



## ***17. “Proverbs Are Worth a Thousand Words”: The Global Spread of American Proverbs***

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My father spoke in proverbs, but for many years I did not notice.  
(Ben-Amos 1995, 13)

While the vast folkloristic scholarship of Dan Ben-Amos contains occasional references to proverbial matters, there also exists his magisterial essay “Meditation on a Russian Proverb in Israel” (1995) that I had the honor of including in *Proverbium*. Its unassuming title might well have kept paremiologists from appreciating its scholarly significance, and it is thus a special delight for me to use it as a prologue to my study of the global spread of proverbs. It begins with an account about how Dan learned the Russian proverb “Ne skazhi gop poka ne pereskochish” (Don’t say “hop” before you jumped and landed) from his father who had immigrated from Russia to Israel and who was keen to admonish his son by way of its wisdom not to “count his chickens before they are hatched,” as the proverb might be interpreted in English. This touching account should remind proverb scholars to give more attention to verbal family traditions, as Dennis Folly (1982) (who later changed his name to Sw. Anand Prahlad) has done for the use of proverbs in his African-American family.

As one would expect, Dan’s personal narrative is augmented by a detailed analysis of this proverb and its variants, explaining that it spread from Russia to the Baltic and Scandinavian countries, including Finland and also Germany (Kuusi 1995, 298; Wander 1867–1880, II, 774 and 1027–1028). I might add here that the proverb not surprisingly also spread from Russian to the Slavic languages of Croatian, Czech, Polish, and Slovakian (Düringsfeld

2004 [1866], 86; Strauss 1994, I, 594 and II, 950). Strangely, however, it does not appear to have entered the Romance languages with the exception that it was loan translated from the German into the French spoken in areas of Switzerland (Düringsfeld and Reinsberg-Düringsfeld 1871–1872, 120). More importantly for Dan’s acquaintance with the proverb is, of course, that it entered the Yiddish spoken in Eastern Europe with Jewish immigrants carrying it to Israel where it was also translated into Hebrew (Ben-Amos 1995, 14–15). Interestingly, the proverb did not find its way from German into British English, but it would be my conjecture that Jewish immigrants carried it to the United States where it was recorded in the middle of the twentieth century in the state of New York as “Don’t say ‘hop’ until you jumped over” (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1992, 308). It did, however, not gain any common currency, with the older equivalent “Do not halloo (shout) until you are out of the woods” from the eighteenth century being dominant (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1992, 538; Wilson 1970, 345). But be that as it may, the rest of Dan’s illuminating article is an insightful analysis of such paremiological issues as the definition, structure, and variants of proverbs with an emphasis on the question of proverbiality that most certainly encompasses traditionality as well as context, function, and semantics (see also Ben-Amos 1993, 213–14, 218). What appears to be just a small comment on a single proverb becomes in typical Ben-Amos fashion a precise and revealing discussion of the nature of proverbs.

But having added the fact that the Russian/Yiddish proverb has made it into American English provides me with the segue to how relatively modern American proverbs in turn are finding their way into other languages. While it has long been established that classical proverbs, Biblical proverbs, and medieval Latin proverbs were translated into European languages in particular but also beyond (Mieder 2004, 10–13), to wit Gyula Paczolay’s invaluable compendium of *European Proverbs in 55 Languages with Equivalentents in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese* (1997) and numerous other comparative proverb collections (Mieder 2011), the time has surely come to take a closer look at the distribution of proverbs in English as the lingua franca of the modern world. In fact, older British-American proverbs are loan translated into foreign languages by way of the incredible influence of the mass media and the internet in all of their occurrences (Mieder 2010b). A particularly telling example is the relatively new German appropriation of the English proverb “The early bird catches the worm” with its earliest reference from 1636. The German equivalent “Morgenstunde hat Gold im Munde” (The morning hour has gold in its mouth) from 1570, one of the most popular German proverbs, has been since about 1980 fighting for its survival.

