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MEDITATION ON A RUSSIAN PROVERB IN ISRAEL

Folklore in My Family

My father spoke in proverbs, but for many years I did not notice. Only after I completed my graduate studies in folklore and began teaching, when my parents came from Israel to visit with me in Philadelphia, did I become aware of the idioms in his conversation. Without being a religious person he interlaced his anecdotes and narratives with proverbs, biblical verses, and parables from the talmuds. I began to pay attention. A few years later, when I visited my parents in Israel, my father, who was a construction worker, told me that in retirement he tried to make a business deal but failed. Yet in spite of his naiveté in such matters, he came through that experience unscathed. "*The Lord protects the simple [minded]*" (Psalms 116:6). He concluded his story with a touch of self-irony, and then explained,"why 'the *simple [minded]*'? Because smart people can take care of themselves." When my mother's health declined, he tended to her at home, and at the same time struggled to maintain his regular busy schedule of volunteer activities in several local organizations. Not one to complain openly, he wrote me in a letter the following parable, hardly realizing its history. "A Jew has complained before God about his share of troubles. He complained so much until God got tired of him and showed him the troubles other people in the world had, and told him to select out of these any trouble that would suit him best. After observing all these afflictions the Jew chose his own old troubles---at least with those, he felt, he was familiar."[1]

Old age had nothing to do with my father's use of proverbs and parables. Although, no doubt, over the years he had honed the art of speaking proverbs and had become more accomplished in their citation, proverbs and parables were part of his conversations also during

my childhood, and one of them in particular I remember to this very day. It was a proverb in Russian, a language which my father spoke fluently, since his home town was Minsk, the capital of Belorussia. Although my parents spoke Hebrew with me, my father cited this proverb in Russian, and apparently did so often enough, that as a child I considered it a challenge to master its pronounciation, trying to enunciate the vowels and consonants that fascinated me in their strangeness. I was six or eight years old at the time, but still recall sitting at the dinner table, mumbling and rehearsing the proverb until my parents assured me that , in the words of Professor Higgins, "they thought I got it."

A Russian Proverb among Hebrew Speakers

The proverb itself, "Не скажи гоп пока не перескочишъ," "Don't say 'hop' before you have jumped and landed" is rather common in Russia, Belorussia, the Baltic and Scandinavian countries, as well as in German. Matti Kussi (1985) deignates it as type 519 in his seven-langauge index of proverbs, rendering it in English as "Don't leap before you reach the ditch" (p. 298), and in German as "*Man muss nicht hopp! sagen, ehe man über den Bach ist.*" His Russian version conforms to the wording that appears in most Russian proverb lists, Не говори гоп пока не перепыгнешъ, using the habitual form of verbs.[2] This rendition appears in some standard Russian proverb dictionaries (Anikina 1988, 213; Zukov 1976, 276), and in a Russian-English proverb dictionary it is considered analogous to "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched" (Kuzmin and Shadrin 1989, 155-156).

East European Jews used the proverb in Yiddish translation. Ignaz Bernstein includes it in his pioneering compilation as "*Sug nit: 'hop!' bis dü bist nit aribergeschprüngen*"(1908, p. 73, no. 1070), comparing it to the biblical proverb "*Let not him that girdeth on his armour boast himself as he that putteth it off*" (I Kings 20:11) and providing yet another variation on the same theme: "*Sug nit: 'hoz!', bis dü bist nit aribergeschprüngen dem kloz*" (No. 1074), in which the two proverb parts rhyme and its metaphor relates specifically to the sport world, since *Kloz* means a"bar." In a recent compliation of parallel proverbs in four languages, English, Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew, Y. Guri cites the latter rendition of the proverb as its principle form, comparing it in all four listings to the above biblical verse, but suggesting different English analogues. In addition to "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched" (15, 60, nos. 52, 162),

he proposes "Don't call till you are out of the wood" (12, no.27), and "Don't halloo till you are out of the wood" (52, no.111). He cites the Russian version that is common in proverb dictionaries rather than the one I learned from my father.

Additional evidence for the proverb's use among Jews, specifically as a Russian proverb, has become available in the 1986 documentary film "The Partisans of Vilna." Mr. Abraham Keren-Paz, a former partisan and one of the interviewees from Vilna, cites it with the wording that I know. While throughout the interview he speaks in Hebrew, he switches to Russian when citing the proverb, and then continues his response in Hebrew. His preference for the perfective rather than the habitual verbs might reflect a regional style--Vilna (Vilnius in Yiddish and Hebrew), the capital of Lithuania, is a relatively short distance from Belorussia. Or perhaps it reflects a difference between a colloquiual and a somewhat literary usage: speakers employ the perfective, while dictionary compilers use the habitual form.

