

## **THE PRAGMATICS OF PROVERBS IN ENGLISH DISCOURSE: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY**

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**Abstract:** Proverbs are succinct, metaphorical expressions of collective cultural wisdom that endure across genres and eras. This study examines the pragmatic functions of proverbs in English by examining their use in three distinct written genres: news articles, literary fiction, and social media posts. From a balanced dataset of real-world texts, over 400 instances of proverbs were identified and coded using a qualitative corpus-based approach. The results indicate that proverbs' functions—including persuasion, evaluation, amusement, and social alignment—differ substantially across genres, despite their consistent form. Proverbs are frequently used in news articles to reinforce arguments or provide moral commentary. In fiction, they are used to reflect interpersonal dynamics and develop characters. On social media, they are frequently recontextualized for the purpose of irony, humor, or identity performance. These findings verify that proverbs are not only conventional expressions, but also dynamic instruments for rhetorical and social discussions. The research makes a valuable contribution to the disciplines of pragmatics, discourse analysis, and corpus linguistics by providing a deeper understanding of how figurative language is able to adapt to the communicative objectives of a particular genre.

**Keywords:** Proverbs; Pragmatics; Corpus Linguistics; Figurative Language; News Discourse; Literary Fiction; Social Media; Discourse Analysis; Genre Variation; Language and Culture

**Introduction.** Language is a potent instrument for the expression of attitudes, the management of relationships, and the shaping of reality, in addition to serving as a means of conveying information. The proverb is a concise, metaphorical statement that embodies shared cultural wisdom, making it one of the most enduring and versatile forms of language. In English-speaking cultures, proverbs such as "The early bird catches the worm" and "Actions speak louder than words" are profoundly ingrained and are present in a diverse array of communicative contexts. The pragmatic function of proverbs in contemporary discourse, particularly in various types of written texts, is an area of research that has yet to be fully explored, despite the historical and literary significance that has long been acknowledged.

In pragmatics and discourse studies, there has been a recent surge in interest in figurative and formulaic language. Scholars such as Holmes (2008), Mieder (2004), and Wierzbicka (2003) have emphasized the cultural, rhetorical, and interpersonal functions of proverbial expressions. Proverbs are employed not only to impart moral judgment or wisdom, but also to commend, censure, persuade, entertain, or distance the speaker from an opinion. Nevertheless, these functions are context-dependent: the same proverb may serve a humorous purpose in a social media post, an evaluative purpose in a news article, or a narrative purpose in a novel.

Although proverbs are ubiquitous, the majority of research on them has concentrated on their structure, origin, or meaning, rather than their application in contemporary discourse genres. Proverbs are typically examined in oral contexts or as components of folklore traditions in existing research (Finnegan, 1992; Taylor, 1981). However, there is a vacuum in our comprehension of the pragmatic operation of proverbs in written English texts that vary in tone, audience, and communicative purpose. Researchers can observe the natural occurrence of proverb use in large, diverse text samples using a corpus-based approach. This approach reveals the linguistic patterns and pragmatic effects associated with each genre, in addition to the frequency and variation of their use.

By conducting an analysis of proverbs in three distinct categories of written English discourse—news articles, literary fiction (novels), and social media posts—this investigation aims to address a critical lacuna. The selection of these genres was based on their communicative objectives and divergent approaches. Novels are known for their ability to narrate and reflect the voice of their characters, while news articles are intended to inform and evaluate. Social media posts are frequently personal, dialogic, and emotionally expressive. By analyzing the functionality of proverbs in these genres, we can gain a more profound understanding of the ways in which context influences meaning and how proverbs are employed to fulfill a variety of pragmatic functions, including humor, criticism, argumentation, and solidarity.

Additionally, this investigation offers empirical evidence to substantiate theoretical assertions regarding the use of proverbs and emphasizes real-world patterns that may not be discernible in isolated examples or interviews, as a result of its corpus-based methodology.

The primary objective of this investigation is to investigate the pragmatic functions and effects of proverbs in various English text types through a corpus-based analysis.

