What Goes Around Comes Around

The Circulation of Proverbs in Contemporary Life

Kimberly J. Lau, Peter I. Tokofsky, and Stephen D. Winick

Introduction

When it comes to proverb scholarship, we have all been taught by the same master, Wolfgang Mieder, without question one of the greatest paremiologists of all time. His body of work on proverbs is so extensive as to make it nearly impossible to say anything new, but we nonetheless dedicate our efforts in this collection to that very purpose as a way of thanking him for his brilliant leadership in the field of international proverb scholarship, his unsurpassed intellectual generosity, and his incredible humor, kindness, and spirit. We only hope that the essays in this volume do justice to the ever-increasing ways he has inspired us to think about proverbs in all their various contexts and manifestations. Thus, the title of our book, What Goes Around Comes Around, is meant first to honor Wolfgang Mieder, to convey our deep appreciation not only for his intellectual influence on our work but also for his wonderful presence in all of our lives.

The circulation of proverbs in our everyday lives reminds us that folklore is, indeed, a truly dynamic process. The vitality of proverbs—the constant emergence of new proverbs, together with their continual expression in new contexts—captures the ways in which folklore draws together our gravest concerns and our strongest commitments, our most precious values and our wisest perspectives, at times even our coarsest humor and our basest beliefs, thereby structuring the world around us. In this collection, we look specifically at proverbs as they go out into the world beyond their usual contexts (“what goes around”) as well as the
ways in which the world beyond traditional folklore comes into being through the creation and recontextualization of new proverbs (“what comes around”). The diverse perspectives and analyses in these essays raise the question of what, precisely, is meant by *proverb*. Thus, we begin by reviewing the long tradition of scholarship that endeavors to define this dynamic genre of folklore.

**Proverbs: What They Are and What They Do**

One of the great paradoxes of the proverb is that it is generally understood to epitomize simplicity and common sense, but it turns out to be both complex and hard to define. Although most people can list many examples of proverbs, few can accurately define what makes them proverbial. Scholars have discussed proverbs for hundreds of years, and hundreds of different definitions have been advanced, making it impossible to provide even a cursory summary of them. Instead, we offer a brief overview of some of the classic scholarship on proverbs, and then touch briefly on recent and more unconventional definitions.

Because proverbs are both linguistic items (possessing concrete elements of verbal and logical structure) and behaviors (possessing motives, strategies, and outcomes), it is imperative to discuss not only what they are in linguistic and structural senses but also what they do in social and behavioral ones. Proverbs are, first of all, messages passed between and among people. They are principally expressed in speech, though they can also be transmitted through writing, visual arts, and electronic communication. In their verbal form, they are brief and pithy, wise and witty, rhetorically forceful but discreetly indirect. They include old sayings like “A rolling stone gathers no moss,” as well as recent ones such as “You snooze, you lose.” They can be as short as two words (“Money talks”), or they can be thirty times as long (“For want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe, the horse was lost; for want of a horse, the rider was lost; for want of a rider, the message was lost; for want of a message, the battle was lost; for want of the battle, the war was lost; and all for the want of horseshoe nail”).

But aside from memorizing lists of proverbs, how can we tell if any given utterance can be considered a proverb? In some cultures and situations, we are lucky that proverbs are preceded by a framing device: “You know what they say”; “As someone once said”; or, in some locales, “We have a proverb for that.” In most
cases, though, we need to look for other clues. Sometimes pro-
verbial messages are metaphorical so that, for example, being
circumspect in signing a mortgage can be described as “look-
ing before you leap.” Sometimes proverbs are poetic, featuring
rhyme (“No pain, no gain”; “Early to bed and early to rise makes
a man healthy, wealthy, and wise”), near rhyme (“Honesty is the
best policy”; “A stitch in time saves nine”), regular meter (“There’s
many a slip twixt the cup and the lip”; “A bird in the hand is worth
two in the bush”), or alliteration (“Where there’s a will, there’s a
way”; “Love laughs at locksmiths”). Sometimes they use unusual
or archaic syntax (“He who hesitates is lost”; “Here today, gone
tomorrow”; “It’s an ill wind that blows nobody good”). Although
all of these attributes apply to many proverbs, none of them is
present in every one. How, then, is it possible to determine what
constitutes proverbiality?

