

ACHIEVING BETTER INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH LEARNING TO INTERPRET THE CULTURAL VALUE OF PROVERBS IN A LANGUAGE AND THE WAY THEY REFLECT NATIONAL CHARACTER

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to look into the cultural value of English proverbs reflecting the development of national character due to influences of history, geography or social environment. The truth of a proverb is what every culture recognizes about human nature or the physical world. By studying the proverbs of any language we gain new insight into the culture of a nation and its unique perceptions of the outside world. The paper aims at outlining traits of national character through comparing the way certain social aspects are treated in proverbs in English and Bulgarian. The conclusion is that learning to interpret the value and moral of proverbs while studying a foreign language helps deeper understanding of national character and it inevitably leads to improved intercultural communication.

Keywords: *proverbs, cultural value, national character, intercultural communication*

JEL classification:

1. Introduction and presentation

Culture has been defined as an “integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability

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to transmit the above to succeeding generations” *Goode, Sockalingam et al. (2000)*. Language and culture are inextricably linked. In the field of foreign language teaching, one aspect that occasionally emerges as a topic of discussion is the relationship between knowledge of a foreign language, and knowledge of the culture from which that language "originated". It would appear that the question of "culture" is often relegated to the end of a language teaching plan. It seems as if it is always something of a bonus if the teacher manages to find time to introduce a bit of the culture of the foreign language into the classroom - some music perhaps, or a traditional dance, in the final lesson of the course.

“Every language carries the weight of a civilization. The decision to use a certain language means to support the existence of a given cultural matrix.” *Pennycook (1994)* This means that language is not only part of how we define culture, it also reflects culture. Thus, the culture associated with a language cannot be learned in a few lessons about celebrations, folk songs, or costumes of the area in which the language is spoken. It is a much broader concept that is inherently tied to many of the linguistic concepts taught in second language classes.

Linguists and anthropologists have long recognized that the forms and uses of a given language reflect the cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken. “Linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language”. *Krasner (1999)* Language learners need to be aware, for example, of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone. They should know that behaviour and intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own speech community may be perceived differently by members of the target language speech community. They understand that, if communication is to be successful, language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behavior.

“Through the study of other languages, students gain knowledge and understanding of the *cultures* that use that language; in fact, students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs.” *National Standards in FL Teaching Project (1996)*

An interesting and creative way of exploring culture through the use of language is by studying proverbs and sayings every language abounds in. “Discussion of common proverbs in the target language could focus on how

the proverbs are different from or similar to proverbs in the students' native language and how differences might underscore historical and cultural background." *Ciccarelli (1996)*. Using proverbs as a way of exploring culture also provides a way to analyze the stereotypes and misperceptions about a given nation, as well as a way for students to explore the values that are often represented in the proverbs of their native culture. Following this approach of studying the value of proverbs is an attempt to learn a language from an intercultural perspective.

According to *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* the meaning of the English word *proverb* derives from the Latin *pro* - for, and *verba*- words. We put those elements together to define a proverb as *a short, pithy saying in frequent and widespread use that expresses a basic truth or practical precept*. The English *proverb*, however, is not nearly as broad in meaning as the Hebrew word *mishal* that comes from a root meaning *rule*. To the Hebrews proverbs are rules to live by.

In Britain and Bulgaria proverbs are relatively complete semantic structures, popular, lively sayings when used as ingredients, but also as an independent unit of communication to express a complete thought. Often created by ordinary people, or translated from ancient written sources and borrowed from literary works, they express wise ideas and thoughts in concise and witty form. When we compare social variables in foreign languages to those in our native language we find such wise observations in folk sayings attributing characteristics of natural elements or animal traits to people and their behavior in social relations. We find striking similarities or subtle differences that really reflect the character of a nation.

Proverbs are passed down from generation to generation because they invite confirmation through individual observation and experience and have come to be recognized as being generally and consistently true. While repeated observation over an extended period can be an important part of the makeup of proverbs, they are also very much passed from person to person often without much observation included. Proverbs tend to be more readily accepted as trusted sayings, being passed down by elders, wise men and others of status in society and deal with principle and character rather than characteristics of a group of people. In a nation's language proverbs play a crucial role, as a product of culture proverbs can inspire and guide people's behaviour, teach experience, give moral education and perform other social functions.

