

RELEVANCE THEORY AND PROVERBS: EXPLORING CONTEXT THROUGH
EXPLICATURES AND IMPLICATURES

by

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Abstract

Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995) is a theory of communication which states that the human brain is geared towards processing relevant stimuli for little effort. While proponents of Relevance Theory have endeavored to explain various linguistic phenomena such as metaphor, irony, sarcasm, and idioms, there has been little work done on the proverb. The current thesis fills in this gap within Relevance Theory by applying Relevance-Theoretic principles to the interpretation of proverbs in context. This study explains how proverb meaning carries both a base meaning as well as an implicated meaning in context, with the use of Relevance Theory's explicatures and implicatures. In addition, this thesis makes use of ad hoc concept formation (Wilson & Carston 2007) to account for meaning modulation and contrasts the analysis of proverbs under Relevance Theory with Vega-Moreno's (2003) analysis of idioms under Relevance Theory.

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1. Introduction

They say that *a picture is worth a thousand words* and if that were truly the case, this thesis would be complete with only a slideshow. Proverbs have a way of giving a general truth in a terse and poetic manner even though the speakers of the language know they are not applicable in every situation. It takes someone with wisdom to utter the right proverb at the right time; so says Lord John Russell: proverbs are “the wisdom of many and the wit of one” (Taylor 1962: 3). The use of the proverb *a picture is worth a thousand words* carries a general meaning (the wisdom of many; images communicate a lot with a little) and a specific application in a specific context (the wit of one). This will be the main thrust of the thesis, to explain how proverbs carry meaning in context.

Proverbs are (relatively) fixed, poetic phrases which typically offer a nugget of some culturally approved wisdom. By way of example, here are several common English proverbs presented in (1).

- (1) a. Look before you leap.
- b. He who hesitates is lost.
- c. Out of sight, out of mind.
- d. Absence makes the heart grow fonder.
- e. Don't judge a book by its cover.
- f. Birds of a feather flock together.
- g. Where there's smoke there's fire.
- h. The bigger they come, the harder they fall.

While it may be easy for a native speaker of English to identify the meaning of each of these proverbs, there are in fact several layers of meaning that become apparent on closer examination.

Perhaps a proverb from another language will highlight this more clearly: consider the following proverb in (2) from Tshiluba (Niger-Congo; Ku-Mesu 1996: 110).

(2) The bean is destroyed by the very insect that lives in it.

Ku-Mesu presented several African proverbs such as the proverb in (2) to a group of participants from around the world who had no prior knowledge of the cultures from which the proverbs came. If you were to guess at the meaning of (2), what would you say? The responses in (3) represent some of the responses of Ku-Mesu's participants (1996: 110-111). Only one of them is correct.

- (3)
- a. Man is his own enemy.
 - b. You will be harmed by the very person that is closest to you.
 - c. We are responsible for the environment ... in which we live.

Ku-Mesu's study brings up several interesting observations that pertain to the current thesis. First, notice how each of the responses in (3) are more literal than the proverb given in (2). People often give a literal paraphrase of metaphorical proverbs; the base meaning of a proverb is more literal than its original form.

The given interpretations fell into three categories (individualistic, environmental, or communal) each of which is represented by the responses in (3). Each of these interpretations could be appropriate if the proverb is uttered in isolation; the participants, in their search for relevance (see Chapter 2), came up with a solution that satisfied their expectations of what the proverb meant. However, cultural context is such an important factor here, that two of the three categories of interpretation would be deemed incorrect (individualistic and environmental). The correct response is (3b). There is an appropriate traditional meaning within the culture that the proverb comes from and this "cultural information is needed to accurately formulate the base

meaning” (Aasland 2012: 138). This is the common cultural understanding (see Aasland 2012) that is necessary for a phrase (or proverb) to enter the lexicon with a smaller set of meanings than would otherwise be expected.

In addition to the importance of cultural context, Ku-Mesu’s (1996) study also shows the importance of situational context. In some of their responses, participants of her study attempted to create a context in which each proverb would be properly understood. With proverb use, there will often be an application of the general truth to a particular situation, and so the participants of the study made artificial situational contexts to explain the meaning of some of the proverbs.

The layers of meaning briefly sketched in the discussion of this proverb can be explained by Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1996). While Relevance Theory has been used to describe many other linguistic phenomena such as metaphor, idioms, irony, and sarcasm, proponents of the theory have not ventured very far into the territory of proverbs. Relevance Theory is a pragmatic theory which theorizes that humans are guided by a search for relevance, seeking adequate cognitive effects (that is, adjustments to the hearer’s representation of the world; Clark 2013: 77-78) for little effort, generally speaking. In doing so, communication requires that hearers interpret each utterance to arrive at premises and conclusions that align with their search for relevance. This includes both explicit and implicit information communicated by an utterance, both of which are essential when it comes to understanding proverbs. By applying Relevance-Theoretic principles to the interpretation of proverbs in context this thesis attempts to provide a robust account of the pragmatic use of proverbs.

There have been a few articles within Relevance Theory that mention proverbs. Of these, several of them (see Wilson 2009, Pegulescu 2016, and El-Bahy 2019) are focused on translating

proverbs from other languages. Each of these authors uses Relevance Theory as a backdrop but does not provide the depth of application that will be done in this thesis.

I will mention two studies related to Relevance Theory here: Ramírez (2015) and Soi (2014). Ramírez (2015) notes rightly that there has been little application of Gricean pragmatics and other pragmatic theories to the analysis of proverbs. However, Ramírez does not discuss implicatures and explicatures (see Section 2.3, this thesis) as I do here; Ramírez instead focuses on how utterances of proverbs should be relevant enough to achieve appropriate cognitive effects such as to criticize, to advise, and to warn (2015: 19). A study by Soi (2014) has a more detailed application of Relevance Theory to proverb use; however, her perspective has a different range of focus, commenting on the aspects of proverbs that make them more or less relevant: recency of use, frequency of use, linguistic complexity, and logical complexity (2014: 91). I will be making much more specific claims than the studies that have come before when it comes to meaning modulation and understanding proverbs in context.

1.1 A note on data

Data sets are vital to arguing for the acceptance or rejection of a hypothesis. Since this paper is largely theoretical, it will focus on a smaller set of examples in order to explain different facets of the theory. Chapter 4 contains the application of the theoretical framework to the interpretation of proverbs and thus contains data from several sources. Some data come from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; Davies 2008-), a few are created, and several other proverb examples in context are the result of ethnographic work of proverb scholars. In order to be effective in persuasion, all data in that chapter will be given a sufficient context in order to increase the validity of each point argued.

The majority of the data will be English proverbs. This is because the understanding of proverbs often relies on an implicit knowledge of their meaning in the culture; the lexicalization of overly used phrases (e.g. proverbs) sometimes results in interpretations that do not rely on the form of the phrase. This is a key aspect of my theory and thus, in order to retain the validity of my argument, the data will be in the mother tongue of the author. However, several examples will be offered in other languages (see Section 4.5) as a point of comparison.

1.2 Overview of the paper

Chapter 2 of this thesis, “Relevance Theory,” lays the theoretical foundations for the analysis of proverbs. It begins with the roots of Gricean pragmatics (Grice 1957, 1975) and explains the potential advantages that Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995) has over the Gricean approach in the analysis of metaphor, loose talk, and proverbs.

Chapter 3 “Proverbs” is our introduction to the meaning of *proverb*. It will discuss what a proverb is, what it is not, and explain some characteristics and structural features of proverbs. Of note, this chapter gives an overview of other theoretical frameworks for explaining proverbs (where some are more thorough than others) with a focus on pragmatic theories. I will not be dealing with speech acts of proverbs; for a good summary of speech acts and proverbs see Jesenšek (2014).

Chapter 4 “Applying Relevance Theory to proverbs” is the culmination of the research done on this thesis. It will explain my theoretical propositions for the interpretation of proverbs using Relevance Theory to a degree that has not yet been done under the theory. My own contributions include how proverbs should be understood under Relevance Theory and how proverbs compare to idioms under Relevance Theory. In short, I will discuss how proverbs are similar to and different from idioms, how proverbs are understood as metaphors, and how ad hoc

concept formation (Wilson & Carston 2007) plays a significant role in meaning modulation. I will also make use of Ariel's (2002, 2008) Privileged Interactional Interpretation, which is the meaning that a speaker is committed to in context, independent of the form of the utterance.

Chapter 5 "Conclusion" offers the summary of the thesis, thoughts on limitations of the current study, and future directions for possible research.

2. Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory, developed by Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995), is a cognitive theory of communication which attempts to explain all forms of communication, both explicit and implicit. It assumes that the salience (or relevance) of stimuli in a communication act influences the hearer's interpretation of a speaker's utterance. The relevant stimuli can range from word choice to intonation to context – anything that may affect the interpretation of the utterance. Relevance Theory explains how we understand utterances, especially when they are incomplete or when they deviate from a more literal reading. In Relevance Theory, *literal* is taken to mean an utterance that has the “same propositional form as [a speaker's] thought” (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 233; cf. pp. 231-237). As we will see in our discussion on loose talk (Section 2.1.2), the propositional form of an utterance is not always the same as the propositional form of the speaker's thought. The current chapter will offer a summary of Relevance Theory and argue that it is sufficient to deal with the phenomenon of proverbs.

To begin with, there are many pragmatic theories and not all of them are equal. Perhaps the most influential contribution to the field is that of Grice (1957, 1975) who broke away from discussing language as a code, using strict rules to encode and decode messages, and into something Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995: 2) call an inferential model, based on the interpretation of evidence. This chapter begins with some theoretical roots of Relevance Theory which can be seen in Grice. Section 2.1 will give an account of Gricean pragmatics and its contribution to linguistics. Grice's theory was a fundamental shift in developing a discussion of everyday meaning; however, it will not prove adequate to examining proverbs. Section 2.2 of this chapter will discuss Relevance Theory's response to Gricean pragmatics and how it evolved out of an attempt to improve it. The theory is a post-Gricean pragmatic theory since Sperber and Wilson have largely replaced Grice's maxims rather than merely revising them (Clark 2013).

Section 2.3 gets into the details of explicatures and implicatures within Relevance Theory which are pragmatically derived interpretations of an utterance.

2.1 A post-Gricean theory

Grice's contributions to the philosophy of language had a profound impact for pragmatics and the importance of inference in meaning understanding. He first came onto the scene in 1957 with an article titled "Meaning", discussing the ways in which the meaning derived through communication is inherently different than the meaning that one would derive naturally in the world. An example of this natural meaning would be when we infer that clouds mean rain or that red splotches on the skin mean a rash. This natural meaning has nothing to do with an intention to communicate. When Grice talks about meaning and language, he is referring to intentional communication which he calls non-natural meaning.

In 1957 we see the beginnings of his developments of the Cooperative Principle and for rules governing the transmission of information between human beings. Meaning is a form of cooperation between participants in addition to the propositional forms the utterance may represent. Although he holds that the propositional, logical form is still the underlying form, he develops maxims of communication to account for the apparent discrepancy in what is spoken and what is meant. His analysis attempts to solve the 'problem' of literal meaning, something which is key in our understanding of proverbs. In Section 2.1.1, we will discuss some of the details and examples of Grice's principles and maxims and Section 2.1.2 will show Sperber and Wilson's response.

2.1.1 The Cooperative Principle and its maxims

This is the heart and foundation of Grice's communication theory: the Cooperative Principle, shown in (4).

- (4) Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice 1975: 45)

The idea is that speakers and hearers are generally cooperative in speaking to one another in order to communicate meaning. We typically want to have our utterances understood and to understand others. In support of this, Grice lists four super-maxims (along with several submaxims) that explain the dimensions along which this cooperation should take place. These can be either adhered to or flouted (i.e. violated) depending on the communication act. It is possible to think of scenarios in which a person will not be following the Cooperative Principle (for example, lying or outbursts of emotion), but Grice is, for the most part, making a theory about the average, typical conversations that we deal with every day.

The first super-maxim is that of Quantity which has the following submaxims in (5):

- (5) a. Make your contribution as informative as required.
b. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (Grice 1975: 45)

Quantity has to do with saying the appropriate amount in the given context; there is some flexibility in this, but in general it is considered bad form to be too wordy or too tacit (apparently despite the wide variety of differences amongst people). This may prove a problem for proverbs which are pithy in nature and carry a lot of meaning in few words.

Quality is the second super-maxim and it has to do with truthfulness. (6) shows its submaxims.

- (6) a. Do not say what you believe to be false.
b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. (Grice 1975: 46)

The maxim of Quality would also apply to figurative language (which is literally false) and to loose speech (e.g. *I'll be there in 5 minutes*). In both of these cases, the maxim of Quality is violated.

The supermaxim of Relation is underdeveloped, as admitted by Grice. While he states that he was wanting to work on making this maxim more robust and clear (1975: 46), he never did so. The submaxim is simply (7),

(7) Be relevant (Grice 1975: 46)

which accounts for certain odds and ends in a communication exchange that have to do with the context. One expects a conversation to stay on topic, for example.

Lastly, we come to the supermaxim of Manner. The list of its submaxims, given in (8), is not an exhaustive list and can be summarized with one word: clarity.

(8) a. Avoid obscurity of expression.

b. Avoid ambiguity.

c. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

d. Be orderly. (Grice 1975: 46)

This is all well and good; we now have some guiding principles that can offer insight into how people communicate and how people are expected to interpret an utterance. The problem arises, however, in that many utterances do not follow the maxims given by Grice, especially proverbs. For example, proverbs may violate the maxim of Quantity by saying too little, violate the maxim of Quality by using a metaphor that is literally untrue, violate the maxim of Relation by seemingly being off-topic, and/or violate the maxim of Manner by not being clear enough in the context. Ramírez (2015: 13) notes that Grice will have a hard time in accounting for proverbs due to how often his maxims would be violated.

This is where Grice develops the idea of flouting maxims, that is, purposefully violating one of his maxims or submaxims for an intended effect. The most common examples of this are utterances of irony and metaphor. For Grice, these utterances clearly flout Quality (truthfulness) because irony and metaphor are for the most part literally untrue. When a speaker intentionally

flouts a maxim in this way, they are still seen to be adhering to the Cooperative Principle overall and thus the hearer must discern why the words uttered are untrue and in turn come up with a satisfactory interpretation of the utterance. Some would call this approach elegant (e.g. Ludlow 2014) whereas Wilson & Sperber (1981) argue that a simpler approach is not only possible but would also be clearer. One of the reasons that Grice's maxims are necessary in his framework is because he takes utterances to be fully propositional and literal in their base form.

Through an understanding of the maxims, we can arrive at an appropriate pragmatic deduction of a given utterance. Consider Grice's famous example of the interchange in (9):

- (9) A: I am out of petrol.
B: There is a garage around the corner. (Grice 1975: 51)

Here, B's utterance appears to be violating both Quantity (not enough information) and Relation (not responding directly to the issue of no petrol); the hearer can assume that B does not, in fact, intentionally violate these maxims. If A believes that B is cooperative, then she can interpret B's utterance to be enough information for her and to be relevant, (i.e. that the garage around the corner is open and has petrol). This would be pragmatic inference.

Some linguists have attempted to create a more robust theory that is still based on Grice's philosophy (e.g. Levinson (1983) and Horn (1989)). These are Neo-Gricean approaches; the essence of Neo-Gricean approaches is that they retain Grice's assumptions while attempting to improve the description of his Cooperative Principle and maxims. Post-Gricean approaches, by contrast, attempt to address the same problems as Grice, such as literal meaning and inference, but do so with a different approach and with different base assumptions. For example, Relevance Theory focuses on the salience of stimuli in a conversational act whereas the Cooperative Principle focuses on the social intentions of adhering to or flouting a linguistic moral code. It is to Relevance Theory that our discussion now turns.

2.1.2 A response to Grice

Several years before the publication of *Relevance*, Wilson & Sperber's (1981) article "On Grice's theory of conversation" was an initial response to Grice. They were intrigued by Grice's account despite having several fundamental questions and claiming that "it seems to us that its detail needs considerable modification if any further progress is to be made" (1981: 155).

However, the broad strokes of Grice's theory greatly influenced their work.

While the importance of Grice's contribution to the field is not to be underestimated, there was still something lacking in going forward with the theory. This is in part due to the foursome of maxims which are neither robust nor completely well-defined. One of Wilson & Sperber's main goals was to reduce the maxims to one Principle. And so, they began with this definition of a communicative principle: "the speaker has done his best to be maximally relevant" (1981: 170). Their claim was that all of Grice's maxims could be subsumed under this one.

The problems with the maxims arise when they are contemplated more fully. To begin with, the maxim of Quantity is vague because it doesn't describe the amount or type of information that is required in an utterance. It would mean that if there are two utterances which have the same propositional meaning or the same semantic meaning and one is longer, then the shorter of the two will be chosen. How is this amount to be measured? Syllables? Time? Complexity? Consider (10) from Wilson & Sperber (1981: 173).

- (10) a. Peter is married to Madeleine.
 b. It is Peter who is married to Madeleine.

While the propositions remain the same, (10b) is slightly longer and so, under the Cooperative Principle, (10a) should be uttered due to the maxim of Quantity. However, there is a reason that

(10b) is longer; it brings *Peter* into focus. We can assume that, instead of violating the maxim of Quantity, the speaker is being maximally relevant in the current interchange. Consider also (11).