This problem has been discussed since ancient times; phi-
losophers like Plato and Aristotle had much to say about prov-
verbs, though they were not always referring to the same kinds of
expressions we call proverbs today. For instance, Aristotle calls
the phrase “an Attic neighbor” a proverb, though today it would
be considered an idiom at best. Still, classical and medieval defi-
nitions of the proverb do include statements of intuitive and des cri-
tive power, such as Michael Apostolius of Byzantium’s dictum:

A proverb is a statement which conceals the clear in the unclear, or
which through concrete images indicates intellectual concepts, or
which makes clear the truth in furtive fashion. And further in this
fashion, a proverb is . . . a trite phrase constantly used in popular
speech . . . or a saying that has become thoroughly habitual in our
daily customs and life. (Apostolius, quoted in Whiting 1994, 65)

Two American scholars, writing in the 1930s, ushered in the
modern era of proverb study by summarizing and evaluating the
centuries of scholarship before them. The first, Archer Taylor,
rejected out of hand the possibility of creating a strict and orderly
definition in a famous passage from his book The Proverb:

The definition of the proverb is too difficult to repay the un-
dertaking; and should we fortunately combine within a single
definition all the essential elements and give each its proper empha-
sis, even then we would not have a touchstone. An incommunicable
quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial. . . . Let us be content with saying that a proverb is a saying current among the folk. At least so much of a definition is indisputable. . . . (Taylor 1985, 3)

Taylor’s influence on other definitions began almost immediately. Spurred to action by his colleague’s statement, B. J. Whiting published “The Nature of the Proverb” in 1932. Whiting’s article draws ideas about proverbs from classical authors, medieval writers, and a whole host of English men of letters. Out of these varied ingredients, Whiting constructs his own definition of the proverb, which stands today as an often-quoted and much-admired statement about the nature of proverbiality:

A proverb is an expression which, owing its birth to the people, testifies to its origin in form and phrase. It expresses an apparently fundamental truth—that is, a truism—in homely language, often adorned, however, with alliteration and rhyme. It is usually short, but need not be; it is usually true, but need not be. Some proverbs have both a literal and a figurative meaning. . . . A proverb must . . . bear the sign of antiquity, and, since such signs may be counterfeited by a clever literary man, it should be attested in different places at different times. (Whiting 1994, 80)

Both passages proceed from an intelligent recognition of the difficulties inherent in the nature of proverbs, but both also have their weaknesses. Taylor uses the vague term “saying” to describe the type of expression that may be a proverb but never explains what he means by it. The lack of a more precise description of proverbs boils Taylor’s definition down to one feature: “currency” among “the folk,” but even that is problematic; the concept of “the folk” is not elucidated, either. Currency, in Taylor’s sense, apparently means that the proverb is repeated frequently—though just how often it must be repeated is again undefined.

Whiting’s passage, while it is more thorough, can be reduced to a similar result: Where Taylor uses “saying,” Whiting calls the proverb an “expression,” but what exactly does he mean? Surely every utterance owes its birth to people; what does he mean by “the people”? All the concrete characteristics Whiting mentions (rhyme, alliteration, brevity, truth, and double meaning) are optional, not present in every proverb. Every point of this
definition is therefore either very vague or so specific it applies only to some proverbs. The only easily defined characteristic Whiting claims proverbs must unequivocally have is age, and the proper test of age, he tells us, is repetition.

Like Taylor, then, Whiting finds that belonging to a cultural canon of repeated sayings is the most essential quality defining proverbiality. While Taylor uses currency to express this idea, Whiting uses age. For both scholars, the test of this feature is the same: If the proverb can be found in multiple places, it is likely to have both age enough for Whiting and currency enough for Taylor. In this, Taylor and Whiting were following an old tradition in English-language scholarship; the first definition of the proverb in English seems to be that of Thomas More, who in 1528 called it simply “an old said saw” or a saying long said (Whiting 1994, 69).