Many proverbs are made of two proportional rhyming parts. Like 'Birds of a feather, flock together' or 'A friend in need is a friend indeed'. Proverbs, as a rule, have both literal and figurative meanings (morals) e.g. 'The early bird catches the worm' or 'Every cloud has a silver lining'. There can often be several different versions of proverbs with the same morals, e.g. 'An idle brain is the devil's workshop', 'Idle hands are the devil's tools', or 'No smoke without fire', 'No wind, no waves'.

However, the focus of this paper is more on the inherent wisdom of these moral statements rather than their purely linguistic characteristics. Examining the reflection of different aspects of culture in proverbs we could reach exceptionally truthful revelations of the character of a nation and make shrewd observations on human nature:

Let's consider the accepted stereotype of the British nationality. The British are often viewed as the most boring people in the world. They wear unimaginative formal clothes, eat tasteless food and have a peculiar sense of humor which is usually not understood by foreigners. They are also said to be conservative and reserved. Indeed, the British are not very open or spontaneous. They do not kiss or embrace when greeting someone so as not to allow familiarity. They always keep a certain distance and are not willing to manifest their feelings and emotions. 'Keeping a Stiff Upper Lip' The characteristic English pose involves keeping the head held high, the upper lip stiff and 'The best foot forward'. In this position, conversation is difficult and intimacy of any kind almost impossible. This in itself is a clue to the English character.

If there is one trait that absolutely singles out the English it is moderation, their shared dislike for anyone or anything that "goes too far". Going too far, as the English see it, covers displaying an excess of emotion, getting drunk or discussing money in public. To the English the proper way to behave in almost all situations is to display a languid indifference to almost everything. Even in affairs of the heart, it is considered unseemly to show one's feelings except behind closed doors. 'An ounce of discretion is worth a pound of wit', 'Let sleeping dogs lie' are popular proverb implying that one should preferably avoid discussing issues that are likely to create trouble.

Research about national character has emphasized the influence of educational practices on the development of adult personalities. In many European countries, the cheerful, easy-going, informal Americans are often jokingly referred to as being big children. One of the most efficient ways to

study the formation process of national character is to observe education systems and relations between generations, some of the key elements of personality development and the degree of socialization into various parts of community and most importantly the reward-sanction system which helps to orientate their behaviour. If we look at English proverbs to do with this aspect of culture we will find examples illustrating British attitude to raising children following very strict rules. 'Spare the rod and you'll spoil the child', 'Children should be seen and not heard', 'Speak softly and carry a heavy stick'.

Another factor that might have had a long-term influence on the culture, which would in turn influence skills and behaviour is the geographical situation and climate of a country. Some peoples are considered to be more work-oriented and more efficient when it comes to producing material goods. Climate has always been considered an environmental variable with strong influence on performance. The fact that Britain is an island country and enjoys a mild, favourable climate is directly reflected in the moral implications of proverbs. They are full of optimism, relentless perseverance and a down-to-earth attitude to the practical benefits of honest and reasonable labour relations. 'Time and tide wait for no man', 'After a storm comes a calm', 'Small rain lays great dust'. Being a sea-faring nation it has created numerous proverbs to do with the sea and life of sailors such as; 'Hoist sail when the wind is fair' meaning you should grab the favourable opportunity. 'Smooth sea never made a skilled mariner' meaning you learn through making mistakes or when you have to make a decision choosing one of two unfavourable options - 'You are caught between the devil and the deep sea'.

Proverbs also reflect the nation's history. The social and historical impact on the development of language is huge. Traces of all the influences of other languages can be seen in proverbs too. Following the Roman occupation of the British Isles for over 400 years Roman customs were gradually infiltrated into British culture, which can be illustrated in proverbs directly translated from Latin such as: 'Do in Rome as the Romans do', 'Rome was not built in a day', 'All roads lead to Rome', 'Fortune favors the brave'. There are also many wise sayings imported from other languages like the French 'Don't put the cart before the horse' or the Spanish 'A cold April the barn will fill'.

Britain takes pride in its history as an Imperial force, it has had tremendous impact on the culture of all its former colonies but the reverse process is also evident imprinted in numerous proverbs like 'A leopard cannot change its spots', 'A monkey in silk is a monkey no less'. Bulgarian proverbs

with similar associations are closely related to our environment and geographic latitude: 'The wolf changes his fur, not his nature.'

Comparing British to Bulgarian attitude to hard work we find the morals similar, however the variations and expressivity of images and associations are a reflection of the different cultural values. The Bulgarian people traditionally have a strong bond with the land, farmwork, the countryside as a whole. The Balkan Mountains having lent its name to the whole peninsula run through the whole length of the country. So the mountain as an element of nature, observed in folk songs and sayings has always been associated with strength, shelter or a challenge to overcome. The following proverbs provide vivid illustration: 'No man is an Island' GB vs. 'Two mountains cannot meet, but two men can', 'Many hands make light work' GB vs. 'If men unite, they could lift a mountain' BG, 'Gardens are not made by sitting in the shade' GB vs. 'The vineyard doesn't need praying, it needs digging' BG, 'Hard work breaks no bones' GB vs. 'Better work to no avail than sit around with idle hands' BG. In modern times hard work is looked at a different angle, though, and it is not associated with economic prosperity, so this leads to the Bulgarian proverb 'Hard work bends you back, it does not make you wealthy', which carries a negative connotation while the corresponding English version has a more positive twist: 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy' GB, stressing on the need to have fun in life from time to time.

Proverbs to do with the concept of money reveal a striking similarity in the practical wisdom of both cultures, the realities are different, however. The English 'A penny saved is a penny earned' creates the idea that thriftiness can be a virtue. The corresponding Bulgarian proverb implies that the effort to accumulate and enlarge wealth gets paid off. 'Drop by drop, it turns into a pool' BG, which actually has a similar version in English 'Many a little, makes a mickle'. How wise people are when it comes to money can be traced in the following: 'Penny wise, pound foolish' GB vs. 'He sells bran expensively but flour cheaply' BG, which probably is a direct translation from the French 'Avare au son et large à la farine.' Those two proverbs have the same moral, just that the British count money being a country of banks and the Bulgarians being an agricultural nation turn it into flour. Other proverbs to do with money have a direct counterpart, and yet you can trace the associations. Bad climate-

bad fate in 'A penny for a rainy day' GB vs. 'White banknotes for black days' BG, white and black standing for the worlds of good and bad (an opposition used in Bulgarian folk tales). The English 'He who pays the piper calls the tune' has a direct translation in Bulgarian, moreover the moral is the same. Obviously men in every nation behave alike be it in the pub, in politics, or social relations.

'Home, sweet home', 'There is no place like home' say the British. This adage best expresses an Englishman's traditional love of his home. Most homes have a garden in which the British spend a lot of time pottering around and looking after the lawn, which is a national pride. Many houses, especially the older ones, are surrounded by hedges, which symbolize the desire of the British to protect their privacy. 'My house is my castle' - this well-known proverb reminds a visitor that unless he is invited, he may expect to be treated as an intruder. Interesting is the comparison with the way Bulgarians treat close human relations, such as the attitude to their neighbours. 'Good fences make good neighbours' GB vs. 'Lock the door so as not to make your neighbor a thief' BG, both nations wisely treat private property as something to be respected. The concept of envy and constant effort to compete with your peers is illustrated in the following 'The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence' GB with the image of green grass always associated with plenty vs. 'Even vinegar is sweeter in your neighbour's home' BG, the Bulgarian sense of humour can be traced in the bitter-sweet connotation.

Another parallel that could be made between the two nations is the way animals are featured in proverbs. The English love their pets. Many people keep cats, dogs, budgies and other animals at home. There are more animal rights groups in Britain than anywhere else in the world. Paradoxically, the English still enjoy their national sport of hunting wild animals. Compare the following 'If you chase two rabbits you'll not catch either one' GB, with the Bulgarian 'He missed the tame and is now chasing the wild', both with the idea of being too ambitious might turn into a futile effort, if you don't make the right decision.

