

## ARE PROVERBS DYING?

Sana' Ababneh<sup>1</sup>, Mohammed K. Al-Ajlouny<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Al-Balqa' Applied University, Jordan  
Phone: +962-795-211-332, E-Mail: sanabneh@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup>Yarmouk University, Jordan  
Phone: +962-795-577-758, majlouny@yahoo.com

**Abstract.** *This paper is aimed at investigating the issue whether proverbs are falling out of public usage. A field study is carried out to answer the questions of the study. A sample of Jordanian Arabic native speakers were asked to complete twenty unfinished proverbs and to give an appropriate proverb they would use in each of ten different situations described in a written questionnaire. The responses were graded to gauge the amount of knowledge the subjects have of proverbs. The subjects' gender was also considered to see whether gender has any effect on a speaker's amount of knowledge in this regard. The results show that males and females performed equally well displaying comparable knowledge. Age, on the other hand, is crucial: older people of both genders consistently knew more proverbs. This decline in knowledge of proverbs in younger people is not seen here as an indication that proverbs are 'dying'. Rather, the authors believe that the nature of proverbs as what might be considered complex lexical items may be the reason behind their acquisition coming later in life compared to productively-combined phrases which require less effort on the memory. However, the issue is not completely settled and further, large-scale research is needed to probe other issues of education beside these young people's knowledge of proverbs. They could be lagging behind older people in other aspects of knowledge as well.*

**Key words:** *Proverbs, Jordanian Arabic, complex lexical items, gender, language acquisition*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are brief, commonly used sayings of traditional wisdom with a relatively fixed form (cf., for example, Seitel 1984:145; Norrick 1985: 31 & 78 and Bakella 1984: 284). Speakers use proverbs hoping that they give a text which includes them the weight of traditional wisdom. The use of such sayings “conjures up in the mind of the reader or the hearer all the aspects of experience which are associated with the typical contexts in which the expression is used” (Baker 1992: 64). Therefore, when a speaker uses a proverb in talking to other speakers, it is like saying to them, “This is not my personal view; this is the view of wiser people who have already discovered and accepted the wisdom of this saying.” (Cf. El-Yasin and Shehabat 2005:162).

Proverbs continue to be considered an effective means to spread knowledge, wisdom and truth about life from ancient times up till today (Hanze'n, 2007: 1), especially that they are economic means of expression since they compress a traditionally agreed upon

idea into what can be seen as a shorthand phrase or sentence standing for a much larger text. Hanze'n (2007:1) quotes Mieder who asserts that proverbs "belong to the common knowledge of basically all native speakers, [and, therefore,] they are indeed very effective devices to communicate wisdom and knowledge about human nature and the world at large." Proverbs are effective tools of persuasion and, as such, they have been used by men of letters, politicians (1), etc. (Mieder [2008:89]) as well as by common people to enhance the power of their language.

The present study derives its significance to sociolinguistics, pragmatics and foreign language teaching from the important role proverbs play in language use. Since proverbs are an essential part of language, they have to be understood and, hence, taught in any effective program of language teaching.

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

"Proverbs [having] always played a major role in human communication, be it in oral or written form" (Mieder 2005: 1), one expects them to continue to exist as long as there is language. But there are many who claim that proverbs are losing ground in modern society in the sense that they are passing out of usage. The present authors disagree and would rather accept the opinion of scholars like Mieder (1993: xi) who refutes this position insisting that "proverbs are certainly not dead." Mieder reiterates the same position later when he says that "proverbs as traditional expressions of human wisdom are here to stay for generations to come" (Mieder, 2005: 1).

This paper is an attempt to investigate this issue in the Jordanian Arabic context to find out whether proverbs are actually 'dying'. A field study was conducted for the purposes of this paper. It is hoped that the extent to which proverbs survive in the Jordanian Arabic context can be gauged and whether the loss or the preservation of proverbs is related to other factors such as age and gender.

## 3. QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

This study aims to find answers for the following questions:

- (i) Are the subjects of this study familiar with the Arabic proverbs mentioned in the Questionnaire ?
- (ii) Are there any significant differences between the subjects' responses to the Questionnaire statements that could be attributed to the difference in their gender?
- (iii) Are there any significant differences between the subjects' responses to the Questionnaire statements that could be attributed to the difference in their age?

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. Sample of the study

One thousand Jordanians were asked to complete the instrument of the study. This sample of a thousand people, both male and female, was a varied group of native speakers of Jordanian Arabic consisting of university professors and students of different academic levels,

secondary school students, shop assistants and owners of different kinds of shops, university and government administrative personnel etc. The variety was intended to give a more realistic assessment of the situation since the aim of the study is to describe native knowledge, and this knowledge is not exclusive to any special group; *all* native speakers are expected to know proverbs as part of their repertoire of mother tongue regardless of education or any other factor.

This variety made it necessary that the sample be large enough to guarantee proper representation. In order to have a reasonably representative number in each of the various groups, the total number of the whole sample is necessarily large. One hundred and thirty forms were not completed properly, so they were discarded. The returned forms were filled by four hundred males and four hundred and seventy females. The breakdown of the two groups into their different age groups is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Number, gender and age of the subjects.