Whiting also contributes one more crucial idea to our understanding of proverbs: The proverb, he tells us, “expresses an apparently fundamental truth.” This characteristic, combined with age and currency, is essentially the basis of many, if not most, proverb definitions. One of the world’s finest proverb scholars, Wolfgang Mieder, for example, follows his own teacher Stuart Gallacher (1959, 47) and adapts that scholar’s definition to “a Proverb is a concise statement of an apparent truth that has [had, or will have] some currency among the people” (Mieder 1993, 14). This then, at its basic level, is what the proverb is: a saying encapsulating a culturally recognized truth, repeated until it is recognized as traditional.

However, most scholars are not satisfied with this level of description, and many have tried to provide a more concrete or rigorous definition. In particular, citing logical and structural composition has become an important means of defining proverbs. This has resulted in a rich literature, but also a broad and disparate one, with such ideas as “analogic structure” (Crépeau 1975), “topic-comment structure” (Dundes 1981), and “quadripartite structure” (Milner 1969a), all advanced as possible definitional models. (For other structural possibilities, see Seitel 1981; Priebe 1971; Milner 1969b; Barley 1972; Permiakov 1979; Cram 1994; Grzybek 1994). Because proverbs exhibit such a variety of structures on the surface, and because there are many kinds of structures (e.g., syntactic, logical, conceptual, etc.), scholars must resort
to analyzing deep structures. These they derive themselves from the proverbs they analyze, interpreting them as they see fit. This leaves a lot of room for other scholars to disagree, and, predictably, their work has not led to widely accepted definitions.

Some scholars have approached the problem from a different angle, asking, “Is there some other way we recognize the traditional nature of the proverb, besides by having heard it before?” Shirley Arora (1994) found that among Spanish speakers poetic features such as rhyme were as important as a previous hearing in people’s decisions about what a proverb was. But poetic features, as already explained, are not present in every proverb, and thus it is difficult to define a proverb by their presence or absence.

Since proverbs cannot easily be defined by what they are, scholars have also tried to define them by what they do. Instead of analyzing the linguistic or logical structure, these students of the proverb analyze its rhetorical and social functions. This approach also has a long history. Hermogenes of Tarsus, a Sophistic rhetorician of the second century C.E., wrote that “a proverb is a summary saying, in a statement of general application, dissuading from something or persuading toward something, or showing what is the nature of each” (Hermogenes, quoted in Whiting 1994, 59). This essentially rhetorical definition still describes many instances of proverbial speech today, making it one of the earliest proverb definitions still recognizable in the modern world.

Hermogenes’ definition does not account for every proverbial utterance, however. Proverbs can persuade and dissuade, but they can also accomplish many other rhetorical goals: They can express deference or confidence or worry, instill fear or respect, or even mock the listener. Recognizing this, modern proverb scholars tend to follow philosopher of language Kenneth Burke, who describes proverbs as “strategies for dealing with situations” (Burke 1957, 296).

Burke points out that proverbs name and sum up certain recurrent social situations. For example, a man is taking a long time to make up his mind, and we think he needs to act more quickly. This is a commonly recurring situation, and we have many proverbs to deal with it. We can say, “He who hesitates is lost,” or “When opportunity knocks, answer the door,” or “Strike while the iron is hot,” or “Shit or get off the pot,” or even “You snooze, you lose.” All these send the same message: Act now.
As Burke’s theory suggests, proverbial speech is a complex process. First, we recognize a situation in our life as a special instance of a social situation or context that recurs. Then we realize that there is a proverb for that recurrent situation. We speak the proverb in an attempt to contribute to the conversation. Our goal is to recast the specific, unique situation as a version of the general, recurrent one, and if we are successful, our hearer will understand the implied advice. Burke’s approach to proverbs, first published in 1941, has been very influential and informs the work of such scholars as Abrahams (1968, 1972), Seitel (1981), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1981), Briggs (1994), Yankah (1989), Prahlad (1996), and Winick (1998, 2003), all of whom have contributed to our understanding of proverbs as rhetorical strategies and devices of communication.