The dog, often being the best friend of its owner, is an important character in a substantial number of English proverbs: 'Dogs of the same street bark alike', 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks', 'Let sleeping dogs lie', 'Better the head of a dog than the tail of a lion'. Cats also feature very

often in English proverbs: ‘Put the cat among the pigeons’, ‘Let the cat out of the bag’, ‘Curiosity killed the cat’, ‘When the cat is away, the mice will play’. This routine appearance of cats in the language is no doubt a consequence of them being widely kept as mousers and pets in domestic houses.

By contrast, the Bulgarians prefer to attribute the qualities of such strong animals like the bear, the wolf or the donkey when generalizing human traits. The wolf is associated with interest, selfish personality and individuality, the bear stands for peril, or for a wise fellow. ‘The wolf has a strong neck because he does his job by himself’, ‘A wolf can change his fur, but not his temper’ If you are afraid of the bear, you don’t go to the woods’ speaks of the courage you need to face challenges, or ‘A hungry bear will not dance the horo’ (a traditional Bulgarian chain dance) is quite often used to illustrate the idea that no man would do any work without being rewarded.’

The British say that their best characteristics are culture, courtesy and consideration for the needs of others. It is true that they care for the needy, as there are a lot of charity organizations all over Britain. However most notable are some of the following proverbs. ‘Charity begins at home’ meaning that a person’s first duty is to help and care for his own family first. ‘Beggars should not be choosers’ speaks of the deprived status of poor people, ‘If wishes were horses, beggars would ride’, which is usually used to suggest that it is useless to wish; better results will be achieved through action.

Finally, the aspect in which both nations have almost identical perceptions is related to wise action and reasonable thinking reflected in proverbs mostly borrowed from ancient sources or the bible: ‘The early bird catches the worm’ GB – ‘An early bird early sings’ BG, ‘As you sow, so shall you reap’, directly translated in both languages, ‘Cut your coat according to your cloth’ GB – ‘Stretch your legs as far as you rug goes’ BG, ‘It is too late to shut the stable-door when the horse has bolted’ GB vs. ‘When the cart goes in the ditch – there are many ways to go’ BG.

Studying proverbs can help students understand the similarities and differences of other cultures compared to their own. They can do individual research work trying to explain the meaning of each saying and illustrate it with an example from everyday situations. Many will be curious to trace the origin of proverbs they have found most interesting, to learn how some of the widely-used sayings were specially coined to raise the nation’s morale in

times of crises or economic uplift. Such is the case with the optimistic ‘Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise’. The length and precision of this 18th century proverb leave little room for interpretation as to its meaning. Like many improving mottos, for example ‘a rolling stone gathers no moss’ and ‘a stitch in time saves nine’, they were all an encouragement to hard, diligent work. (www.phrases.org.uk/.../proverbs.html)

In the English language classroom proverbs can be used to illustrate various traits of human character or national characteristics. Students can classify them in semantic groups and search for the parallel versions in their own language. Teachers can design various quiz and word-play games. There certainly is a changing fashion in proverbs, some obsolete uses of language or old-fashioned lifestyles seem hard to be understood by today’s students. However, apart from the fable-loaded moral wisdom purveyed in each proverb, we can all enjoy the lively humour and purely linguistic artistic value in the exquisite way these ‘winged’ phrases were coined.

Proverbs are a quick way of communication and they reveal how a culture has developed over the centuries. The truth of a proverb is often the truth that every culture recognizes about human nature or the physical world. However, it is expressed in a unique way. By studying the proverbs in the language of a nation, we gain new insight into the way they use language to express ideas and highlight the concepts important in forming the national character. Gradually, we learn to understand and connect to that new culture whose language we find so fascinating and all that facilitates the process of intercultural interaction. In the modern world, where consumerism and new technologies have promoted the ‘Global Village’ concept, intercultural communication skills that help us understand our partners while still being able to preserve our national identity will be even more appreciated.

2. Appendix

When assigning individual or group tasks on studying the cultural value of proverbs in different languages teachers can use the comparative tables below to illustrate how several social concepts are treated by the different nations. The table can be extended or customized according to the practical exercises designed for purely language classes or classes in cross-culture studies and intercultural communication.

