

Universality of Proverbs and Aristotle's Universals

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Abstract. This essay analyses samples of various proverbs from Latin, English, French, Italian and Russian, treating them as universal cultural cognitive fundamentals which ultimately reflect the same civilizational pathway and shared cultural ascent. This comparison of proverbs presents interest since they are the result of the earliest human observation about Being which strikes humans with surprising sameness. Proverbs summarize long centuries of human co-habitation and universal attempts to work out the most plausible and reasonable means of living together. Despite the linguistic and cultural differences, and different histories, they reflect similar conclusions about similar existential circumstances. They summarize the ultimate truths about private and public lives, the conclusions about the civilizational pathway of humanity which has proven to be universal. Proverbs, transmitted orally from generation to generation, precede epos, mythology, religious commandments, literature and scientific discourse. They represent the collective wisdom of humanity and collective cultural memory. Proverbs are the earliest permanent **cultural signs** and fundamentals known to all, also reaffirming Aristotle's theory of cultural universals.

Keywords: cultural memory, cultural universals, permanent cultural signs, cognitive fundamentals, cultural ascent, universal truths

Резюме. В данном эссе анализируются образцы различных пословиц из латинского, английского, французского, итальянского и русского языков, рассматривая их как универсальные культурные когнитивные основы, которые в конечном итоге отражают один и тот же цивилизационный путь и общее культурное восхождение. Сопоставление пословиц представляет интерес, поскольку они являются результатом самого раннего человеческого наблюдения за бытием, которое поражает людей удивительной одинаковостью. Пословицы подводят итог долгим векам совместного проживания людей и всеобщим попыткам выработать наиболее правдоподобные и разумные способы совместной жизни. Несмотря на языковые и культурные различия и разные истории, они отражают схожие выводы о схожих экзистенциальных обстоятельствах. В них обобщены предельные истины о личной и общественной жизни, выводы о цивилизационном пути человечества, которые оказались универсальными. Пословицы, передаваемые из поколения в поколение в устной форме, предшествуют эпосу, мифологии, религиозным заповедям, литературе и научному дискурсу. Они представляют собой коллективную мудрость человечества и коллективную культурную память. Пословицы являются самыми ранними постоянными культурными знаками и основами, известными всем, что также подтверждает теорию культурных универсалий Аристотеля.

Ключевые слова: культурная память, культурные универсалии, постоянные культурные знаки, когнитивные основы, культурное восхождение, универсальные истины

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Introduction

1. The Oldest and Most Universal Sentiment – Fear of Death, Reflected in Various Proverbs
2. Optimistic Message, Despite the Acknowledged Sadness of Being
3. Tested Strategy of Living: Appeal for Patience
4. Sociological Motif in Proverbs.
5. Value of Human Devotion to Each Other
6. Call for Acceptance of Differences and Recipes for Diplomacy
7. In Defense of Honesty in Communication
8. Eternal Learning – the Prominent Adage to Collective Wisdom
9. Social Aspect of Being
10. Close Association – Foundation of Love
11. On the Futility of Discussion with the Less Intelligent.
12. Doubt – One of the Earliest Human Thoughts

Conclusions

Содержание

Введение

1. Древнейшее и наиболее универсальное чувство – страх смерти, отраженный в различных пословицах
2. Оптимистическое послание, несмотря на признанную печаль бытия
3. Проверенная стратегия жизни : призыв к терпению
4. Социологический мотив в притчах
5. Ценность преданности людей друг другу
6. Призыв к принятию различий и рецепты дипломатии
7. В защиту честности в общении
8. Вечное обучение – выдающееся изречение о коллективной мудрости
9. Социальный аспект бытия
10. Близкие отношения – основа любви
11. О тщетности дискуссий с менее умными
12. Сомнение – одна из самых ранних человеческих мыслей

Выводы

Introduction. Aristotle’s theory of cultural universals has been continuously reaffirmed by the comparative studies of different societies, different languages, various cultural traditions, literatures, philosophies and ethical norms. We would like to argue that nowhere the commonality of the cultural ascent has been more obvious than in the overview of different proverbs which exemplify the common collective existential experience of humanity. These earliest summaries of the universal truths and observations precede literacy, literature, religious commandments, philosophy, ethics, and science. Proverbs, the apparent cognitive fundamentals which must have appeared during the millennia of the gradual human development from the ordinary primitive biological species to the homo sapiens.