Ideally, a successful proverb definition would answer both of our initial questions: What are proverbs (how they are internally constructed?), and what do they do (how do they communicate or make meaning?)? A few, like Crépeau’s definition of the proverb as “a sentence with analogic structure and normative function” (1975, 303), touch on both questions, but more often proverb definitions address only one of the two.

In one of the more interesting definitions that does discuss both what proverbs are and what they do, Richard P. Honeck (1997) describes proverbs as “a discourse deviant, relatively concrete, present (nonpast) tense statement that uses characteristic linguistic markers to arouse cognitive ideals that serve to categorize topics in order to make a pragmatic point about them” (p. 18). In pointing out that “characteristic linguistic markers” are part of the way proverbs function, Honeck makes such markers part of the definition. Thus, rhyme, meter, alliteration, metaphor, and other poetic features are re-incorporated into this modern proverb definition. At the same time, Honeck also includes the fact that a proverb categorizes topics and makes points about them, clearly a derivation of Burke’s theory.

Honeck’s point that the proverb “uses characteristic linguistic markers to arouse cognitive ideals” suggests an important aspect of “proverbial markers,” such as rhyme, alliteration, and meter. These are not only part of what proverbs are but also part of what they do; they are not only physical features of the proverb but also serve a rhetorical function.
Winick (1998, 2003) also combines poetic, structural, and functional approaches, together with entextualization theory and intertextual theories of genre, to define the proverb:

Proverbs are brief (sentence-length) entextualized utterances, which derive a sense of wisdom, wit and authority from explicit and intentional intertextual reference to a tradition of previous similar wisdom utterances. This intertextual reference may take many forms, including replication (i.e., repetition of the text from previous contexts), imitation (i.e., modeling a new utterance after a previous utterance), or the use of features (rhyme, alliteration, meter, ascription to the elders, etc.) associated with previous wisdom sayings. Finally, proverbs address recurrent social situations in a strategic way. (Winick 2003, 595)

Like Honeck’s definition, this one addresses what proverbs are (short utterances with features that act as intertextual references) and what they do (address social situations).

Where does this exploration get us? How do these disparate definitions relate to each other? Most scholars agree on certain features of the proverb: its brevity, its ability to sum up social situations and encapsulate principles held true and important by the culture that speaks them. Most also believe that sentences require another ingredient to make them proverbial. Taylor, Whiting, and Mieder call for age or currency. Some scholars instead look for characteristic structures (e.g., Dundes), linguistic markers (e.g., Honeck), or forms of intertextual reference (e.g., Winick).

What all of these scholars are trying to describe is the proverb’s relationship to tradition. For Mieder, Whiting, and Taylor, tradition is the process of handing down the item from person to person and perhaps generation to generation. For structuralists like Dundes, certain structures are traditionally associated with proverbs, while for scholars like Arora, Honeck, and Winick, certain poetic features are. These traditional associations are important to the transmission and reception of proverbs. Although their theories of tradition are quite different, these scholars would all agree on at least the following: Proverbs are short, traditional utterances that encapsulate cultural truths and sum up recurrent social situations. This, then, becomes our working definition of what proverbs are and what they do.
The circulation of proverbs and proverbial speech into and out of popular culture—to and from vernacular oral tradition—has reached a fevered pitch over the past decade. Indeed, the present age is one in which the proverb has reasserted itself as a basic form of expression (cf. Jolles 1930), rather than one in decline. Consider, for example, the following list of popular (proverbial) phrases:

- Where’s the beef?
- You’re off the island.
- Is that your final answer?
- It takes a village.
- No soup for you.
- You’re fired!
- If you build it, they will come.
- I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up.

This list contains items which originated in commercial media and then entered vernacular speech, as well as items imported into popular culture from living vernacular (both American and foreign), which then migrated back into active oral usage with new connotations and associations. The list includes phrases associated with popular movies, television broadcasts, advertisements, and best-selling books. Most notably, all of the items in the list appear so frequently in various discursive contexts that they are certainly part of American vernacular speech. The generation and circulation of such phrases have become so much a part of contemporary life that a current series of television commercials for Burger King depicts a group of employees debating the possibility of spontaneously coining a “catchphrase” to describe a new burger—a metaprovverbial advertisement, so to speak.