(11) a. The baby is eating arsenic!

b. The baby is putting arsenic into his mouth, chewing and swallowing it! (Ibid.)

While (11b) might be severely odd, we would understand (through Relevance) that the only reason for adding extra detail in (11b) is that somehow in the context, the description of the activity of eating is more relevant than not saying it. Even if Grice would interpret this as flouting a maxim to generate an effect, it is still more succinct to hypothesize that relevance is the crucial factor here. The other maxims could be interpreted as following a Relevance-Theoretic approach as well. For example, one of the sub-maxims of Manner (avoid ambiguity) is unnecessary because utterances will always have some amount of ambiguity – that’s the point of doing pragmatics in the first place. The other sub-maxim “be brief” also falls into a problem of how it should be measured, like Quantity above. The maxim of Relation (i.e. be relevant) speaks for itself.

The other maxim that Relevance Theory can subsume is Quality. Wilson (1995) breaks down the approach to Grice’s maxim of Quality which is the most important within the theory according to Grice (Wilson 1995: 197). She asks in challenge to Grice whether or not there is indeed any such maxim at all. The obvious problems are with metaphor, jokes, and fiction. Grice does have an account for these through suspended violation (fiction) and overt violation (jokes and metaphor) of his maxims. Instead, Wilson asks the following question: “If figurative language violates a basic principle of communication, why does [figurative language] arise naturally, spontaneously and universally?” (1995: 201). Proverbs, likewise, are uttered without effort.

While the examples of metaphor and fiction have to be accounted for in Grice's framework, there is at least an explanation for them. However, there are other examples on the fringes which still prove to be problematic within the Gricean framework. Wilson cites (12) through (14) as utterances which are neither fictional nor metaphorical yet also violate the maxim of Quality (1995: 204). Each of these is what Wilson would call an example of loose talk.

(12) Holland is flat.

(13) Jane's face was oval.

(14) The lecture started at 8:00.

Each of the above utterances is not true in a strictly literal sense; in (12), the literal interpretation depends on the meaning of *flat*. It is impossible for an entire country to be perfectly flat, yet this utterance is not difficult to understand. There must be some adjustment of the concept FLAT in order to arrive at the appropriate interpretation which might be something along the lines of *Holland is relatively flat when compared to other countries, Holland is not a mountainous country*, etc. There are some features of countries which categorize them as flat without being literally flat as in a two-dimensional plane. In (13), Jane's face is likewise not an identical representation of *oval* but more of an approximation. In addition, (14) can be seen as an approximation as well and can violate the maxim of Quality quite easily. If the lecture started at 8:03, the speaker could utter (14) without much thought since it is easier to do so – a path of least resistance if you will. In fact, it may be seen as more relevant to utter (14) because it causes less processing effort for the hearer than would a more exact time.

Wilson responds to these loose examples with the following: "instead of saying that ... the proposition literally expressed by an utterance must be *identical* to a thought of the speaker's ... we claim that the proposition expressed must merely *resemble* this thought to some degree"

(1995: 208). In Relevance Theory, we choose the most accessible interpretation. This explanation also allows for loose talk such as in (12) through (14). As we will see in Chapter 4, proverbs also have a degree of loose talk. A good pragmatic theory needs to be able to explain this type of loose talk and this is a case where Grice seems to come up short.

2.2 Summary of Relevance Theory

This section will give an overview of Relevance Theory in order to discuss how it may be useful in interpreting proverbs. It should be stated that Relevance Theory is, at its core, a cognitive theory. Despite primarily describing pragmatic features of communication, Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995) reassessed one of their primary principles in a later rendition of the theory; this reworking allowed for the primacy of cognition. The fundamental distinction between Sperber & Wilson and Grice is that Relevance Theory is based in cognition and Grice's theory is based on human cooperation. Sperber & Wilson latched on to Grice's innovative ideas, however, and built upon them. As mentioned above, Sperber & Wilson subsume all of Grice's supermaxims and submaxims under one concept: Relevance. For Sperber & Wilson, this is the most important and brings all aspects of inference to a head. All (successful) communication must be relevant in some way and hearers actively look for ways in which to interpret communication correctly.

This brings us to the concept of *ostensive-inferential communication* (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 50-54) which is largely derived from Grice's notion of non-natural meaning. Ostensive-inferential communication acts are those instances of communication where it is obvious, apparent, or otherwise unmistakable that someone is trying to communicate with you. For example, if you are studying at a table with a friend and that friend gets up quietly and leaves, there is no ostensive communication act. You may infer that they are going to the washroom or getting up to grab a snack but there is no (to your knowledge) intention of

communication on the part of your friend. If that friend were to get up from the table and then wave at you, you would assume that they are communicating to you in some fashion and are inviting you to make an inference. This is ostensive-inferential communication: communication in which it is apparent that the speaker is trying to get the hearer to infer their meaning.

This leads to the problem that Relevance Theory is trying to solve: how do we infer meaning? Meaning and utterances are context-bound and the forms of language used to communicate are not always enough in and of themselves to get at the intended meaning of an utterance. There must be operations involved that help us infer such meaning. Sperber & Wilson propose two principles of Relevance. The first principle is called the Cognitive Principle of Relevance defined in (15).

- (15) Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of Relevance.
(Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 260)

This means that one of the major goals of the human brain is to break down perceptions of the world into understandable pieces that are relatable to our experience. Our mind naturally assesses perceptions in a way that will make sense to us. The way that “maximisation” is to be understood in (15) is that cognitive processes attempt to achieve adequate cognitive effects for the least processing effort. Cognitive effects are changes in cognition to strengthen an assumption, contradict an existing assumption, or derive a new, context-bound implication (Clark 2013: 102). A further concession here is that “adequate cognitive effects” does not mean the *most* cognitive effects, as is sometimes misunderstood in discussions and critiques of Relevance Theory. Rather, it is better to say, when applied to communication, that it is the *intended* effects that are achieved for the least amount of processing effort. In this sense, the intended effects are greatest when the communication act has been successful. An example of different kinds of cognitive effects can be seen in the utterances of (16) and (17).

(16) My childhood days are gone.

(17) My childhood days are gone, gone. (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 221)

In (17), the addition of an extra *gone* indicates to the hearer that there must be extra cognitive effects that the speaker is trying to achieve when compared to (16). On its own, (16) has a relatively straightforward interpretation and relatively straightforward cognitive effects; however, the hearer of (17) will attempt to put together an assumption that makes that additional *gone* relevant in the utterance. The hearer will then consider it necessary to put in extra cognitive effort to achieve more cognitive effects.

The second principle of Relevance is defined in (18).

(18) Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 158)

This means that when a speaker is (ostensively) attempting a communication act it will be worth the cognitive effort to process it and that there *is* an optimally relevant interpretation. When a proverb is uttered, for example, the hearer will interpret the utterance as best fits the current context and that while it may seem irrelevant on the surface, there may be a deeper meaning that the speaker wants to imply.

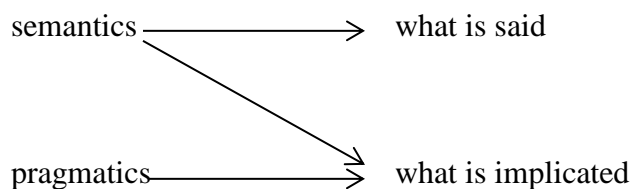
2.3 The explicature/implicature distinction

Relevance Theory claims that communicative utterances carry meaning through explicatures and implicatures, which are related to (but not the same as) what is explicit and what is implied in the utterance. An explicature is a proposition derived from the logical form encoded by the utterance (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 182); implicatures, on the other hand, are premises or conclusions which are communicated by the utterance but which are not developments of the logical form of the utterance. Both can be inferred; this is a marked departure from Grice who proposed that explicatures are decoded from the utterance whereas implicatures are inferred

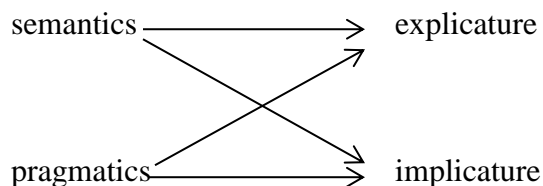
(Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 182). Sperber & Wilson hold that “the recovery of any assumption requires an element of inference” (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 182) whether it is explicit or implicit. Grice prioritized keeping the literal form as the base; the literal form is what is communicated in an utterance and any further interpretation must be pragmatically derived through the maxims. The literal form is, in Grice’s terms, “what is said” whereas anything inferred is called an implicature. This is one way of looking at the dividing line between semantics and pragmatics; Figure 1 gives a simplified representation of how Grice and Sperber & Wilson would classify the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. Under Relevance Theory, both semantic and pragmatic processes are involved in arriving at explicatures and implicatures. “What is said” should not be relegated to only the domain of linguistic semantics.

Figure 1 The semantics-pragmatics distinction (adapted from Clark 2013: 65-66)

Under Grice (1975):



Under Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995):



Sperber & Wilson note that Grice’s view of implicating accounts for too much. It would mean that all non-explicit information is inferred (and thus implicated); sometimes, the interpretation

of “what is said” falls under pragmatics, instead of only semantics. An example of this would be the implied time reference of (19).

(19) I’ve eaten breakfast.

In (19), there is an implicit understanding that the speaker has eaten today, or even recently. The speaker probably does not intend to communicate that he has eaten breakfast some two weeks past or even last year or ever. Consider, by contrast, (20).

(20) I’ve eaten frog legs.

Depending on the culture, an utterance of (20) may be more or less common. The context I am thinking of is one in which this is a rarity. Given this, the time reference is understood to be any time in the past up to and including the speaker’s entire life. It is interpreted as a unique event much like *I’ve been to the capital of Australia*, or *I’ve ridden in a limousine*. For Grice, the time reference in (19) and (20) would be implicated, but for Sperber and Wilson it is said to be an explicature because it is logically inferred within the utterance.

Relegating explicature to the analysis of Grice’s “what is said” is too restricted for Relevance Theory because it relies too much on the purely literal form. Instead, Relevance Theory’s explicatures account for any explicit information, due to the grammar, the semantics and the context. The term refers to the elements of the utterance which are arrived at naturally through both linguistic *and* pragmatic processes. Thus, the time referents of (19) and (20), since they are logically inferred, are explicatures since they are a part of the explicit meaning of the utterance. The key distinction with Grice is that Relevance theorists posit that pragmatic processes are involved in deriving meaning from *both* explicatures and implicatures whereas Grice would relegate pragmatic processes only to what is implicated. In this view, there are pragmatic conventions for disambiguating explicatures and no conventions for the interpretation

of implicature. Carston puts it succinctly in her summary of the topic: “This is emphatically not how the explicit/implicit distinction is drawn within the Relevance-theoretic account of utterance understanding, a basic difference being that pragmatic processes play an essential role on both sides of the distinction” (2004: 633). Carston (1988, 2000, 2004) has done much work on the distinction in Relevance Theory between explicatures and implicatures.

An example of implicatures will take us back to (17) where the repetition of *gone* provides more cognitive effects than it does alone in (16). The hearer will likely arrive at one or more implicatures from the utterance such as *the speaker’s childhood days are long gone, the speaker is sad that her childhood days are gone*, etc. These additional cognitive effects are the result of inferred communication.

2.3.1 Strong versus weak communication

Aside from the fact that some communicated conclusions follow more or less closely from the proposition that was uttered, there is also the degree of the strength of those conclusions. In the discussion of Relevance Theory, there are strong explicatures and weak explicatures, strong implicatures and weak implicatures. A strong explicature is the communicated content of the propositional form that is retrieved with the least amount of effort for adequate effects.

This discussion of strong and weak communication becomes more interesting when it comes to implicatures. As we have discussed, implicatures include both premises and conclusions derived from an utterance that are not entailed by the propositional form of the utterance. However, in many cases, there are multiple implicatures that can be communicated through one utterance. Some of these implicatures are more strongly communicated than others. For example consider the difference between (21) and (22).

(21) Would you like a coffee?

(22) Would you like to go for coffee?

The content of (21) has strong implicatures; there are many strong and reasonable implicatures of this utterance within North American culture. Some of these may include the list in (23).

(23) a. Would you like a coffee, or another hot beverage?

b. I will serve you the drink if you say yes.

c. I will go and get you the drink if you say yes.

On the other hand, while (22) may seem like a straightforward utterance, there are many possible weaker implicatures which can arise, especially within different contexts. Weaker implicatures are propositions which are often up for interpretation and not as obviously intentionally communicated. Forms of weak communication could include those in (24).

(24) a. I would like to get to know you better.

b. Let's talk.

c. We will engage in conversation while we are out.

d. I am interested in you.

Remember, the explicature is not only derived from the logical form but also from the context of the utterance. A likely strong explicature of (22) may be *Would you like to go out for a (non-alcoholic) drink?* or even *Would you like to go for a (non-alcoholic) beverage at a public location primarily known for serving coffee?* It is interesting to note that in (22) the meaning of *coffee* has expanded, especially when compared to the meaning of *coffee* in (21). While it is implicated that *coffee* will extend beyond the concept of COFFEE to BEVERAGE, it is usually also clear that it will stay out of the realm of ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE.

2.3.2 Metaphor and Relevance Theory

In Relevance Theory terms, the more creative an utterance is, the more implicatures are likely to be drawn from it and the more interpretation is required. When it comes to metaphor, the theory states that a metaphor gives rise to many weak implicatures instead of fewer strong ones. An example of this would be poetry, where there is a lot of information derived from a single line, some of it more strongly communicated than others. That is, the conclusions drawn from more figurative language will be less certain and more open to meaning modulation, especially when there are a dozen competing weak implicatures. Strong implicatures would arise from an overused or dead metaphor, before it becomes a part of the lexicon, at which point it would become an explicature (Vega-Moreno 2003). I will be arguing that most proverbs exhibit one strong implicature with many weaker ones.

Relevance Theory has changed and developed its treatment of metaphor over the years. While it has always rejected the traditional view on the dichotomy of literal versus non-literal utterances (see, e.g., Sperber & Wilson 2008), it has become more flexible in its understanding of figurative language. There is not an obvious division of literal and non-literal; they are on a continuum. Furthermore, it is recognized by some (e.g. Gibbs 2001) that non-literal or figurative interpretations of utterances are sometimes processed more quickly than the more literal interpretation of the utterance. One of Relevance Theory's main tenets which sets it apart from more traditional approaches is that it does not assume that more literal utterances are different in kind to metaphorical utterances. This assumption has allowed Relevance Theory to explain processes that underlie all communication regardless of its propositional form. This will be a boon when it comes to an analysis of proverbs which can vary greatly between their semantics and their pragmatic interpretation.

Another advantage within Relevance Theory is that the processing of possible interpretations of an utterance occurs in parallel and not in sequence. That is, the brain will arrive at an interpretation often without even considering the literal meaning of the utterance, as is the case with idioms, proverbs, and many uses of metaphor. On this point, Tendahl & Gibbs (2008) offer the following insight on their summary of Relevance Theory: “listeners will never assume that the speaker’s utterance is literal, they will only assume that it is optimally relevant. In order to achieve optimal Relevance, we are often forced to speak loosely and therefore hearers do not expect us to talk literally” (2008: 1834). This discussion of Relevance Theory and metaphor will continue in Chapter 4.

2.4 Summary

In a search for an adequate pragmatic theory to handle the analysis of proverbs, theories such as Grice’s may fall short due to their focus on the literal proposition as the base form of an utterance. Relevance Theory rejects the traditional view and allows for the on-line processing of figurative language in parallel with and sometimes more quickly than the literal. The assumption is that figurative language is not deviant from a literal norm. Proverbs, of course, are often metaphoric and so may fall into this analysis as a type of speech that results in weaker implicatures; we will see if that is the case. An additional dimension of the proverb, however, is the inclination, in some cultures, to offer a proverb in a way that results in multiple interpretations, each for a different hearer. Chapter 4 will have detailed examples of explicatures and implicatures derived from proverbs. Before we get there, the following chapter gives us our introduction to proverbs.

3. Proverbs

The study of proverbs is paremiology, a wide-ranging field which varies from discussions of proverb constituent structure to the role of proverbs in the sociocultural realm of a given society. There has been a steady stream of research on the proverb which is largely indebted to Mieder (e.g. 1994; cf. Mieder & Dundes 1994) who has compiled key works into several edited volumes as well as editing the annually published *Proverbium* since 1985. Related to paremiology, the field of paremiography is the collection of proverbs; there are many, many compendiums of proverbs in hundreds of languages. While proverb collections are useful, these documents do not typically offer an analysis of the proverbs or even annotations of the meanings of the proverbs within the culture's context (Mieder 1997). Yankah refers to this as proverbs being “isolated and frozen on paper by the scholar” (1984: 5). Mieder has worked to increase the amount of analysis rather than focus on butterfly collecting, and this thesis attempts to offer some pragmatic linguistic analysis to add to the discussion. Despite the amount of content available, there have been few studies of proverbs that mention Relevance Theory (Ku-Mesu 1996, Wilson 2009, Soi 2014, Ramírez 2015, Pegulescu 2016, Abang Muhi 2018, and El-Bahy 2019) and fewer still which apply the theory with a deeper analysis (of these, Soi (2014) bears mentioning).

