the sun shines.*

(12)   *The road to hell is the spice of life.*

(13)   *Time is thicker than water.*

(14)   *When in Rome, do it yourself.*

Such 'proverb amalgamations', or 'proverb contaminations', or 'proverb blendings', which have also been termed 'portmanteau proverbs', or 'spliced proverbs', in any case consist of the fusion of two ordinary proverbs into one, thus ultimately containing the modification of two proverbs. Yet, within the category of perverbs, a second sub-category has been distinguished, namely, so-called 'garden path proverbs', which are based on syntactical and grammatical incompatible or incongruent fusions, such as

(15)   *Don't count your chickens will do it for you.*

In this case starting with the ordinary proverbial beginning of the proverb *Don't count your chickens before they're hatched*, this perverb then mixes its beginning with some kind of advice (*Don't count, your chicken will ...*), which is ultimately based on the usage of the very same proverb, but ends in some absurd kind of construction.

In order to cover both sub-categories (i.e., the spliced portmanteau proverbs as well as the garden path ones), a rather general definition of 'perverb' has been offered in literature:

A **perverb** (portmanteau of 'perverse proverb'), also known as an anti-proverb, is a humorous modification of a *known* proverb, usually by changing its ending in a way that surprises or confounds the listener.

This definition may seem to be plausible, at first sight; specifically, reference to some *known* proverb as a basis of a perverb may turn out to be helpful in the understanding of this genre, or sub-genre. A closer inspection of this definition shows, however, that it focuses on the modification of *one* proverb, only, and ignores the fact that the spliced portmanteau proverbs actually contain the modification of two. And what may be even more problematic, is the identification of perverbs with anti-proverbs; although perverbs may be, without a doubt, regarded to be one particular kind of anti-proverbs, this definition does not work in the reverse direction: in fact, it would seems rather questionable to regard all kinds of anti-proverbs to be perverbs.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to understand perverbs to be a sub-category of anti-proverbs and, as has been stated above, distinguish between *structure-oriented* or *genre-oriented* anti-proverbs, on the one hand, and *item-oriented* ones, on the other. This allows for the inclusion of "traditional" anti-proverbs in Wolfgang Mieder's understanding of this term, according to which an **anti-proverb** may generally be understood to be the transformation of a proverb for humorous effects, and which, to have full effect, must be based on a known proverb. Given this understanding, the following items would be examples of "classical" anti-proverbs:

(16) *All's well that ends well.*	→	*All's well that ends.*
(17) *Absence makes the heart grow fonder.*	→	*Absence makes the heart go wander.*
(18) *An apple a day keeps the doctor away;*	→	*An onion a day keeps everybody away;*
(19) *Don't bite the hand that feeds you.*	→	*Don't bite the hand that looks dirty.*

Although most paremiologists and "anti-paremiologists" would probably agree on the above definition and the attribution of Examples (16) through (19) to the category of anti-proverbs, the understanding of 'anti-proverb' alas, again is not unambiguous: The reason for this is that in the history of paroemiology and paroemiography, a very different understanding of 'anti-proverb' has been promoted, too. According to this alternative understanding an anti-proverb is such a proverb which, usually within a given language and culture, expresses the opposite meaning of a given proverb. Such cases are not really frequent, but they are far from being exceptional, either, cf. Examples (20) through (25):

(20) *The pen is mightier than the sword.*		*Actions speak louder than words.*
(21) *There's no such thing as a free lunch.*		*The best things in life are free.*
(22) *Birds of a feather flock together.*	vs.	*Opposites attract.*
(23) *You're never too old to learn.*		*You can't teach an old dog new tricks.*

(24) *What's good for the goose is good for the gander;*		*One man's meat is another man's poison.*
(25) *Out of sight, out of mind.*		*Absence makes the heart grow fonder.*

One may, of course, in one case or another, discuss to what degree distinctly opposite meanings are expressed in the in the right and left column items, and to what degree there may be fine semantic nuances or pragmatic restrictions — such details may well, however, turn out to be primarily a question of proverbial meta-language (and may represent quite hard nuts for paroemiological nut-crackers).

