

Scottish Identity through National Proverbs and Sayings. (A Linguo-Cultural Perspective)

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The best proverbs are true and witty; sometimes they are witty, but not true; sometimes they are true, but not witty; sometimes even neither true nor witty; but they always have “salt,” the quality which gives zest and preserves from decay.

(Mackay 1891:7)

Abstract

The importance of historicity in the construction of national identity is undeniable.

Proverbs and sayings, which are a link with the past, are used by speakers for a variety of purposes. Folklore, literary criticism, stylistics are the main fields interested in the study of proverbs, but scholars from a variety of fields have found ways to profitably incorporate the study of proverbs. The development and maintenance of proverbs and sayings, which is a time-consuming process, cannot go unaffected by inner and outer factors. The aim of this article is to show that proverbs and sayings, formed and established in the course of the development of the nation and its culture, can provide a reasonable basis for establishing a nation's identity and wisdom (Usman et al 2013:47-58). It is beyond doubt that in the era of globalization national identity issues necessarily find their multilateral consideration and objective evaluation by scholars of vast assortment of specialties across scientific disciplines.

Key words: *Scottish culture and language, proverbs and sayings, paremiology, proverbiality, national identity, national wisdom, national values.*

Introduction

There is an impressive history of the two major aspects of academic study of proverbs: *paremiography* and *paremiology*¹ known as the collection of proverbs and the study of proverbs, correspondingly. The term *παροιμία* *paroimía*, in Greek means “proverb, maxim, saw” (Kenneth 1993). There is the opinion that best research on proverb academic study is secured when both are combined in perfect harmony.

The interest in proverbs can, as our research established, be traced back to the earliest Sumerian cuneiform tablets and the philosophical writings of Aristotle. Renaissance scholars, such as Erasmus of Rotterdam² and modern folklorists, such as Archer Taylor³ have all built on previous research as they put forth their own collections and studies of proverbs (Meider 1997). Although the identification of traditional texts as proverbs and their arrangement in collections of various types are of paramount importance, proverb scholars have always known that the interpretation of their use in oral or written speech is of equal significance.

Attempts to define proverbs and the criteria required for classifying proverbs have also been the subject of an endless number of theoretical papers written over the years by paremiologists.

The core problem of the article can be best presented if we introduce one of the most outstanding modern approaches on markers of proverbiality. Defining a linguistically founded proverb definition, Norrik R. N. establishes a certain set of properties of proverbs, irrespective of their structure, and considers them to be enough for distinguishing the proverb from all other literary and folkloristic genres. Among these properties are:

- a) **pithiness** (being *brief, full of vigor, and meaningful in expression*);
- b) **traditionality** which distinguishes the proverb from original, freely formed utterances and from authored items such as slogans or aphorisms;
- c) **fixidness**, which helps to distinguish a proverb from the riddle and/or the joke;
- d) **prosodic arrangement** and very often, **figuration** (Norrik 1985:66-67).

The markers of *proverbiality* are considered to vary from culture to culture – in one case it is the **prosody**, as it is in Spanish, in the other case – **metaphoricity** (Norrik 1985:66) as it is in English and Armenian.

Proverbs and sayings, which are part and parcel of every language and form the most viable genre of folklore, are extremely popular in Scottish.

The Message of Scottish Proverbs and Sayings

The cognitive role of proverbs and sayings is undeniable since they can convey considerable information. F. Sharifian was quite right to mention that language serves as a “collective memory bank” of the cultural cognition of a speech community (Sharifian 2017). Developing this idea we may conclude that proverbs and sayings can be viewed as part of the language whose task is “to store” national wisdom based on prior experience for further effective communication and cultural cognition. Moreover, proverbs and sayings are not only part of the “memory bank” but they also act as a vehicle for transmission of national wisdom from generation to generation and as a rigid basis of national identity. For instance, “*Words of wisdom come out of the mouths of simple people*” has the noun *mouth* as the key word. In Arabic culture wisdom is obviously associated with *opening* one’s mouth and uttering wise ideas, while the Scots consider the wisest approach to keep one’s mouth shut, as, for instance:

1. A wise head makes a close mouth.

2. A close mouth catches nae flees.

A closed mouth catches no flies.

From another Scottish proverb – “*Wisdom is best taught by distress.*” - it can be inferred that in Scottish reality wisdom is thought to be gained from one’s own experience, through misfortunes and hard work. It can be guessed that serious obstacles make one think about finding ways out of the situation. Looking for and finding a variety of ways to overcome the hardships makes people more circumspect and organized. The more difficulties one faces, the wiser he/she becomes. But, as reality shows, the fool are quite self-confident and can give advice to the wise who prefer to keep silent as in

A fule may gie a wise man counsel.

A fool may give a wise man counsel.

