Proverbs in the press: from 'sentence-like units' to 'word-like units'

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to examine how the British quality press makes use of a specific subgroup of proverbs and the reasons behind this stylistic choice. Nominal sentence proverbs such as *Once bitten, twice shy* or *Out of sight, out of mind* tend to appear in media discourse functioning as lexical items or 'word-like units' rather than 'sentence-like units', that is as "traditional maxims with deontic functions" (Moon, 1998: 22). These elliptical proverbs are likelier to be used as lexical items, integrated in sentences, bearing a specific syntactic function, than other longer and more structurally elaborated proverbs. Regular syntactic and lexical patterns seem to frame the instantiations of this type of proverbs in journalistic discourse. Their use provides a more popular and stylistically informal language register to this type of press.

Key-words: Elliptical proverbs, lexical status, collocation, collocational framework, colligation, journalistic discourse.

1. Word-like units versus sentence-like units

Word-like units are made up of polylexematic items including mainly phrases and idioms such as *at bay*, *second to none* or *in the blink of an eye*, to mention just a few, that behave in discourse as monolexematic units and that have a regular syntactic function in the sentence. Unlike word-like units, sentence-like units do not behave as single lexical items in the sentence, but rather they are self-contained utterances functioning autonomously in discourse. They comprise sayings and proverbs but also conversational formulae, slogans, catchphrases and the like.

> "Most of the early schemes and subsequent refinements (as in Gläser 1986a) are agreed in recognizing a primary division between 'word-like' units, which function syntactically at or below the level of the simple sentence, and 'sentence-like' units, which function pragmatically as sayings, catchphrases, and conversational formulae. Examples of the former are *in the nick of time*, *a broken need* and *break one's journey*, and of the latter *There's no fool like an old fool*, *The buck stops here*, and *You don't say!*" (Cowie, 1998: 4)

This primary and fundamental dichotomy that splits up the whole heterogeneous mass of multi-word items of any natural language into two distinct groups or categories has been drawn as well in French phraseological and paremiological research by scholars such as Mortureux for whom "Le proverbe demeure un fait de discours, collectif, certes, mais non une unité lexicale." (Mortureux, 2003: 22) or Rey (1997: 345):

> "Entre lexique et énoncé, la phraséologie, dans son centre (la locution, si l'on veut) est *lexicale*. Mais le proverbe, l'allusion, la citation n'ont plus les mêmes caractères sémiotiques : ce sont des *énoncés* plus ou moins fixes et réemployables." (Rey, 1997: 345)

Claims stating that proverbs cannot function as lexical items or that they are restricted to their quotational status seem to pervade paremiological research. This theoretical position does not obviously take into consideration the so-called elliptical proverbs, otherwise known as formulaic proverbs, nominal sentence proverbs or paired parallel phrases as they have been "described and mentioned (by Fillmore et al. 1988: 507 footnote), for example *cold hands, warm hearts* and *garbage in, garbage out*." (Moon, 1998: 152). These proverbs are widely instantiated in discourse as lexical units, sometimes superseding entirely their status as proverbs proper as illustrated by the following examples:

> (1) The music industry is notorious for signing artists to enormous deals that embarrassingly fail to recoup their multi-million pound advances. But **once bitten, twice shy** does not apply to recording giant EMI.

> (2) Dot.commery has been characterised by youthfulness, exuberance and dynamism - not, it has to be said, untinged by greed. But if the sector finds itself completely cold shouldered by **once-bitten, twice-shy investors**, that could change.

2. Proverbs and journalism

Observation of the language used in media discourse in general and in the British quality press in particular—increasingly inclined to update, modernise and vary their language register—has led us to undertake a study of the actual use of proverbs in this particular type of media discourse.