In any case and almost unnoticed, we have left the field of proverb parodies, and entered the realm of "ordinary" proverb variation. After all, Examples (20) through (25) are, in Grigorij L. Permjakov's systematic approach, nothing but instances of (intra-lingual) 'proverbial antonyms', which Permjakov has shown to exist both within and between languages (i.e., on an intra-lingual and inter-lingual level), as well as proverbial synonyms and proverbial homonyms. Specifically, Permjakov would have called the above items (logical) **transformations**. It is important to note, in this context, that transformations, in a Permjakovian framework, would have to be regarded, or treated, on a systematic level, rather than on textual one, i.e., they are part of the paremic (and, as a consequence) paroemiological system, not a matter of individual text variation.

But before going into details as to this point, arguing in favor of reserving the term *variation* for this third category, let us summarizingly suggest to consider the **ations* of the first two categories – which may well be covered by the general term of anti-proverb – as being of principally different kind: whereas the first group – containing hoax proverbs, mock proverbs, fake proverbs, pseudo proverbs, etc. – is based upon and presupposes structural knowledge of the proverbial genre as a whole and thus implies the process of (ludistic) **creation** or **generation**, the second group is based upon and presupposes knowledge of (or familiarity with) concrete individual proverbs, and it is the intentional ludistic or humoristic **modification** of an individual proverb, which is at stake in this group. In contrast, processes of **logical transformation** and **linguistic variation** may be seen to be characteristic of the third and fourth groups, for the understanding of which a short excursion into a modern interpretation of Permjakov's theory of proverb seems to be in place.

Without going into any details as to Permjakov's system, let it suffice to call into our memory that in the framework of his *General Theory of Cliché*, Permjakov described a whole system of logical transformations of proverbial utterances, which may be sub-divided into first-order and second-order transformations (cf. Table 1).

Second-order Transformations		
First-order Transformations	**a** Positive	**b** Negative	**c** Mixed
A Basic Form	«Much is good»	«Little is bad»	«Much is better than little»
B Transformation of Negation	«Much is bad»	«Little is good»	«Little is better than much»
C Transformation of Ambivalence	«Much is good and bad»	«Little is bad and good»	«Sometimes much is better, sometimes little is better»
D Interrogative Transformation	«Aa ?» «Ba ?» «Ca ?»	«Ab ?» «Bb » «Cb ?»	«Ac ?» «Bc ?» «Cc ?»

Quite obviously, Examples (20) through (25) may be treated as instances of "simple" first-order **transformations** in the Permjakovian understanding of this term – of course, in these cases it is almost impossible to define, which item is a transformation of which. Whereas it may therefore seem to be preferable to use the more neutral 'proverbial antonyms' to refer to them, since this term does not imply any direction of the transformation, Permjakov has, for practical reasons, taken the 'positive' form as some initial basis and starting-point for paroemiological classification.

What is important, however, is the fact that, in case of proverbial *ations between, or across, the cells, we would be concerned with transformations – in contradistinction to this, any kind of *ation within a given cell would result in **variation** in a narrower understanding of this term. This suggestion seems to be fully in line with Permjakov's view, albeit it not so explicitly provided in his writings. But it becomes clear from his further "complication" of Table 1, which is, in fact, a more detailed specification: After all, Table 1 offers but a basic schema of possible transformations; in more detail, for each of the twelve cells there are three different ways of expressing a given proverb's meaning, which, at first sight, lend themselves to be interpreted as further sub-categorizations. If, for example, we take the positive basic form (Aa), then this, at closer sight, already corresponds to one of them; but in addition to «Much is good» (Aaα) we also have «Much cannot be bad» (Aaβ) and «Much is good and cannot be bad» (Aaγ) at our disposal to express this meaning in more or less (sic!) one and the same way, without changing the proverb's basic meaning – and the same holds true for all cells ("transforms").