Males			Females		
15-20 yrs	21-25 yrs	26 and above	15-20 yrs	21-25 yrs	26 and above
190	100	110	175	240	55
400			470		

#### 4.2. Instrument of the study

To check the truth of the claim that proverbs are ‘dying’, and to see whether factors like age and gender interact with the preservation or the loss of proverbs, a number of what different scholars (e.g. Al-Amad [2008]) list as common Jordanian, or more generally Arabic, proverbs were compiled. In addition, we, as native speakers of Jordanian Arabic, added a number of what we think are common Jordanian proverbs. Based on this collection, a questionnaire was designed to be given to a sample of speakers of Jordanian Arabic. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. In Part 1 the subjects were asked to give their gender and their age. Age was indicated by choosing from three categories: from 15 to 20 years old, from 21 to 25 and 26 years and above. In Part 2 the respondents were asked to complete twenty unfinished proverbs. In Part 3 they were asked to give a proverb they would use in each of ten different situations described in the questionnaire. It might be worth mentioning here that some of these proverbs belong completely to the spoken dialect while others come from the more formal standard Arabic but are still in use in natural conversation where colloquial forms are expected rather than standard ones. So both types were treated as Jordanian Arabic.

#### 4.3. Data collection and analysis procedures

The researchers distributed the three-part questionnaire to the subjects, explained the purpose of the study and one of them was present with the respondents while they filled the forms to answer any questions that might arise.

A number of measures were taken to obtain as large a sample as possible to guarantee reasonably reliable results. The first author, a university professor of English, distributed copies of the questionnaire to her students at Al-Husn University College, Al-Balqa’ Applied University, to fill, collecting thus about 200 responses. In addition, she interviewed her forty-odd colleagues. The second author, also a university professor of English and linguistics,

would carry a number of copies of the questionnaire in his briefcase and seize any opportunity to interview any targeted subject who seemed to have some time to answer the questions whether the interviewee be a colleague in his/her office hours, a shop assistant at a supermarket or a waiter at a coffee shop, or a restaurant. The researcher would read the questions and take down the answers to save some time. In addition, he asked his 150 students at the time to fill the questionnaire. The process took place during the academic year 2015/2016.

The filled forms were corrected as follows: a correctly-completed proverb in Part 2 was given one point adding up to twenty points for correct answers on the whole part. A response that is not literally as expected but which gives equivalent meaning was considered a correct one. For example, (1a) and (1b) were given (by different respondents) instead of the correct proverb (1c) and were given a point each.

- 1.a. maa kullu maa yatamanna l-mar'u *yataHaqqaq*  
Not all that wish-(HE) the-man materialize  
'Not all that one wishes gets realized'.
- b. maa kullu ma yatmanna l-mar'u *HaSil*  
... .. realized  
'Not all that one wishes becomes a reality'
- c. maa kullu maa yatamanna lmar'u *yudrikuhu*  
... .. get(HE)-it  
'Not all that one wishes one gets (it)'.

(The respondents were asked to give the italicized word, the rest being already given in the Questionnaire.)

In Part 3 one point was awarded to an appropriate proverb given to fit the situation described in the ten cases adding up to a maximum of ten points. As in Part 2, a close response was accepted as correct. (2a) and (2b) were accepted for the expected (2c).

- 2.a. laa tguul fuul Hatta tHuTT bi-li-'duul  
Not say fava-beans till you-put in-the-sacks  
'Do not say (you've got) fava beans till you've put (it) in the sacks'.  
(That is, 'Don't count your chicken before they hatch!')
- b. laa tguul fuul la-tHuTT bi-l-makyuul  
... .. till-you-put in-that-which-has-been-measured  
'Do not say (you've got) fava beans till you've put (it) with what you have already measured (i.e., your crop)'.
- c. laa tguul fuul ta-tHuTT bi-li-'duul  
... .. till-you-put ...

In (2a) the fuller form *Hatta* is used instead of the more common *ta-* and in (2b) *la-*, which has an equivalent meaning to *ta-*'s, is used. Both responses were treated as correct especially because the respondents have given the first part (*laa tguul fuul ...*) correctly although no cue was given in the description of the situation given in the Questionnaire. The description of the situation in this particular item translates as *What would you say to someone in order not to rejoice at having something until he's sure he's got it?*

After the forms have been corrected, the mean scores and the percentages of the subjects' responses on Part 2 and 3 of the Questionnaire were computed to find out if there were any differences between the responses due to gender or age of the respondent as well as to the type of the task they were asked to do. Table 2 gives the results of this grading process. Table 3 compares the males' and the females' results considered separately from each other regardless of age.

Table 2 Scores of the different groups on Part 2 and 3 of the Questionnaire.

	Males			Females		
	15 -20 yrs	21-25 yrs	26 and above	15-20 yrs	21-25 yrs	26 and above
Score on Part 2	10.9/20	12.4/20	17.4/20	11.4/20	13/20	15.7/20
Score on Part 3	3.9/10	4/10	6.3/10	3.5/10	5.1/10	6.4/10

Table 3 Male and female scores compared.