We do not offer this set of examples to ignite debate over the ultimate source of any individual phrase, nor do we wish to demonstrate a static borrowing among domains of creativity, nor even the priority of one medium over another in terms of significance or precedence. Rather, we wish to demonstrate that, although many of the phrases vary in their usage, they have all become traditional utterances that, for their speakers, encapsulate cultural truths and sum up recurrent social situations. Moreover, the dynamism of form and fluidity in the creative domains exhibited by these examples verify the ongoing negotiation of meaning to which
speakers subject popular phrases. We hope this list, and the following descriptions of how some of the items have been used, affirms the necessity of the contemporary paremiologist remaining attuned to the comings and goings of proverbial speech. We live in an era “after the great divide” (Huyssen 1986), when gaps between high and low—elite, popular, and folk—no longer define the flow of cultural and discursive practices. Indeed, as Winick (1998) argues in his dissertation, *The Proverb Process: Intertextuality and Proverbial Innovation in Popular Culture*, it is precisely in this intertextual gap between domains that we can frequently locate the meaning of proverbial utterances.

Several of the items in our list are most readily associated with the recent crop of “reality” television shows. “You’re off the island”—meaning “you’re out” or “you’re eliminated”—references *Survivor*, one of the first successes in this broadcast genre. The phrase quickly spread beyond the confines of the television set. For instance, one UCLA folklore student reports the phrase being used in his dorm room in spring 2000: Following the annoying intrusion by an unpopular hallmate into a private conversation among several students, one of the members in the group remarked, “I wish we could just kick his ass off the island and be done with him!” The folklore student goes on to comment that the speaker “used the phrase to mean that [the unpopular resident’s] presence was no longer desired within our group, and he should be barred from returning, just as if we were contestants on *Survivor*, voting him off the show.” Completing the circular flow, the comings and goings, the student adds that he has seen the phrase on the Web site www.espn.com, where a poll asked, “If these eight athletes were on Survivor Island, who would be the first to be kicked off the island?”

A contrasting example of the phrase appeared in an advertisement the United Way of Greater Los Angeles placed in the *Los Angeles Times* (21 August 2000). The copy inverts the saying in its headline, “None of These People Will Be Voted off the Island.” Below this banner, presumably intended to draw attention to the work of the United Way in an unexpected fashion, the full-page ad lists all donors who contributed a thousand dollars or more to the organization.

Two other recent catchphrases associated with television programs also rapidly found their way into other media as well.
What Goes Around

Comes Around

as popular usage. Both “Is that your final answer?” and “You’re fired!” existed in American vernacular prior to their fifteen minutes of fame in the mass media, but at this writing, most Americans associate them with Regis Philbin, host of the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, and Donald Trump, host of *The Apprentice*. The former is a quiz show where contestants attempt to answer a series of increasingly difficult multiple-choice questions leading up to the ultimate million-dollar question. To unnerve contestants, Philbin occasionally urges them to reconsider their tentative response: “Is that your final answer?” On 31 May 2000, a two-inch headline across the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* sports section declared, “That’s no final answer.” Immediately above this banner, readers could see that it referred to the score in game five of the western conference finals of the National Basketball Association: Portland 96, Lakers 88. Just as the United Way advertisement attracts attention by invoking a popular television show, this headline achieves much of its effect through its intertextual reference to Philbin’s phrase, even though the two phenomena have no apparent relationship.

On the recently completed first season of *The Apprentice*, a group of aspiring businesspeople competed to convince entrepreneur Donald Trump that he should hire them into a management position with a six-figure salary. Each week Trump put the contestants through various tasks designed to demonstrate their suitability for the prize, and at the end of the hour, he told one of them, “You’re fired!” While Trump did not, of course, invent this phrase, he did bring it to proverbial status, inspiring an upsurge in its use in various contexts beyond employment. Indeed, Trump is reportedly even attempting to obtain a trademark on it (ABC NewsOnline, 3 March 2004), providing perhaps the ultimate evidence of the phrase’s widespread circulation.