There is (at least) one important *caveat* in place here. As paroemiological experts will have noticed, the schema represented in Table 1 goes back to Permjakov's early writings from the late 1960's, when he still focused on the logical plane of proverbs as the most relevant issue, at least for study. And only from the mid-1970s on, he would refuse the reduction of describing proverb meaning in logical terms only, or the fusion of semantic aspects into logical aspects. Rather, in his later writings, he would convincingly show that a proverb's meaning must be described differently; that is, in a more complex way, treating it as a combination of a particular logical form, on the one hand, and one or more semantic oppositions, on the other.

Ultimately, this resulted in the schema represented in Figure 2 below, where his later sub-division of his "Higher logico-semiotic invariants" into "form-building groups" can be seen, as well as the different kinds of "invariant thematic pairs", both of which in combination are, as indispensable components of a proverb meaning's description, merged in what Permjakov called a proverb's "content level".
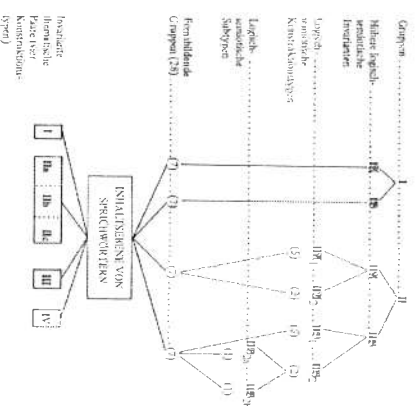
Figure 2: Permjakov's scheme of proverb meaning: logical and semantic sub-categories

All these aspects have been repeatedly discussed in the relevant paroemiological literature, and this needs not be redundantly done here again. In this context, it has also been pointed out that these processes are, from a semiotic point of view, best understood in terms of being relevant for the secondary, "connotative" level of proverb meaning.

Thus, coming back to the intra-cell sub-divisions (α,β,γ) mentioned above, this is the crucial point here: any linguistic change along this line leaves the given proverb's overall meaning almost unchanged, and it is but a semantic nuance which is focused in a different way. This,

however, this leads us back to our intentional rumination as to what degree a proverb's *ation and its text are admissible or acceptable.

It seems reasonable to suggest that such *ations are acceptable which do not touch upon a given proverb's type – and it is just a **proverb type**, which is represented as an intra-cell item in Table 1 above.

Once more, this is not the place here to enter the complex field of proverb typology, the more since this has to be seen in close context with the distinction of different situational types coming into play – and all this has again been discussed in details elsewhere. Suffice it therefore to say here, that Permjakov's understanding of "invariant meaning" is fully in line with the assumptions that (a) not only the situations proverbs are used in (i.e., the *interaction situations*), but, first and foremost, the situations they refer to (i.e., the *reference situations*), may vary, and that the same holds true (b) for all those linguistic variations of expressing one and the same meaning of a given proverb (type) in the above-defined understanding (what has been termed the *proverb situation* elsewhere).

$$P_{1,2,3,...n} \equiv [\text{Variants}]$$
$$\searrow\downarrow\swarrow \qquad \Downarrow$$
$$P\text{-} \equiv [\text{Model}]$$
$$\text{Invariant} \qquad \Uparrow\Downarrow$$
$$Rs\text{-} \equiv [\text{Model}]$$
$$\text{Invariant} \qquad \Uparrow$$
$$Rs_{1,2,3,...n} \equiv [\text{Variants}]$$
$$\nearrow\uparrow\nwarrow$$
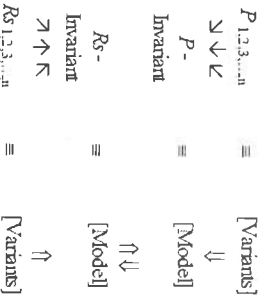
Figure 3: Variants and invariants (models)

What thus remains invariant, are models which are derived from the complex process of proverb usage in a theoretically infinite number of *interaction situations* in which proverbs are actually used, namely

(a) *model situations* which are derived from a theoretically infinite number of proverb occurrences, i.e. either repetitions of one and the same proverbial text or such of its variations, which still are accepted as belonging to and allowing to be subsumed under the given model.