Apparently my father was not the only Russian-born immigrant in Israel admonishing his son with this very proverb. Whether directly from the Russian or mediated through the Yiddish, this proverb made its way into the Hebrew slang of the descendants of East-European Jewish immigrants in the pre-statehood days of Israel. Dahn Ben-Amotz and Netiva Ben-Yehuda included it in *The World Dictionary of Hebrew Slang* as an illustration to the exclamation "hop.": *al tagid hop liphnei she-abharta,*"don't say 'hop' before you have leaped over" (1972,60).[3]

As much as Hebrew and Yiddish are grammatically removed from the Russian[4], similar structure and semantic patterns have facilitated the adaptation of this proverb by speakers of these languages. Grammatically, Silverman-Weinreich ([1978] 1981, 73) recognizes the imperative sentence as one of the common patterns of Yiddish proverbs. Her example is "*tsekalupe nit di vund, es vet rinen blut*" "don't pick your sore, or it will bleed." It is a negative imperative, much as the present proverb is, suggesting the prevelance of this pattern in Yiddish. Similarly, Galit Hasan-Rokem (1982, 22-53) finds this structural pattern quite common in Hebrew proverbs that occur in oral narratives. Although in her sample the basic negated verb is specifically "trust" ("Don't trust") rather than "say"("Don't say"). Traditional Jewish literature, from the Hebrew Bible to the post-biblical books, is replete with ethical normative precepts and edicts, many of which are coded in the negative imperative grammatical patterns.

Some employ a locutionary verb and are designed to regulate speech behavior.[5]

Definitions, Models, and a Single Proverb

My childhood fascination with the Russian pronunciation clearly stimulated my initial interest in the proverb, but now it extends beyond these phonetic dimensions. At first glance this appears to be a rather common proverb, undistinguished from any other for any obvious reason. Speakers of at least nine languages have recognized its proverbiality [the seven that Kuusi (1985) lists plus Yiddish and Hebrew], and it would stand the litmus test of most theoretical proverb definitions. The phrase is proverbial in terms of Archer Taylor's classical proposition of intuitive proverb perception that "[a]n incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not" (Taylor 1931, 3). Similarly, it fits all the criteria that B. J. Whiting has set for proverbs, considering them to be of folk origin, to have a truistic nature, and to possess the attributes of literariness, brevity, social venerability, and multiplicity of use.[6] Contemporary definitions would not deny this phrase its proverbiality either. It is certainly "une sentence normative de structure analogique" (Crépeau 1975, 303), and it also examplifies Norrick's supercultural definition of the proverb as "a typically spoken, conversational form with didactic function [which is] not associated with any particular source" (1985, 79).[7]

The phrase could equally illustrate most theoretical and descriptive proverb models. Personally I learned the proverb within an educational situation which enabled an admonishioning father to inculcate in his son a set of cultural values such as a sense of reality, responsibility, patience, and modesty (Firth 1926; Arewa and Dundes 1964; Norrick 1985, 41-43). My own memories of and preoccupation with the proverb are indicative of its rhetorical impact as a mode of instruction (Abrahams 1968a, 1968b). In spite of its didactic significance in my own experience, its semantics are not definite (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1973; Krikmann 1984), making it possible to employ the proverb in a number of situations, some of which could be quite disparate from each other. For example, while I learned the proverb in an educational context, in Mr. Keren-Paz's narrative about the hostility of the Russian partisans toward their Jewish comrades, the proverb is for him a statement about the existence of divine justice.

Keren-Paz tells: "There was a partisan named Kuzma who would say so from the begining: 'Abramchik, Abramchik --for him every

Jew was Abramchik. My name was also Abraham, but he used it as a deregatory name--you will die first. Soon there will be a battle and you will die.'"

"Why?"

"Because the Jews shoot into the ground. The Jews are cowards, and they do not shoot at the enemy. The bullet hits the ground and then they are shot."

I said to him:"Kuzma Не скажи гоп пока не перескочишъ, the famous Russian proverb, 'Don't say 'hop' before you have leaped over'."

"At the end Kuzma died at the first battle with the Germans, and I said to myself:' there is a God in heaven'."

His narrative coda underscores the proverb meaning for him.

In both cases, the "proverb situation" (Seitel 1976, 129)-- the verbal image that requires interpretation-- is metaphoric in its relationship to an applicable social situation. However, the use of the proverb involves drawing an analogy from one sphere of human action to another, rather than from the domain of animals or plants to social life as is the case in other uses of metaphors in culture (Fernandez 1974; Maranda, E. K. 1971; Sapir and Crocker 1977).