Specifically, the objectives are as follows:

To determine the most frequently employed English proverbs in a variety of corpora, including news, fiction, and social media discourse.

To examine the pragmatic functions (e.g., humor, criticism, irony, persuasion) that proverbs fulfill in each genre.

To evaluate the framing, positioning, and interpretation of proverbs in various types of texts.

To investigate the correlation between the function of proverbs and the context of discourse.

The subsequent inquiries are addressed in this investigation:

1. What are the most frequently employed proverbs in news articles, novels, and social media posts?

2. In each genre of discourse, what pragmatic functions do proverbs serve?
3. In what ways do the context and framing of a proverb influence its rhetorical impact and interpretation?
4. In terms of proverb utilization, what patterns can be identified across genres?

The scope of this investigation is restricted to English-language texts and concentrates on a carefully chosen selection of three genres. The corpora consist of approximately:

One hundred news articles from prominent English-language news websites

Ten contemporary English novels (complete texts or selective chapters)

500 public social media posts, with a focus on Twitter and Facebook.

The analysis is limited to proverbs that are widely recognized in the English language, such as those from Mieder's (2004) database. Although the generalizability of the study may be restricted by the scale and selection of the corpus, it offers a comprehensive comparative framework and elucidates significant insights into the function of proverbs in real-world discourse.

**Literature Review.** The rich metaphorical content and socio-cultural significance of proverbs have long captivated linguists, folklorists, and cultural theorists. A proverb is a "short, generally known sentence of the folk that contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and easily memorable form," as defined by Mieder (2004). Proverbs frequently embody abstract values in concrete terms, rendering them effective instruments for evaluation, persuasion, and reasoning. Nevertheless, the meaning of proverbs is rarely unchanging; as Wierzbicka (2003) observes, they are profoundly ingrained in cultural frameworks and their interpretation is significantly influenced by pragmatic objectives and contextual clues.

Pragmatics, which is the study of language in use, offers a comprehensive framework for examining the manner in which proverbs are employed to execute actions in discourse. According to Holmes (2008), proverbs are classified as formulaic language that serves a variety of interpersonal and discourse functions, such as reinforcing solidarity, indirectly criticizing behavior, or asserting moral judgments without confrontation. This perspective is further bolstered by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which posits that proverbs frequently function as face-saving strategies, enabling speakers to express negative evaluations or disagreements more tactfully.

For example, a proverb such as "Don't count your chickens before they hatch" may be employed to provide advice and to discreetly critique imprudent confidence. In the same vein, the phrase "A leopard can't change its spots" may suggest resignation or judgment without the necessity of direct confrontation.

Corpus linguistics provides a data-driven approach to the examination of proverb usage in vast quantities of natural language data. Unlike conventional proverb studies, which frequently depend on literary or oral examples (Finnegan, 1992; Taylor, 1981), corpus-based approaches can disclose the frequency and manner in which proverbs are present in commonplace texts.

Moon (1998) was one of the first to systematically examine fixed expressions in corpora. She discovered that proverbs frequently appear in either modified or fragmented forms, which may complicate their identification. However, corpus analysis enables researchers to investigate the textual positioning of proverbs, syntactic flexibility, collocations, and patterns of usage—information that is not accessible through introspective methods.

Partington (2001) contends that corpora can also assist in the identification of discursual patterns, such as the likelihood of proverbs occurring in persuasive or evaluative contexts. Tognini-Bonelli (2001) underscores the potential of corpus data to elucidate pragmatic effects, including irony, stance-taking, and attitude markers, particularly when proverbs are metaphorically or creatively rephrased.

Diverse disciplines provide distinct opportunities for employing proverbs. In opinion pieces, editorials, and headings, proverbs are frequently employed in news discourse to summarize arguments, emphasize conclusions, or invoke moral authority. Bednarek (2006) posits that evaluative language in news is significantly influenced by shared cultural references, and proverbs are prominent examples of such references. Their utilization indicates that the speaker is in agreement with the audience's preconceived notions and strengthens rhetorical persuasiveness.

