DO PROVERBS CONTRADICT?

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This paper looks at proverbs that are often labelled as contradictory by proverb scholars and proposes an alternative perspective from which they may be viewed. To this end, I examine the illusion of contradiction in proverbs and argue that the impression of antithesis is in part based on a superficial understanding of the dynamics of proverb use.

The issue of contradiction proverb scholars have in mind, however, needs to be defined. We are not referring here to the impression of contradiction in a single proverb; this would have been relevant if our intention was to appraise the artistic use of the devices of paradox, or oxymoron, to create the impression of self-contradiction, or absurdity in proverbs. Rather, we are concerned here with proverb pairs that are argued by scholars as advocating opposing principles, such as in the English proverbs, "Haste makes waste," on the one hand, and "He who hesitates is lost" on the other. Contradiction here need not be interpreted as mere diversity or inconsistency, such as can be traced in all moral laws, principles or charters. By contradiction between proverbs, we refer to a juxtaposition of antonymous elements, or principles (Katz 1964).

Indeed, as early as the beginning of the 17th century, attention to conflicting proverbs, or proverbs advocating opposing philosophies, was drawn by Nicholas Brenton (1618). Since then, most scholarly discussions of proverb collections allude to

this. Firth (1926) refers to the "diverse nature, the square-faced oppositions" of Maori proverbs. Andrzejewski (1968) in his study of Somali proverbs makes a similar observation. This is also said of Jabo proverbs (Herzog 1936), English proverbs (Taylor 1950), proverbs in Chinese (Lister 1874), and Yoruba proverbs (Lindfors and Owomoyela 1973).

The existence of contradictory proverbs naturally poses a problem to the view of the proverb as a reflection of rules and ideals of life (Hertzler 1933, Cohen 1913, Kelso 1930), so it would undermine the view that folklore validates culture (Bascom 1965). It would indeed upset Radcliffe-Brown's (1952) notion of "functional unity," which is said to explain the functioning of society. The view that proverbs contradict could on the other hand lend some credence to the "shreds and patches" theory, in which items in a society are perceived as having been brought together by an accident of history. But we cannot ignore here past attempts to explain contradiction between proverbs. To Elmslie (1917), antithetical proverbs represent the viewpoint of different classes of men. This view hints at the possible absence of unanimity in a society's view of life. To scholars such as Firth, on the other hand, proverbs may contradict each other because they reflect the ideal of the community on the one hand and the selfish impulse of the individual on the other.

Yet these explanations of proverb contradiction would still have to contend with the fact that it does not take the proverb repertoire of a whole group to exemplify contradictory proverbs; that the active proverb repertoire of an individual may exhibit the alleged antithesis; and finally that the active use of a proverb presupposes the ap-

proval of the relevant community.

The problem of contradictory proverbs is partially resolved by Taylor who contends that the advice that underlies most proverbs is the counsel to avoid excess (Taylor 1950: 903). Taylor's point here is embellished by Greenway when he says that proverbs advise expediency, which obeys no consistent precepts (Greenway 1964:64). The viewpoint of Taylor and Greenway ostensibly leads us to the rhetorical view of proverbs.

The view of the proverb as a tool for rhetoric is advanced by such scholars as Burke (1957), Abrahams (1968), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1972), Boadi (1972), a few of whom exploit the antithesis in proverbs as a partial basis for advocating a rhetorical view of proverbs. From this standpoint, the morals proverbs advocate are not of primary importance.

This notwithstanding, it is our view here that the admission by scholars that proverbs contradict does not necessarily shed light on the rhetorical view of proverbs; neither does the rhetorical view of proverbs adequately explain the alleged contradiction in proverbs. For wherever these viewpoints have been launched by scholars, the element which would have been most crucial in the validation of their theses has been missing. I refer here to **context.**

But the absence of contextual information in the literature on proverb contradiction is not of limited relevance; it characterizes a goodly proportion of scholarly works on the proverb. Often, scholars have compiled proverbs from various culture areas and assigned meanings to these, without recourse to the linguistic context in which they are, or were used.

In appealing to context to rebut the existence of contradictory proverbs, we are

aware of the over-use to which the term has been subjected in folkloristics. In fact, the possible abuse of the notion of context in the social sciences, and the possible dangers in its use as the basis for explaining the irrational is pointed out by Gellner:

> Contextual interpretation is, in some respects, like the invocation of ad hoc additional hypotheses in science: it is inevitable, proper, often very valuable, and at the same time dangerous and liable to disasterous abuse. It is probably impossible in either case to draw up general rules for delimiting the legitimate and illegitimate uses of it (1973:44).

Our safeguard against this danger is that unlike the treatment of beliefs, superstitions, etc., peculiar to "primitive" societies with which Gellner exemplifies his position, we are dealing here with a phenomenon (contradictory proverbs) which is almost universal. Secondly, the very nature of the proverb as occurring only within a matrix of discourse should discourage any approach to its meaning outside contextual setting. Proverb informants among the Akan of Ghana, for instance, protest against direct elicitation of proverbs through the use of the proverb "One cannot sleep except in a dream," and the meta-proverb, "Without discourse, one does not tell proverbs."

The advantage in paying heed to the point in the above-cited proverbs by informants is that it enables the curious scholar to explore a possible meaning discrepancy between the proverb as isolated and frozen on paper by the scholar, and the proverb as used in the flow of discourse. It is this dichotomy between proverb concept and proverb in context that underlies our position in this paper. The attraction in the proposed schism is that it provides us with a

theoretical support for the unlikelihood of contradiction in the use of proverbs, and indeed explains the multiplicity of meanings that can be associated with one proverb. The suggestion here is that past scholars of the proverb in assigning meaning and subsequently contradiction, have only dealt with the proverb concept. But the difference between proverb concept and proverb context is fundamentally one of ideology.

Whereas in the realm of proverb concept, one is dealing with the proverb as a cultural fact or truism, which is liable to contradiction, in contextual usage the truth in a proverb is irrelevant.

In referring to the proverb concept as a truism, we are only drawing attention to its general orientation to the assertion of a cultural truth. The truism in a proverb may be empirically valid as in the Akan proverb, "The five fingers are of unequal length;" it may be in the form of a valid traditional belief as in the Indian proverb, "Oxen with bad traits bring misfortune" Srivastava 1972). The proverb on the other hand, may be based on a questionable logic, or an unverifiable claim as in the English proverb, "One hour's sleep before midnight is worth two hours after," or "We must all eat a pack of dirt before we die" (Hand 1980). The proverb may also be an interpretation of an activity in the non-human world as in the Akan proverb, "The perspiration of the tiger is hardly noticed." Regardless of the logic or fallacy of a proverb, however, it is observed is a cultural truism, or fact. In theoretical terms, the proverbs above are capable of contradiction

or denial; but in practice, the truth in them is hardly questioned.

It is this unquestioned character of the proverb concept that is exploited for the purposes of persuasion in discourse. But in the realm of discourse context, the proverb ceases to be fact-oriented; it assumes the character of an opinion, confirming or validating the judgment or opinion the speaker has already formed. At this stage where the truism in a proverb is only exploited to corroborate with a judgment, discretion, or opinion, contradiction becomes irrelevant; for opinions by their very nature, are not factual, even though they may be predicated upon facts.

In one situation of proverb use documented by the present writer, speaker A was debating whether he should avail himself of a provision of unattractive utensils that were being offered free of charge by another. As A was dismissing the idea because the items were not attractive, speaker B suggested that A should take them as they were, since better utensils were hard to come by. B supported his suggestion with the Akan proverb, "A worthless sponge is picked up in needy times." This proverb, in isolation is fact-oriented; the point in it is potentially contestable, but as it was used by speaker B to stylize or justify his considered judgement or opinion, it ceased to be deniable since opinions cannot be contested or denied, but are only subject to acceptance or rejection. This makes the proverb a fitting tool for rhetoric.

In discourse situations, speakers may adopt similar or different viewpoints. But regardless of the stand taken, each speaker asserts his point of view by adopting a strategy. He may rely on personal insights, past experiences or precedences in enhancing

his argument; but where necessary, a speaker may use his discretion and, considering the susceptibility of his audience to proverbs, use a proverb to solidify the stand he has taken. In utilizing a proverb in the situation, the speaker may be referring to a well-known belief, practice, fact, convention or phenomenon whose validity in the society his audience takes for granted. Knowing that the relevant proverb is an unquestionable truism, the speaker exploits this situation and uses the cultural truism to support an opinion he has formed in the discourse or an action he has taken, which may even be unpopular. By using a cultural truism to enhance an opinion, the speaker may indeed be saying, to his audience, "Well, if you all accept this point in this proverb as an incontestable truth which has been blessed by our forefathers and handed down to us, you may as well support the view I am advancing." Of course, the logic or message in the speaker's viewpoint and that in the proverb may not necessarily be identical, but the speaker here exploits the traditionality of the proverb, its flexibility and metaphorical character; he in fact exploits the wisdom of many to assert his personal wit.

The distinction between proverb concept and proverb in context to which we resort in separating fact from opinion becomes even more relevant if we emphasize the metaphorical essence of the proverb (Seitel 1969); for even though a proverb may be an image or a set of images, it may define an unlimited range of situations, each distinct in particularity. These situations may have a common logical denominator, but they need not; for the isolated proverb concept may be viewed as having a constellation of potential meanings each of which crystallizes in con-

textual usage. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1972) for example, refers to the proverb meaning as the integration of proverbial and situational meaning, and exemplifies the multiple meanings that a proverb may contract as it is used in different contexts.

Part of the reason for the multiple meanings a proverb may acquire is that potential proverb users may have different techniques of timing in applying the proverb, which may occasion a change in proverb meaning. This is beside the manipulation of other extralinguistic features such as tone, stress, or recourse to facial expression or other motor or gestural activity by proverb users. All these reflect on the multiplicity of meanings that may be associated with one proverb. Among the Jabo of Liberia, according to Herzog, the following proverb can be used in two senses which directly contradict each other; a person may condemn or praise the same behavior with the same proverb: "They usually say it is the villager, they don't say it is the stranger, who if he walks about town, walks leisurely" (Herzog 1936).

Evans-Pritchard (1963) also draws attention to the multiple meanings Zande proverbs contract in varying contexts; this he demonstrates with varied meanings assigned by different scholars to the same Zande proverbs. Fieldwork on the proverb carried out by the present writer in fact reveals that proverb informants often find it difficult telling the scholar what precisely a proverb means. Instead of indicating what a proverb means, informants would normally give the context or contexts in which the proverb would be used. The potential for multiple meanings in a proverb seems to have been missed by such scholars as

Merrick, who, while working on proverbs among the Hausa, pointed out that the Hausa's way of looking at things is different from the European. His reason? Hausa informants are unable to pin down the meaning of proverbs. For example, one man gave three interpretations of the same proverb on three successive days (Merrick 1905). In squeezing out a proverb's meanings from an informant, Merrick had in fact compelled the informant to come up with three meanings based on different hypthetical contexts of usage. And one could imagine the extent of chaos, if Merrick had further asked his informant for proverbs that contradicted his earlier ones. In fact, it is difficult to talk of contradiction between proverbs, since proverbs have more than one meaning. This character of the proverb increases its value as a rhetorical tool.

But the rhetorical power of the proverb is also attributable to its literary flavor (balancing, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, pun, etc.), motivated brevity, and authoritative tone. Through these attributes, many proverbs assume the character of absolute, unqualified rules encapsulated in abbreviated language. This often leads to apparent contradiction in some proverb pairs outside their contextual usage. For example, the following two Akan proverbs seem to contradict each other, the first advising against fellowship, and the second advocating fellowship:

a. It's due to friendship that the crab got no head.

b. "Blow off a mote in my eyes," that is why antelopes walk in pairs.

The following English proverbs have a similar antithetical flavor:

a. Look before you leap.

b. He who hesitates is lost.

a. Out of sight, out of mind.
b. Absence makes the heart grow fonder (Godwin and Wenzel 1981).

A second look at these proverb pairs suggests that their full meanings are conditioned by the various situations in which they would be used, and the pairs may even complement each other in contextual usage. The first Akan proverb, for example, would be seen in context as guarding against excesses in acquisition of friends or selection of friends, while the second proverb would be used in situations where avoiding friends entirely has led to untoward consequences. A significant point here is that the timing of a proverb plays a role in determining its situational meaning: for while the use of the 'anti-friendship' proverb in anticipation of a mishap has an underlying, weaker meaning of "stop indulging in too much fellowship. disaster **may** occur," its use after the occurrence of a disaster has the underlying meaning, "disaster has occurred; this proverb confirms it." Similarly, the apparently contradictory English proverbs above have a parenthetical preface, "In some contexts..."

A further argument that supports the negotiable meaning of a proverb in context lies in the caution exercised by some proverb compilers in explaining proverbs. For example, having rendered an Akan proverb in the following English translation, "If the mouth slips, the consequence is worse than the slipping of the foot." Akrofi (n.d.) provides the following explanation: "A wrong word **may** do more harm than a fall." And for the proverb, "One lie destroys a thousand truths," Akrofi states, "An honest man **may** ruin his reputation by telling lies," even though the proverbs themselves are more absolute. One may indeed observe how absurd

the following would sound as proverbs among the Akan:

* If the mouth slips, the consequence may be worse than the slipping of the foot.
* One lie may destroy a thousand truths.

and how the following are not likely to be proverbs in English:

* Haste sometimes makes waste.
* Absence sometimes makes the heart grow fonder.

The potential for negotiable meaning does not, however, mean anything goes for a proverb's meaning or that the proverb user is in no way constrained in the specific meaning he associates with the proverb in discourse. Rather, the proverb user is guided in his choice of proverb, by his known position or attitude in the discourse interaction, what literal statements precede his proverb citation, or statements he utters after the proverb he quotes. These defined attitudes have to coincide with the intended meaning of the proverb which is circumscribed by tradition and usage. Thus even though the proverb user is not accountable for the content of the proverb, which is attributed to tradition, the responsibility of timely and appropriate usage devolves on him. He is, in fact, responsible for the aesthetic effect the proverb achieves in the discourse and how the proverb harmonizes with his known sentiments in the interaction. The proverb user is indeed accountable, if subconsciously, for the avoidance of a possible disharmony between his attitude, and the proverb he cites.

But even after disputing the existence of contradictory proverbs on the basis of the proverb concept/context schism, one could go extra lengths to subject to closer perusal some of the proverb pairs scholars have suggested are contradictory. While this borders

on the fringes of our argument in this paper, it helps to demonstrate that even at the level of proverb concept, not all the proverbs purported to be contradictory are logically so; for we realise that these often have different points of emphasis. Andrzejewski (1968), for example, offers the following as examples of contradiction in Somali proverbs,

* God does not put to shame a brave man.
* The mother of a coward does not lose her children.

adding that while the first advocates courage, the second encourages cowardice. A closer look at the proverbs, however, indicates that the points of emphasis in the proverbs, "brave man," and "the mother of a coward" occupy different grammatical positions (the first acting as subject, the second acting as object) and therefore reflect a distance in meaning. Secondly, "brave man" and "mother of a coward" are not logical opposites. For while in the first proverb, it is the brave man that is 'rewarded' in his exhibition of courage, it is not the coward that is rewarded in his cowardice, but his blood relation. The latter modification leads to an absence of logical parity between the two constituents, and therefore an absence of contradiction between the two proverbs. Consider also the following proverbs highlighted by Herzog as contradicting each other:

* Chicken says: we follow the one who has something.
* Chicken says: if you have managed to get something, you avoid your fellows.

The contradiction, for Herzog, lies in justifying generosity in the first proverb and defending selfishness in the second. A second reading of these proverbs indicates, however, that even if we agree that both proverbs advocate a course of action, the

recommendations here are not mutually exclusive. For while the chicken has every right to seek food from another having food, the latter also has every right to avoid the needy chicken. The examination of proverb pairs with different areas of focus suggests that the composition of proverbs in a culture's repertoire is based on a diversity of human experiences. Each proverb composer was guided by the idiosyncracies of the situation that inspired the proverb. This naturally diversifies the relevant areas of focus, and gives many proverbs distinctive logical patternings that reduce their potential of being contradicted.

Beside this, the tenor of the two proverbs above (and several others) suggests that proverbs do not necessarily advocate course of action, but sometimes merely highlight an unpleasant human tendency, or a common irony in life. More examples of proverbs depicting ironical situations may be cited from other languages:

Vietnamese: A blacksmith never has a knife for betel.

Tamils: A mat maker dies on bare ground.

Japanese: A dyer always wears undyed **hakani.**

Chinese: In the home of a carpenter there are no benches (Permyakov 1970).

Besides sounding more absolute than they really mean, the proverbs above highlight the irony of a producer of goods or services unable to benefit from his labor.

The point being emphasized here is that proverb pairs often highlighted as contradictory sometimes do not advocate contradictory courses of action, but are mere summations of ironical tendencies. The following pair of proverbs used by Firth as contradictory in Maori proverbs may be summaries of ironical tendencies in Maori life, and not rules for ideal living as Firth (1926:27) would suggest:

a. When there is a feast Paeko is not called, when there is fighting you call him loud enough.
b. At planting time one labors alone, at harvest, friends are all around.

We have in this essay advanced arguments against the existence of contradictory proverbs, based mainly on the suggested concept/context discrepancy. This schism was also argued as coinciding with the metaphorical nature of the proverb.

But paradoxically, while the metaphorical essence of the proverb strengthens our stand, it could also be a source of weakness; for not all proverbs are open-ended in the situations that they may be used. The validity of this latter point makes possible the pairing of proverbs whose conflicting meanings even in some contexts seem beyond doubt. I have in mind pairs of sayings such as the following cited by Lister (1874) from Chinese proverbs:
a. Know a man by his looks.
b. Looks are borne in the heart.
It seems impossible for these proverbs to be applied to convey metaphorical meanings such as is possible in a proverb like, "Birds of a feather flock together." In the use of the proverbs above, the dichotomy between literal meaning and metaphorical meaning may be blurred since the situations in which they may be used are not open-ended. This does not necessarily erase our concept/context distinction, however; for each of these proverbs may still carry varying shades of meaning in context. Even so, it is worth adding that most of such non-metaphorical sayings are often referred to as "maxims" or "aphorisms," and may not be considered high on the preference scale of good proverb users in societies where proverbs are actively used.

Proverbs, by their very nature, are often metaphorical, but they are also diverse and unsystematized. Even within the proberb repertoire of a single culture or individual, proverbs may be irregular in the messages they carry. But this is not as relevant as the fact that this potential needs to be exploited for the purposes of rhetoric. Thus speakers in a discourse situation may exchange proverbs to support diverse opinions. This is demonstrated by Messenger (1965) in his account of proverb use in traditional courts among the Anang of Nigeria. It must be pointed out, however, that proverbs used in such situations are not direct oppositions, but highlight aspects of the relevant problem that have not been considered by the other speaker in taking his position.

Thus even though in Messenger's example, the plaintiff supports his accusation of the defendant with the proverb, "If the dog plucks palm fruits from a cluster, he does not fear porcupine," (implying that the defendant is an old thief), the proverb used by the defendant to repudiate the charge and assert his innocence, "A single partridge flying through the bush leaves no path" (implying that he has no symphatizers, and this has resulted in his apparent guilt) is not in direct opposition to the first proverb. The second proverb merely highlights a philosophy which the plaintiff did not earlier consider. Even though the two parties take opposing positions in the case, the proverbs they use are not contradictory.

To conclude our attempt to rebut the existence of contradictory proverbs, it may be added that proverb users themselves do not seem to be aware that proverbs contradict. The point here is that the whole idea of proverbs in opposition seems to be merely a scholarly construct, of little or no rele-

vance in the free flow of discourse. In pointing this out it has not been our intention to belittle the value of past scholarship on the proverb. Rather, we have sought to highlight some of the illusions about the proverb which may be perpetuated in the continued treatment of the proverb outside contextual usage. The field informant has been our guide here; hark his words: "One can not dream except in a sleep," "Without discourse, one does not tell proverbs."

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