This chapter begins with a description and definition of the proverb (3.1) with Section 3.2 showcasing some important structural aspects and terminology of the proverb. The following section (3.3) will explore the importance of context before summarizing the work that has been done in or is related to pragmatics in Section 3.4. The last section of this chapter (3.4.1) will delve deeper into the analogic nature of proverbs and discuss how this can be further analyzed with Relevance Theory.

3.1 Definition of the proverb

It has been widely claimed that proverbs are impossible to define; here enters the famous and oft-quoted remark by Taylor who stated that “the definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking” (1931: 3). In addition to the difficulties in coming up with a definition, there are also the widespread contributions that are consistently made to the study of proverbs from a multitude of fields. Each discipline has its own views and goals which can make a cross-discipline definition difficult. For example, psychologists seem more interested in the figurative aspect of proverbs for screening out certain disorders that make it difficult to determine metaphoric meaning (e.g. Mieder 1978, Van Lancker 1990). Folklorists and historians focus on proverbs’ origins in antiquity, and anthropologists focus on proverbs’ capacity to represent the social mind of a culture. To make deciding on a definition even more difficult, definitions of proverbs can vary depending on the culture. Aasland (2012: 14; cf. 25-26) notes that an interdisciplinary approach is best.

Despite these challenges, and Taylor’s (1931) prevalent statement, some authors have made it clear that it is, in fact, possible to draw some boundaries on what the meaning of the term “proverb” actually is. We will make an attempt here to justify the bounds within which a proverb should reside.

Perhaps the most common definition, at least informally, has been ascribed to Lord John Russell and has changed through use to “the wisdom of many and the wit of one” (Taylor 1962: 3; repeated from the introduction). It requires someone to utter the right proverb in the right context at the right time. Another definition of the proverb comes from Seitel (1969: 124) who states that proverbs are “short, traditional, ‘out-of-context’ statements used to further some social end.” But perhaps the most recognized description of the proverb comes from Mieder: “a

proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” (1985: 119).

When it comes to analyzing proverbs, Norrick (1985: 31-79, 2014) offers a comprehensive summary of how proverbs have been described, and looks at how they overlap with or are distinct from related expressions of language use such as aphorisms, maxims, slogans and more. Norrick’s work captures the essence of the proverb with several well-chosen adjectives, similar to Mieder (1985): “proverbs are traditional, pithy, often formulaic and/or figurative, fairly stable and generally recognizable units” (Norrick 2014: 7). There is some flexibility with each of these descriptors, but this will do for now. Examples from English can be seen in (25) through (29), each of them fitting Norrick’s description. Several of these are so ingrained in the culture that it may be surprising to think of them as proverbs of Western culture at all.

(25) Money talks.

(26) A picture is worth a thousand words.

(27) Look before you leap.

(28) Many cooks spoil the broth.

(29) The more, the merrier.

These few examples coincide with Norrick’s definition; they are metaphoric, stable, and pithy. In addition, they appear to offer a truth that is undeniable within the given culture (despite the paradoxical fact that many proverbs appear to contradict with one another, such as (28) and (29)). The generic truth behind any proverb is often a culturally assumed truth that is taken for

granted, such as *money talks*. This cultural truth fits into the part of the description that calls them “traditional”.

While proverbs are typically fixed forms, there is another characteristic which Norrick identifies as being essential to the proverb: they make a full conversational contribution on their own. That is, they are complete grammatical units that don’t require additional arguments, syntax, or morphology to make a complete sentence. As Norrick states, they are “syntactically independent of their context” (1985: 30).

We have begun our discussion with what a proverb *is* (or at least its characteristics). In order to refine our definition of the proverb, I will now delineate what a proverb is *not*. At this point a comparison to similar linguistic forms will help in justifying this definition. Norrick (1985, 2014) goes on to compare the proverb to several other fixed forms in order to make his definition a little tighter. The types of fixed forms that the proverb is related to are what Norrick calls the proverbial phrase (*to kick over the traces*) and the proverbial comparison (*as old as the hills*; 2014: 8).

These are typically akin to idiomatic expressions (see discussion in 4.2); the major point of departure here from the proverb is that the proverbial phrase and the proverbial comparison cannot stand on their own as an utterance. They do not make a conversational contribution on their own. Additional elements are required such as the insertion of a noun phrase which would lead to the need to change the form for some idioms to account for verb agreement.

In addition to proverbial phrase, there are also slogans (*Just do it*; *Yes we can*) which are pithy and stable statements yet are not traditional; it is possible, however, that some advertising campaigns could result in a proverb being added to the culture over time. Lastly, we have winged words (*I have a dream*) and aphorisms (*art is long, life is short*), both of which rely on citation

rather than shared cultural knowledge (Martin Luther King Jr. for the former and Hippocrates for the latter). Winged words belong to historical figures and aphorisms belong to literature and so there can be at times an overlapping of the two. For a more comprehensive discussion of these comparisons, see Norrick (1985: 73).

On comparing proverbs with other types of utterances, Cram (1983) offers an interesting insight into how the proverb, with its cultural truth, differs from a similar statement that appears to offer a generic truth. Cram asks us to consider and compare the sentences in (30) and (31).

(30) Nicotine makes the heart beat faster.

(31) Absence makes the heart grow fonder. (Cram 1983: 74)

He states that mother tongue speakers will notice an immediate difference between the two statements: (30) is a fact whereas (31) is a proverb (1983: 74). The latter of these examples has several of Norrick's characteristics listed for proverbs: oft-used, traditional and stable. The stability of the proverb can be noticed more abruptly when the constituents are rearranged. Rearranging the constituents of (30) is possible whereas for (31) it is not, or it is at least less likely. Compare (32) and (33).

(32) The heart beats faster because of nicotine.

(33) ?The heart grows fonder because of absence.

The distinction that Cram argues for is that proverbs are stored in the lexicon as whole, independent units, which adds to the general consensus that proverbs are stable forms. The stability of a form likely comes through repetition of the proverb over time leading to the view that it is also traditional.

There are other multi-constituent forms that are also stable or fixed, such as the idiom. While idioms may not always be as fixed as we think (Vega-Moreno 2003), they are still

relatively stable forms within a language. This comparison between proverbs and idioms will be further explored in 4.2.

3.2 Some proverb types and terminology

A recurring and ubiquitous stylistic feature of the proverb is the use of parallelisms (Mac Coinnigh 2014: 122-128). Two lexemes, clauses, or sentences are compared or contrasted; this is evidenced both syntactically and semantically where particular structural features denote that a comparison is being made. There are several ways of creating parallelisms, as described by Mac Coinnigh, and depending on the context and meaning of the proverb, the parallelism will result in a different interpretation. That is, the general relationship between each half of the proverb will differ depending on the proverb.

The major distinction is between two different types of coordination: syndetic and asyndetic. These types of coordination have to do with how the first half and latter half of the proverb are related grammatically. Syndetic coordinations have an explicit conjunction within the proverb, such as is bolded in (34; Spanish).

- (34) *El muerto a la tumba y el vivo a la rumba*
 The dead to the tomb **and** the living to the rumba [i.e. dance]
 (Mac Coinnigh 2014: 122)

Parallelisms as in (34) often have mirrored or analogic syntax where the structure of the first element is replicated or partially replicated in the second. In (34), we have a noun phrase followed by a prepositional phrase, with the same prepositions (*a* ‘to’) and the same determiners (*el* and *la* ‘the’) mirrored in each clause. Additionally, we have a rhyming pair of nouns *tumba* and *rumba*.

Asyndetic coordinations involve a parallel construction in which the conjunction is absent. Crystal’s (2008: 470) dictionary notes that this type of expression is often used for

“economical or dramatic” effect. These proverbs are often aided by the use of mirrored syntax which helps create the connection between the clauses. Rhyming, alliteration, and other poetic features often help with this as well. This is shown in (35) and (36).

(35) *Nemico diviso, mezzo vino.* (Italian)
Enemy divided, half won. (Mac Coinnigh 2014: 123)

(36) *Andere Länder, andere Sitten.* (German)
Other countries, other customs. (Ibid.)

Asyndetic coordination brings us to the discussion of one of the most ubiquitous forms of the proverb: parataxis. Parataxis is a structural device, like asyndetic coordination, which omits the use of coordinating conjunctions. However, it is a special type of coordination in which the link is defined primarily by the juxtaposition of elements (Crystal 2008) rather than the omission of a conjunction. This juxtaposition is often expressed with punctuation (in writing) or intonation (in speech, typically a pause). In many languages, there is overlap between asyndetic coordination and parataxis; the proverbs in (35) and (36), for example, could also be categorized as using parataxis. However, Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) is an example of a language that has proverbs of both types. There is an intriguing contrast in the types of asyndetic coordination and parataxis that appear in CPE. The first type is shown in (37) and (38).