Proverbs are instrumental in the development of characters, the authenticity of the cultural setting, and the veracity of dialogue in fiction. Tannen (1989) observes that proverbs frequently disclose the worldviews of characters or function as indicators of social identity in literary dialogue. They are frequently employed by elder or more experienced characters to provide guidance or criticism to others, thereby reinforcing interpersonal dynamics.

The use of proverbs on social media is more spontaneous and innovative. Users frequently alter or modify proverbs for the purpose of political commentary, irony, or humor, as per Tagliamonte et al. (2014). Social media posts frequently capitalize on the intertextual nature of proverbs, utilizing them to establish a connection with audiences by leveraging shared linguistic familiarity, frequently with a humorous variation (e.g., "The early bird...forgot to set the alarm").

The following pragmatic functions of proverbs have been frequently identified across genres:

Persuasion: Presenting opinions or arguments as "common sense" (Holmes, 2008)

Evaluation: The act of either reinforcing or criticizing behavior, events, or ideas (Bednarek, 2006)

Irony or humor: Particularly in fiction or social media (Tagliamonte et al., 2014)

Marking group identity or values: Solidarity and cultural alignment (Tannen, 1989; Wiezbicka, 2003)

Softening face-threatening actions: Through indirect or mitigated speech acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

**Methodology.** This study employed a qualitative corpus-based design to analyze the pragmatic functions of proverbs in three types of written English discourse: news articles, literary fiction, and social media posts. A corpus-based approach allows for both frequency-based insights and contextual qualitative interpretation, making it suitable for investigating how proverbs are used in natural texts to perform specific communicative actions (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001).

**Data Collection.** Three mini-corpora were compiled between February and April 2025, consisting of a balanced sample of texts from each genre:

Genre Source Quantity

News Articles Online English newspapers (e.g., BBC, NY Times) 100 articles

Literary Fiction Contemporary novels (2000–2024) 10 full novels

Social Media Posts Public posts (Twitter/X, Reddit, Facebook) 500 posts

All texts were collected ethically, ensuring either public access or appropriate citation. Social media posts were filtered for English-language content and relevance (i.e., posts containing at least one common English proverb).

A list of 60 commonly used English proverbs (sourced from Mieder, 2004, and validated against online phrase databases) served as the search base. Examples include: “Actions speak louder than words,” “When in Rome,” “Better late than never,” and “You reap what you sow.”

**Data Processing and Coding.** Each corpus was processed using AntConc (Anthony, 2019), a free corpus analysis toolkit. Keyword and concordance tools were used to identify proverbs in context. The identified proverb instances were then manually coded for pragmatic function based on frameworks by Holmes (2008), Brown and Levinson (1987), and Bednarek (2006).

The following coding categories were applied:

Persuasion

Evaluation (positive/negative)

Irony/Humor

Solidarity/Cultural alignment

Face-saving (indirect speech)

Narrative structure (in fiction only)

Each instance of proverb use was tagged with metadata: genre, author/speaker, position in the text, surrounding context, and inferred intention. Coding reliability was confirmed by a second coder on a subset of 100 items (inter-rater agreement: 91%).

Data Analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques were used:

Frequency counts determined which proverbs were most commonly used in each genre.

Comparative analysis identified patterns in pragmatic function across genres.

Contextual discourse analysis was used to interpret each proverb's impact within its text (e.g., whether it softened criticism, added irony, or emphasized a point).

Examples were selected to illustrate key trends and were contextualized using genre norms. For instance, irony in social media was interpreted with attention to emojis, hashtags, or sarcasm markers, while moral alignment in news discourse was linked to editorial tone and argumentation style.

All data were collected from public or legally accessible sources. For social media, usernames and identifying information were anonymized. Literary texts were cited appropriately, and news sources were credited. The study did not involve interaction with human subjects and thus posed minimal ethical risk.

Limitations:

The study focused only on written English discourse, excluding spoken or multimodal communication.

The selected corpora may not be fully representative of all varieties of English (e.g., no regional variation was considered).

Modified or creatively altered proverbs (e.g., "Don't put all your memes in one basket") may have been missed by keyword searches.

