

## **Weather Proverbs: Outstanding Sociocultural Traits**

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**Despise not the discourse of the wise, but acquaint thyself with their proverbs ; for of them thou shalt learn instruction.**

**Apocrypha :*Ecclesiasticus*, viii,8**

### **Abstract**

Perhaps, the most outstanding traits that weather proverbs exhibit are those that are directly coupled with all relevant factors in the environment , social conventions and shared experience of the participants. Those socially distinctive characteristics of the setting essentially correlate with the cluster of artefacts, rules of behaviour and cast of characters in the external world. The accumulated factors, in return, instinctively affect the cognitive and sociable ability of the user of such sayings. Hence, this paper is an attempt towards revealing those salient sociocultural features identifying a certain type of sayings as proverbs of weather.

### **Introduction**

The paper aims at introducing the most crucial sociocultural features by which weather proverbs , as a particular group of the whole stock of the proverbial sayings

, can be identified and distinguished from other types of proverbial utterances in particular, and from other folk forms, such as , riddles fables and parables, in general. The ultimate goal is to provide a satisfying social and cultural identification and description of this particular group of folk sayings.

But, before embarking on the presentation of the properties of weather proverbs, an overall view of proverbs in general is worth-mentioning, since the former originally emanates from the latter that they show part-whole relation.

Proverbs , as folk sayings , reflect and contribute to patterns in people's lives and thus can establish a solid basis for community affinity , (sometimes they give a certain group of society its linguistic identity . ) They are general statements employed for setting up standards in ethical and moral behaviour, giving guidance for individuals' lives in a society, since " *all good sense of the world runs into proverbs .*" They constitute an integral part of formulaic transmission of traditional culture . They characteristically utilize the ordinary manner of speech achieving several social functions ,ie, they are cultural tools for thought and persuasion , conveying moral messages , for " *nothing tells us more of the spirit of a people than its proverbs.* " They were first invented by individuals and applied by them to their particular situations ,due to the fact that the interesting and sought meaning is the one that is often derived from the application of a given proverb to a certain appropriate

situation , not its literal meaning. ( As a well known fact , the same proverb can be exploited on different occasions to express different meanings.)

(For a wider view on the general characteristics of proverbs, see Taylor,1996) Every culture in the world tries to predict atmospheric conditions through its folk sayings which represent a condensation of local stories , tales , fables and myths pertinent to topics such as how and why the sun , moon or stars rise (*When the sun shines while raining , it will rain the same time again tomorrow. & When stars shine clear and bright, we will have a very cold night.*), how and why the wind blows- lightly or forcibly- (*The winds of the daytime wrestle and fight ,longer and stronger than those of the night.*)why we have rain,snow,dew or frost ( *A ring around the sun or moon means rain or snow coming soon . & Clear moon, frost soon*  ),why the sky changes ( *Three days rain will empty any sky.*  ) or how and why the clouds appear ( *When clouds appear like rocks and towers, the Earth's refreshed by frequent showers.*)

Weather matters have greatly attracted people's attention since the beginning of human knowledge and experience of the world around , and this has been documented through history. Sayings concerning weather(ie,proverbs) can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, Biblical sayings and familiar sayings and quotations of the most famous authors, such as Shakespeare , Bacon and Pliny. Here are a few proverbs taken from prominent authors:

1. Fair weather cometh out of the north. (*Job*,xxxvii:22)
2. He that observeth the wind shall not sow;  
and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.(*Ecclesiastes*,xi:14)
3. Take care not to sow in a north or to graft and inoculate when  
the wind is in the south. (*Pliny*)
4. The north wind is best for sowing seed, the south for grafting.  
(*Worldedge*,1669) (Spencer, 2006)

The overarching question here is how weather proverbs come into life. It has been thought (Phillips,1997) that:

Farmers watched cloud movement and the sky colour to know to sow and reap.

Mariners noted wind shifts and watched wave motions for signs of change. Hunters studied the behaviour of insects and animals and , through repeated observations, learned to foretell the weather. Shepherds and sailors...showed a keen sense of observation and quickly connected changes in nature with rhythms or patterns of weather. They recalled what they saw in form of the short sayings, often embodied in rhyme for ease of memory.

These folk sayings became part of culture . They were repeated by people and became familiar sayings , and thus were transmitted from generation to generation in everyday social interactions . The reason behind the fact that these sayings have acquired currency(familiarity or frequency of occurrence at a certain period of time)and popularity among people relates to the

potentiality of these proverbs to figure out apparent truths and point to observations gathered from everyday events and experiences about nature , life and sometimes behaviour of human beings. A weather saying cannot be identified as a proverb unless it has inherited some currency for a certain period of time.