(b) *situation models* which are derived, by way of experience, from a theoretically infinite number of reference situations the proverbs refer to.

In this framework, it is important to note that these processes (sic!) cannot be explained by reference or recourse to proverb texts, that is linguistic structures (sic!), alone: the question of what is an appropriate model, and which situations are considered to be acceptable (i.e.,

which models are ultimately derived), is not a question of linguistic structure, but of usage and pragmatics. Moreover, a model cannot exist a priori, at least not as part of an individual's linguistic and/or cultural competence, but it must be based on pragmatic (not only linguistic) experience. Ultimately it is this trivial fact which is responsible for the fact that one cannot, in principle, reliably derive a proverb's meaning from its linguistic surface structure – although, from an intra-cultural point of view, one may tend to believe this, not even being able to see possible alternatives pragmatically ruled out by experience.
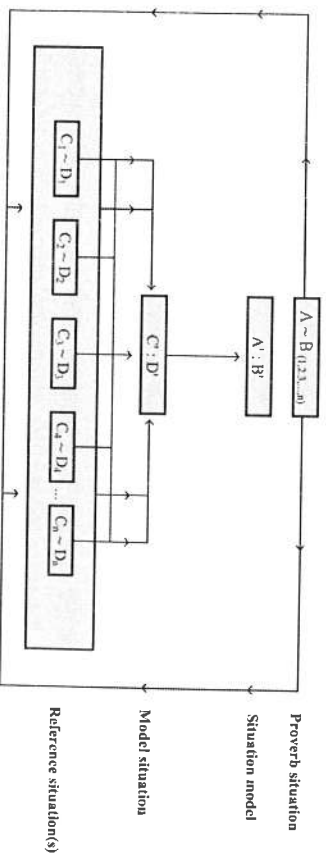
These circumstances have given rise to a definition of the proverb which attempts to pay due attention to the above-mentioned specifics:

A proverb can be understood to be a model of some situation if – eventually in a given interaction situation (I) – such a **situation model** (IIb) may be derived from the **proverb situation** (IIa), which stands in isological relation to some abstract **model situation** (IIIb) derived from a concrete **reference situation** (IIIa).

Reference situation(s)

Model situation

Situation model

Proverb situation

A~B(1,2,3...n)

A':B'

C':D'

C₁~D₁   C₂~D₂   C₃~D₃   C₄~D₄ ... Cₙ~Dₙ

Figure 4: The generation of proverb meanings and models

Having arrived at this point, suggesting that paroemic variation in a narrower understanding of this term can indeed be restricted to such processes which change the linguistic surface structure of a given proverb (i.e., of some concrete 'proverb situation') without affecting the remaining processes outlined in the definition quoted above, based on the schema depicted in Figure 4, it seems that only some crucial questions remain to be answered: How substantial is the phenomenon of variation in the field of paroemiology and paroemiography, or is proverb variation, if one confines it to this narrower technical understanding, but a *quantité négligeable* in the field of paroemiology and paroemiology?

The answer is very easy: yes, the problem is substantial; and no, it is no *quantité négligeable*, but a widely spread phenomenon, of equal importance for both paroemiography and paroemiology.

In the beginning of the 1970s, Vilmos Voigt, emphasized that, from an empirical point of view, the importance of variation had been well known in the field of paroemiography since the 19th century, at least. This situation was not, however, mirrored on a theoretical (that is, paroemiological) level; on the contrary, European science of folklore never elaborated on what Voigt called "the regularities of variation of the proverbial genre" (Voigt 1970a,b). Voigt distinguished different kinds of variation such as, according to his terms, linguistic, formulaic, or formal variations. He also pointed out the close interrelations between functional, pragmatic and semantic aspects of proverb variation, which were later fundamentally treated with in a number of works by Arvo Krikmann (1974a,b). Neither frequencies of variations nor any regularities in a stricter sense of this word were studied at that time, however.