After the gradual, step by step, and trial and error experience, humans have finally arrived at the most beneficial and appropriate way of co-existing, the model of *modus vivendi*. “Proverbs are daughters of experience,” preaches even the African proverb of unknown origin. Italian scholar Massimo Baldini, reflecting upon the possible origins of proverbs in his analysis of the Tuscan Italian proverbs, labels them as “cognitive fossils” that have been preserved in the collective cultural memory, in the annals of the accumulated collective wisdom [1997:7].

Greek philosophy, from the pre-Socratics to Aristotle, brought humanity to the conclusions about the cultural universals, best articulated in Aristotle’s theory of **cultural universals**. “Man is universal, Callias is particular,” taught Aristotle. His theory could be most suitably applied to the analysis of proverbs and their most prominent themes.

The end of human passage, death, impressed humans earlier than other features of Being – it forever remained in the collective human memory. The inevitability of death and the reality of aging inspired humans to formulate the universal truth in all proverbs. The Nigerian proverb stated the universal truth: “There is no medicine against death.” The Italians immortalized their own collective conclusion in their analogous proverb:

Contro la morte non vale ne muro ne porte (There is no wall or door against death).

The English expressed the same idea in their saying:

A Man can die but once.

The Russian proverb carries the same conclusion:

Dvum smertiam ne byvat (Двум смертям не бывать – Two deaths do not happen).

The inevitability of death and ageing inspired humans to observe the differences between the young and the old, to conclude about the advantages and disadvantages of each stage of Being.

In the French collective memory youth is described as the stage when knowledge and skills lack, while physical health prevails. The old age, in contrast, exhibits the deterioration of physical strength but demonstrates the accumulated knowledge about life and numerous skills which only long experience could bring. The French proverb records the fact of this obvious existential dissonance:

Si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait. If youth had known, and if the old could.

The same thought is expressed in the Russian proverb:

Esli by molodost' znala, a starost' mogla (Если бы молодость знала, а старость могла – Had the youth known, and had the old age could).

Both immortalize the reality of age differences in the identical manner in two different languages and traditions. The universal existential reality is reflected in the same way. The message is – to accept it and appreciate each phase.

2. Optimistic Message Despite the Acknowledged Sadness of Being

Despite the collective awareness of the universal sadness, resulting from the inevitable end in the human existence, a very short duration of the most attractive beginning and regrettable frailty of the old age, humans still managed to concentrate on the positive side of Being and on making life more pleasant, comfortable and peaceful. The collective wisdom concluded that, despite the sad reality and misfortunes, one has to think about the positive and joyful side of life, and proverbs make an attempt to focus on the positive and the happy side of existence. For instance, the Latin proverb teaches:

Nullum malum sine aliquo bono. There is no bad without the good.

Thus the English proverb mediates the same:

All is well that ends well.

The same idea is verbalized in the Russian version in the identical manner:

Vsio khorosho chto khorosho konchaetsia (Все хорошо, что хорошо кончается – All is well that ends well).

The French proverb expresses the same thought:

La fin couronne l'oeuvre / The end crowns the work.

Having observed for millennia changes in human environment, humans transposed certain observations of nature onto human life, having concluded that the positive and negative interchange and come together, like rain, snow, sunshine, cold, heat. The French proverb, for instance, recorded this idea in the metaphorized popular proverb:

Après la pluie le beau temps / After rain there comes good weather.

Similar idea is rendered in Italian:

Non e male senza bene / Nothing bad comes without some good.

The English version stated the same:

Every cloud has a silver lining.