Another instance of proverbial speech circulating among media and the vernacular appears in a *Los Angeles Times* headline over a story about football players who endorsed Campbell’s Chunky Soup having bad luck (either injuries or slumps): “Curses . . . No Soup for You!” (*Los Angeles Times*, 8 December 2002). There was no need for this column even to mention the television show *Seinfeld*. By the time the story appeared, the phrase was circulating independently and with new, metaphorical meanings. Indeed, the humor of the newspaper story and the headline derived
from this circulation. What began as a literal admonishment by a chef to the character Elaine in the notorious “Soup Nazi” episode of *Seinfeld* became a locution for denial in popular speech. By re-connecting the phrase to a story about soup, the columnist uses its intertextual resonances to suggest humorously that football players should focus on the sport rather than endorsements. “Already, the Chunky Soup curse is part of NFL folklore,” the story reports as it ponders why the soup is “nowhere to be found on the league’s list of banned substances.”

As our final two examples, we take phrases associated with a movie and an advertisement. In *The Proverb Process*, Winick treats cinematic proverbial speech in depth, particularly phrases associated with *Forrest Gump*. One film not mentioned by Winick is *Field of Dreams*, starring Kevin Costner. In the film, Costner’s character gets the notion that he must construct a baseball field on his farmland. The message mysteriously reaches him in the words, “If you build it, they will come.” In the years since the release of the film, the phrase has become part of political discourse during the past two presidential administrations, as well as an element of other discursive domains. To cite some timely examples from the many available, it is ironic that during President Clinton’s second term of office, national security advisor Sandy Berger employed the phrase to declare that if then-Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein rebuilt the nuclear reactor destroyed in an Israel air strike, the U.S. would intervene: “If he rebuilds it, we will come.” Even though Saddam did not rebuild it, the United States still came.

Although Clinton’s vice president, Al Gore, did not take office as a result of the 2000 election, the phrase still found its way into the next administration. In 2001, political cartoonist Margulies depicted the current president (identified by a W on his baseball cap) surrounded by an array of incoming missiles. A grinning Bush reads from a document entitled “Missile Defense” and declares, “Build it and they WON’T come. . . .” Margulies reveals his commentary in the caption: “Shield of Dreams.”

The baseball-field metaphor rose to the level of national political debates, but commentators also found it useful to describe local controversies. For instance, a radio commentator in Los Angeles summed up his opinion about expanding the freeway interchange between the San Diego and Ventura Freeways...
The phrase lent itself to a Los Angeles debate over a different mode of transportation as well. In a 26 May 2002 article reviewing the merits of utilizing smaller regional airports (a potential alternative to expansion of Los Angeles International Airport), Los Angeles Times travel columnist Jane Engle summarized, "If you build it, they won’t come. If they come, you had better build it.”

A less lofty example of the circulation of proverbial speech comes from a low-budget television commercial for an emergency communication device. The advertisement promotes the necessity of the device by depicting an elderly woman who has fallen outside her home. She retrieves the device and tells the helpful voice which responds that “I've fallen, and I can’t get up.” Like the other examples, this one has experienced a healthy second life in the vernacular. The graphic image of a floundering body has made the phrase attractive to sportswriters:

“The St. Louis Rams have fallen, and there’s no telling when they’ll get up” (Los Angeles Times, 24 September 2002).
“Twins Are Falling and Can’t Get Up” (Los Angeles Times, 16 August 2001).
“I've Fallen—and I Can’t Get Up” (caption on a photo of a speed skater whooshing by a fallen opponent in the Canadian Olympic trials; Los Angeles Times, 12 December 2001).

In a delightful proverbial twist, this last example comes from a regular feature in the Times sports section entitled “1,000 Words’ Worth,” which features unusual and compelling sports photos. Ironically, the photos frequently require substantial captions to clarify what they depict to readers.