As many proverbs tend to be used in conversational exchanges, usually as a remark, a conclusion, a summary or a commentary of a given situation expressed by the interlocutor, they tend not to be frequently used in this type of discourse. However, journalists make regular use of traditional proverbs, more often than not manipulated or exploited, mainly to create catchy headlines (Mieder, 2004: 250) and to enhance the stylistics of their daily written production: a quick search in one of the archives of the main British or American newspapers yields significant and remarkable results in this respect. But the exploitation or manipulation of proverbs has been widely investigated either from a stylistic, cultural or even sociolinguistic point of view. Our main concern is the actual use of elliptical proverbs in their canonical forms when they are not used with their quotational status or even introduced or followed by a formula such as *as the old saying goes* or *as they say*, in other words what has been described as *reduction à niveau inférieur* (Arnaud & Moon, 1993: 336), that is to say when proverbs are downgraded to an inferior status from the sentence level.

3. Proverbs and their lexicalised variant forms

Proverbs are by and large less likely to present variant forms than other types of phraseological units, specially idiomatic verbal phrases such as *lose the plot* or *turn back the clock* which can be varied by means of substitution, lexical insertion or even stylistic exploitation. However, some examples of lexical substitution are attested as with *Light come, light go*, a variation on *Easy come, easy go* (Gläser, 1986: 112). But the main types of lexicalised variant forms are the result of a structural transformation of the original proverbial sentences mainly achieved through truncation as with *a stitch in time/A stitch in time saves nine* or *a silver lining/Every cloud has a silver lining*. Let us underline the importance of truncated forms of proverbs in contemporary English: lexicographical treatment in dictionaries of idioms is revealing of the fact that the truncated forms appear as the head-phrase and that the proverbs themselves are listed as the variant forms or are simply mentioned in a footnote. This phraseological reactivation, otherwise considered as "downgrading", constitutes one of the main ways in which proverbs can have their place, as autonomous syntactic multi-word units, in different types of discourse, particularly in journalistic discourse:

> "downgrading from their canonical or earliest forms to lower-level grammatical units: a compound sentence to a single clause, or a clause to a group. The reduced forms can be seen in terms of ellipsis, since in many cases an allusion to the original and fuller form remains. However, they are institutionalized, and many can be regarded as lexical items in their own right." (Moon, 1998: 131)

Many proverbs have thus become institutionalised idioms. Such is the case of the proverbs *It's an ill bird that fouls its own nest* which is normally used as the predicate verbal idiom *foul one's own nest* and *Make hay while the sun shines*, mainly instantiated as *make hay*. It is generally acknowledged that proverbs showing a higher degree of frequency in corpora tend to appear in their truncated form or otherwise downgraded to a simpler syntactic unit.

Another way in which proverbs are sometimes used, neither in their canonical form nor with their quotational status, has to do with their potentiality of being the target of stylistic exploitation or manipulation as illustrated by the examples that follow in which the proverbs *You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear* and *The early bird catches the worm* are singularly instantiated:

> (3) Don Revie's Leeds United were gifted but ruthless to the point of cynicism, while Brian Clough turned **silk-purse** manufacture into a fine art form and produced Nottingham Forest's double European Cup-winning team from his particular collection of **sows' ears**.

(4) New, new new! It's come to be Charles Saatchi's big thing. New art, new names, new movements to spin, new careers to boost and inflect. Getting ahead of the others, **snatching the early bird's worm**, stealing a march on the rest.

4. Elliptical proverbs

Elliptical proverbs (Mieder, 2004: 44) such as *Out of sight, out of mind* or *Once bitten, twice shy* are nominal sentence proverbs that fall under one of the "finite number of proverb compositional or architectural formulas" (Dundes, 1981: 46) and that can have particular syntactic roles inside the sentence. It is precisely the fact that these proverbs have no main verb which makes them appropriate for playing the role of single lexical items, but from a semantic and a pragmatic point of view it is the holistic meaning of the string that may or may not be adapted to the contextual needs of the communicative situation. All proverbs considered for this piece of research have the same repeated syntactic structure.