The word for word translation of “The early bird catches the worm” into the German “Der frühe Vogel fängt den Wurm” has been adopted to such a degree in a matter of about four decades that it is in fact replacing the older German proverb. Young Germans are barely employing the older proverb any longer. This development is occurring as well outside of Germany with the “bird”-proverb conquering its world market in translations (Mieder 2015b).

Having assembled the first collection of 1250 historically documented authentic American proverbs albeit for German readers as *“Different Strokes for Different Folks”: 1250 authentisch amerikanische Sprichwörter* (Mieder 2015a), I examine here the spread of a few American proverbs more or less worldwide to interpret their relation to older borrowings of idioms (Mieder 2010a; Piirainen 2012–2016). Since these loan processes are relatively new, the translated proverbs for the most part have not yet appeared in the printed proverb collections of various national languages. I thus engaged my paremiological network around the world with a questionnaire asking them to check with native speakers and on the Internet to see whether certain American proverbs have gained some currency in their native languages. I am aware that much more diachronic and synchronic work is necessary, and it would be good to have the proverbs in actual contexts. To spur work in this area, I offer a brief report on where the trail led, and might lead in the future. I am also aware that the following lists are dominated by European languages, but I have tried to include languages from Asia and the Middle East with African languages still sorely missing. In any case, here are the twenty-nine languages represented thus far with the names of the kind informants:

- Ara: Arabic (Hilda Matta)
- Bul: Bulgarian (Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Roumyana Petrova)
- Chi: Chinese (Xu Jinlong, Wei Liu, Wenyuan Shao)
- Cro: Croatian (Melita Aleksa Varga)
- Cze: Czech (František Čermák)
- Dut: Dutch (Marinus van den Broek)
- Est: Estonian (Anneli Baran)
- Fin: Finnish (Liisa Granbom-Herranen, Outi Lauhakangas)
- Fre: French (Damien Villers)
- Ger: German (my responsibility)
- Gre: Greek (Minas Alexiadis, Aristeidis Doulaveras)
- Heb: Hebrew (Galit Hasan-Rokem)
- Hun: Hungarian (Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Anna T. Litovkina)
- Ind: Indonesian (Rebecca Fanany)
- Ita: Italian (Adriana Borra, Julia Sevilla Muñoz)

Jap:	Japanese (Yoko Mori, Masamizu Tokita, Masanobu Yamaguchi)
Lat:	Latvian (Anita Naciscione)
Lit:	Lithuanian (Dalia Zaikauskienė)
Mal:	Malay (Rebecca Fanany)
Per:	Persian (Ahmad Abrishami)
Pol:	Polish (Joanna Szerszunowicz)
Por:	Portuguese (Rui J.B. Soares)
Rom:	Romanian (Daniela Ionescu)
Rus:	Russian (Valerii Mokienko, Harry Walter)
Slk:	Slovakian (Peter Ďurčo)
Slv:	Slovenian (Vida Jesenšek)
Spa:	Spanish (Julia Sevilla Muñoz)
Swe:	Swedish (Anders Widbäck)
Tur:	Turkish (Öznur Tuzcu)

Beginning with three American proverbs from the nineteenth century, let me first turn to the proverb “Don’t swap horses in the middle of the stream” that most Americans associate with President Abraham Lincoln, who used it on June 9, 1864, in a short statement regarding his possible candidacy for a second presidential term (Mieder 2000, 34–35). In a prior investigation, I found that the proverb was already in circulation by 1834 (Mieder 2007), but it is nevertheless of interest that my informants have stated that Lincoln’s name usually remains attached to its loan translation and that it is most often cited in cases of attempted political reelections. This is also the case here in the United States, but here is this well-known proverb in its appearance in twelve languages:

*Don’t swap (switch) horses in mid-stream (the middle of the stream)* (13)