(37) *chop foget tomoro*
Eat, forget tomorrow. (Someone who eats today and forgets the following day.)
(Kouega 2017: 10)

(38) *ova sabi kari basket* [sic.]
Over know, carry basket. (He who pretends to know everything is easily duped.) (Ibid.)

These examples have what Kouega calls an “implicit” coordinator. There is no pause in the pronunciation of the CPE like there would be after the comma in the English gloss. Since (37) and (38) are defined by the omission of the conjunction, these are a clear example of asyndetic

coordination. By contrast, there are several proverbs in CPE which *do* include a pause. A sample of these is shown in (39) and (40).

(39) *giv ashia, kari kenja*
Give sympathy, carry basket. (You have come only to help him but now you are doing the whole job.) (Kouega 2017: 10)

(40) *man pas yu, kari yi bak*
Man surpass you, carry his back. (If you can't beat someone, join him.) (Ibid.)

These examples include the orthographic convention of a comma to indicate the pause in speech. Since (39) and (40) are categorized by their intonation and focus on juxtaposition, they clearly fall within the definition of parataxis (as per Crystal (2008)).

The classic example of parataxis in English is shown in (41) where each clause is successively juxtaposed. These clauses are juxtaposed in order to show a sequence of events, omitting the use of conjunctions.

(41) *I came, I saw, I conquered.*

One feature that separates parataxis from asyndetic coordination is that some parallelisms using parataxis are semantically motivated based on the structure. Like in (41) where it is apparent that the clauses represent a temporal sequence, the relationship and nature of juxtaposition is clear within the context of a proverb. This kind of interpretation would fall under the explicature within Relevance Theory; there are semantic cues which point to the appropriate interpretation. Mac Coinnigh (2014: 128-129) lists three major types of paratactic constructions in proverbs: equating, cause and effect, and contrast and antonymy. An example of each of these will be given in turn.

The following type of parataxis is the comparison of two elements that are seen as equivalent. Consider (42).

(42) *First come, first served.*

There is no intent to show contrast between the first and second clauses; they are equal.

Secondly, two elements may be juxtaposed for the purpose of showing cause and effect. This is shown in (43) and (44) where the first clause is seen to either precede or be the cause of the second. Again, the interpretation of “cause and effect” would be an example of explicature.

(43) *No pain, no gain.*

(44) *Full cup, steady hand.*

Last are examples of contrast. In (45) *argent* ‘pay’ is contrasted with *besogne* ‘work’ such that the two elements cannot be equal as in (42) but indicate an antonymic relationship. This is the nature of parataxis; the environment of the clause dictates the relationship.

(45) *Selon l’argent, la besogne.* (French)
What pay, such work. (Mac Coinnigh 2014: 129)

Again, there are no identifiable syntactic coordinators to combine the two clauses or even to designate the relationship. The relationship is largely predicted by the semantics of the proverb as well as its understanding through use and reuse. The following section will discuss how we determine the meaning of proverbs by exploring the importance of context.

3.3 The importance of context

Of course, all communication happens at a specific time, in a specific place, and between specific people. All of these factors will influence to a lesser or greater degree the interpretation of utterances. As noted above, however, many proverb collections are typically lists of isolated utterances, absent of context; while the meaning can still be clear in these compendiums, the range of their possible uses may not be (as per Ku-Mesu 1996; e.g. see Section 1, this paper). As Wilson has stated, “context alone can change the message” (2009: 45) and this could not be more true for proverbs. In the examples in this chapter so far, the isolated utterances of proverbs were

useful in determining some terminology for proverbs without context. One aim of this thesis, though, is to describe how context influences the use and understanding of proverbs.

We must first begin with the base meaning. The base meaning of the proverb is essentially a non-figurative paraphrase of the proverb when removed from context, as per Andersson (2013) and Aasland (2012, 2014), what Norrick (1985) calls the “standard proverbial interpretation”. Aasland (2012) makes the point that cultural information is necessary to find the base meaning of the proverb which is supported by Ku-Mesu’s (1996) study and Soi (2014: 108). While no utterance is entirely context-free, what is meant by the base meaning is the stable, general truth of the proverb understood by the language community. This common, shared meaning is the “wisdom of many”. I will be arguing in Chapter 4 that this meaning is largely the explicature of the proverb and shares some qualities with idioms. Proverbs, of course, typically have a deeper meaning than idioms, and this meaning comes to the surface when the proverb is applied to a specific context. For example, consider the common English proverb in (46).

(46) You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.

One might say that the base meaning of this proverb is that it is difficult for an older person (or animal) to learn something new. When considering cases in which this may or may not be true, however, the discussion must revolve around specific cases in a specific context. For (46), the situation could be a long-term employee learning a new machine at the workplace. This is where another meaning begins to surface, when the proverb, by analogy, is applied to certain referents in the real world. I will be arguing that this emergent meaning is the implicature. The work of Domínguez Barajas (2010) has done much to show how context contributes to the emergent meaning of proverbs:

“Proverbs are seen, instead, as communicative tools that contribute to the desired goal of people engaged in communication, but these tools – despite the unchanging aspect of their surface forms – are remarkably multifunctional because it is not their form but the

social context and adaptive human reasoning that invest them with meaning.”
(Domínguez Barajas 2010: 17)

Other scholars have also focused on the context of proverbs in their analyses. Arewa & Dundes (1964), for example, call for the elicitation and explanation of context when recording proverbs; their well-documented examples of Yoruba proverbs in their paper reflect that desire with much explanation of context (1964: 71-73). Their comment on the field of folklore is insightful (though dated) in which they state that many collections focus on “the lore rather than upon the folk” (1964: 70), i.e. on form rather than context. Penfield & Duru (1988) also note the role of context as an essential feature in how children grow and develop in their understanding of proverbs with data from Igbo (Niger-Congo): “[Children] must understand the similarity or analogy between the literal meaning and the interactional context” (1988: 122). What Penfield & Duru also notice is how proverbs retain their base meaning while still providing different, emergent meanings in different contexts; this facet of proverb use is another point that children must grasp in order to speak well: “they must also learn that the same proverb can have very different contextual meanings and illocutionary acts yet maintain the same deep philosophical meaning” (1988: 122). While proverbs may play a much larger role in Igbo than in English, the general principle is the same: one base meaning, different contextual meanings.

There appears to be a conflict, then, when two or more proverbs in a given language contradict each other, called counter proverbs. Yankah (1984) discusses the apparent contradictory nature of proverbs in all cultures. For example, the proverb *absence makes the heart grow fonder* and *out of sight, out of mind* appear on the surface to have a contradictory meaning despite the fact that the proverbs are seen as traditional and cultural truths of the society. There are countless pairs of antithetical proverbs in many languages. Yankah’s argument is that the context of the utterance eliminates the contradiction. For example, one may utter the

proverb *absence makes the heart grow fonder* to someone who is experiencing heartache after a loved one has made a long journey. To someone who has an alleged loved one but appears not to be missing them at all, one might say *out of sight, out of mind*. To Yankah, the underlying truth of the proverb does not change but the context makes it clear which truth should be expressed. Either of the above proverbs can be uttered truthfully if it is in the correct context, which is why Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that proverbs “express relative rather than absolute truth” (1973: 115). Relevance Theory is well-equipped to explain counter proverbs because of the presumption of optimal relevance: a hearer will search for the relevance of a particular utterance of a proverb regardless of whether or not it may appear to contradict another proverb in the language. Within Relevance Theory, cognitive effects will be processed based on the context of the utterance in order to determine meaning.

Yankah (1984) notes that most scholars in the past have dealt with the “concept” or base meaning when attempting to explain antithetical proverb pairs but Yankah states that it becomes easier to see how these disparate proverbs can co-exist once we look at context. In view of explaining counter proverbs, no other article at that point had done so while referring to context (1984: 4). For Yankah, it is in the moment of uttering the proverb that “contradiction becomes irrelevant” (1984: 7).

To further explore the interaction between the context and the utterance of the proverb, the following section will discuss some ideas from paremiology which explore potential pragmatic solutions to how we understand proverbs in context.

3.4 Earlier and current ideas on pragmatics

There appears to be a lack in the literature of a unified pragmatic theory on the use of proverbs, although several authors have brought this discussion to bear in specific contexts (see Seitel

1969, Lieber 1984, Yankah 1984, Penfield & Duru 1988, Krikmann 1974, Arewa & Dundes 1964, Jesenšek 2014, Grzybek 2014, et al.). These authors begin with the importance of context as a key aspect of their analysis.

