

## A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis of Some Selected English Proverbs.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comprehensive semantic and pragmatic analysis of selected English proverbs. The analysis highlights the distinctions between semantic and pragmatic meanings, focusing on how these proverbs are interpreted in different contexts. By examining specific examples, this study aims to clarify the linguistic nuances that differentiate literal meaning from intended communicative value.

Key Words: semantics, pragmatics, proverbs.

التحليل الدلالي والعملي لبعض الأمثال الإنجليزية المختارة

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### المخلص

تقدم هذا الدراسة تحليلاً دلاليًا وعمليًا لبعض الأمثال الإنجليزية المختارة. يُظهر هذا التحليل الفروق بين المعنى الدلالي والمعنى العملي وتفسير هذه الأمثال. يمكن أن تساعد النتائج والأمثلة الموجودة في هذه الدراسة في فهم بعض الفروق في معاني الأمثال الإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدلالات، علم اللغة العملي، الأمثال

### Introduction

Proverbs are wisdom delivered in short phrase used by a group of people during a period of time. These proverbs have a perfect aspect of language (semantics, pragmatics and syntax). There used in our daily life accusation them important role in language. Similarly, to other types of folk-sayings as riddles, fables, and parables. Proverbs found in all languages and their used depend on the cultural background of the users, regardless of they were advanced or primitive, rural or civilized (Bertram, 1993:49).

Therefore, linguists, specialists and language educator have been given a big a considerable attention to proverbs. Proverbs are the common factor between the languages of the world. Thus, they are just like living experiences that are transmitted from one generation to another. According to differences between generations and even between people in the same time the interpreting of these proverbs actually defers, these interpreting depend on pragmatic and semantic meanings, since semantics concern with lexical meaning and pragmatics deals with

hidden meaning (Black, E. (2006). Therefore, the accurate research gives a simple explanation of such differences and convention taking into consideration various linguistic and non-linguistic aspects. The problem is the convention of understanding these proverbs and how pragmatics and semantics analyzing them (Cutting, 2002).

**A Proverb:** (A proverb as a word is derived from the Latin word “proverbium,” which means a proverb) is a well-known and repeated popular utterance with complete meaning and pronunciation. It is also a cultural and historical heritage transmitted among members of society, Proverbs show the truth with common sense or practical experience of people. The famous linguist W. Mieder provides a definition to a proverb in his book: “A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memoizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” [Mieder , 1993: 27].

Based on this definition shows that proverbs are usually have metaphor and has symbolism meaning. Among a lot of definitions that linguists provide to the concept of proverb, Mieder’s definition is the best. Because a proverb considers as a ready-made sentence that gives a metaphorical meaning of words covered by wisdom or traditional ideas of a people or society.

In addition, Proverbs are the product of society and nations for a long time. They are handed down through years and ages as frames or models of human life typical situations. Ch. C. Doyle suggests investigating them as minimal folk poems [2, p. 4] in literature, because they enliven dialogues or give expressiveness and emotiveness to poetry or prose in various ways. (Fair, 2003).

Moreover, their diverse expressiveness and emotiveness are obviously noticed during the process of conversation. Therefore, proverbs can represent the speech situation clearly.

As we know, proverbs, as a rule, are used for some practical, pragmatical purposes in various circumstances of everyday communication. With the aid of a proverb, we can aim to provide statements and opinions, forecast something, express doubts, reproach someone with something, accuse someone of something, justify or excuse somebody, warn against something, advise something or interdict somebody from doing something, and so on, and so forth. It is unthinkable to consider the proverb apart from such pragmatic functions [ibid.50].

## The differences between idioms and proverbs(A Comparative View)

Linguists distinguish between proverbs and idioms based on their grammatical and functional roles:

**Proverbs:** Often function as independent clauses or complete sentences that offer advice or express general truths.

**Idioms:** Typically phrases whose meaning is ambiguous and cannot be derived from individual words (e.g., "white lie" refers to a harmless falsehood, not the color white). Linguistics also distinguish proverbs from idioms as phrases some time have similar using in social but linguistics deal with them differently; they analyze them as clauses, speech acts, sentences, conversational turns, etc. from this point of view, Proverb is seen as a phraseological unit and in linguistics has figurative meaning to be equal with a sentence to make a complete utterance that they can form in speech. It is simply a short and popular saying that gives advice about how people should behave or that expresses a belief that is commonly thought to be true

While an idiom is simply a phrase with ambiguity meaning that cannot be understood from its individual words. To be clear there are some examples with their explanations:

The idiom 'white lie' (also called "fib" or "harmless lie") it doesn't mean white color or lie without color, but simply means it is simple small and unharmed lie, it said to avoid harm feelings of others. for example, I told my friend a white lie about liking her new haircut, even though I don't really like it. The proverb "Don't cry over spilled milk. Obsoletely don't mean the milk itself but it gives a device to skip the wrong past it says don't get upset about something that has already happened and cannot be undone and the cry can't change anything. (Gibbs, 1999:255).

This example of proverb (Don't cry over spilled milk) shows a common feature between the proverb and the idiom, which is the hidden meaning that lies in the content and not in the context of the sentence. but in a different way. The literal meaning of an idiom often doesn't make sense, and idioms can be impossible to understand unless you have learned or heard them before (Al-Musawi, 2011).