In order to distinguish them from other types of folk sayings in general and proverbial utterances in particular, there must be certain main characteristics with which weather proverbs are identified as a special group of proverbial utterances. The upcoming section is devoted to the presentation of the most common features of weather proverbs.

### **Main Characteristics**

Certain prominent social and cultural features of weather proverbs will be singled out in the following sections to provide the basic means of identifying and describing a specific group of rhymed utterances as weather proverbs . The unique combination of these attributes found in such sayings distinguishes them from other types of folk sayings.

### **Locality**

Proverbs associated with changes in the atmospheric conditions , the appearance of the sky , the character and movements of the clouds , the direction and force of the winds are all determined by the principle of locality.

The importance of locality can be shown in the following weather proverb:

**5. When the wind is in the west , the weather is always best.**

Spencer (2006) explains that it is often believed that the west wind makes the weather finer and this may be due to the fact that on the " Pacific Coast the moisture-bearing winds blow in from the west and southwest , while in the east they come from over the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic." Moreover, rain and snow are frequent companions of the west and southwest wind on the slopes of the Cascade Mountains and the Sierras.

In contrast , the south winds coming from the Gulf of Mexico are less preferable and rather unwishful since they are the wettest , stormiest and least pleasant of winds , particularly in the states bordering the Gulf of Mexico. This is clearly revealed in the complaint felt in the proverb:

**6. When the wind's in the south , the rain's in its mouth.**

But, this is not always the case that the west wind indicates pleasantness of weather and the south the unpleasantness of weather, for there are a lot of counter-examples in which this idea does not work. Consider:

**7. The south wind warms the aged.**

**8. The south wind is the father of the poor. (Spencer : *ibid.*)**

The universal idea of atmospheric conditions pertaining to locality is also emphasized in the Arabic proverbs concerning the weather . As for winds , the traditional Arabs called:

الجنوبية (والد رحيم) والشمالية ( ) والشمالية الشرقية ( )

**The southern *a merciful father*, the northern *the destroyer* and the northern- east *al-Nesri* (for bringing provision).**

They described the southern wind as the merciful father because it is warm

and accompanied by rain and the northern wind as the exterminator since it eliminates the clouds and they called the northern-east wind *al-Nesri* , for it is accompanied by clouds and rain ( though it is the coldest wind in Najd ) . The most striking point here is that the direction , force and character of the winds are determined by the locality of Najd ( in the Saudi Arabia ).

Interestingly, the essentiality of locality has not been disregarded in the Biblical sayings and famous authors' texts , as shown in the following

examples:

**9. Out of the south cometh the whirlwind and cold out of the north. (*Job, xxxvii : 9*)**

**10. If feet swell , the change will be the south , and the same thing is a sign of hurricane.(*Shakespeare*)**

Ultimately , the trouble with weather proverbs is that they are not always all right for all times and in all places . The following proverbs could not prove to

be true or be inapplicable in the East:

**11. A western wind carrieth water in his hand.**

**12. When the east wind toucheth it, it shall wither.**

(Spencer,*ibid.*)

### **Value**

For any proverb to survive , it must contain some social value . This value lies in the sort of advice and moral lessons that this proverb yields. Basically, weather proverbs are created to offer practical advice based on personal experience and social observations of the atmospheric aspects of life . They often serve didactic function in a society, that is , they serve as a general code for establishing living standards and sometimes morals or give righteous guidance for the individuals in a social community (of fishermen, farmers, hunters , sailors...etc) . The didactic principle in the following proverb is " a condensation of experience or a concisely formulated rule"(Taylor,1996):

**13. Rain before seven, fine before eleven.**

Weather proverbs are mostly folk sayings which reflect the importance of human affairs ( particularly those concerning weather conditions ) . They demonstrate very obviously man's hopeful idea that experience is a good teacher. Furthermore , they appear to guide community and individual behaviour and standards for dealing with situations that might come up. They are often manipulated in people's daily issues to offer opinion , comment, advice , warning , excuse...etc. with regard to good or



bad atmospheric conditions. The following weather proverbs provide general social standards ascribed to people's daily affairs:

**14. When the wind is in the east , 'tis neither good for man or beast.**

**15. A year of snow, a year of plenty.**

However, some proverbs are used to serve didactic function and to express moral lessons particularly when exploited in contexts other than those related to weather conditions . That is , these proverbs using weather lexical items are utilized to give meaning to issues related not only to weather but also to morals, life experience and skills for daily living. The upcoming proverbs seem, though containing weather vocabulary , to be used to explain or communicate social values unrelated to weather affairs in the communities in which they are utilized:

**16. Drought and heat consume the snow waters. ( *Job, xxiv:19* )**

**17. Ask rain from the Lord in the season of the spring rain. ( *Zechariah, x:1* )**

#### **Nature clues**

It appears that nature has provided us with many clues that can be utilized to help interpret the relationships existing between weather conditions and natural existents. Nearly most animals, some insects and plants, and other non-living things are susceptible to environmental ( atmospheric ) changes that are not usually noticed or detected by ordinary ( not concerned or

specialists) people . Weather proverbs are generally found to reveal very interesting relationships between the actions of such creatures and the changes of weather conditions. They may sense changes in the weather and thus be affected by the climatic ambiance . Most probably , fluctuation in the atmospheric conditions may be interpreted in terms of their peculiar behaviour and weird movements.

The ways birds fly or emit their calls are , to some extent , associated with weather oscillation . Birds in general , buzzards , seagulls and swallows in particular flying low would be more frequent with dropping pressure , rain or storm

**18. Birds on a telephone wire indicate the coming of rain. 19. Buzzards flying high indicate fair weather. 20. Seagull, seagull, sit on the sand. It's never good weather while you're on the land. When seagulls fly to land, a storm is at hand. 21. Swallows are flying low; It will rain soon.**

*(cf. Rooks are flying high in the sky; It will rain soon)*

Crows flying , individually or chorally , may also be attributed to the ebb and flow of the air pressure:

**22. One crow flying alone is a sign of foul weather. But if crows fly in pairs, expect fine weather.**

The types ( and sometimes the intensity ) of cries geese , owls , roosters , and Redbirds and Bluebirds release may give an indication of a change in weather state:

**23. When the goose honks high, fair weather is nigh. 24. If an owl hoots on the east side of a mountain, it denotes bad weather. 25. If a rooster goes crowing to bed, he'll certainly rise with a watery head.**

**26. Redbirds or Bluebirds chatter when it's going to rain.**

Severe weather caused by falling pressure, a storm or rain may affect cows and make them less willing to go pasture ( they usually prefer to lie down) and dogs to have vegetarian ,but not carnivorous, food :

**27. Before a storm , cows will lie down and refuse to go out to pasture. 28. Seeing cows sitting down in the field means it will rain. 29. Expect rain and maybe severe weather when dogs eat grass.** Fish, porpoises , whales , pigs and squirrels may be more willing to feed or gather food before a hard winter or a storm so that they can seek shelter:

**30. When the wind blows from the west, fish bites best. When it blows from the east, fish bites least.**

**31. When porpoises and whales spout about ships at sea , storm may be expected.**

**32. Pigs gather leaves and straw before a storm.**

**33. When squirrels bury their nuts early, it will be a hard winter.**

Furthermore squirrels' stores, and bears' and horses' thickness of hair may give an obvious hint of hard winter:

**34. When squirrels lay in big store of nuts, look for a hard winter.**

**35. If hair on bears or horses is thick early in season, it will be a cold ,  
a snowy weather.**

No one can exactly explain why horses , wolves and frogs act strangely before

the arrival of a storm ,or rain:

**36. Horses run fast before a violent storm or windy conditions.**

**37. Wolves always howl more before a storm.**

**38. If the frogs jump on the ground and croak in the daytime, expect rain soon.**

Aged people are also involved in cases related to weather conditions ; their back pain is a noticeable warning that severe winter is advancing:

**39. If an old man's back aches, then bad weather is coming.**

the arrival of a Likewise, weather proverbs concerning items related to insects reveal that most of these creatures behave strangely before the advent of rain or storm. Sometimes they react to unholy wind and air pressure by staying at home or being nearer to it. Insects –including flies, bees and ants- are " more active when the air pressure drops and stay closer to the ground so that they seem to be swarming before a rain or storm " (Walker,2003) . The following examples demonstrate the relationship existing between those insects and weather surroundings:

**27. Flies bite more before a rain.**

**28. If bees stay at home, rain will soon come. If they fly away, fine will be the day.**

**29. When ants travel in a straight line, expect rain. When they scatter, expect fine weather**

Conversely , Koch (1998) cites a counter-example in which bees behave differently from the other members of the same category of insects ,ie, they give the impression that they are unwilling to fly in group before a storm:

**30. Bees will not swarm before a storm.**

The position wasps and hornets build their nests may predict two different states of the upcoming weather:

**31. If wasps build their nests high, the winter will be long and hard.**

**32. Hornets' nests build in the top of trees point to a mild winter.**

Spiders behave distinctively in accordance with the different changes of the environmental surroundings:

**33. A spider is lazy and motionless; it will rain soon.**

**34. When spiders come in, it's a sign of rain.**

**35. When spiders weave their webs by noon , fine weather is coming soon.**

Crickets in this respect seem to be the most reliable thermometers that can accurately estimate the temperature grade .The number of their squeaks might foretell the exact degree of hotness.

**36. Crickets are accurate thermometers; they chirp faster when warm and slower when cold.**

Walker (*ibid.*) maintains that " the chirping of a cricket has been shown to provide a close indication of air temperature.By counting the number of cricket chirps in a 14 second period and adding 40 , the total will equal the air temperature to within one degree 75% of the time".

The behaviour and actions of some plants may correspond to atmospheric changes. They seem to take action to protect themselves from hard winter. The leaves of some trees curl or show their undersides or backs to stand rain while other trees wear thicker clothes(outer coverings),yet others take various shapes, to endure the bitter chill of winter:

**37. When leaves show their backs (or undersides), it will rain.**

**38. If corn husks are thicker than usual, a cold winter is ahead.**

**39. If clovers draw the leaves together and bend, expect bad weather.**

**40. If dandelions shrink their balls, the rain is coming.**

Other non-living things in nature appear to play a role in prophesying weather conditions by providing particular indications of the expected atmospheric settings . Smoke or soot of the chimney falling down to the ground may " indicate that heavy moisture in the air . When it [smoke] ascends straight up there is little likelihood of rain "(Phillips, 1997)

**41. When smoke hovers close to the ground, there will be a weather change.**

**42. When down the chimney falls soot, mud will soon be underfoot.**

The higher the humidity in the air, the better sound or smell travels:

**43. Sound travelling far and wide, a stormy day betide.**

**44. When the ditch and pond offend the nose, then look out for rain and stormy blows.**

The chances of the occurrence of rain and sharp winter may be predicted by the clarity of the sound of church bells, and the strength of the tone of the forest and the mountain:

**45. Sun sets Friday clear as bell. Rain on Monday sure as hell.**

**46. When the forest murmurs and the mountain roars, then close your windows and shut your doors.**

Even the appearance of a specific type of stars (comets) may foresee the arrival of chilly atmosphere:

**47. Comets bring cold weather.**

The relationships, mentioned above, between living and nonliving things on the one hand and weather aspects on the other can be interpreted on the basis of the fact that they are all regarded as components of nature that should interact with one another to ascertain life survival.

### **Science or Superstition**

Weather proverbs are usually based on someone's observations rather than on scientific principles . But under certain conditions , some proverbs do hold up to science and this can explain how they work , while others do not show such a scientific basis yet they often prove to be true . Still others do not really work( can not truly explain or forecast the weather state).The best example for the latter case is known as *Groundhog Day* :

#### **48. If groundhog is clear, corn and fruit will then be dear**

The validity of this proverb is principally doubtful and this may be related to the interpretation of this proverb which designates that "if on Feb. 2, it is bright and clear , the groundhog will stay in his den , indicating that more snow and winter are to come ; if it is dark or rainy , the winter is over " (Jenny 2004) . Whether based on scientific basis or folk belief, most weathers do in fact work. The subsequent section presents the most salient examples concentrating on the idea that the more scientific a weather proverb is, the more accurate it is.

Resorting to scientific reasoning (utilizing optics and meteorological means) may provide more reliable guides to weather changes, and this might be taken as an essential point for their survival in daily life . Consider:

#### **49. Red sky at night , sailor's delight.**

#### **Red sky in the morning , sailors take warning.**

There is an established common folk belief that a red sky in the evening points to fair (dry) weather to come whereas a red sky in



the morning foretells bad weather (Dundes , 2000). However , based on scientific principles, this proverb can be reasonably true since the red or pink hue in the evening is caused by light passing through dust particles in the dry, unstable air to the west which means dry weather is approaching . A red sky in the morning , however , means that the atmosphere is heavy with water droplets that will probably fall the next day( Michaels, 2000).