Не скажи гоп пока не перепыгнешъ appears to fit some proverb structural models but to defy others. Milner, for example, regards the "quadripartite structures" to be the quintessential feature of the proverbial phrase (1969a 1969b, 1971). He assigns the respective halves of the complete proverb a positive and a negative valence which theoretically can occur in sixteen permutations. The present proverb, "Don't (-) say 'hop' (+), before (-) you leap (+)," articulated in any language would fit the model of negative heads and positive tails: - + -+, which Milner designates as class D2 in his "Outline for a Scheme for the Cross-Cultural Classification of Quadripartite Traditional Sayings" (Milner 1971, 261-266).

However, when structural analyses purport to expose the logical relations, the semiotic principles or the semantic levels of proverbs, Не скажи гоп пока не перескочишъ challenges current models. Although negative imperative sentences do appear as a distinct category in Permyakov's typology of proverb syntax (1979, 14, 16), he fails to consider them in the logical terms as he applies to other proverb types. The reason for such an omission becomes apparent in light of his basic proverb definition . For him "proverbs and proverbial phrases are signs of situations or of a certain type of relationships between *objects* (my emphasis)" (1979, 20). But the present proverb

involves a temporal relation which is between actions rather than objects, between "saying" and "leaping." Indeed, it could have been possible to express the proverb with a simple logical formula $Q<P$, which states the superiority of "leaping" over "saying", or, if these actions have a metaphoric value, of completed action over pre-mature speech. But as much as this formula conveys one of the possible abstract meanings of the proverb, in the translation of common language into symbolic logic, the formula changes temporal into qualitative relations. Logical relation involves a permanence that transcends time. Not only should these relations be applicable forever and under all conditions, but also they cannot be expressed along the axis of time. Any rendition of temporal relationship in logical terms involves a modification that distorts, even very slightly, the verbal phrase. While the proverb conveys priority of actions in time, the possible logical formula is a proposition of qualitative superiority and expresses a value judgement.

Alan Dundes' proverb typology (1975) does not provide an adequate structural model for this proverb either. The key element in his system is the distinction between oppositional and non-oppositional proverbs. Dundes sets up a paradigm of oppositions in which both quality,"worst" and "best," and priority,"before" and "after," are among the possible oppositional pairs, which he conceives as topic-comment proverbial constructions. Without reviewing the entire set of paradigmatical oppositions and the validity of their application to all proverbs, it is possible to point out that the oppositional relationship in proverbs does not necessarily occur, employing Dundes' own terminology, between the proverb's "topic" and "comment." In the pattern of "One A is better than two B's" (Dundes 1975, 969; see also Kuusi 1972) as in "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush", "one" is not the opposite of "two" in either proverb or abolute terms. If anything, as Aristotle already stated (The Categories X), "two" (2/1) stands in opposition to one half (1/2) not to one. The "proverb situation" constructs an opposition not simply between quantities in which contrary to expectation and experience, the smaller amount is better than the larger, but it establishes a contrast between the conditions under which such a relation could prevail, namely between "in hand" and "in the bush." Hence, it is necessary to enter into structural relations between the proverb elements not only the size, but also the specific conditions under which this, apparently contradictory relation, exists.

Dundes himself has recognized that the paradigmatic set of oppositions that he proposes does not adequately describe the relations within the "proverb situation." Therefore, he proposes to view them in terms of cause and effect as well. His illustration is particularly relevant because for that purpose he has selected the proverb "Don't count the chickens before they are hatched," which is semantically equivalent to "Don't say 'hop' before you have landed." According to Dundes, in such a proverb "the normal effect [is] being illogically placed before the cause" (1975, 969). While Dundes is correct in his observation, the relations between cause and effect are not oppositional nor can they be sequentially reversed. In these proverbs the acts of "counting" and "hatching," or "saying" and "leaping over" in its Russian equivalent, counter each other in the two proverb parts. Neither of these "speech acts" are the causes of either hatching chicks or landing on the ground after leaping in the air. Chicks will be hatched whether or not they are counted, and the exclamation 'hop!' is neither a cause of nor a requirement for successful leaping.

Therefore, neither the logical nor the structural models could account for the proverbiality of the phrase, or could critically discern its elements that convey such a quality for the intuitive perception of speakers in several languages. Such a lack of correspondence between a common language and the analytical models that purport to discover its grammatical rules requires rethinking of the basic assumptions and the fundamental analytical principles that enable the discovery of proverb rules and proverbiality. In another context, in the light of Chomskyan generative grammar, Wallace Chafe (1968; see also Cram 1983) has declared proverbs to be grammatical anomalies. They are not subject to the same transformational rules that govern the rest of the sentences in any given language. Is the present proverb, then, anomolous in terms of current proverb theory, or does its occurrence in the language require the construction of other structural models or analytical proceedures that would permit the rationalization of linguistic intuition?

