

Proverbial occurrences and wordplay: a corpus investigation

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Proverbs, which are anonymous, self-contained, concise and often metaphorical statements of general truths and pieces of wisdom about the human condition, share with other categories the status of memorized sentences, which may be considered as the longest phraseologies in the lexicon. Phraseologies, especially long ones, frequently occur in discourse in non-canonical forms. Proverbs refer to shared cultural knowledge, but in the comprehension process the non-canonical occurrences must be connected with the memorized form for this reference to be possible, and so need to be recognizable.

The present study aims first at establishing an inventory of the occurrences, canonical or otherwise, of a select number of English proverbs. For this purpose, the COCA corpus of American English was searched using various substrings and combinations of words from the canonical forms. The occurrences were then classified on formal and functional criteria. Some of the numerous resulting non-canonical categories are simply elliptic forms or allusions that do not seem particularly playful, like "this was the last straw", while, at the other extreme, more elaborately modified occurrences appear, like "for the United States and Iran the 1979 Iranian revolution [...] has proved to be the geopolitical divorce from hell." The discussion will attempt to establish what objective characteristics distinguish those categories of proverbial occurrences that are perceived subjectively as wordplay from other non-canonical categories.

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