One of the earlier scholars who began developing a theory of proverb meaning is Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1973); she proposed a specific equation for determining the meaning of a proverb in context. Her hypothesis reads like this: proverb meaning *is equal to* the participants' evaluation of the situation *plus* participants' understanding of the proverb's base *plus* the interactional strategy of the proverb user (1973: 119). Throughout her article, "proverb meaning" is the meaning (intended to be) communicated by a specific utterance of a proverb. We can take "the participants' evaluation of the situation" as the current context. If we do so, this equation put more simply might read something like (47).

(47) Proverb meaning = context + base meaning + speaker's intention

Or, in Relevance Theory terms it may read like something closer to (48), if we allow the "base meaning" to be an explicature and the "strategy" of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's equation to be the intended emergent meaning of the proverb when applied to the situation.

(48) Proverb meaning = context + 1 explicature + implicature(s)/explicature(s) (pragmatically derived from the speaker's intent.)

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's theory works well within the current thesis because it shows the multiple factors that contribute to the interpretation of the utterance of a proverb. The proverb contains a "wisdom of many", or explicature, which requires knowledge of the proverb by speakers of the language. It theorizes that there will always be an explicature in any given proverb utterance that equates to the traditional meaning of the proverb. Then, there are additional implicatures that arise due to the analogy between the explicature of the proverb and a situation in the current

context. Table 1 at the end of the following section shows a comparison of this theory to others that will be discussed.

Analogy is an essential part of proverb interpretation. Each time a proverb is uttered, there are referents in the real world to which elements of the proverb apply. For example, in the proverb *too many cooks spoil the broth*, the cooks may refer to (by analogy) a group of at least two people and the broth to the project/effort that the group is devoted to. The application of this analogy is essential in determining the strong implicature characterized by the utterance which will be specific to the context. Both Seitel (1969) and Lieber (1984) have discussed the importance of analogy in their work and a summary and evaluation of each follows.

3.4.1 Exploring analogies in proverbs

Of all the discussions concerning the pragmatics of proverbs, Seitel's (1969) is perhaps the most cited. Seitel presents a model of proverb understanding which is brief but has had a profound impact on the scholarship that followed. His paper leans towards a pragmatic interpretation of proverbs and presents some similarities to ideas presented in Relevance Theory. To begin with, Seitel breaks down the analogic components of a proverb utterance into two categories: that which belongs to the form itself and that which belongs to the context.

Seitel's model includes X:Y where X is the speaker and Y is the hearer. This relationship represents the social context of the exchange and the dynamics between the speaker and hearer in regards to their age, gender, social status and more. We will leave the X:Y relationship aside for now. The main focus of Seitel is the relationship between the form of the proverb and the application of that form to the current situation. For Seitel, each proverb contains a relationship between two elements, typically represented in the former and latter portions of a proverb. For example *first come* and *first served* would be considered two elements represented by A and B

respectively. According to Seitel, a proverb is of form A:B which is likened to a pair C:D in the situation; there is a relationship between the utterance of *first come, first served* (A:B) and the real world referents in context (C:D; i.e. the referent of *first come* (C) and the referent of *first served* (D)). Any given proverb will have plenty of ways to relate to different contexts. There are many ways the correlations of A:B :: C:D can be drawn, which will be shown in the discussion of Lieber (1984) who expanded upon Seitel's original model.

The relationship between the two elements of a proverb is in part determined by their juxtaposition. Seitel notes how this juxtaposition can lead to relevant cognitive effects of an utterance in context: "when two terms appear in juxtaposition within the proverb situation, the sets of features characteristic of each combine so that features which correspond between the terms make up the relationship ~ while others, for which there is no correspondence between the terms, drop out" (1969: 136). For example, Seitel gives the Ibo (Eastern Nigeria) proverb *if one finger brought oil it soiled the others* (1969: 128). In this proverb, the one finger (A) has a relationship with the other fingers (B) which is that of soiling. The juxtaposition of A and B in this proverb brings about the salience (or relevance) of the proximity of the fingers on the hand which helps in determining the meaning of the proverb.

Lieber (1984) discusses the nature of analogy and that the nature of an analogic relationship can differ depending on the context. For example, the relationship between *black* and *white* could be one of opposites and by analogy be similar to the relationship between *hot* and *cold*. Alternatively, it could also relate to different types in a category *colour* and thus relate, by analogy, to *apple* and *pear* (1984: 105) which could be seen as different types in the category *fruit*. The relationship between the two elements *black* and *white* is ambiguous until the analogic

counterpart is revealed; Lieber argues that the same process applies to proverbs. He calls this “analogic ambiguity”.

Any relationship between A and B in a proverb could alter depending on the context. The ambiguity of a comparison A:B, in relation to another comparison C:D, is ambiguous such that the exact relation between A:B is ambiguous until its metonymic counterpart C:D is revealed. In our example above, *black* would be A, *white* would be B, and the relationship between them (whether it be opposites, points on a spectrum, etc.) would not be determined until another pair C:D is discussed. Lieber presents the paradox that despite proverbs’ inherent ambiguity, their purpose is often to disambiguate a context. A complex scenario can be made clear by a didactic turn of phrase, especially once the situation has been categorized by its relationship to a proverb. What Lieber calls analogic ambiguity could be solved by Relevance Theory’s ad hoc concept formation (see Section 4.3), where concepts are broadened or narrowed in specific contexts. In these situations, the context clarifies the meanings of concepts for the purposes of the communication exchange.

Contributing to the discussion of models of proverb interpretation, Penfield & Duru (1988) comment on Seitel’s (1969) approach to solving the understanding of proverbs and note something missing. They argue that Seitel’s model does not account for what they call the “philosophical” meaning of the proverb, what I am calling the base meaning, or explicature. This absence of the base meaning is also noted by Grzybek (1989: 361, 2014). In Seitel’s model, there is only the utterance (A:B) and the contextual application (C:D); it does not include the traditional meaning. Penfield & Duru state that Seitel’s argument “does not allow for a philosophical meaning nor does it provide an explanation for the reason why [A:B] may remain the same and [C:D] may contain very different elements yet still hold the same philosophical

meaning” (1988: 123). That is, Seitel does not explain how one proverb’s form may account for very different referents in context while the proverb form nearly always refers to the same basic (philosophical) meaning. I am more inclined to agree with this approach as there appear to be three major elements present in proverb interpretation (context, explicature, and implicature). This contrast is noted in Table 1 below. Penfield & Duru make a welcome critique to Seitel, one that fits well with the hypothesis presented in this thesis. The following Table gives a comparison of some of the pragmatic theories discussed, showing the components of proverb meaning under each theory. The first column puts Russell’s famous quote into comparison with the theoretical approach of the other authors.

Table 1 Comparison of proverb theories

Russell (c. 1763)	Seitel (1969)	Penfield & Duru (1988)	Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1973)	Toews (Current thesis)
-	A : B	Literal	Proverb performance	Utterance
-	-	-	Participant’s evaluation of the situation	Context
Wit of one	C : D	Contextual	Interactional strategy of proverb user	Implicature(s)
Wisdom of many	(not accounted for)	Philosophical	Base meaning	Base meaning (explicature)

3.4.2 Cognitive approaches

In a more recent Cognitive approach, Aasland (2012, 2014) has been arguing for the use of Blending Theory (Fauconnier & Turner 1998) for proverb interpretation. In Blending Theory, mental spaces are conceptual packets of information in the brain. Information from different but related mental spaces will combine to make a new mental space called the blend. While Blending Theory operates under different base assumptions than Relevance Theory (e.g. it is an associationist account rather than an inferential account), it also assumes more working parts for the interpretation of proverbs than will Relevance Theory. There are at least four mental spaces in each proverb interpretation (two inputs, a generic space, and a proto-blend) in addition to

external factors such as the setting (*à la* Sietel's (1969) X and Y) and a "common cultural understanding" (Aasland 2012, 2014).

Aasland posits Sperber & Wilson's (1986/1995) relevance as a key element in his theory and he in fact replaces the "common cultural understanding" with relevance in his model (Aasland 2012: 115). He determines that this is the piece that is needed to make his theory complete: "the proverb by itself ... lack[s] the cultural inferences which [have] been termed relevance' ... Culture, then, completes the meaning of the proverb both as base meaning and as blended meaning" (Aasland 2012: 137). Relevance is the connection between the context of the utterance and the base meaning of the proverb used. Aasland sees relevance as what connects the assumption and the context; this is more of an external factor (similar to Soi 2014) and not a part of the mental spaces of the blend.

Other Cognitive approaches include Honeck (1997) and Honeck & Temple (1994) with a critique by Gibbs, Colston, & Johnson (1996). However, the realm of Cognitive Linguistics goes beyond the scope of the present thesis.