Proverbiality: "Say" and "Don't Say"

In their quest for the elusive nature of proverbiality, folklorists have often resorted to logic and structure. But, as it has turned out, logic and structure alone could not disclose the markers of phrases that distinguish proverbs from all other sentences in any given language. Shirley Arora (1984) has already identified eight such markers that signal listeners to the proverbiality of a phrase. Conducting her

research among Spanish speakers in Los Angeles, she discerns repetition, peculiar grammatical structures, metaphorization, parallelism, rhymes, paradox and irony as the features that convey to the listeners the message, using Taylor's felicitous phrase, that "this phrase is proverbial." Each of these markers have long been associated with proverbs (see Rothstein 1968; Russo 1983; Sackett 1964; Silverman-Weinreich 1978; Zolkovskij 1978), yet none of them is exclusive to this genre. Respectively and together these features may enhance the literary effect of proverbs, yet none sanctions a phrase as a proverb and provides it with a rhetorical force that makes it function authoritatively in society.

The single, and most crucial, element that empowers proverbs is the idea of their traditionality. Speakers convey this notion linguistically by employing the verbal frame "people say," and its variants "they say," an "individual says," a "collective group says," or even a "proverb says" (Arora 1984; Briggs 1988, 107-119; Hasan-Rokem 1992, 128). Such an empowering frame consists of a pronoun or a collective noun and a locutionary verb which establishes the proverb as an act of speech and as a proposition that draws its force from speaking and not from any truth value that is verifiable in terms of witnessed or experienced actions.

The locutionary verb presents proverbs as quotations from a traditional corpus of propositions that speech communities have sanctioned as valid and applicable to social life in particular situations (i.e. Mukarovsky 1971 [1942-43]).[8] However, in the present proverb, and in similar phrases like it, the locutionary verb shifts positions from the frame to the text. Such a change in position of the locutionary verb entails other modifications. First, the proverb transforms from a quotation to an assertion. The speaker does not attribute his proverbial utterance to the authority of the past or the community (i.e. Allan 1986; Briggs 1988, 97-99; Shils 1981). His proverb becomes a statement of normative behavior that one speaker prescribes to another, assuming full responsibility for his assertion. The authority of tradition is no longer stated in the proverbial frame but rests with the social position of the speaker. As a person who utters the statement he must possess or assume a social authority that he then presents to his listener.

Secondly, in its new position the locutionary verb transforms to a negative imperative. As such it is an instruction for normative behavior that draws its validity and rhetorcal impact from the social position of the speaker, or as in the example of narrative report, from the

truth value of the story. The proverb becomes a propostition about appropriateness of speech in relation to time and to acts of other kinds. In Russian and in other languages, there are proverbs about proverbs,[9] but the present case, and any other proverbs beginning with the phrase "Don't say," they are not about the proverb as a speech genre, using Bakhtin's terminology (1986), but about speaking as a social act.

While the citation of this proverb in the present example takes an assertive turn, it involves a puzzling factor which is characteristic of both speakers, my father and the former partisan. Both addressed a non-Russian speaker--a young son in one case and an interviewer in another--yet they both shifted to Russian when uttering the proverb. Neither of them intended to obscure the meaning of their statements, nor to resort to a secret code which would have been counter productive to their rhetorical goals and effects. What could then be the rhetorical purpose of such a code shift?

In part, the speakers respectively desire to demonstrate their linguistic skills and knowledge of the Russian language, which carried prestige and was highly valued within the Jewish community. In part, the code shift maintains the quotative quality of proverb citation. By using Russian, both speakers resort to a different body of tradition which they purposefully insert within their Hebrew conversation. Furthermore, although both spoke in Israel, they still internally maintained, the social structure of the Jewish diaspora, in which the Jews were a minority who simultaneously resented and admired the culture of the majority group. In these cases the proverb has been sanctioned by the politically superior "other," the powerful influence of which immigrants remain under long after they have left their native country. Yet, by citing this proverb in Russian the former partisan adds a further subversive dimension to his story as he targets it against a member of the same society whose language he speaks.

