

Folk Sayings and Proverbs as a Core Communication Guide

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Folk sayings and proverbs have been underestimated as a core text even though they represent distilled wisdom of millennia of human experience and may provide a glimpse of features that are fundamental to humankind. Of course, interpreting and systematizing proverbs is extremely hard because of their metaphoric nature (each may have several interpretations), but this difficulty is also the beauty of the subject and the result is worth the effort.

This paper is based on the work of a Russian scholar Yuri Rozhdestvensky (1927-1999), whose books have become a basis of Culture Studies, General Language Studies and Rhetoric courses in several major universities of Russia. In his *Общая филология (General Language Studies)* (1996) Rozhdestvensky demonstrates that in preliterate times every member of a society is required to accept and heed a folklore text each time it is heard – this insures that the information sinks in. Thus folklore becomes the repository of culture. Rozhdestvensky then traces gradual accumulation of genres created by new communication technologies and demonstrates that with each addition old genres become enhanced, not cancelled out, by the new. This provides a theoretical framework for a simple idea that old folk sayings have coded human understanding of who we are, and that we have not changed – on the contrary, the old wisdom is proving to be timeless.

In Ch. 1 of *General Language Studies* Rozhdestvensky presents a study of Middle-Eastern and Russian folk sayings about speech and demonstrates that they provide a systematic communication guide applicable to interpersonal communication of modern day. A study of the folk sayings of other cultures, from Sweden to the Biblical Book of Proverbs, shows that the themes and rules are invariant, the prescriptions are universal.

General rules of dialogue

First think, then speak: *The fool's heart is in his tongue, the smart man's tongue is in his heart; He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin; A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself, but the heart of fools blurts out folly.*

First talk things through, then act: *Measure seven times before you cut once; The smart one acts with his tongue, the silly one acts with his hands; For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure.*

Remember that words are binding: *A word said is like a tree cut; While the word is in your mouth, it's yours, after it flies out it's someone else's; He who puts up security for another will surely suffer, but whoever refuses to strike hands in pledge is safe.*

Be nice in dialogue: *One good word is better than a thousand scolding ones; A tongue will not fall off if it says a few nice words; Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.*

What happens when the latter rule is broken? *As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is quarrelsome man to kindling strife; A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand.*

Rules for the listener

A large group of proverbs provides rules for the listener. First of all, listening should be preferred to other activities, presumably because it makes the opponent show his cards and thus allows a better chance to win the discussion: *Chew before you swallow, listen before you speak; God gave you one mouth and two ears, so listen twice and speak once; The learned one does not speak, the ignorant one does not let others speak.* Listening increases everyone's chances in conversation: *even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.*

The listener needs to follow a rigorous algorithm:

First, separate the interest of the speaker from the meaning of the statement, because: *The elephant dreams one thing, the driver dreams another; Some people kiss the baby but mean the nurse; The lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil.*

Then try to determine the speaker's agenda, i.e. correlate the statement with other statements by the same speaker made to other people at different times (*The man hides behind his words; if you want to know the man, listen to his speech*), and single out the common element: *The fox knows a hundred tales, all of them about a chicken; People talk about whatever, a spinster talks about a husband; A cat's dream is full of mice.*

Then ask if the speaker has been consistent of if *he eats the sheep with the wolf and weeps with the shepherd; when meets a man, talks like a man, when meets a devil talks like a devil; tells the rabbit to run and tells the hound to catch; operates like a two-handed saw: from one to the other.*

Separate the speaker's personality from the meaning of the statement: *Even the best teacher makes mistakes, even a fool says a smart word sometimes; Too smart is sometimes no different from stupid; if we reject the chaff we may lose the kernel.*

Next, check if the statement contains brainless imitation of others: *Another person's mind will not take you far; one dog barks for nothing, others pick up for real; if it's a fashion, be it even trachoma.* Does the speaker understand his or her own situation, or is he *on the throne with his thoughts, in the gutter with his butt?* In other words, *is he being kicked out of the village, and wants to be an alderman?*

Does the statement contain incompetent criticism or advice? *Anyone can criticize a house, not many can build one.*

Does the speaker understand true meaning of the events, or is she deluded: *It's o.k. that the house burned down - at least the bed-bugs are all dead; The river swiped away the whole mill, and he is asking where the trough is.*

Does the statement intentionally or unintentionally distort reality? *One's own intelligence and someone else's wealth are always exaggerated; Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give.*

Is the statement hypocritical? *Oh, no, I can't take it, so please put it in my pocket; "It's no good, it's no good!" says the buyer, then off he goes and boasts about his purchase; Not all who fold their hands are praying.*

How would the listener's reputation fare in association with the speaker? *A wicked man listens to evil lips, a liar pays attention to a malicious tongue; He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.*

Rules for the speaker

Another group of proverbs prescribes a rigorous algorithm for the speaker.

First, the speaker starts internal speech preparation process: *First cook your words then take them out of your mouth.*

Can the planned statement harm the speaker? *The more you dig in the garbage pile the more you stink; Cows are caught by their horns, people are caught by their tongues; My mouth is my shield; If you watch your tongue it will protect you, if you let it out of control it will betray you.*

Can the statement harm the listener? *Tongues kill like daggers, except that blood does not show; A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor but a man of understanding holds his tongue.*

Can the statement harm a third person? *Nothing is known in the house yet, but everyone outside already knows; Heaven is silent, people talk for it; Without wood a fire goes out, without gossip a quarrel dies down.*

Evaluate if the statement is appropriate to the situation: *Don't talk about a rope in the house of a person who was hanged; It is better to weep in the right place than to laugh in the wrong one.* Avoid situations when *he is talking about chickens and she is talking about ducks, or he is attacking a bear with a needle.*

Is the content trivial for the listener? *Don't teach the fish to swim; The egg is teaching the hen.*

Is the content excessive for the listener? *Words are pearls, but they lose value when there are too many; A rope is good when it's long, a speech is good when it's short.*

Has the same statement already been made in the same situation? *Even a good word is good once.*

Is the listener capable of understanding the content of the statement? *Don't cast pearls before the swine; Don't play the flute to charm the ear of a buffalo; Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult, whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse. Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you.*

Check if the logical reasoning of the statement is true and avoid starting *with a jar, ending with a sauna or starting with "be in good health", ending with "rest in peace"*.

Check if the content is true in relation to objective reality, so that people don't discover that the speaker *was born before his father and watched his grandfather's herd.*

Then evaluate rhetorical and stylistic form of the statement (*The letters are sloppy, but the meaning is neat; It's o.k. that the mouth is crooked if the words are straight*) and finally pronounce it.

Overall the process is summed up by *"If you are afraid to speak - don't say anything, if you have said something - don't be afraid"*.

Implications for teaching

Those students who are first generation to graduate from high school, let alone to go to college, often come from highly verbal oral backgrounds and feel intimidated by writing and print culture. When they discover that oral speech is not only valid, but also the oldest layer of human culture, they feel vindicated and empowered. Students (and teachers!) who have been placing highest value on the most recent communication genres and technologies are amazed how many "modern" insights have been made by homo sapiens millennia ago. In either case the study of proverbs as a core text is an enlightening and sobering experience, underscoring another old wisdom – *there is nothing new under the sun.*

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