As meaning is context-dependent, some pragmatic interpretations remain subjective despite careful coding.

**Results.** The corpus analysis uncovered both genre-specific and shared patterns in the pragmatic function and use of proverbs in news articles, literary fiction, and social media posts. The study identified 427 unambiguous instances of proverb usage in total: 138 in news articles, 122 in novels, and 167 in social media texts. Although a significant number of the same proverbs were present in all three genres, the rhetorical effects they produced and the functions they served varied significantly based on the discourse context.

Proverbs were frequently employed in editorial sections and opinion columns in news articles, as

opposed to in real news reporting. Their application was generally persuasive or evaluative. In order to emphasize political commentary or economic criticism, journalists implemented proverbs such as "You reap what you sow" or "Power corrupts." The author's argument was imbued with moral authority and a sense of collective reasoning as a result of these expressions. Proverbs were frequently used as framing devices to accentuate the primary point at the beginning or end of paragraphs. In this genre, the pragmatic function of proverbs was to assess social actions, caution against political errors, or express cautious optimism or apprehension, frequently using subtlety to align the reader with the writer's perspective.

Proverbs were most frequently encountered in dialogue in literary fiction, as opposed to narration. They were spoken by characters, typically elder, wiser, or culturally entrenched figures, and served a variety of purposes, including the provision of moral guidance, the establishment of character identity, and the communication of social norms. For example, in a novel that is set in a rural American community, a matriarch character frequently employs proverbs, such as "Don't cry over spilled milk," to provide guidance to younger characters. In addition to advancing the narrative, these instances of proverb use also disclosed generational values and interpersonal relationships. Thus, proverbs served as narrative instruments that enhanced the emotional intensity of interpersonal interactions, thematic resonance, and characterization in fiction.

In contrast, social media users frequently employed proverbs in a creative manner, either verbatim or by adapting them for a humorous or sardonic effect. Proverbs such as "The early bird catches the worm" were employed to make light of the practice of rising up late, while expressions like "Curiosity killed the cat" were occasionally rephrased to correspond with contemporary dilemmas or memeology. In contrast to news and fiction, proverbs on social media were frequently accompanied by sarcasm, emoticons, or hashtags, which indicated a more informal and performative application. Humor, irony, indirect criticism, and identity expression were the pragmatic functions that were most frequently employed in this genre. It is worth noting that users frequently participated in intertextual play, distorting or combining multiple proverbs to convey cultural awareness or wit.

Some unifying tendencies were observed, despite the genre distinctions. Proverbs were seldom explicated; their effectiveness was contingent upon their immediate recognition by the intended audience. Frequently, their placement in texts was used to emphasize or punctuate a main concept. In all disciplines, proverbs facilitated the projection of authority, the establishment of social alignment, and the expression of evaluations without overt confrontation by speakers and writers. Nevertheless, the communicative norms of the genre—whether it be the formality of journalism, the narrative richness of fiction, or the spontaneity of digital platforms—significantly influenced their function.

These results indicate that, despite the fact that proverbs are consistent in structure and semantic content, their pragmatic force is adaptable and dependent on the type of discourse. The significance of context in determining meaning and impact is underscored by the fact that the same proverb may be interpreted differently depending on its appearance in a newspaper column,

a fictitious exchange, or a tweet.

**Discussion.** The objective of this investigation was to investigate the pragmatic function of proverbs in several English-language discourse genres, including novels, news articles, and social media posts. The results indicate that proverbs' functions, tone, and effects are significantly influenced by the context in which they are used, despite the fact that they retain their metaphorical and culturally incorporated structures across all text types. These findings corroborate and supplement prior research in corpus linguistics and pragmatics.

The utilization of proverbs in news discourse is consistent with Bednarek's (2006) observations regarding journalism evaluation. Proverbs were employed by writers not only to inform, but also to subtly influence the perspectives of their readers. Invoking proverbs such as "You reap what you sow" by journalists, for instance, did not merely describe outcomes; they also assigned moral responsibility, thereby influencing the public's interpretation of political or economic events. This corroborates Holmes' (2008) assertion that proverbs can serve as evaluative and persuasive tools, particularly when presenters or writers endeavor to present an opinion as anchored in shared common sense.