4.1. Elliptical proverbs with no occurrences

Many proverbs that fall within this syntactic schema are not represented in the press. It should be noted that the fact of bearing the same syntactic structure is not therefore a guarantee for their use in discourse. The reasons are varied and they can be examined if we consider the following examples of proverbs[1], traditional but unfamiliar, which have not been found in our searches in the newspaper archives:

Ale in, wit out	*Out of debt, out of danger*
Cold hands, warm heart	*Past shame, past grace*
Full of courtesy, full of craft	*Safe bind, safe find*
Grasp all, lose all	*Soon learnt, soon forgotten*
Happy wife, happy life	*Soon ripe, soon rotten*
Long absent, soon forgotten	*Sooner named, sooner come*

Unsurprisingly, the main reason for this has to do with pragmatics. Even though journalistic discourse has lately evolved towards a more varied and informal style and encompasses nearly all different types of texts, certain proverbs have their own pragmatic constraints which make them inappropriate outside the face-to-face communication situation. This can be applied to examples such as *Cold hands, warm heart*, classified as a saying and defined as "Said to someone with cold hands in order to stop them being embarrassed."

The proverbial repeated pattern *No + N1, no + N2* is hardly ever used in journalism, except for the proverb *No pain, no gain* which represents the exception to the rule. This syntactic

pattern accounts for an important number of obsolete or old-fashioned proverbs with no occurrences in the newspaper archives:

No ball, no beef	*No penny, no pardon*
No bishop, no king	*No priest, no mass*
No broth, no ball	*No purchase, no pay*
No cows, no cares	*No receiver, no thief*
No cross, no crown	*No root, no fruit*
No gates, no city	*No silver, no servant*
No hoof, no horse	*No song, no supper*
No moon, no man	*No sport, no pie*

6. Syntactic patterns of elliptical proverbs in the press

These elliptical proverbs can be sentence elements—usually subject, object or complement—realised as noun phrases or adjective phrases (rarely as adverbials). As adjective phrases they can be used both attributively and predicatively (in this latter case as subject complements). As noun phrases they can function as the subject, the object, the complement of sentences or even as the complement in prepositional phrases.

7. Lexical and grammatical patterns

A certain number of regular lexical and grammatical patterns seem to recur in journalistic discourse. These proverbs are commonly used either as noun phrases or as adjective phrases and they reveal a number of collocations (*proverb + approach*), collocational frameworks (*a + N + of + proverb*) and colligations *((proverb) + copula + (proverb))* which seem to restrict their lexical and syntactic instantiations to a limited number of patterns.

8. Classification by frequency of use

The use of newspaper archives as linguistic corpora can be quite useful if we take into account that certain phenomena are thinly represented in well-known general corpora, for instance the *British National Corpus*. This corpus of 100,000,000 tokens encompassing different types of registers and representative of British English in the second half of the twentieth century can be of invaluable use to scholars for an enormous range of linguistic research. Nevertheless, if we launch a search for proverbs, we will find that they are practically inexistent. *First come, first served*, the most widely used proverb in the English language, has only 10 tokens, and the very popular and current *No pain, no gain* is found only once. With these figures, it is materially impossible to conduct a study into the use of

proverbs as word-like units and their syntactic and lexical constraints. The study carried out by on the frequency of use of English and French proverbs shows that *First come, first served* is the most frequently used elliptical proverb in the Oxford Hector Pilot Corpus of 18 million occurrences out of a corpus of 240 proverbs (Arnaud &Moon, 1993: 325-326). Second in their frequency list comes *Out of sight, out of mind* (Arnaud &Moon, 1993: 327). *Fist come, first served*, classified as a non-metaphorical proverb by Moon (Moon, 1998: 22), is top of our list, which does not come as a surprise if we consider the following quotation:

> The old phrases have become linguistic relics of sorts, and while many have indeed gone out of use, there are those that hang on and that people of the modern age would not want to miss. This certainly is the case with that ever present elliptic proverb "First come, first served", which belongs to one of the most popular proverbs today. (Mieder, 2004: 44)

It has to be pointed out that the use of two different newspaper archives responds to the need of contrasting frequency results. All of the proverbs fall within the same frequency groups in both newspapers except for *The more, the merrier* which has a high frequency of use in *The Guardian* and a medium frequency of use in *The Telegraph*. Particular notice should be paid to the fact that *First come, first served* comes first with a strikingly similar number of occurrences in both newspapers.