As far as the fool is concerned, for example, Armenians think that the fool remain the same all their lifetime, for they never learn from their own experience while clever people become even wiser with age because they learn from experience “*Only the wise becomes wiser with age, the fool is fool at all ages*”. (*Տարիքը խելոքի խելքն է արկալացնում*). One should never hope that the fool will or may become wise at a certain age.

The Scottish greatly value their national proverbs and sayings and the collectors and authors of proverb books never miss the opportunity to tell their readers to follow the advice, message and wisdom of their national proverbs. Kelly (Kelly 1721), who was one of the first collectors of Scottish proverbs and sayings, takes an effort to convincingly plead his countrymen not only to learn Scottish proverbs and sayings that were presented in his famous volume and carry national wisdom but also to use them in every appropriate situation which will be a step towards passing it to the coming generations. This wonderful instruction to be followed and passed on to the coming generations makes the Scottish people and proverbs distinguished. This simple fact states how great the Scottish attitude is towards national values.

Lord Bacon⁴ was quite right to say that “*The genius, wit, and spirit of a nation are discovered in their proverbs*”. He was not mistaken that the study of national wisdom condensed in the nation’s proverbs and sayings, will inevitably lead to the study of national characteristics. He is sure that few countries can lay claim to a more abundant store of the pithy sayings than those which belong to the Scottish people, because, according to him, “no people were more attached” to this part of their linguistic inheritance.

The above-mentioned idea formulated by Lord Bacon can be found in an early collection “*Scottish Proverbs and Sayings in Prose and Rhyme*” (Mackay 1891). While collecting proverbs for his book, Bacon wrote—“*Every proverb should be put down and transmitted to the reader, even the most vulgar ones, since they are very expressive and impressive*.” Lord Bacon collected proverbs

simply because it was “*his recreation*” and he did it without omitting even the vulgar ones, since “*the vulgar ones are excellent good*”. He omitted neither those which “*were dull and flat,*” nor those which stressed “*meanness of the person*”. Moreover, he added some new ones because “*otherwise they would have died*”. Actually, Bacon proceeded from the fact that the message of vulgar ones is more actual, strikingly vivid, picturesquely expressive and to the point. Hence, the wisdom obtained is the result of mass practice and appears rather useful and easy to memorize. The title of Mackay’s book reveals that the early collectors were already aware about the specific prosody of their national proverbs. Applying Norrick’s theory of proverbiality to Scottish proverbs we reveal that prosody and the rhythmic arrangement can be viewed as one of their specific features. This, perhaps, can explain the fact that music was inseparable from Scottish folklore. There is a Scottish saying “*Let me make songs, and no matter who makes the laws*” which confirms that music and national songs are part of national identity, and that Scots must be very romantic and kind-hearted people. Another important issue worth mentioning here is that the melodic arrangement of proverbs greatly helps in memorizing and easily transmitting them from generation to generation. The group of the proverbs of Fife origin are specifically worth to mention since Fife is known as an area with agricultural landscape, and the local proverbs can be defined as weather prophecies. Weather in Scotland was a universal subject that interested everyone and Scottish people were “*an agricultural community which had to win its livelihood in a changeable climate*”. So the rhyme of the East Coast sounds this way:

When Largo⁵ Law the mist doth bear,

When Kellie⁶ Law - for storms prepare.

From the above-mentioned melodic lines the reader learns that hard-working Scots were agricultural people who had to handle the problems manifested by the changeable weather. Thus, the national wisdom teaches the coming generations that they will have to take into consideration weather issues as well.

Our analysis of Scottish proverbs and sayings also establishes that the Scots are kind-hearted, honorable people. The following melodically arranged three pieces of proverbial texts convey great wisdom although the first two produce some comic effect:

*1. When you see a well-bred woman, catch her, catch her;
if you don't do it, another will match her.*

2. A' h - uile fear a theid a dholaidh, gheabh e dolarMhac-Aoidh.
(Every man that's down in luck will get a dollar from Mackay⁷.)

*3. A' h-uile latha sona dhut,
Gun lath' idir dona dhut!
(Every day goodluck to thee,
And no day of sorrow be!)*

The second one refers to the enlisting for the Highland regiment raised by Lord Reay for service under the King of Denmark (1626-29), and Gustavus Adolphus (1629-32), in which the Scots so greatly distinguished themselves.

The investigation reveals that self-respect and sense of honour appear in Scottish proverbs to be of much importance in shaping the national character.