A number of folklore students have also documented this phrase in contexts unrelated to sports. One describes throwing her pencil to the ground in frustration during a calculus study group and telling her peers that she has fallen and can’t get up, meaning she cannot solve the practice problems. In another instance, which suggests the wide appeal of the phrase, a male student reported to class that he employed it in a sexual situation. Notably, this vocal student went on to become a professional football player and made a name for himself by not falling down when catching a desperation “fourth and twenty-six” pass from Donovan McNabb in a recent NFL playoff game.
This somewhat haphazard set of examples clearly indicates the comings and goings of proverbial speech in our contemporary discourse. These phrases circulate in diverse domains of popular media, folk speech, and political debate. They appear in various incarnations, shifting, as proverbs do, to account for the immediate context but retaining textual and contextual features, which endow them with proverbiality. Reporters, headline writers, and admen can assume a wide familiarity with these popular phrases among their readers, and politicians, comedians, commentators, and ordinary conversationalists can evoke the intertextual relationships contained in these phrases to enhance communication in culturally resonant ways.

What Goes Around Comes Around

The following essays explore the wide-ranging comings and goings of proverbs in(to) and out of contemporary culture through close historical, literary, and sociocultural analyses of diverse proverbs, proverb (re)usage, and proverbial speech. We open our collection with Charles Doyle’s “‘In Aqua Scribere’: The Evolution of a Current Proverb.” Doyle reminds us that proverbs come into literary expression with the same frequency that literary quotations go into proverbial use. While many English speakers probably identify the phrase “written in/on water” with the poet John Keats, Doyle finds references to the phrase in early Greek and Latin writings and offers strong evidence to suggest that these references indicate fairly wide vernacular use. Thus, “written in/on water” moves from ancient proverb into classic literature, then from classic literature into nineteenth-century literary circles (though through much more vernacular expression in Keats’s spoken desire that his epitaph read, “Here lies one whose name was writ in water”), and eventually from literary circles back into vernacular expression as proverbial speech.

The process of evolving into proverbs occurs in numerous contexts and often represents the particular interests and motivations, the needs and desires, the passions and anxieties of the people whose cultural practices give rise to such innovative linguistic expressions. In their essay, “‘From One Act of Charity, the World Is Saved’: Creative Selection of Proverbs in Sephardic Narrative,” Isaac Jack Lévy and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt demonstrate the ways in which Sephardic storytellers employ
traditional proverbs as a rhetorically powerful means of ordering their narrative performances. Lévy and Lévy Zumwalt detail the strategic choice of proverbs in structuring and commenting on traditional narratives, thereby allowing the storyteller to render indisputable any potential ambiguity in the narrative’s meaning in the immediate context of its telling. In these cases, then, the intended meaning of the narratives evolves into proverbial expression through the use of proverbs in titles, introductions, and conclusions and closes the possibility of alternative meanings through the proverb’s power to signify uncontested cultural wisdom.

Shirley Arora’s “Baseball as (Pan)America: A Sampling of Baseball-Related Metaphors in Spanish” and Stephen Winick’s “You Can’t Kill Shit: Occupational Proverb and Metaphorical System among Young Medical Professionals” both offer excellent examples of how specific cultural (and subcultural) drives find their way into proverbial expression over time. Arora details the innumerable ways in which common baseball referents and images have given rise to figurative proverbs and proverbial speech in a diversity of Latin American countries. Here, then, baseball achieves proverbial expression as a sign of the widespread passion for the sport, and new proverbs and folk expressions drawing on its jargon and imagery capture baseball’s centrality in Latin American cultures, not only as a sport but as a way of thinking and a way of making meaning.

Similarly, Winick focuses on the medical proverb, “You can’t kill shit,” the related acronym SHPOS (subhuman piece of shit), and other medical folk speech to show how the demands of medical culture, particularly the stress and anxiety that young doctors experience as they realize the impossibility of controlling all aspects of the hospital environment, find expression through occupational proverbs and group folk speech. Winick’s extensive analysis of both of these proverbial expressions, as well as the previous scholarship on medical subcultures, foregrounds the boundaries of medical folk expressions like “You can’t kill shit” within the immediate contexts of their use while simultaneously drawing attention to their flexibility within the unarticulated (perhaps subconscious) logical system of the young doctors.