8.1. High-frequency elliptical proverbs

We have carried out a thorough search in the archives of both *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* to constitute three groups of elliptical proverbs according to the number of results found. Table 1 shows the elliptical proverbs with the highest frequency:

Table 1. Article results in *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* for high frequency elliptical proverbs

HF Elliptical Proverbs	Guardian	Telegraph
First come, first served	321	315
Out of sight, out of mind	109	60
The more, the merrier	91	32
No pain, no gain	73	63

The case of *First come, first served* is interesting in that no instances of actual proverbial usage have been found in our research. It is by far the most widely used proverb in English and it is primarily instantiated as illustrated in the following example:

(5) Ticket applications submitted during this period will be processed, subject to availability, **on a first come, first served basis**.

The phrase *on a first come first served basis* can be then analysed as a transformation of a proverb into a modifier (Moon, 1998: 43). This string may or may not appear hyphenated but it is, at any rate, highly institutionalised and lexicalised. Examples (6) and (7) show

respectively the use of the phrase as a predicative and as an attributive adjective. The high frequency of use of this proverb is due to the fact that it is very often instantiated as a syntactic unit of a lower level (Arnaud & Moon, 1993: 329)[2]. As an attributive adjective the phrase collocates with nouns belonging to the same semantic group such as *tickets, admission policy, system* or *access*.

> (6) Booking is essential, although breakfast (8.30-9.30am) is **first-come-first-served** and very popular with surfers, who swagger in…
>
> (7) Consumers have been warned that their broadband bills could soar after the EU opened the door to "net neutrality" — unrestricted, **first-come-first-served access** to the internet.

The second most widely used proverb is *Out of sight, out of mind*. This phrase, whenever it functions as an adjective, tends to be used predicatively as a subject complement. When used attributively the phrase tends to collocate with the noun *attitude*. It is also frequent for this proverb to occupy the *N2* position in the collocational framework *a + N1 + of + N2*, one of the commonest ways for the English language to instantiate proverbs in discourse, as shown in example (10):

> (8) Our feet, he argues, are usually **out of sight, out of mind**, which is a shame as …
>
> (9) Groundwater suffers from **an "out of sight, out of mind" attitude**, but a report from …
>
> (10) When I moved from Edinburgh to Ibiza two years ago I really thought it would be **a case of "out of sight, out of mind"**.

A higher degree of lexicalisation is achieved in such instances where the phrase is used as an attributive adjective with a noun other than *attitude*:

> (11) The 'McWorld' culture is very much in the frame. Global corporations which exercise more power and possess more wealth than many decent-sized countries have created **an out-of-sight, out-of-mind buying culture**.

The more the merrier is usually instantiated as *N2* in the collocational framework *a + N1 + of + N2* in which *N1* is generally realised by the nouns *case* or *matter*. Otherwise the string is used attributively and collocates with the noun *approach*.

> (12) It's **a case of the more the merrier** when gathering like-minded souls in your teens and twenties, because you …
>
> (13) Charles Kennedy today urged **a "the more, the merrier" approach** at this week's anti-Bush demonstrations …

There are 24 results of *No gain without pain* in the archives of *The Guardian*. Most of them are instantiated as the full proverb "There is no gain without pain". On the other hand, it is the elliptical syntactic structure *No pain, no gain* the one that is usually instantiated as a word-like unit as illustrated by the examples below, which shows the adaptability of this particular structure for syntactic functions below the level of the sentence:

(14) For some reason, I seem to apply the **no pain, no gain rule** to exfoliators - unless I can feel the …

(15) The massage was of the soft and gentle variety, which is exactly the kind of treatment usually guaranteed to wind me up (I'm more of **a no pain, no gain girl**), but it was blissful rather than irritating.