The Russian proverb carries identical message:

Net khuda bez dobra (Нет худа без добра – There is no bad without the good).

All versions try to instill optimism, denoting the unity of the opposites, things, phenomena, and activities that invariably reveal contradictory results and sentiments. In general, proverbs display the innate philosophical bent of human mind that has prepared humans for future ordering of civilization and positive existential sentiments. The collective wisdom of humanity taught how to live with the positive and the negative rather than die contrary to the pessimistic message of the French philosopher Michael Montagne (1533-92), who assumed that philosophy constitutes mastering the art of dying. Proverbs demonstrate the universal attempt to live despite the obvious and inevitable sad end.

The collective wisdom of proverbs described, without prescribing or commanding, the better way of looking at life and people and the way to happiness or what the Greeks would call “eudomonism.” Proverbs shared the collective human strife for contentment, dismissing the focus on the insignificant. The Latin proverb summarized the universal formula of living:

Vivere militare est / To live means to struggle.

The English proverb described the strategy of living, not paying attention to the insignificant which people should not focus upon:

A storm in a teacup.

The same message is in the Russian version:

Mnogo shuma iz nichego (Много шума из ничего – Too much ado about nothing).

3. Tested Strategy of Living: Appeal for Patience

Despite the known brief life span, the collective wisdom accumulated a very valuable strategy of living and recorded it in proverbs. All proverbs suggest to respect time and be patient. Upon millennia of living and observing life, humans have agreed that all things in life require time and patience. For instance, the Latin proverb concluded wisely the role of patience in life:

Consultor homini tempus utilissimus / Time is the best councillor

Naturally, the message of the Italian, originating in Latin, is identical:

Il tempo da consiglio / Time is the best councillor.

The echo of the same message is in the Russian version:

Vremia – luchshy sovetchik (Время – лучший советник : Time is the best councilor).

Another Italian proverb reiterates the same message:

Il tempo vince tutto / Time wins everything.

Or:

Il tempo divora le pietre / Time devours even stone.

Time is collectively perceived as the best advisor, healer, miracle worker. The English repeat that “*time works wonders*,” summarizing the universally accepted truth.

The collective wisdom repeatedly asks humans to be patient in their journey through life. The English proverb describes the universally known fact:

Everything comes to the one who waits.

The same observation is reflected in the Russian proverb with optimistic appeal to wait:

Kto zhdiot, tot dozhdiotsia (Кто ждет, тот дождется – The one who waits, will find what he has been waiting for).

Not to rush shares the French proverb:

Doucement va bien loin / Moving slowly one gets far.

Completely identical is the Russian conclusion:

Tishe edesh, dal'she budesh (Тише едешь – дальше будешь: The slower one moves, the farther one gets).

On the one hand, collective wisdom suggests to do things slowly as the most efficient way, while on the other, it suggests that there is a way to be effective if one learns to do things simultaneously, if it is at all possible. For instance, the English saying advises:

To kill two birds with one stone.

The French render the same suggestion, transmitting the same idea:

Fair d'une pierre deux coups / Long collective human experience has taught to be reasonable and not to be ruled by speed alone.

4. Sociological Motif in Proverbs.

Very early on humans observed the unequal possessions and wealth distribution among people, but wanted to absolve the less fortunate from any guilt, bad reputation and personal responsibility. This noble and reasonable attitude has been immortalized in the universal statements regarding this feature of human life. The English, for instance, categorically stated:

Poverty is not a sin.

Similar statement was made by the French:

Pouvreté n'est pas vice / Poverty is not vice.

Exactly the same idea was expressed by the Italians and immortalized in their identical proverb:

Poverta non e vizio.

The Russians retained the same idea in their collective memory as well:

Bednost' ne porok (Бедность – не порок : Poverty is not flaw).

For millennia, humans had been observing each other's behavior and changeability of situations and conditions. They collectively deduced that not everything should be valued, nor could it be bought – certain things could not be acquired, but rather obtained with hard labor or innate abilities. There has been collectively discovered that not all things have material value. Wealth and property could be lost, wasted and deprive people of their status, but certain things remain and proved to be more valuable than personal possessions. To this effect the Italians collectively stated in their famous proverb the established hierarchy of values:

Pochi denari e molto honore/ Little money but great honor.

This hierarchy of values in favor of the endowments and spiritual qualities has been universally immortalized in proverbs, these monuments to human experience and the ultimate conclusions about what presents real value or constitutes real happiness.

5. Value of Human Devotion to Each Other

Regardless of human differences, be it inborn qualities, different languages, different forms of expression or modes of behavior, friendship is the permanent universal running motif of proverbs. The significance of friendship among people and permanent devotion had been established very early on and found its reflection universally. All activities historically and traditionally done in groups and in cooperation with one another required the tradition of dependence upon each other, demanded sincerity and devotion in close association. This is reflected in the Latin maxim:

Sine amicitia vita est nulla / Life is nil, nonexistent without friendship.

It is understandable that the related Italian proverb also stresses quite forcefully and categorically the same important existential message:

Vale piu un amico che cento parenti / A friend costs more than a hundred parents.

The English saying states this universally accepted idea:

A friend in need is a friend indeed.

Exactly the same message is transmitted in the Russian maxim:

Druzia poznayutsia v bede (Друзья познаются в беде : One discovers who one's real friend only when in trouble).

6. Call for Acceptance of Differences and Recipes for Diplomacy

At the dawn of civilization, people noticed differences even among the closest to them, different ways of behavior, tastes, opinions, views, and in order to keep harmony in human relationships the collective wisdom developed the art and tactics of diplomacy. Perhaps, the origin of the universal commandment, such as “silence is golden,” is precisely in the desire to avoid conflict, keep harmony, peace by not dwelling on the things divisive, offensive. The ancient Romans immortalized respect for human difference in the saying:

Quot capita, tot sententiae / Many heads, many ways to know.

It indirectly asked for tolerance of Difference. “*Many men, many minds,*” states the English popular saying, alluding to the desire to accept different thoughts for the sake of peace and harmony rather than dwell upon differences or battle the Other.

The same message is in the Russian version which legitimizes Difference:

Skol'ko luidey, stol'ko golov / (Сколько людей, столько голов : There are as many heads as people).

And because people exhibit certain stable irreconcilable differences which are impossible to tackle, the collective ancient wisdom suggests not to discuss them for the sake of harmony and peace. The French proverb to this effect carries the categorical message:

De gouts et des couleurs it ne faut pas discuter / One should not discuss tastes and colors.

The Russian maxim is synonymous:

O vkusakh ne sporiat. (О вкусах не спорят – One should not argue about tastes).

The saying from the Ivory coast summarized the universal wise tactics among humans:

Too much discussion means quarrel.

The experience of communication has universally concluded that sharp differences of opinion may be tantamount to a battle, though verbal, and are best to be avoided. And for the same reason all proverbs advise to be silent on certain matters and praise silence over battle-prone communication. Language, the best endowment of humanity among all the other species in the natural kingdom, has been universally treated as the most powerful tool in keeping harmony and peace. It has to be used very selectively, carefully and deliberate contemplation and choice of words have been valued in all cultures long prior to the invention of diplomacy as a universal social instrument. For the same reason the earliest collective human wisdom has arrived at a conclusion that it is preferable not to dwell on the Past for the sake of the Present.

For instance, let us quote the English proverb:

Let bygone be bygone.

The same idea is in the French version:

Oublions le passe / Let us forget the Past.

Thinking in silence is valued and praised universally for the sake of peace and harmony. This is the message of the Italian cautionary advice:

La lingua in tasca / Keep tongue in the pocket or Keep mum.

For the same reason, the Italians like to repeat:

Pensa oggi e parla domain / Think today but speak tomorrow.

