

Even a monkey can
fall from a tree
(Japanese)



Collecting, Using, and Enjoying Proverbs

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Many language groups have developed proverbs, sets of oral wisdom. Collecting these proverbs can be useful in many ways. This article presents a dozen ways that collecting local proverbs can be useful. Many of these points have already been written about at length by others. Rather than present a detailed review of the literature on these subjects, this paper presents these topics in a way that is meant to share my enthusiasm. A few sources are mentioned, but they are only a few of the many that could be cited.

To reinforce/present new concepts/Gospel

Advocating the adoption of a new concept in some cultures is often done using proverbs. When introducing the Gospel or a biblical concept, using traditional proverbs from within the culture, proverbs that parallel or agree with the Gospel, can be a powerful tool to connect the old with the new. For example, in Ethiopia the Amharic proverb “Praying with a grudge, burglarizing with a cough,” can be used to address the need to forgive, along with supporting biblical texts such as Matthew 11:26, 18:23–35; Luke 11:4.

Cotter (<http://www.maryknollafrica.org/ComCotter.htm>) gives a number of additional examples of matching local proverbs to biblical concepts from Oromo in Ethiopia, such as “*The singer is not the song maker.*” He explains “This means that a gifted composer writes the song, but many people sing it. The Gospels reveal the Word of God; we pass it on.” Cotter used this approach to prepare a whole book of Biblical passages and parallel Oromo proverbs in Ethiopia (1991).

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Rearranging the things under the pot does not improve the flavor of the stew.
(Amharic)

Gives a reason to be there

In some places the presence of outsiders asking about a language can be seen as suspicious, even sinister. The outsiders may be an initial survey team, or a translation team working in a geographically distant part of the language community. A newly-arrived team may be able to create a warmer welcome if they begin by asking for an elder to give them proverbs, rather than collecting uninteresting word lists or asking people to repeat strange sentences.

Documenting a positive aspect of endangered languages

Many languages are now endangered (though there is no agreement on what criteria classify a language as “endangered”.) Fewer and fewer people speak these languages, and those who use these languages speak them in a shrinking number of social domains. Collecting proverbs (a restricted and vulnerable domain) from such languages can be a valuable contribution, to both members of the culture and outside scholars.

Investigate cultural values

Studying the traditional proverbs of a culture can give many insights into the values of a culture. These proverbs provide a window into local values, ethics, ideals, and traditions that direct interviewing will not. A collection of proverbs will show that certain traits and behaviors are valued and other traits are generally frowned upon. For example, the Amharic proverb “A wise one, a peacemaker” points to the strong value that the culture puts on reconciliation and mediation.

In this vein of investigating cultural values, note the title of the book by Awedoba, *An introduction to Kasena society and culture through their proverbs* (2000) and the articles by Peacock (1997) “Proverbs as insight into worldview” and the McKinneys’ “Worldview reflected in Bajju proverbs” (2003).

Engage team members in collecting and editing proverbs

Collecting, transcribing, and editing proverbs are tasks that local team members can do to gain practice and develop their skills in writing the vernacular. Also, there are times that a member of a team may not be occupied with more “formal” translating or literacy activities, such as while others in the team are at a workshop. During such times, a team member in the language area can profitably work on a collection of proverbs.

Also, in language projects where the translators are young and educated outside of their home area, the traditional leaders may be doubtful of their work. Spending time with the elders, writing down their proverbs, creates a good opportunity for these “young” translators to strengthen their links to the traditional leaders.

Adult literacy materials

A collection of vernacular proverbs can also be utilized in literacy programs. In the Literacy section of LinguaLinks Library (http://www.ethnologue.com/LL_docs/contents.asp), there is a

description of a literacy teaching game using proverbs (Proverb game demonstration). There are at least two reasons that local proverbs can make good literacy material for adults.

First, it is critical to make literacy materials as meaningful as possible, and proverbs are intensely meaningful. Second, since proverbs are generally familiar, the familiarity of the proverbs makes it easier for literacy students to guess at the rest of the word or sentence.

For example, if an adult English reader reads “Look before ...,” they will likely be able to guess that the rest of the sentence is “... you leap.” Also, since proverbs in many languages often contain rhyme and alliteration, they can also be used to help teach certain letters, such as the letter *z* and *b* in the Amharic proverb *zəmm balä af, zəmb aygäbabbätəm* ‘The mouth that is silent, no fly enters it’.



Go to the ant, you sluggard.

Proverbs are not merely useful for primers. Published collections of proverbs have been important contributions to ongoing literacy in some projects. Once proverbs are collected and edited for study by a language team, preparing them for publication is not so difficult.

Prepare for translation of scriptural passages with proverbs

Before translating biblical proverbs, it is clearly preferable to practice translating other proverbs. Translating a few proverbs will quickly show translators that this is a different genre than narrative! Translating proverbs requires a greater attention to form, since proverbs are typically a tight bundle of artistically crafted language, often utilizing such techniques as rhyme, meter, and alliteration.