An important step in this direction is represented by Pierre Crépeau's (1977) study on proverb variation, in context of his collection of Rwanda proverbs. Compiling the collection, and noticing the enormous amount of variation, Crépeau attempted to classify the different kinds of variation, distinguishing, among others, between processes of substitution, omission, addition, inversion, etc. Additionally, Crépeau attempted to quantify the frequencies of these variations. According to his data, of a total of 4454 proverbs, more than a third (1735, i.e. ca. 39%) were concerned with at least one kind of variation; on the whole, there were, however, almost twice as many variations (3486), since more often than not, a proverb was affected in more than one way. The most frequent kind of variation were (mainly lexical) substitutions [1], summing up to ca. 60% of all variations.

Specifically analyzing the variations from a semiotic point of view, distinguishing between expression plane, on the one hand, and first and second levels of signification, on the other, Crépeau found the following percentages:

(i) 2198 variations (63%) concerned the expression (63%) plane; according to Crépeau, these occurrences, which he termed 'variants' in a stricter sense, consisted of 'simple formal variations without effect on meaning';

(ii) 1288 variations (37%) were related to the content plane; of these,
a. 33.8% concerned the first level of signification (which Crépeau termed 'versions'),
b. 3.2% related to the second level of signification; these instance, also termed 'transformations', according to Crépeau gave rise to new folklore items.

Crépeau summarized: "Taking into account the larger number of identified variants, it is clear that one cannot neglect a fact of such importance".

A detailed classification schema of proverb variation was later needed, developed and applied in the field of empirical paroemiology, particularly in the context of so-called partial text presentations, a method originating in Permjakov's study of familiarity with Russian proverbs. After the first attempt to transfer this method to some other language (Grzybek 1991), it soon turned out that subject's completions of proverbs' beginnings were characterized by a broad spectrum of possible variations, ranging from orthographic errors, over lexical and syntactic alternatives, to the "invention" of "new" proverbs, which have nothing to do with the original items presented: the meticulous documentation of all completions and their occurrence frequencies requires a detailed classificational schema, of course, as a pre-requisite to not only gain insight into the variational spectrum of a proverb, but also to find out the most frequently used forms. To this end, the classification system originally suggested by Grzybek, Chlosta, and Roos (1994), which need not be discussed here in detail, has been repeatedly used for various languages (cf. Chlosta and Grzybek 1995, 2005, Grzybek 2008); its major along categories, or 'levels', are:

1. **Zero modifications** are those cases where a proverb is completed in the "expected" form, for which the term 'zero variant' (V_0) has been proposed, in order to prevent any kind of normative implication: this form does not imply any kind of a priori prejudice as to frequency, as opposed to traditional paroemiography and paroemiology, where terms such as "standard form," "basic variant," etc. imply that this form is the most common form, as compared to all kinds of variations. As a matter of fact, such a V_0 may well turn out to be the most common, or the most frequent one, but, quite logically, only a posteriori, i.e. as a result of the empirical study.

2. **First degree modifications** of the indicate familiarity (also) with the given V_0, it has been suggested by Chlosta and Grzybek (2005) to term such modifications 'variations'; they include, e.g., the omission of single words which are not crucial to the proverb's semantics, orthographic or morphological variations; also lexical or syntactic variations are included here, as long as the modification does not result in a second degree variation.

3. **Second degree modifications** of the V_0 result in a proverbial form which does not any longer imply its knowledge, but familiarity with the proverb type (in the paroemiological meaning of this word) underlying it; for such modifications the term 'variant' has been proposed, including shortenings or prolongations, lexical variations (other than lexical synonymy), etc.

4. **Third degree modifications** neither imply knowledge of the V_0 nor of the proverb type underlying it; in some cases, we may be concerned here with a different, or "new" proverb, in other cases with nonsense answers or other modifications; some other kinds of third degree modifications have been attributed to categories in their own right, e.g., completions representing explicit negations of the V_0, unreadable answers, etc.

As has been mentioned above, this classification schema has been primarily developed for the detailed documentation of each occurring variant, and for the determination of the variants' frequencies. As can easily be seen, it is quite compatible with the major categories of Crépeau's earlier distinctions, but much more systematic in detail. But what is more important in the concrete context given here is the fact that empirical results based on this schema allow for far-reaching conclusions as to the quantification of proverb variations, both with regard to individual proverbs – a topic not at stake here – and in general.