*Credit lost is like a broken glass.
He who's lost his credit is dead to the world.
As thou valuest thyself, others will esteem thee.
He who lies in the mud will rise dirty.
A man's will is his kingdom.
A man is king in his own.
When a man goes down, his own back is his support.*

The analysis of the linguistic material shows that the Scotsman, being very purposeful and determined, is a real patriot, besides he will never surrender once he has made up his mind, he will go to the end, fulfil his goal and ambition - he will get whatever he wants, “*unlike the English and the Irish*”, as

the proverb says: *The Englishman greets, the Irishman sleeps, but the Scotchman gangs till he gets it.*

The research also establishes that, according to the learned Scotsmen, this linguistic part of the national heritage differs from nation to nation. “[...] *Every nation hath their own Proverbs and Proverbial Speeches; yea, every shire or part of a nation hath some Proverbial Speeches which others hath not: so that a man can hardly gather all such speeches*”⁸. The early collectors of Scottish proverbs in XVI-XIX centuries already understood that “*Proverbial Speeches*” varied from nation to nation. The above-mentioned remark comes to confirm that proverbs of a nation contain something which can be missing in other nations’ culture, national wisdom and character.

In the course of the research it is revealed that the Scottish Celts are naturally disposed to be religious, but they do not speak much or familiarly of sacred things. Although they seem to have belief in an almighty and just God, they seem to be very practical about religion.

*Ye ‘ll do little for God, if the deil was dead.
There is no hiding of evil but not to do it.
Wrong cannot rest, nor ill deed stand.
Though there be delay, the evil-doer is not forgotten.*

Freedom of criticism on the ministers of religion does not seem to be unfamiliar to the Scots, anyhow.

*It is not the priest's first story that should be believed⁹.
It is his own child the priest baptizes first.
The priest drank only what he had.*

Scottish proverbs distinctly imply a fixed belief that human destiny is shaped by Fate or Providence. Here are some examples to testify what has been said:

1. *Tha 'fhàgail fhèin aig gach neach.* (Everyone has his fate.)

2. *Tha 'fhortan fhein air Mac-Cuaradh, biodh e cniaidhno biodh e bog.
(MacQuarrie has his own luck, whether it be hard or soft.)*
3. *No man can avoid the spot, where birth or death is his lot.*

Below are some more examples of Scottish proverbs and sayings on fate and luck which are marked by the author of the book as “*exceedingly wise... among a people believing so firmly in Fate*” (Nicolson 1882:333):

1. *Ni droch dhuine dan da fhein.
A bad man makes his own destiny.*
2. *For whom ill is fated, him it will strike.*
3. *Where folk's fate is to go, ford or hill won't prevent.*
4. *Who is born to be hanged cannot be drowned.*
5. *Bheir duine beath' air eigin, ach cha toir e rath air eigin.
A man may force a livelihood, hut cannot force fortune.*

The attitude towards women and the way women are treated in the society defines the nature of the nation and, hence, gives a significant idea about the stage of the civilization of that particular nation. Scottish proverbs and sayings on women, wives, maidens, matrimony contain emphasized respect for women.

- Is mine miu na gran, is mine mnàì na fir.
Meal is finer than grain, women are finer than men.*

According to the investigated linguistic material a good wife was a pride for a Scotsman.

1. *A gude wife and health is a man's best wealth.*
2. *They say in Fife,
That next to nae wife,
The best thing is a guid wife.*

Although Scottish proverbs contain great wisdom they may show open humour at the same time, or sound rather tragic, as for instance:

*1. Ma 's math leat do mholadh, faigh has ; ma's math leat do chàhieadh, pòs.
If you wish to be praised, die ; if you wish to be decried, marry.*

*2. Mar dliobliran 'am bun uisge,
Mar sheobhag gu ian slèibhe,
Mar chù gu cat, mar chat gu lucli,
Tha bean mic gu 'màtliair-chèile.
Like otter at a river-mouth,
Like hawk to a mountain bird,
Like dog to cat, like cat to mouse,
The son's wife is to his mother.
3. Women's patience – up to three.*

Special attention is paid to the behavior of maidens:

*Maidens should be mild and meek
Quick to hear, and slow to speak.
Fair maidens wear nae purses.
Young women are not permitted to pay their share of the reckoning ;
the young men pay for them.
Maidens want naething but a husband, and then they want everything.
Maidens should be mim(modest) till they're married,
and then they may burn kirks (churches).*

The books of Scottish proverbs studied by us show that old Scots were kind-hearted and civilized by nature. Their proverbs, to their own surprise, in their own words “*give very little indication of those ferocious traits*” characterizing their Celtic ancestors.

Conclusion

The application of a linguo-cultural approach does explain much. All the above discussed proverbs and sayings confirm that national wisdom may be expressed through various instances of a human's experience where the cultural background matters greatly. Scottish proverbs and sayings show that old Scots were kind-hearted and hard-working agricultural people with specific love for music and national issues, who cultivated great patriotism, self-respect and sense of honour, whose respect for women was emphasized. The rhythmic and melodic arrangement of Scottish proverbs and sayings make them easy to memorize.

Proverbs and sayings differ from nation to nation since proverbs of a nation contain something which can be missing in other nations' culture. Proverbs and sayings are carriers of national wisdom, and are an undeniable source of establishing a nation's identity.