While these essays reveal the ways cultural meanings, practices, beliefs and worldviews evolve into expressive existence
Comes Around

What Goes Around through (often new) proverbs and proverbial speech, and the motivations driving the use of these expressions, the remaining essays examine the movement of proverbs into new contexts. In his essay, “‘Cheaters Never Prosper’ and Other Lies Adults Tell Kids: Proverbs and the Culture Wars over Character,” Jay Mechling follows proverbs as they move from traditional, vernacular contexts into the rarified realms of “cultural literacy” (a concept fully entrenched in an elitist view of what constitutes education) and neoconservative attempts to help children build character. Here, proverbs are no longer folk expressions of cultural wisdom invoked in specific performative contexts which create their meanings, but rather become concrete adages expressing unchanging and unquestioned “truths” and values. As such, hundreds of proverbs find themselves on lists children are encouraged to memorize as a character-building exercise devoid of the classical rhetorical skill of situating and manipulating proverbial speech.

In addition to pointing out the absurdity of considering proverbs out of their everyday, oral contexts, Mechling emphasizes the fact that proverbs are rarely used by children in their own folklore (though they do, sometimes, parody them) and, consequently, are likely to be ineffective as character-building devices. These new uses to which proverbs are put, however, do tell us something about the adults who continually enlist tradition in their attempts to address the supposed crisis in character among children, especially boys, and Mechling does a superb job of laying bare their rhetoric as well as their neoconservative motivations.

Just as proverbs are put to work by neoconservative traditionalists, so, too, are they mobilized in advertising campaigns for an extensive range of products, services, lifestyles, and ultimately to promote American hegemonic ideals, as Anand Prahlad demonstrates in his essay, “The Proverb and Fetishism in American Advertisements.” Prahlad does far more than identify proverbs and their strategic placement in magazine advertisements; he also suggests that the deep entanglements of proverb and advertisement produce an altogether new cultural form, what he calls the “ad/altar,” at the heart of which is the altered proverb itself. Through close readings of several proverb ad/altars, Prahlad begins to build a new theory of the fetishized proverb in American advertising (itself something of a fetish), a theory that emerges
from the proverb’s movement (and incorporation) into new contexts and cultural configurations.

At the same time, however, traditional proverbs in traditional contexts also find innovative ends. Jan Brunvand’s essay, “The Early Bird Is Worth Two in the Bush: Captain Jack Aubrey’s Fractured Proverbs,” is an incredible survey of the intentionally fractured proverbs invented by novelist Patrick O’Brien in creating the quirky, though entirely believable, character of Captain Jack Aubrey, hero of O’Brien’s vastly popular series of maritime novels set during the Napoleonic War. In keeping with the spirit of much of Mieder’s own work, Brunvand has combed O’Brien’s full series to compile a list of fractured proverbs and misspoken proverbial expressions attributed to Aubrey and some of the other characters in the series who either intentionally or accidentally offer versions of fractured proverbs, Wellerisms, or clever puns and witticisms. Most impressive, perhaps, is Brunvand’s ability not only to recognize various proverbs and proverbial expressions but also to trace them to their origins and offer correct versions.

We close our collection of essays on proverbial circulation with Alan Dundes’s “As the Crow Flies: A Straightforward Study of Lineal Worldview in American Folk Speech.” Dundes assembles a seemingly infinite number of proverbs and examples of proverbial speech, folk metaphors, and traditional expressions that detail the American cultural preference for the linear over the circular. As Dundes demonstrates, a vast range of proverbs and folk expressions come into existence—into articulation—as reflections of an American cultural ideology and worldview rooted in the lineal. While our own emphasis on circularity both in proverb scholarship and circulation may seem to fly in the face of the straight-minded crow in Dundes’s title, we should also reiterate that the proverb in our title is also very frequently used to comment negatively on another’s behavior (as in “He’ll get his”) and, thus, is fully consistent with Dundes’s masterful delination of a lineal worldview in American folk speech. In his essay, Dundes shows that at the broadest level, we arrive at proverbs and proverbial speech from the cultural expanse that gives meaning not only to specific performative utterances but to our entire mental map of the world around us.

As these essays collectively argue so persuasively, proverbs may come, and proverbs may go, but the roles they play and the tendencies they reveal about the people who employ them are
hardly insignificant. Just as we are certain that proverb usage will continue to engage and fascinate, we know, too, that the name Wolfgang Mieder shall never be writ in water.

References