With regard to American-English proverbs, for example, 234 proverbs from Wolfgang Mieder's (1988) collection of *English Proverbs* have been used for a partial text presentation.[2] On the whole, there were, as the possible (theoretical) maximum, 13806 (59 x 234) completions. 9.71% 8747 proverbs of these (63.36%) were completed in form of the V_0; 1421 (10.29%) items were classified as 'unknown' since they remained uncompleted. As a consequence, ca. one quarter of all completions (3,638, or 26.35%, respectively), contained some kind of modification as compared to the V_0 and thus fell into one of the remaining categories.[3]

From a comparative perspective, these results thus seem to approximately converge with the earlier observations reported by Crépeau, saying that variation plays indeed a major role, and that it must and can in fact be dealt with from a paroemiological point of view.

As compared to this relatively large amount of variation among ordinary proverbs, only little variation has been observed in an empirical study on familiarity with German proverbs, conducted by Peter Ďurčo (2003): in his study, 385 German familiar proverbs were presented to 220 subjects, who were asked, if they know the proverb presented and eventually (also) some variant(s) of it. According to his results, about 10% of the subjects gave a variant for overall 30 proverbs, so that on the whole, ca. 3% of the proverbs were what he called 'variants'.

It seems quite obvious that this comparatively small amount of variation is a result of methodology: in such a full text presentation, people obviously concentrate on the question if they know a proverb or not, rather than paying attention to alternative wordings, they themselves might eventually prefer in their own usage of these proverbs.

This interpretation is confirmed by findings on the familiarity with Slovenian proverbs, particularly a recent re-analysis of Makarovič's 1975 earlier work on *Pregovori*. The original study had been based on 100 Slovenian proverbs which were presented in their full form to 64 subjects; as a result, 50.98% of the answers had been classified as 'familiar', 48.47% as 'unfamiliar', and only 0.55% of variations had been observed. In contrast, a large portion of variability could be observed in Grzybek's (2008) re-analysis of the same material with 103 subjects, and applying a partial text presentation: now, one could see that of those 3720 completions, which were rated as familiar, 1550 had to be classified as **variants or variations** (see above) corresponding to 41.66% of the completions given.

We can thus summarize that not only ludistic and humoristic modifications play an important role in the contemporary world of proverbs, but also "ordinary" variations. In principle, this fact has always been known to paroemiographers since the 19th century, but their interest has mainly been the documentation of standard variants, more often than not defined on the basis of authoritative decisions. It seems likely that this circumstance has largely contributed given to the wrong impression that variation plays only a minor role in proverb knowledge.

At closer sight, it seems quite obvious that in this context there are more open than solved questions. It goes without saying that this concerns, of course, the relation between "ordinary" proverbs and anti-proverbs, including the possible transformation of humoristic modifications into ordinary proverbs over time. But also more general problems are at stake, as e.g. to the degree of variation both of individual proverbs and proverbs in general. Let alone the results of the empirical studies reported above, it seems worthwhile asking which factors enhance the amount of proverb variation. Such factors may, among others, depend on the language type involved, particularly the juxtaposition of (more or less) analytical or synthetic languages, or they may related to length or familiarity of the proverb, and many more factors, ultimately leading to the question of a synergetic model of paroemiology. In any case it seems that the various *ations of the proverb deserve even more theoretical attention than they have hitherto received.

Notes

1. More specifically, Crepeau distinguished different kinds of substitution, including synonymy, analogy, opposition, assonance, transfer, syntax, narrative, etc.

2. For details of the results, see details Chlosta and Grzybek (2005)..

3. More than one half of them (1,962; i.e. 14.21% of all completions) were 1st degree variations; 823 (5.96% of all completions) were 2nd degree modifications.

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Peter Grzybek, Associate Prof. Mag. Dr., Head of Department for Slavic Studies, at the University of Graz, Austria, was born at Herne (Germany). From his Academic Education and Career we distinguish:

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