Notes:

1. A *saw* is defined in Wiki as an old saying, a commonly repeated phrase or idea, a conventional wisdom. While "old saw" is a common phrase for "saw", some consider it a tautology (Kenneth 1993:381). Among various synonyms for "saying", dictionaries from 18th century singled out "saw" as a vulgar, uneducated wisdom, often based on superstitions (Crabb 1863:211).
2. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) - Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus, known as Erasmus or Erasmus of Rotterdam, was a Dutch Renaissance humanist, Catholic priest, social critic, teacher, and theologian. Erasmus was a classical scholar and wrote in a pure Latin style. Available at <Erasmus of Rotterdam - Dutch Renaissance Scholar – Biography.com. <<https://www.biography.com/people/erasmus-21291705>> [Accessed July 2017].
3. Archer Taylor (1890-1973), a seminal proverb and riddle scholar and folklorist, enrolled at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, graduating with the BA and MA in German by 1912. He then taught German at Pennsylvania State College. Later he moved to California where he worked as a journal editor, for California Folklore Quarterly (which he helped to found) (now Western Folklore) and

the Journal of American Folklore. In 1965, Archer worked with his friend Matti Kuusi to establish the journal *Proverbium*. Available at: Archer Taylor-Revolyv <https://www.revolvy.com/topic/Archer%20Taylor&item_type=topic> [Accessed July 2017].

4. Francis Bacon, 1st Viscount St. Alban (1561–1626) was an English philosopher, statesman, scientist, jurist, orator, and author. He served both as Attorney General and as Lord Chancellor of England. After his death he remained influential through his works.
5. Largo, the eroded plug of an ancient volcano, rises sharply above the farmland and fields of eastern Fife, Scotland.
6. Kellic refers to the western extremity of the lake in the district of Kenmore, Scotland.
7. Mackay was the Sheriff of the Counties of Fife and Kinross who had collected and selected the proverbs for the book - *A Century of Scottish Proverbs and Saying, in Prose and Rhyme Current in Fife and Chiefly of Fife Origin* (Mackay 1891).
8. These remarks belong to David Ferguson, a Scottish reformer, who “*was celebrated for his attention to this branch of composition. He had not enjoyed the advantages of a university education*”.[...]“*While other leaders of the Reformation were busied cultivating the literature of Greece and Rome, Ferguson was equally assiduous in polishing the vernacular dialect*” (Henderson 1876). *Ferguson’s* collection of Scottish proverbs was published in 1641 under the title “*Scottish Proverbs gathered together by David Ferguson, sometime minister at Dunfermline, and put ordine alphabetico when he departed this life anno 1598*”. Andrew Henderson writes about James Kelly in the preface of his work: “*Saving what may be gleaned from the volume itself we know nothing of its learned and ingenious author. By birth he was a Scotsman, and we are inclined to believe that he was educated for the church.*” (Henderson 1876).

Other editions appeared in 1659, 1675, 1699, and 1706, the latter bearing the title “*Nine Hundred and Forty Scottish Proverbs, the greater part of which were first gathered together by David Ferguson, the rest since added.*”

Available at: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Ferguson_\(reformer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Ferguson_(reformer))> [Accessed July 2017].

9. In some cases the Scottish equivalents are missing in the paper. Authors of books of proverbs and sayings sometimes only present the translated variants in English and we failed to find their Scottish equivalents.

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**Շոտլանդական ինքնությունն ըստ ազգային առած-ասացվածքների
(լեզվամշակութային մեկնակետ)**

Դեռևս լորդ Ֆրենսիս Բեկոնն է նկատել, որ ազգային ինքնության այնպիսի դրսևորումներ, որոնք են ազգի տաղանդը, իսկալն ու ոգին արտահայտվում են նրա առածներում և ավելի խոր դիտարկումներ, քան առած-ասացվածքների բնագավառը, որը ժողովրդական բանահյուսության ամենակենսունակ ժանրաձևերից է, հնարավոր չէ գտնել: Շոտլանդական առած-ասացվածքների լեզվամշակութային քննությունը բացահայտում է տվյալ ազգի հոգեկերտվածքի, ազգային ինքնության, մտածողության առանձնահատկությունները՝ դառնալով նրա բարոյական արժանիքների ու ձգտումների մասին տեղեկատվություն պարունակող արժեքավոր աղբյուր: Հետաքրքրական է, որ շոտլանդացու տեսանկյունից քիչ ժողովուրդներ կարող են հպարտանալ, որ իրենց լեզուն ունի առած-ասացվածքների առավել հարուստ շտեմարան, և երբևէ ոչ մի այլ ժողովուրդ, բացի շոտլանդացիներից չի կարող պարծենալ, որ նման հարստությունից այդպիսի մեծ հաճախությամբ է օգտվում իր առօրյայում: