

## PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF PROVERBIAL UNITS IN DISCOURSE

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the pragmatic functions of proverbial units in discourse. Proverbs and proverbial expressions are not only fixed linguistic forms that transmit folk wisdom; they are also communicative tools used to advise, warn, persuade, evaluate, criticize, justify, soften disagreement, create solidarity, and organize discourse. From a pragmatic perspective, the meaning of a proverb cannot be fully explained by its literal or dictionary meaning alone. Its actual force depends on speaker intention, context, shared cultural knowledge, interpersonal relations, and the communicative situation. Drawing on paremiology, phraseology, discourse analysis, speech act theory, and intercultural pragmatics, the article classifies the main pragmatic functions of proverbial units and shows how they operate in everyday speech, literary texts, public discourse, education, and cross-cultural communication.

### **Keywords**

proverbial units, proverbs, pragmatics, paremiology, phraseology, speech acts, discourse, implicature, cultural knowledge, communicative function.

**Introduction.** Proverbial units occupy a special position in language because they combine stability of form with flexibility of use. A proverb such as *Actions speak louder than words* or *A stitch in time saves nine* has a relatively fixed structure, but its pragmatic meaning changes depending on who uses it, where it is used, and for what purpose. In one context, a proverb may function as advice; in another, it may express criticism, irony, warning, justification, or moral evaluation.

In paremiology, proverbs are often described as concise, traditional, metaphorical, and didactic utterances that express collective experience. Wolfgang Mieder's work emphasizes that proverbs are deeply embedded in culture, literature, politics, mass media, and everyday communication; they do not exist as isolated "wisdom formulas" but function actively in social discourse.

From a pragmatic point of view, the central question is not only what a proverb means, but what a speaker does by using it. This distinction is essential. A proverbial unit may have a general semantic content, but in actual communication it performs an illocutionary and perlocutionary function: it may advise the listener, persuade them, shame them, comfort them, or invite them to interpret a situation through shared cultural knowledge.

Theoretical foundations – the pragmatic study of proverbial units draws on several linguistic and folkloristic traditions.

First, paremiology studies proverbs as traditional units of folk wisdom. Mieder's research has shown that proverbs remain productive in oral speech, literature, journalism, political rhetoric, advertising, and digital communication.

Second, phraseology treats proverbial units as fixed or semi-fixed expressions. Unlike simple idioms, many proverbs are complete sentences or “mini-texts” capable of functioning as independent utterances. A discourse-oriented study of proverbs notes that proverbs are communicatively self-contained units and may serve as ready-made conversational texts.

Third, pragmatics studies meaning in use. It examines speaker intention, context, implicature, presupposition, politeness, indirectness, speech acts, and discourse strategy. In this sense, a proverb is not merely a semantic object; it is a pragmatic act.

Fourth, speech act theory is especially relevant because many proverbs perform acts such as advising, warning, reproaching, encouraging, evaluating, or legitimizing a decision. Studies on proverbs as speech acts argue that the illocutionary force of a proverb may change in actual discourse and that contextual conditions are crucial for understanding whether the proverb functions independently or as part of a broader utterance.

Neal Norrick's *How Proverbs Mean* is also important for the semantic-pragmatic study of proverbs because it examines how English proverbs produce meaning through figurative structure, traditionality, context, and interpretive conventions.

Proverbial units as pragmatic signs – a proverbial unit is a culturally marked linguistic sign. It carries not only propositional meaning but also social, evaluative, and cultural meaning. When a speaker uses a proverb, they usually rely on shared background knowledge. For example, the proverb *Don't count your chickens before they hatch* does not literally concern chickens in most modern uses. Pragmatically, it warns someone not to celebrate success before it is certain.

Thus, the pragmatic interpretation of proverbial units involves several layers:

Literal layer – the surface meaning of the words.

Figurative layer – the metaphorical or symbolic meaning.

Cultural layer – traditional knowledge associated with the proverb.

Contextual layer – the specific situation in which the proverb is used.

Illocutionary layer – what the speaker intends to do with the proverb.

Perlocutionary layer – the effect produced on the listener.

Proverbs, implicature, and indirect meaning – one of the most important pragmatic features of proverbial units is their ability to generate implicature. The speaker often says one thing but means something more specific.

For example: *When the cat is away, the mice will play.*

In context, this may imply that people behave irresponsibly when authority is absent. The speaker does not directly accuse anyone; the proverb invites the listener to infer the intended meaning.

This indirectness is pragmatically useful because it allows the speaker to communicate sensitive meanings without explicit confrontation. Proverbs can therefore function as culturally licensed indirect speech acts.

Proverbs as speech acts – from the perspective of speech act theory, proverbial units may perform different illocutionary acts:

Speech act type	Proverbial function	Example
Directive	Advising or warning	<i>Look before you leap.</i>
Assertive	Stating general truth	<i>Practice makes perfect.</i>
Expressive	Expressing attitude	<i>Good riddance to bad rubbish.</i>
Commissive-like use	Supporting commitment	<i>Where there is a will, there is a way.</i>
Evaluative act	Judging behavior	<i>Empty vessels make the most noise.</i>

However, the same proverb may perform different speech acts in different contexts. For example, *Practice makes perfect* may be encouragement, advice, explanation, or mild criticism depending on the situation.

This confirms that the pragmatic force of a proverb is context-dependent.

Pragmatic functions in uzbek and english contexts – although this article discusses proverbial units generally, English and Uzbek provide useful comparative examples.

In Uzbek discourse, proverbs are frequently used to express moral evaluation, social wisdom, respect for elders, family values, patience, labor, modesty, and community responsibility. For instance: *Mehnat qilgan elda aziz.* "Whoever works hard is respected among people."

Pragmatically, this proverb praises labor and encourages diligence.

Another Uzbek proverb: *Kattaga hurmat, kichikka izzat.* "Respect the elder, honor the younger."

This proverb performs a normative and didactic function. It teaches proper social behavior and regulates interpersonal relations.

In English, proverbs such as *Honesty is the best policy*, *No pain, no gain*, and *Better late than never* perform similar pragmatic functions: they advise, evaluate, console, or justify.

The comparison shows that while the surface imagery of proverbs differs across cultures, many pragmatic functions are universal: advice, warning, persuasion, evaluation, solidarity, and moral regulation.

Modern users often shorten, parody, translate, remix, or creatively modify proverbs. This does not necessarily weaken their cultural value. Rather, it shows that proverbs remain pragmatically productive.

For example, in digital discourse, a proverb may be used as a hashtag, caption, meme text, ironic comment, or moral evaluation. Its pragmatic function may shift from traditional instruction to humor, identity performance, or social criticism.

Methodological principles for studying pragmatic functions – a serious analysis of proverbial units should consider the following factors:

**Conclusion.** Proverbial units are not passive fragments of folk wisdom. They are active pragmatic instruments. In discourse, they perform many communicative functions: they teach, advise, warn, persuade, evaluate, criticize, justify, console, organize discourse, create solidarity, soften disagreement, and produce irony or humor.

The pragmatic power of proverbs comes from their traditional authority, figurative structure, memorability, cultural familiarity, and contextual flexibility. A proverb is short in form but rich in communicative force. It allows speakers to express complex meanings indirectly and persuasively.

Therefore, the study of proverbial units should not be limited to their lexical meaning or structural classification. They must be analyzed as culturally loaded speech acts that operate within real communicative situations. From this perspective, proverbs are not only linguistic units but also social actions, moral arguments, cultural signs, and discourse strategies.

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