The Italian later wisdom which appeared after the invention of writing reiterated the same earlier advice developed at the civilizational beginning:

Pensa molto, parla poco and scrivi meno / Think a lot, speak less, and write even less.

People universally praised prudent silence over expressing all thoughts and feelings to maintain harmony and peace. The Italian collective wisdom for millennia taught the same:

I saggi hanno la bocca nel cuore/ The wise have a mountain in their heart and do not say what they feel.

It summarizes the wisdom of silence in many life situations on the basis of the millennial contacts and communication.

7. In Defense of Honesty in Communication

Despite praising silence as a virtue, humans still eventually still demanded honesty, understanding and clarity in their communication, suggesting to avoid ambiguity. The Latins had a cult of “*Nuda veritas*” / naked truth. The same idea was immortalized in the English maxim:

Call spade a spade.

The identical message is carried by the French saying:

I'appelle une chat une chat / I call a cat a cat.

So does the synonymous Russian version that demands to call it by its name:

Nazyvat' veschi svoimi imenami (Называй вещи своими именами – Call things by their names).

These sayings confirm the universal human desire to understand each other and know one's true opinion on things, events, and attitudes in order to form authentic evaluation of reality. Despite the numerous appeals for occasional silent appraisal, humans still desired clarity, wishing to avoid misguided interpretations in important situations.

8. Eternal Learning – the Prominent Adage to Collective Wisdom

Organizing human existence, humans learned that acquisition of knowledge about themselves and the environment and the tactics of tackling various situations could be always improved and one should never limit one's horizons to the available skills. Thus, the theme of eternal learning is the running motif of all summaries of proverbs that reveal observations of the past experiences and advice for the future. The “live and learn” -motif in proverbs summarizes the universal conclusion about the adequate handling of reality, human life and daily communication. The French variant reiterates it by teaching:

On apprend chaque jour quelque chose de nouveau / Each day one learns something new.

The Italians proclaim the same:

Veendo s'impara / Living means learning.

They mean the same by also saying:

Non e mai troppo tardi per imparare / It is never too late to learn.

Exactly the same idea is embodied in the Russian analogous version:

Vek zhivi, vek uchis' (Век живи, век учись : Live and learn all the time).

Upon living and working together for millennia, people have observed that Knowledge takes time and effort, and nobody is born an accomplished craftsman, or becomes skilled without learning by practice or making mistakes. And the English concluded:

No one is born wise and learned.

The Italians have come to the same conclusion:

Nessuno nasce maestro / Nobody is born a teacher.

9. Social Aspect of Being

Humans devised similar rules of proper conduct among each other in the same manner as they invented language, organized society and developed values. It was collectively learnt that socialization could be both positive and negative, that the power of mimesis may direct humans to take different courses and routes towards perfection of behavior on the one hand and deterioration on the other. Motif of keeping company is the running motif in all proverbs. The Latins used to preach:

Sine amicitia vita est nulla / Life is nil without socializing.

As said above, the Italian saying discloses the universally accepted idea that commonality among friends could be stronger than family relationship. Related to this idea is also the thought that one may judge a person by the company one keeps. If one examines conclusions on the topic, one finds that one's friends reveal one's tastes, spiritual affinities. It has been collectively observed and concluded that preferences to the company of some people does make it possible to judge one's own character or friends become the sign of preferences, tastes and values. Then, the idea of judging people by the company one keeps appears:

Noscitur ex sociis / One is recognized by one's friends.

Naturally, the Italians rendered the same message in their proverb:

Disumi con chi vai ete diro chi su / Tell me with whom you associate, I will tell you who you are.

The English accepted the same idea and cultivated among themselves:

One is known by the company one keeps.

The same idea is carried by the French saying:

Dis-moi qui tua hantes et te dirai qui tu es./ Tell me whom you often visit, I will tell you who you are.

The Russian popular saying mediates the same meaning:

Skazhi mne kto tvoi druz'ia I ya skazhu tebe kto ty / Скажи мне кто твои друзья, и я скажу кто ты :
Tell me who your friends are and I will tell you who you are.