Tannen's (1989) observation that formulaic expressions are essential for the development of culturally situated and credible characters is corroborated by the frequent use of proverbs in dialogue in literary fiction. Proverbs in novels not only conveyed wisdom or social norms, but also enriched the realism and depth of character interactions, particularly in relationships that were culturally marked or multigenerational. Wierzbicka (2003) argues that proverbs serve as cultural anchors, conveying both interpersonal roles and collective values, which is further supported by the use of these proverbs by elder or mentor characters.

The results from social media indicate that the use of proverbs has undergone a transformation that is indicative of the emergence of new communicative norms. In this context, proverbs were frequently rephrased in a frivolous, sardonic, or purposeful manner to achieve a humorous effect. Tagliamonte et al. (2014) observed that users on platforms such as Twitter frequently alter traditional sayings to remark on contemporary life in witty or sardonic ways. This is consistent with their findings. A form of creative intertextuality is the result, in which proverbs serve as both cultural touchstones and instruments for self-expression. This is consistent with Agha's (2007) perspective on language as a performative resource that enables individuals to mediate their identity and community membership.

The study supports the theory that context and audience influence meaning, a fundamental principle of pragmatics, in all three genres. The politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987) offers a valuable framework for comprehending the operation of proverbs as indirect speech acts. This theory enables speakers and writers to critique, advise, or praise while maintaining social harmony. Nevertheless, the extent of indirectness differs by genre. The utilization of proverbs in both fiction and news frequently serves to instruct or persuade the audience without alienating them. In short-form posts, the risk of misinterpretation may be greater due to the limited context provided, and the intent is more whimsical or sardonic on social media.

The results also make a valuable contribution to corpus linguistics by illustrating the importance of integrating frequency data with detailed qualitative analysis. Although certain high-frequency proverbs, such as "Better late than never," were present in all corpora, their function was not consistent. In fiction, it may convey forgiveness; in journalism, it may convey cautious optimism; and on social media, it may convey self-deprecating humor. This variation exemplifies Moon's (1998) assertion that corpus tools can reveal usage patterns, but meaning is only revealed through contextual interpretation.

In summary, the research substantiates the notion that proverbs are not predetermined in their functionality, despite their consistent form. Their pragmatic adaptability enables them to accommodate genre norms, audience expectations, and communicative objectives. This renders them not only enduring components of English discourse, but also potent instruments for social navigation in both traditional and contemporary settings.

In this corpus-based study, it has been demonstrated that proverbs in English are highly adaptable discourse tools that are employed across genres to fulfill a diverse array of pragmatic applications. Whether they are incorporated into the structured argumentation of news articles, the rich dialogue of novels, or the spontaneous, performative posts of social media, proverbs continue to serve as potent linguistic instruments that encode cultural values, direct interpersonal interaction, and conceptualize ideas with metaphorical clarity.

The research demonstrated that proverbs are most frequently employed to entertain, evaluate, persuade, or align the speaker or writer with the audience. The writer's stance is frequently reinforced and a shared judgment is sought in news discourse. In fiction, they disclose character characteristics and social relationships, whereas in social media, they symbolize humor, creativity, and identity. These distinctions underscore the importance of genre, audience, and communicative intent in determining the functionality of proverbs.

Proverbs are still pertinent in contemporary written communication, despite their extensive history. Their adaptability in terms of meaning and form implies that they will continue to develop in tandem with language usage. This research substantiates the importance of integrating pragmatic theory with corpus-based methods to comprehend the function of figurative language in real-world texts.

**Recommendation For Future Researchers:** Future research could investigate the application of proverbs in other discourse categories (e.g., legal language, advertising, spoken interviews) or in multilingual and intercultural contexts. Additionally, a longitudinal corpus could monitor the evolution of proverb usage over time, particularly in domains that are subject to rapid change, such as social media.

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