Studying a collection of vernacular proverbs will give translators (whether mother-tongue speakers or other-tongue speakers) opportunities to compile a list of linguistic techniques and figures found in local proverbs. For example, such a list compiled from Amharic proverbs shows that meter, alliteration, and rhyme are very important in many traditional proverbs. Many Amharic proverbs are simply two noun phrases, others are rhetorical questions, and many are couplets. Equipped with such a list of common features in vernacular features, a translator can consciously try to cast source language proverbs according to local, established patterns of proverb form (Unseth 2004, 2006). (The same sort of procedure applied to vernacular poetry is described by Moomo (1993:24–25).)

Don’t put this off, thinking that proverbs are found only in the Old Testament book of Proverbs; they are found in various books of the Old and New Testament (e.g. 1 Samuel 24:13; Ezra 16:44; Luke 4:23; John 4:37; 2 Peter 2:22).

Good language learning opportunities

Whose fault is it that the chicken doesn’t have teeth?
(Isthmus Zapotec)



A rich diet of proverbs is not ideal for initial language learning because they are often grammatically complex, contain less common lexicon, depend on knowledge of the culture, and are often even grammatically marginal. But as we learn a new language, we need some fixed phrases, something that we can say repeatedly. Many cultures will have proverbs about practice and perseverance, e.g. English “Practice makes perfect”. Every foreigner who ever attended Amharic language classes in Ethiopia has learned to say “Slowly, slowly, the egg learns to walk.”

Ethiopians respond well to this explanation of the foreigners' slow growth in the language; sometimes it is the only thing Ethiopians understand from these beginners! Learning local proverbs gives us language learners a chance to learn substantial pieces of the language (together with some points of the culture). Try to use these pieces of language repeatedly.

The idea of learning language (and culture) through proverbs is highlighted in the title of a book by Habibian (2002): *One Thousand & One Persian-English Proverbs: Learning Language and Culture Through Commonly Used Sayings*. Note that this is a native speaker of a language suggesting that outsiders learn her language by using proverbs.

Good material for literature, giving prestige to a language

Publishing a collection of proverbs from a vernacular language inevitably raises the prestige of the language, both in the eyes of its speakers but also the wider community. I have seen great interest in published collections of proverbs in three languages of Ethiopia, both from speakers of the languages but also those who did not speak them. For example, a friend who spoke a language related to a newly published collection of proverbs immediately seized my copy, read the translations and was excited to find many proverbs comparable to his own language. In watching reactions by native speakers to published collections of proverbs in their languages, I have *always* found them to be very positive.

Collections of proverbs have been published by people associated with several Bible translation projects. Some books of proverbs have been published for advanced reading material as a support for literacy and others have been published in an academic format by a local university.

Good conversation material

In cultures that have many proverbs, they are great material for conversations. As we progress beyond limited conversations about crops and family, we will find more and more opportunities to use a knowledge of proverbs, both in speaking and in listening.

In difficult situations, I have found that the use of a local proverb is inevitably helpful, if only because it was so funny to hear a foreigner quoting a traditional piece of wisdom.

Use in presentations to outsiders, nationally & internationally

When we tell other people about people groups that we work with, we often find ourselves looking for ways to present interesting and positive aspects of their cultures. Telling people interesting proverbs from a language/culture can be a very positive way to present a view of that culture. For example, when I tell Americans the Ethiopian proverb "*Praying with a grudge, burglarizing with a cough*", they laugh in agreement, find it a rich gem that they can agree with, and are impressed by this wisdom in Ethiopian culture. The use of proverbs in this way is a positive way of portraying the people we work among.

Fun!!

I do not apologize for adding "Fun" to my list! The collection and study of proverbs can be very enjoyable. While living in the capital city of Ethiopia, on many evenings I spent a happy hour studying a locally published collection of proverbs with the watchman. He could not read, but could explain them. I did not

Keep holding
the hammer!
(Klingon)



understand them, but I could read them, so our “lessons” were the cause of much laughter.

Having said all these positive things about proverbs, let me add three simple cautions. First, proverbs are probably not good examples for grammatical analysis since the desire for verbal artistry often bends the normal rules of grammar. Second, any collection of proverbs will need to be edited. Some proverbs may be frequently used, but local people may not want all of them exposed so publicly.

Third, when studying proverbs for cultural values, do not use isolated proverbs as your only evidence of a cultural value. Be prepared for proverbs that may suggest contradictory values, each proverb to be employed in different circumstances. For example, English has proverbs that seem to conflict, e.g. “Strike while the iron is hot” vs. “Look before you leap.”

So enjoy collecting and studying proverbs. After all, “A conversation without proverbs is like stew without salt” (Oromo proverb from Ethiopia).

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