It may surprise that the same thought is transmitted by the Ethiopian proverb:

He who lives with an ass makes noises like an ass.

10. Close Association – Foundation of Love

Long before the rules of the proper ethical conduct had been devised, humans have observed that closeness with the people one feels affection for is the precondition of happiness, while separation from people one is fond of affects the intensity of feelings and the outcome of the relationship. The popular English maxim runs as follows:

Out of sight, out of mind.

The same idea is summarized in the Italian existential observation:

Lontan dagli occhi, lontan dal cuore / Far out of sight, far from the heart.

The same message is in the Russian analogous proverb:

S glaz doloy, iz serdtsa von / (С глаз долой, из сердца вон : Away from the eyes, out of the heart).

Remarkably, there is the identical French version of collective wisdom:

Loin des yeux, loin du coeur/ Far from the eyes, far from the heart.

It is remarkable that the Kenian proverb carries the same message:

Absence makes the heart forget.

11. On the Futility of Discussion with the Less Intelligent.

Differences in intelligence and perception had been observed in society, prior to the invention of governments and public political debates. Humans summarized the futility of arguments with those who are incapable of understanding. To the common astonishment, the same relevant idea had been expressed in different ages and traditions. For instance, the Romans and Italians (in their related to Latin-language) taught in their proverbs (both came, perhaps, from the Greek):

Nolite mittere margaritas ante porcos / Do not throw pearls in front of the swine.

The English immortalized the same in their commandment:

Not to cast pearls before the swine.

12. Doubt – One of the Earliest Human Thoughts

Prior to the development of philosophy and written culture, the proverbs encapsulated human pathway to wisdom that allegedly invariably contained Doubt. The Romans expressed it their Latin recorded observation:

Primus sapientum gradus est falsa intellegere / The primary observation may be false and, thus, unreliable.

The Italians captured the same idea in their related saying:

Non e tutto oro quel che riluce / Not all is gold which glitters.

Surprisingly, absolutely identical message is in the Russian saying:

Ne vsie zoloto chto blestit (Не все золото, что блестит – Not all that shines is gold).

The English cautioned not to “*judge book by its cover*” or “*Not all that glitters is gold*”.

The colorful metaphors inside the sayings captured the multitude of impressions, stressing the need not to trust the first impressions, nor arrive at conclusions based upon them. All proverbs in different cultures and languages recommended to subject all first impressions and observations to lengthy examination since they could be eventually false, and thus deem to be unreliable.

Conclusions. Millennia later, Greek philosopher Aristotle introduced the concept of the Universal Man, i.e. the sole representative of the most civilized species, the Man endowed with advanced thought and speech, relying in all actions and considerations upon Reason, possesses constant curiosity about the world and the constant desire to Know. Proverbs are the most convincing proof of the Universal Reason, articulated much later in history.

Our comparative analysis of samples of different maxims from different continents, ethnic groups and languages is the testimony to the thought of the Universal Man. They are the earliest **cultural signs** which signify the earliest universal human observations about Being and proper routes to Existence which anticipate literacy, religious commandments, social regulations, politics, ethics, philosophy, and science. Unlike the much later religious commandments, proverbs do not **prescribe**

the mode of conduct and behavior, they **describe**, summarizing the most habitual observable and beneficial tactics, they suggest rather than dictate.

Proverbs are the fundamentals of human society, the earliest universal steps to Civilization and happy and harmonious co-existence. They must have appeared as a result of the millennia of numerous human actions, lengthy observations, trial and error-undertakings and afterthoughts. All proverbs avoid categorical statements, dogmatic pronouncements but rather diplomatically suggest the most successful mode of public or private behavior, and communication. The identical meaning of proverbs in different traditions, ethnic groups and languages reaffirm the single Civilizational Pathway, the universal route from savagery and barbarism to civilized conduct. Proverbs are the preludes to the legalized and universally adopted conduct in civilized society.

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