In fact, this saying often holds true in the United States.Rempel and Hanson (1998) explain that as the weather patterns in North America usually travel from west to east , when clouds appear overhead at sunrise the sky will be red , indicating a storm "moving in". When the storm ultimately goes by the sky will be lucid in the western sky. If sunset happens concurrently, the light will emit a red glow on the clouds above, which are now moving towards the east.

Another example supported by the scientific standard (cited in Nzgirl, 2003) is:

**50.When halo rings the moon or sun, rain's approaching on the run.**

Halo is a layer of cirrus clouds ( ice crystals ) which act as prisms , forming a white or sometimes colourful halo round the sun or moon . This cirrus is an indicative of warm front and predicts rain within 20-24 hours. There is a higher probability of rain after a halo is seen. It is confirmed (by Weather Service)that rain follows about 75% of sun halos and about 65% of moon halos.

Further attraction for the scientific analysis of the weather proverb ( **51** ) is ascribed to the fact that scents are more easily detected in wet atmosphere and this wetness very frequently predicts rain:

**51. Flowers smell best just before rain.**

The validity of the this proverb can be interpreted in terms of the scientific fact that " when particles of odour becomes 'hydrated' (wet) they cling more easily to the olfactory membranes in the nose . The stronger smells may be a sign of rain or stormy weather approaching "(Nzgirl, *ibid.*).

The majority of weather proverbs seem to be based on people's observations and their traditional beliefs rather on scientific or meteorological ground , and their accuracy often appear to be doubtful. These old tales and sayings , though give less minute information on what is likely to occur in the next few hours, do customarily work. For instance, as relied on superstition, some truth may be coupled with this weather proverb:

**52. A cow with its tail to the west makes the weather the best; A cow with its tail to the east makes the weather the least.**

In order to minimize getting their faces wet and cold , cows generally face away from the wind in case of raining or snowing when they are standing or resting . In principle , fair and dry weather occurs when the wind is blowing from the west . Wet and rough weather comes about when the wind is blowing from the east. Hence, if the cows stand facing away from the western wind, the weather is best , whereas facing away from the eastern wind may signal stormy or wet(least) weather(Bechtold, 2001).

What affirms that cows are not good weather forecasters is that ,as an exception to this rule,"wet or stormy weather can occur with the wind from any direction , or even no wind at the surface at all . Likewise for dry and sunny weather(*ibid.*). Many of weather proverbs associated with animals' peculiar behaviour can have a bit of truth. Consider:

**53. When birds flying low, there is a storm on its way.**

This old tale may hold some reality because when a storm approaches , the swiftly dropping of the air pressure can cause uneasiness in birds' ears . Flying closer to the ground may apparently assuage some of the pain (Nzgirl, 2003).

Cats are almost traditionally believed to be good weather predictors.Fair and dry weather may be expected "when the cat washes herself" , and bad (rainy or stormy) weather may be expected " when she licks her coat against the grain or washes her face over her ears, or sits with her tail to the fire( Jenny, 2004):

**54. When cats wash behind their ears, it will rain; When they wash themselves, it will be fine weather.** It has been noticed that nearly all commonly used weather proverbs need not be absolutely true.This is often the case for proverbs utilizing astrology and those pertinent to animals' behaviour and appearances, and plants' conditions.In this connection , CDLI (2004) argues that observations of animals' unusual and odd actions should not always be exploited to predict future weather conditions since (i ) their behaviour indicates current but not future weather states , (ii) their behaviour, which is not easily detected, has nothing to do

with the weather, and (iii) " animals have no idea why they do what they do.

### **Summary**

Forecasting the weather conditions has been always seen as an integral part of nearly all cultures round the world, often expressed in terms of weather lore proverbs, tales and sayings. Nevertheless methods of weather prediction can not always work because "even when you're feeling warm , the temperature could drop away like four season in one day"(Crowded House quoted in Nzgir (*ibid.*).

Another good reason for the invalidity of weather prediction stems from the idea that some proverbs are thoroughly regional ; they may be true for one part or a country, but not for everywhere. That is, the environment plays a great role in the trueness of the given weather proverb. (For more information on the trueness of weather proverbs, see Michaels, *ibid.*) In short, weather proverbs need not be scientifically and meteorologically verified and tested in order to be commonly used by people . But one can argue here that scientific reasoning may be considered as one of the most important factors through which this type of sayings preserved their survival in a social community.

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