Connecting Operatives

Users of proverbs rhetorically invoke the authority of tradition and other sources of power in order to validate their propositions. Yet, as far as proverbs are concerned, the resort to the past and to power is insufficient. The proverbial phrase itself requires a linguistic formulation that would make it irrefutable in its own terms. Speakers in many languages achieve the tightness of their statements by constructing them in a paired formation that relates objects or actions to each other. This pattern has been the single most common proverb

marker that has occured in many languages cross-culturally, and therefore has been the subject of many descriptions that have sought to capture proverbiality as a linguistic quality. Levin (1968, 182-183), for example, describes Russian proverbs as correlative, contrastive, and conjunctive formulae. Silverman-Weinreich (1981, 75) considers parallelism as a secondary grammatical marker of Yiddish proverbs. Alan Dundes (1975), as noted above, discerns in the proverb structure a topic-comment formula that may or may not be in opposition to each other. Crépeau (1975) considers analogy as the central concept in describing the proverb structure. Such a list is expandable and would reveal different theoretical approaches and that have been taken in the analysis of the proverb sentential structure.

However the present proverb, "Не скажи гоп пока не перескочишъ," "Don't say 'hop' before you have leaped [and land-ed]" demonstrates the need to explore not only its two constituent parts, but also the conjunctive terms that join them. These are opera-tional terms that establish the relations between the two proverb parts and can be represented in different parts of speech. In the present case, the adverb "before" serves this operational function enabling the proverb speaker to prescribe a normative sequence of events in which action should preceed speaking and should not occur in the reverse. The American proverbs "Getting *while* the getting is good" and "To close the barn *after* the horses were stolen" illustrate simultaneous and late actions, respectively.

These operative terms that connect the proverb parts are some-times verbs, sometimes adjectives, and sometimes simply unverb-alized implicit assumptions. They are the pivots around which the proverbial phrase turns. Objects, actions, and ideas that occur in prov-erbs are not inherenly oppositional or non-oppostional, contrasts and correlates. But they become so with a cultural cognitive system, expe-rience and world view. Proverbs serve to represent these systems linguistically in constructions that pit actions, objects, and ideas against each other along axes of quality, time, and place, and perhaps many other ways I have not yet fathomed.

Notes
1. Glückel of Hameln (1646-1724), a German-Jewish woman, mentioned it in her memoirs. See *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*, translated by Marvin Lowenthal (New York: Harper, 1932; Schocken, 1977), p. 119. Bernstein (1908, 203, no. 2831) cites a proverb that sums up this parable *As men sol aufhengen auf der wand ale peklech (oder: ümgliken), wolt sich itlicher gechapt zü seinem*, "If all the bundles (of troubles) are hanging out in the wind, each person will stick to his own." See also

Stutchkoff (1950, 531, no.498) and Furman (1968, 308, no. 1282), who suggests that this is a Yiddish rendition of the German proverb "Jeder hat sein Bündel (Päckchen) zu tragen." For variations on the same proverb, see Ch. Turniansky (1993, 155-157).

2. I would like to thank Elliott Mossman for his patience in dealing with my rudimentary knowledge of Russian.

3. I would like to thank Dov Noy for drawing my attention to this dictionary entry.

4. See the controversial study of Paul Wexler (1987) on the relation between Yiddish and Russian.

5. See for example: *Do not say, "I will requite evil"; Put your hope in the LORD and He will deliver you* (Proverbs 20:22); *Do not say, "I will do to him what he did to me; I will pay the man what he deserves"* (Proverbs 24:29).

6. B. J. Whiting, "The Nature of the Proverb," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, 14 (1932), 302.

7. For surveys of current proverb definitions see Liver (1977), Matta (1988), Mieder (1989, 13-27) and Norrick (1985, 31-79).

8. The subject of quotation in literature and in speech has enjoyed intense scholarly attention in recent years. In addition to the Mukarovsky's work and Penfield (1983), in which fragments of his seminal article appear in English translation, notable are Compagnon (1979); Cram (1978); Frost (1979); Morawski (1970); Neumann (1980); Rolleston (1989); Schültz (1989); and Zöllner (1990).

9. See, for example the following proverbs: "Глупая голая речь не пословича" ("A proverb is always wise"; lit: "Stupid/empty/ talk is not a proverb"); "Пословича несыдима" ("A proverb is alway right"; lit: "A proverb can't be judged"); Хороша пословича в лад да в Масть ("A proverb is good only when used in the proper situation"; lit: "A proverb is (only) good in turn and in suit"); "На пословичу, на дурака, да на правду—и суда нет" (lit: "You can't argue against a proverb, a fool, or the truth."); "на пословичу ни суда, ни расправы" ("You can't argue with a proverb"; lit: "There is no judgement nor reprisal of proverbs"); Пословичы ни обоити ни объехать ("There's no escaping the truth of a proverb"; lit: "You can't get around a proverb") (Krylov 1973,162-163, nos. 1885-1889).

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