While, the literal meaning of proverbs is clear, according for the hidden meanings of these terms are not the same as their literal meanings. For example, this can be shown above with the meaning of the proverb "Don't cry over spilled milk" is not

about spilling milk at all. (<https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/eb/qa/what-is-the-difference-between-idioms-and-proverbs>)

## **Selected English proverbs with its pragmatics and semantics analysis**

Proverbs have many meanings and interpretations in which they are used. Their meanings are interpreted semantically and pragmatically to reach the intended meaning and use it correctly (Grice, 1975). Pragmatic interpretations of proverbs are different from semantic one:

**Semantic Level:** A proverb is a unit with a varied meaning because it has a literal and non-literal or figurative meaning that is often used to suit certain situations. In addition to its familiar meaning, the contextual meaning that actively imposes itself, because it is based on the induced attitude. Which produces two types of meaning. First, Literal meaning: Leech (1983: 10) states that literal meaning refers to the lexical meaning of a word, it refers to the meaning of a sentence that can be understood without context. it is also called logical, conceptual, denotative or cognitive meaning. On other hand, Johnson (1954:152) defines the literal meaning as the meaning which is derived from the meaning of the proverb's components (ibid.). Therefore, the literal meaning of the proverb has no age to learn is created when you read it. Sa'eed (1997:15) gives comprehensive definition of several figurative meanings including irony, metonymy and metaphor.

**Pragmatic level:** Proverbs depend on a hidden meaning rather than the semantic meaning, since their aims produced in a hidden meaning and need pragmatic reasoning to understand them. In addition to that, they are used for social and communicative purposes. Indeed, proverbs originally product of people throughout time so it transcends their linguistic form and meaning; so, they can be manipulated by language users. Moreover, in interpreting a proverb when the metaphorical and figurative meaning fails to interpret it, pragmatic meaning is the best alternative to doing so. This contextual meaning will supersede and transcend through employing the situational dimension: pragmatic dimension or the semiotic one (Leech, 1983:199). The proverbs here violate the principles of pragmatics (maxim of quality, quantity, relation and manner) established by Crice to create implicit meaning (Grice, 1975)

In the following there are some proverbs with semantic and pragmatic analyses:

### **1. "A stitch in time saves nine."**

Semantically: A small repair done promptly prevents a larger problem later.

Pragmatically: This proverb is often used to encourage prompt action to prevent future difficulties. It implies that neglecting small issues can lead to bigger problems that are more costly and time-consuming to fix. The refer or Implicature suggests that the listener should address a problem immediately, rather than delaying it. The speaker here violates the maxim of quantity (being as informative as required) if the problem is not actually serious.

## 2. "The early bird catches the worm."

Literal Meaning: The bird that wakes up and starts looking for food early in the morning is more likely to find food.

Pragmatic Analysis: This proverb is often used to encourage promptness and diligence. It suggests that those who are proactive and seize opportunities early are more likely to succeed. The speaker implies that the listener should be proactive and take advantage of opportunities as soon as they arise. The proverb can violate the maxim of relation (being relevant) if the situation does not involve competition or limited resources.

## 3. "Two wrongs don't make a right."

Contentive Meaning: Responding to a wrong with another wrong does not justify the original wrong. Pragmatic Analysis: This proverb is often used to discourage retaliation and emphasize the importance of seeking peaceful solutions to conflicts. It suggests that violence or other negative actions do not solve problems.

The speaker's implicature implies that the listener should not resort to retaliation, but rather seek a more constructive way to address the situation. The proverb can violate the maxim of manner (being clear and concise) if the situation is complex and requires a nuanced response.

## 4. "A penny saved is a penny earned."

Literal Meaning: Saving money is as valuable as earning money.

Pragmatic Analysis: This proverb is often used to encourage thrift and wise financial management. It suggests that avoiding unnecessary spending is as important as increasing income.

Implicature: The speaker implies that the listener should be mindful of their spending habits and look for ways to save money. The proverb can violate the

maxim of quality (being truthful) if the speaker is trying to downplay the importance of earning money.

### 5. "Don't count your chickens before they hatch."

Literal Meaning: Avoid making plans or celebrating prematurely.

Pragmatic Analysis: This proverb is often used to caution against excessive optimism or premature celebration. It suggests that things can change unexpectedly, and it's best to wait for concrete results before making assumptions. The speaker implies that the listener should be cautious and realistic about their expectations. The proverb can violate the maxim of quantity (being as informative as required) if the speaker is trying to discourage the listener from pursuing a goal.

### Result and discussion

- 1- The proverb is a wisdom derived from the experiences of others, while the idiom is an inherited or popular phrase that is passed down by communities according to their culture.
- 2- The proverb differs from the idiom in that it has an independent meaning, while the idiom may not be understood without context.
- 3- The proverb is similar to the idiom in that both have an implicit meaning, with differences in how each is understood and interpreted. This explains why some people believe that the proverb and the wisdom are the same thing.
- 4- finally: The specific pragmatic analysis of a proverb can vary depending on the context in which it is used. So, some explanations or intending meaning may be different according to the speakers and listeners and the situation that proverbs used in it. Therefore, the proverbs don't have fixed meaning (intending or literal) but in contrast its meaning change according to speaker, listener and context.

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