Bul:	Ne smenyay konete po sredata na rekata.
Chi:	Xing zhi zhong liu bu huan ma.
Est:	Poollel teel hobuseid ei vahetata.
Fre:	Il ne faut pas changer de cheval au milieu de la rivière.
Ger:	Mitten im Strom kann man die Pferde nicht umspannen.
Hun:	Ne cserélj lovat a víz sodrában.
Ind:	Jangan berganti kuda selagi nyebrang kali.
Ita:	Non cambiare i cavalli in mezzo alla corrente.
Jap:	Kawa no mannaka de uma wo norikaeruna.
Lit:	Perkėloje arklių niekas nekeičia.
Pol:	Nie zmienia się koni podczas przeprawy przez rzekę.
Pro:	Não troques de cavalo no meio da corrida.
Tur:	Irmaktan geçerken at değiştirilmez.

The earliest reference found thus far for the extremely popular American proverb “Good fences make good neighbors” also stems from 1834, gaining wide currency because of its use as a leitmotif in Robert Frost’s celebrated poem “Mending Wall” (1914) that delineates the ambivalent value of building fences or walls. It is a very appropriate metaphor to express the perplexities not only of human relations but also of modern issues with illegal immigration and the building of walls between countries (Mieder 2003). It causes no problem in translating, and due to its multiple applicability has gained considerable international dissemination:

*Good fences make good neighbors.* (10)

- Bul: Dobrite ogradi pravjat dobri sasedi.  
Cro: Dobre ograde čine dobre susjede.  
Fre: Les bonnes clôtures font les bons voisins.  
Ger: Gute Zäune machen gute Nachbarn.  
Hun: A jó szomszédság záloga a jó kerítés.  
Ita: I buoni recinti fanno buoni vicini.  
Lit: Gera tvora—geri kaimynai.  
Pol: Gdzie dobre płoty, tak dobrzy sąsiedzi.  
Por: Os bons muros fazem os bons vizinhos.  
Slk: Vysoké ploty robia dobrých susedov.

A third American proverb from 1870 also presents no translation problem, making it possible for the “medical” or at least nutritional piece of wisdom “An apple a day keeps the doctor away” to become established in other languages (Mieder 1993a, 162–68):

*An apple a day keeps the doctor away.* (19)

- Bul: Edna yabalka na den darzhi doktora dalech ot men.  
Chi: Ri shi yi ping guo, yi sheng yuan li wo.  
Cro: Jedna jabuka na dan tjera doktora iz kuće van.  
Est: Üks õun päevas hoiab arsti eemal.  
Fin: Omena päivässä pitää lääkärin loitolla.  
Fre: Une pomme par jour éloigne le médecin (pour toujours).  
Ger: Ein Apfel pro Tag hält den Arzt fern.  
Gre: Ena milo tin inera / ton giatro ton kani pera.  
Hun: Naponta egy alma a doktort távol tartja.  
Ita: Una mela al giorno toglie il medico di torno.  
Jap: Ichinichi ikko no ringo wa isha irazu.  
Per: Kordane yek sib dar ruz doctor ra dur negahmidard.

- Pol: Jedno jabłko dziennie trzyma lekarza z daleka.  
 Por: Uma maçã por dia afasta o medico.  
 Rus: Po iabloku v den'—i doktor ne nuzhen.  
 Slk: Jedno jablko denne udrží doktora d'aleko.  
 Slv: Eno jabolko na dan prežene zdravnika stran.  
 Swe: Ett äpple om dagen håller doktorn borta från magen.  
 Tur: Günde bir elma doktoru uzak tutar.

What has been shown for three somewhat older American proverbs thus far can also be observed for some more modern proverbs that originated in the United States and that are registered with detailed historical and contextualized materials in *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012; Mieder 2014a). While it has at times been claimed that the proverb “One picture is worth a thousand words” is of Chinese or Japanese origin, this is definitely not the case with the proverb actually having its start in 1911 in the American advertising magazine *Printers' Ink* (Mieder 1993a, 137–38). Realizing that American society is flooded by images of all sorts and with the rest of the world also being influenced by media ranging from printed illustrations to television, film, and the Internet, it can hardly be surprising that this proverb, once again being easily translated, has found the widest acceptance throughout the world of the proverbs discussed here as a most fitting expression for the visual dominance in modern life:

*One picture is worth a thousand words.* (26)

- Ara: El-şura ablağ min alf kelma.  
 Bul: Edna snimka kazva/govori poveche ot hilyadi dumi.  
 Chi: Yi fu hua ding yi qian ge ci.  
 Cro: Slika vrijedi tisuću riječi.  
 Est: Üks pilt ütleb rohkem kui tuhat sõna.  
 Fin: Yksi kuva kertoo enemmän kuin tuhat sanaa.  
 Fre: Une image vaut mille mots.  
 Ger: Ein Bild sagt mehr als tausend Worte.  
 Gre: Mia ikona axizi xilies lexis.  
 Heb: Tmuna ahath shava elef milim.  
 Hun: Egy kép többet mond ezer szónál.  
 Ind: Gambar lebih berarti dari seribu kata.  
 Ita: Un'immagine vale mille parole.  
 Jap: Ichimai no e wa ichimango ni ataisuru.  
 Lit: Vaizdas vertas tūkstančio žodžių.  
 Mal: Sebuah gambar senilai seribu kata.

- Per: Yek aks guyatar az hezar kelameh ast.  
Pol: Jeden obraz jest więcej wart niż tysiąc słów.  
Por: Uma imagem vale mais do que mil palavras.  
Rom: O imagine face mai mult decat o mie de cucinte.  
Rus: Odná kartina luchshe tysiachi slov.  
Slk: Obraz je viac ako tisíc slov.  
Slv: Slika pove več kot tisoč besed.  
Spa: Una imagen vale más que mil palabras.  
Swe: En bild är värd mer än tusen ord.  
Tur: Bir resim, bin kelimeye bedeldir.

In a study of the proverb “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence” dating from 1913, I called this insight “an American proverb of discontent” (Mieder 1993). The fact that grazing animals favor the fresh grass on the other side of a fence is a natural phenomenon that can be observed in most countries, and it is an easy step to transpose this image to the greed and dissatisfaction of human beings anywhere. It is then understandable that this natural metaphor could establish itself in other languages in a rather short amount of time. After all, this desire for better things is by no means just an American social problem:

*The grass on the other side of the fence always looks greener.* (19)

- Bul: Trevata vinagi e po-zelena ot drugata strana na ogradata.  
Chi: Li ba na tou (bian) de cao zong shi geng lu xie.  
Cro: Trava je zelenija s druge strane ograde.  
Dut: Het gras bij de buren is altijd groener.  
Est: Teisel pool aeda on muru rohelisem.  
Fin: Ruoho on aina vihreämpää aidan toisella puolella.  
Fre: L’herbe est toujours plus verte ailleurs.  
Ger: Das Gras auf der anderen Seite des Zaunes ist immer grüner.  
Heb: Ha-deshe shel hashakhen yaroq yoter.  
Ind: Rumput di sebelah pagar selalu kelihatan lebih hijau.  
Ita: L’erba è sempre più verde dall’altro lato della recinzione.  
Jap: Tonari no shibafu wa aoi.  
Lit: Žolė visada žalesnė anapus tvoros.  
Pol: Trawa jest zawsze bardziej zielona / Zieleńsza po drugiej stronie płotu.  
Por: A relva da minha vizinha é sempre mais verde que a minha.  
Slk: Tráva na druhej strane hory je zelenšia.  
Slv: Trava na drugi strani ograje je vedno bolj zelena.

Swe: Gräset är alltid grönnare på andra sidan.

Tur: Çimenler tepenin diğer tarafında her zaman daha yeşildir.

Regarding the next text, it might come as somewhat of a surprise to learn that the proverb “Think globally, act locally” had its origin by 1942, with its first reference found thus far indicating clearly that global awareness of various issues is not really that new: “Our vision of a better world is limited to our vision of better communities. We must think globally, but first act locally” (Doyle *et al.* 2012, 256). The proverb’s brevity, parallel structure, and lack of a metaphor together with its deep insight into global concerns makes it a perfect candidate to gain worldwide currency. Things are quite different concerning my favorite modern American proverb “Different strokes for different folks” that had its beginning among African Americans around 1945 (Doyle *et al.* 2012, 241–42). A translation might well lose the rhyme and parallel structure, but the main problem would be the rendering of “strokes” into another language. I have tried to translate it into German as “Andere Leute, andere Kniffe (Wege, Züge)” that would amount in English to “Other people, other tricks (ways, means)”, but I am not at all satisfied with this (Mieder 2015a, 217). This liberating American proverb has a non-metaphorical precursor in the classical “Suum quique” which in turn was translated into English as “To each his own” and into German as “Jedem das Seine.” The latter is, however, not acceptable in German any longer since it was part of the gate to the Buchenwald concentration camp. For the same reason Germans should refrain from using the proverb “Arbeit macht frei” (Work makes you free) that is most associated with the infamous gate at Auschwitz (Brückner 1998; Doerr 2000). All of this shows why I would like to render the proverb “Different strokes for different folks” into my native German. And yet, as I always tell my proverb students, the proverb does not give them absolute freedom to do whatever they wish. There is an ethical component to the proverb that can best be expressed by the proverbial golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7: 12; McKenzie 1996; Mieder 1989).

The problems mentioned in this short diversion does not exist with the uncomplicated translation of the “global/local”-proverb:

*Think globally, act locally.* (18)

Bul: Misli globalno, deystvay localno.

Chi: Quan qiu si wei, ben tu xing dong.

Cro: Misli globalno, djeluj lokalno.

Cze: Mysli globálně, jednej lokálně.



- Est: Mõtle globaalselt, tegutse lokaalselt.  
Fin: Ajattele globaalisti, toimi paikallisesti.  
Fre: Penser global, agir local.  
Ger: Global denken, lokal handeln.  
Hun: Gondolkodj globálisan, cselekedj lokálisan.  
Ind: Berpikir global, bertindak lokal.  
Ita: Pensa globale, agisci locale (Pensare globale, agire locale)  
Lit: Galvok globaliai—veik lolakiai!  
Pol: Myśl globalnie, działaj lokalnie.  
Por: Pensar global, agir local.  
Rus: Myslit’ global’no—deistvovat’ lokal’no.  
Slk: Mysli globálne, konaj lokálne.  
Slv: Misli globalno, deluj lokalno.  
Tur: Global düşün, lokal davran.

Matters are also quite simple with the international distribution of the modern proverb “It takes two to tango” that had its start with the song “Takes Two to Tango” (1952) by Al Hoffman and Dick Manning which became an international hit by way of the famous African-American singer Pearl Bailey. It is probably fair to assume that the new proverb is based on the old English proverb “It takes two to quarrel” from 1706, changing that regrettable insight into the positive statement that people can and should get along. The image of two partners dancing the intimate tango becomes a great metaphor for any two parties including political leaders:

*It takes two to tango.* (17)

- Bul: Za tantz sa nuzhni dvama.  
Cro: Za tango treba dvoje.  
Est: Tangoks on vaja kaht.  
Fin: Tangoon tarvitaan kaksi.  
Fre: Il faut être deux pour danser le tango.  
Ger: Zum Tango gehören zwei.  
Gre: Hriazonte dio gia to tango.  
Heb: Tsarikh shnayim le-tango.  
Hun: A tangóhoz két ember kell.  
Ita: Bisogna essere in due per ballare il tango.  
Lit: Tango šokoma dviese.  
Pol: Do tanga trzeba dwojga.  
Pro: São precisas duas pessoas para dançar o tango.  
Rus: Dlia tango nuzhny dvoe.

- Slk: Na tango treba dvoch.  
 Slv: Za tango sta potrebna dva.  
 Tur: Tango iki kişiyle yapilir.

Knowing that the truly modern American proverb “You have to kiss a lot of frogs (toads) to find a (your handsome) prince” had its beginning in 1976 and by 1984 had also become current in Germany as a loan translation (Doyle *et al.* 2012, 89), I decided to include it in my questionnaire as somewhat of a shot in the dark. I had traced the origin of the proverb in my article “‘You Have to Kiss a Lot of Frogs (Toads) Before You Meet Your Handsome Prince.’ From Fairy-Tale Motif to Modern Proverb” (Mieder 2014b), showing that it is not based on “The Frog King” fairy tale of the Brothers Grimm. As will be remembered, the folk narrative does not have a liberating kiss scene. Instead, the young princess throws the ugly frog against the wall whereupon it turns into a handsome prince. But there are the “Beauty and the Beast” narratives that do at times include the kiss, and the new proverb might allude to one of them. The proverb, being relatively long, exists in a number of variants, but in spite of this, it has rather quickly gained a considerable dissemination throughout Europe. Obviously people of various nationalities can relate to the metaphor that deals with the complex aspects of finding a suitable partner:

*You have to kiss a lot of frog (toads) to find a (your handsome) prince.* (13)

- Bul: Tryabva da tzelunesh mnogo zhabi, predi da/dokato otkriesh/namerish svoya printz.  
 Cze: Aby si našla prince, musí políbit spoustu žabáků.  
 Est: Pead suudlema palju konnasid, enne kui oma printsi leiad.  
 Fre: Il faut embrasser beaucoup de crapauds avant de trouver le (son) prince (charmant).  
 Ger: Man muß viele Frösche küssen, bevor man einen Prinzen findet.  
 Hun: Sok békát meg kell csókolnod, mielőtt megatalálod a herceged.  
 Ita: Bisogna baciare molti rospi prima di trovare il principe.  
 Lit: Dažnai turime pabučiuoti ne vieną varle, kol surandame savo Žavųjū prinčą.  
 Pol: Trzeba pocałować wiele żab, aby trafić na księcia / zanin trafi się na księcia.  
 Por: Tens de beijar muitos sapos para encontrares un principe.  
 Rus: Vam pridetsia potselovat' mnogo liagushek prezhde, chem vy naidete svoego prekrasnogo printsa.  
 Slv: Preden najdeš svojega princa, moraš poljubiti veliko žab.  
 Tur: Prensini bulmadan önce çok kurbağa öpmen gerekir.

What has taken decades if not centuries in former times, can be achieved today in short time spans. By way or oral and written communication that includes the mass media in all its forms together with the internet, proverbs can be disseminated regionally, nationally, and internationally. Older proverbs and also new proverbs can quickly gain widespread currency, and with English as the *lingua franca* of the world, British proverbs in general and American proverbs in particular will doubtlessly continue to be loan translated into other languages. My limited glance at eight American proverbs from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggests that international patterns vary greatly with loan translations from English. More detailed studies of individual proverbs in cultural contexts are definitely needed. The work so far shows that proverbs as “monumenta humana” (Kuusi 1957, 52) contain general wisdom that in many cases defy geographical or linguistic boundaries. As basic insights and valuable wisdom they illustrate that people are much more alike than different, and American proverbs will doubtlessly play an important role in this globalization process. As they take on their own lives in the form of loan translations, people will most likely not even be aware of their foreign origin, just as they today think of proverbs like “One hand washes the other,” “Man does not live by bread alone,” and “Strike while the iron is hot” as their own wisdom even though they started as classical, Biblical, and medieval Latin proverbs that were translated into many languages. Just as the widespread Russian proverb “Don’t say ‘hop’ before you jumped and landed” used by Dan Ben-Amos’ father, these globalized American proverbs contain humanistic values that tie the people of the world together into a common web of mutual respect and support.

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