8.2. Medium-frequency elliptical proverbs

Table 2. Article results in *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* for medium frequency elliptical proverbs

MF Elliptical Proverbs	Guardian	Telegraph
Once bitten, twice shy	59	35
Easy come, easy go	58	39
Nothing ventured, nothing gained	33	43

The elliptical proverb *Once bitten, twice shy*[3] shows at the same time both "internal parallelism and contrast" (Moon, 1998: 299). Interestingly enough the proverb does not function only as a coda, as shown in example (16), since it may function as the subject of a sentence as in (17) or as a subject complement as in (18):

(16) "Maybe I'm wrong because I've not met the person yet, I really don't think I'd want to be with someone in the industry. I really don't think so. **Once bitten, twice shy**."

(17) But **once bitten, twice shy** does not apply to recording giant EMI.

(18) Although new - and the government says, more generous - provisions have been introduced since then, the industry is **once bitten, twice shy**.

Easy come, easy go is a remarkable example of a proverbial saying that has an exact synonym in a well-known and lexically related adjective. In fact the phrase can perfectly replace the adjective *easy-going* in all instances where the hyphenated lexeme is used. This is clearly shown by the noun with which both the phrase and the adjective collocate, *attitude*.

(19) But, still, Alexander Lebedev seems remarkably **easy come, easy go** about his fortune.

(20) Whether in a relationship or not, they may have **a more "easy come, easy go" attitude** to commitment.

We have found no occurrences of the variant *Light come, light go*, something which contrasts with the pervasiveness of *Easy come, easy go* in the newspaper archives. This clearly shows both the insignificance of the former and the prevalence and popularity of the latter.

8.3. Low-frequency elliptical proverbs

Table 3. Article results in *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* for low frequency elliptical proverbs

Low frequency	Results GUA	Telegraph
Garbage in, garbage out	14	8
More haste, less speed	13	5
Least said, soonest mended	7	11

Garbage in, garbage out is a rather recent creation coming from the US as the use of the noun *garbage* (American word for *rubbish*) demonstrates. The meaning of this proverb is extremely close to the meaning of the traditional proverb *You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear* and appears to be replacing it in modern usage if we take into consideration the results obtained for both proverbs in the archives of *The Guardian*:

Garbage in, garbage out   *16*

You can't make a silk purse out of sow's ear   *6*

It should be noted that the proverb in question follows the well-established and long-standing pattern **N + in, N + out** as exemplified by *Ale in, wit out*. It is fairly obvious that the syntactic structure facilitates the use of the proverb as a word-like unit as illustrated in the following example:

> (21) John McFall, chair of the Treasury select committee, said too often investors, including pension funds, were the victims of **a "garbage in, garbage out" culture** that …

9. Conclusions

Paired parallel or elliptical proverbs such as *First come, first served* or *Out of sight, out of mind* are to be found quite frequently in journalistic discourse functioning inside the sentence as lexical items. Their not having an explicit verb form and the fact that their holistic meaning can be usually analyzable as a single-word unit expressing a certain type of attitude or human characteristic make them appropriate for being used in lower syntactic roles. There is a clear and growing tendency for these proverbs to be used in this type of discourse for stylistic purposes and as a means of introducing a more informal and popular register in the quality press.

Notes

1. Our selection of proverbs has been made from the *Oxford English Dictionary of Proverbs* (see references).

2. Their results show that 12 out of 15 occurrences of *First come, first served* are instantiated as *on a first come first served basis*.

3. The variant *Once smitten, twice shy* has just yielded one result, a variation by the substitution of one of the constituents for a synonymous term belonging to a more literary register found in a headline.

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Curriculum vitae

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