	Males	Females
Score on Part 2	13.063/20	12.719/20
Score on Part 3	4.585/10	4.657/10

## 5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Considering our first research question, Are the subjects of this study familiar with the Arabic proverbs mentioned in the questionnaire, we can see that the subjects' knowledge of the proverbs under investigation is not up to the standard implied in the definition of proverbs being traditional sayings in common use in the speech community. One should expect higher scores than those in Table 3 where the overall performance of the whole sample averages about 12.9 points out of 20 (13.063 for males and 12.719 for females) on Part 2 and about 4.6 out of 10 (4.585 for males and 4.657 for females) on Part 3. In other words, the sample scored about 65% on the completion task and about 46% on the choice of an appropriate proverb in a given situation—not very good performance for “traditional sayings in common use” which “belong to the common knowledge of basically all native speakers”, to use Mieder's words quoted in Hanze'n (2007: 1).

Moving on to our second research question, Are there any significant differences between the subjects' responses to the questionnaire statements that could be attributed to the difference in their gender, we find this question answered with a clear No in our data. There are no significant differences between males and females in their overall performance indicating equal familiarity with proverbs. Table 3 shows that in both Part 2 and Part 3 of the questionnaire, males and females had very close results: 13.088 compared to 12.721 out of 20 on Part 2 and 4.64 compared to 4.67 out of 10 on Part 3. Even if one looks at the performance of the different age groups in Table 2, the numbers of the two genders are still comparable. Table 4 rearranges the numbers in Table 2 to put the females' numbers below the males' numbers for the purpose of easier comparison. Not only is the overall performance of males and females comparable, but the performance of each age group taken separately from other age groups shows comparable results for the two genders as well.

Table 4 Table 2 rearranged

		15-20 yrs	21-25 yrs	21-25 yrs
Score on Part 2	Males	10.9/20	12.4/20	12.4/20
	Females	11.4/20	13/20	13/20
Score on Part 3	Males	3.9/10	4/10	4/10
	Females	3.5/10	5.1/10	5.1/10

The age difference is the subject of our third question - Are there any significant differences between the subjects' responses to the questionnaire statements that could be attributed to the difference in their age? Again either Table 2 or Table 4 (Table 2 Rearranged) will be the table to consult. Clearly, as we move higher along the age axis, the concerned scores get consistently higher. In other words, older speakers know more proverbs. It could be argued that this finding is an indication that proverbs are actually dying since newer generations' knowledge of proverbs is not as good as that of the older groups and if the trend continues later generations will even fewer proverbs than those who are now the young generation. This conclusion seems to contradict some scholars' (e.g. Mieder 2005:1) insistence that proverbs are going to continue to be an important part of language speakers' repertoire.

However, one can advance an alternative explanation: as people grow older they acquire more proverbs. Proverbs are acquired as chunks and are not created by combining smaller units together in a productive manner. Being what would be considered complex lexical units, they are more difficult to memorize and, therefore, acquiring them comes late compared to made-up phrases which require memorizing shorter items and combining them together productively. This causes younger speakers to have a smaller repertoire of proverbs. The results reported in Tables 2 and 4 become natural

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Our data have shown that the gender of the speaker does not seem to affect his or her knowledge of proverbs. In all three age groups the performance of both males and females is comparable: 10.9 out of 20 for males is not much different from 11.4 out of 20 for females in the 15-20 yrs. age group; 12.4 is close to 13 in 21-25 age group and 17.4 is comparable to 15.7 in the 26 and above age group though the difference here is the largest but the overall trend is consistent.

Age, however, seems a factor: older speakers know more proverbs. Whether this tendency is an indication that proverbs are losing ground in modern society is an unsettled question. It is possible that the nature of proverbs' acquisition is a reason why they come later in life. Further research is needed to settle this question and one possibility might be to test these younger speakers' general knowledge not only their knowledge of proverbs. Their general education could be lacking in other areas of knowledge: it might be a case of overall apathy to general education not to proverbs alone. This is a huge project beyond the capacity of single authors or small groups of authors.

There are factors to make us hesitate to accept the fact that proverbs are dying as the data would superficially indicate. The fact that speakers come up with their own innovations by adding to exiting proverbs or omitting parts of some proverbs or coming up with a

phrase that sounds like a proverb or even echoes an existing one is evidence that proverbs constitute a living phenomenon so vital to the speakers of the language that it cannot die. Witness the presence and creation of what has been termed ‘anti-proverbs’ (Mieder and Litovkina 2003:3; see also Abu Al-Rub 2010 for a study of anti-proverbs in Arabic). Anti-proverbs have the potential of becoming proverbs proper in their own right—a source of renewal rather than decay. Other phenomena pointing to liveliness of proverbs include their use in mass media (e.g. Farghal and Al-Hamly [2010]) and in literature and political discourse (see Mieder [2008: 89]). One is tempted to agree that proverbs “are here to stay” (Mieder 2005:1), in spite of any conclusion to the contrary.

(1) A quick look at the Table of Contents of Mieder’s *Proverbs are the Best Policy* (2005) gives an idea of the extent to which politicians have used proverbs in their speeches for purposes of persuasion.

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