**Tables of comparison
Social variables in english and bulgarian proverbs**

Table 1: English proverbs

Education	Nature	Labour	Social relations	Animals in proverbs
Spare the rod and you'll spoil the child	Time and tide wait for no man.	A bad workman blames his tools	An Englishman's home is his castle	All cats are grey in the dark
Children should be seen and not heard	A rising tide lifts all boats	Haste makes waste	A friend to all is a friend to none	If you chase two rabbits you'll not catch either one
Speak softly and carry a heavy stick	Into every life a little rain must fall	Many hands make light work	Everybody's business is nobody's business	Dogs of the same street bark alike
Practice makes perfect	<u>After a storm comes a calm</u>	Hard work breaks no bones	No man is an island	Birds of a feather flock together
All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy	It never rains but it pours	An idle brain is the devil's workshop	A rolling stone gathers no moss	A bird in hand is worth two in a bush.
One father is more than 100 schoolmasters	Small rain lays great dust	Gardens are not made by sitting in the shade.	The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence	The early bird catches the worm.
Charity begins at home.	After rain comes fair weather.	A stitch in time saves nine	Good fences make good neighbours	You can't teach an old dog new tricks.
The child is the father of the man	Every cloud has a silver lining	A penny saved is a penny earned	All frills and no knickers.	Better the head of a dog than the tail of a lion
The pen is mightier than the sword	Lightning never strikes in the same place twice	Penny wise, pound foolish.	A problem shared is a problem halved.	A leopard cannot change its spots.
Youth is wasted on the young	Hoist sail when the wind is fair	A fool and his money are soon (easily) parted.	He who pays the piper calls the music	Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.
Too many cooks spoil the broth	It rains cats and dogs	A penny for a rainy day	<u>Beggars should not be choosers</u>	Never offer to teach fish to swim.

Knowledge in youth is wisdom in age	Smooth sea never made a skilled mariner?	There is no such thing as free lunch	Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me!	Let sleeping dogs lie
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Table 2. Bulgarian proverbs (author's translation)

Educator	Nature	Labour	Social relations	Animals in proverbs
Slap the small bum, or you'll have to slap a big one later	Time can heal your sorrow	A bad sailor blames the weeds A bad spaceship blames space	Tell me who your friends are and I'll tell you who you are	One swallow doesn't bring spring
If the King and a baby are at the table, everybody looks at the baby.	If the day is short, the year is long enough	Hasty work is the master's shame A hasty bitch gives birth to blind puppies	A man with no sins is not dear even to God	The wolf has a strong neck because he does his job by himself
A soft word can open doors	After the rain he puts on the hood	If men unite, they could lift a mountain	Partners' work is good enough to throw to the dogs	Lame donkeys are recognized in nine villages
Study, my child, not to work hard when you grow up!	Tiny like a drop in the whole sea	Hard work bends you back, it does not make you wealthy	Help yourself, so God might help you	Each frog should know its pool
Father's advice – son's good fortune	Soaked to the bone, he is not afraid of the rain	Make the lazy one work, he will give you some advice	A stone is heavy knowing its place	He has missed the tame and goes for the game
It costs your mum and dad (it is too dear)	The rain in May will help you pay your debts	The vineyard doesn't need prayer, but digging	Even vinegar is sweeter in your neighbour's home	They told the fox and he told his tail.
If there is a mistake, there is forgiveness too	Dawn is wiser than dusk	Measure three times before you cut once	Lock the door not to make your neighbour a thief	An early bird, early sings
Don't ask the elderly, ask those with experience	The sea is not knee-deep	He sells bran expensively but flour cheaply	A pair of revolvers on a naked belly	Heading to eat honey with the bears?
Study while you're young so you'll	The sun doesn't rise just for one	White money for black days	A sin confessed is half a sin	If you have a cow, you drink milk...

not be sorry at old age				
Study is not a healing potion to drink it and be a scholar overnight	To feel where the wind blows (to know your way around)	If you brain is weak, then your back should be strong	A poor man is a real clever devil	A wolf can change his fur, but not his temper
Too many midwives – a sickly child	Two sharp stones cannot grind corn	A single hand cannot wash itself even in the Danube river	Fiendship is a friendship, but you buy cheese with money	He hurries like a calf in front of his mom, the cow

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