3.5 Summary

This chapter began with describing several characteristics of the proverb, namely that they are traditional, pithy, and stable over time. The parallel structure of proverbs is ubiquitous and it results in a relationship being drawn between the first half of a proverb and the latter half. Parataxis is an important notion which shows that the nature of this relationship can differ depending on the proverb.

Several scholars have made steps towards a theory of proverb meaning (e.g. Seitel 1969 and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1973). Drawing a comparison between several of the approaches described above, Table 1 offered a summary of how each theory compares on different aspects of

proverb interpretation; Seitel (1969) does not have the base meaning as part of his model and each perspective presented gives context an important role in the interpretation of proverbs. I will bring all these aspects together in the following chapter in which I present a detailed overview of how Relevance Theory may account for proverb meaning through explicatures, implicatures, and ad hoc concept formation.

4. Applying Relevance Theory to proverbs

The preceding chapters have laid the foundation for the approach of the current thesis. Relevance Theory is robust enough to account for the pragmatics of proverb use. Proverbs have been characterized as pithy, traditional, and stable units of speech which have an analogic application to a situation in the current context. Proverbs tend to have some amount of underdetermined meaning; how will a particular proverb will be applied and understood in a particular situation? This will be the focus of the current chapter.

Yankah summarizes well one of the core aspects of this discussion: “the isolated proverb concept may be viewed as having a constellation of potential meanings, each of which crystallizes in contextual usage” (1984: 8-9). A proverb has many applications, which is one of the reasons a given proverb can remain in a language over generations. The potential meanings that Yankah refers to are the potential implicatures that may arise in context, an idea that will be developed as we explore the data.

Section 1.1 included the reasoning behind the types of examples and data that are present in this chapter. To begin with, each section will have proverbs which should be easily recognizable to native English speakers; this will increase the ease in identifying the appropriate explicatures of each proverb. Later on in this chapter, I will apply my hypothesis to data from other languages.

This chapter will begin with an overview of the application of Relevance Theory to proverbs in Section 4.1. This overview will introduce the three main concepts essential to this thesis: idioms, metaphor, and ad hoc concept formation. The following three sections will address each of these in further detail (idioms in 4.2, metaphor in 4.3, and ad hoc concept

formation in 4.4). Several examples from other languages will be included in 4.5 before the summary of the chapter in 4.6.

4.1 Overview of the hypothesis

The majority of the proverbs that I will be discussing in this chapter will be conventional and more well-known proverbs. Abang Muhi, in his study of nearly 1,400 Sarawak Malay (Austronesian) proverbs, notes that 70 per cent are proverbs which are “established by usage and not immediately comprehensible from the words used” (2018: 3). The reason for this is that one of the main characteristics of a proverb is that they are traditional (see Section 3.1), meaning that the language community as a whole will typically recognize them in speech. There are definitely cases of lesser known proverbs, proverbs that have fallen out of favor and the like; new proverbs may also arise over time (e.g. *a picture is worth a thousand words*). However, most proverbs in this discussion should typically be tacit knowledge to native speakers of a language and thus many of these examples to begin with are in English. Recall from Chapter 1 that Ku-Mesu (1996) and Aasland (2012) noticed the importance of cultural knowledge in the appropriate interpretation of proverbs. For proverbs in other languages, I will rely on examples of proverbs with sufficient context.

The line of reasoning for interpreting proverbs is as follows. When a proverb is uttered, the surface meaning of the utterance typically appears unrelated to the situation or conversation at hand. However, due to the presumption of optimal relevance, the intended meaning of the proverb is not lost on the hearer. In fact, since the form is conventional, similar to an idiom (see 4.2), the appropriate meaning is likely to be readily apparent as an explicature to the hearer. That is, an utterance of a proverb will lead to an explicature, which is that proverb’s base meaning. Consider the proverb in (49).

(49) Don't judge a book by its cover.

This proverb is recognizable as a saying that is not only applicable to books. The base meaning of (49) can be found in (50).

(50) Don't judge [something or someone] by the outward appearance.

The base meaning in (50) is an explicature of the proverb in (49) because it is its conventionalized meaning in the lexicon. The form of (49) carries the meaning in (50) for native English speakers. While (50) may be an explicature of (49), the meaning in (50) is likely not the first interpretation that the hearer will conclude from (49). When hearing a proverb, it is the implicature that is typically the most relevant part of what is communicated.

In order to clarify what is meant by the intended meaning of a proverb, I will be using Ariel's concept of Privileged Interactional Interpretation (Ariel 2002, 2008). She states that this "is the meaning which the speaker is seen as minimally and necessarily committed to, i.e. the one by which she is judged as telling the truth or being sincere" (Ariel 2008: 299). It is the meaning that is relevant in the communication. While this is most often an explicature (2008: 305), proverbs tend to diverge from this pattern. I am not arguing that the base meaning of a proverb is the same as the intended meaning of a proverb (i.e. its Privileged Interactional Interpretation). Instead, the base meaning is an explicature that is communicated but is not necessarily the most relevant interpretation in context (in contrast to idioms (Section 4.2), for example).

It is far more relevant for a hearer to understand a strong implicature communicated by (49) in a specific context. For example, let's say I go to a local coffee shop, feeling a bit hungry, and I take a longing look at the pastries available for purchase. I really want a donut, but there is only one type of donut available and it does not look appetizing. The barista may see me eyeing this donut and say (51).

(51) Don't judge a book by its cover.

What would be relevant in this utterance? Obviously, the barista is not talking about a book; he or she is talking about the donuts. What is most relevant to me (the hearer) is not the explicature given in (50), but an application of that meaning to the current context. Perhaps, I should think twice before rejecting the donut. A likely strong implicature of the barista's comment is noted in (52).

(52) Don't judge that donut by the way it looks.

Ad hoc meaning construction (see 4.4) allows for broadening and/or narrowing of concepts in online processing. For example, the concept COVER which appears in (51) is broadened through ad hoc meaning construction to include the concept OUTWARD APPEARANCE as in (50); OUTWARD APPEARANCE can in turn be broadened to include FIRST IMPRESSION. Other implicatures that may arise in the context given above are those in (53).

- (53)
- a. The donut tastes great
 - b. Your impression of the donut should not be informed by the presentation of the donut
 - c. The donut will taste better than you expect.
 - d. You should try the donut [despite its appearance].
 - e. You should think twice before rejecting the donut.

All or some of the implicatures may occur to the hearer of (51) and they are indeed implicatures if they were intended to be communicated by the speaker of (51). These potential implicatures are potential meanings that the proverb *don't judge a book by its cover* may generate.

What about the analogic mapping discussed in 3.4? In this example, some connections are readily apparent. The book is the donut and the cover is the appearance of the donut. Using Seitel's notation, the relationship between A and B (the book and its cover) is analogous to the

relationship between C and D (the donut and its appearance). This relationship between A:B and C:D (that of judging) is communicated in the explicature in (50) and in the implicature in (52). This kind of analogic mapping can be explained through Relevance Theory's ad hoc meaning construction where metaphor is seen as an expansive broadening of ad hoc meaning construction (Wilson & Carston 2007: 10).

In summary, when hearing a proverb it is the implicature that is typically the most relevant part of the communicative act, its Privileged Interactional Interpretation. The base meaning, or explicature, of the proverb is likely not retrieved until later, if at all. The following section will provide a more detailed comparison of proverbs to idioms within the Relevance-Theoretic framework.

4.2 Proverbs and idioms

One question for Relevance Theory is whether or not the understood traditional meaning of the proverb should belong to the category of explicature or implicature. We will treat the base meaning of the proverb in the same way we could treat a conventional, dead metaphor, one that has been used often enough to allow for unambiguous interpretation. This is one way in which proverbs are similar to idioms. Idioms are strings of words that have become lexicalized as a unit and do not necessarily have a one-to-one correspondence between meaning and form.

Much of the work on idioms within Relevance Theory has been done by Vega-Moreno (2003). Her main tenet is that "idiom comprehension, like utterance comprehension more generally, is not literal or figurative but relevance-driven" (2003: 315). The starting point for this discussion is narrowing down how idioms are interpreted. However, this is not so simple. This is because idioms vary in a lot of ways; some are non-compositional, some are partly compositional, some are static, some are not.

Compositionality is the idea that we derive meaning from the constituent parts of a sentence and “compose” them to develop the meaning of the utterance. Within a traditional view of idioms, the idea of compositionality is not compatible with idioms; idioms are treated as a full and complete unit in the lexicon where meaning is derived from only the idiom as a whole. This is likely because certain examples are frequently cited which are only representative of a smaller set of idioms. Some of these examples are given in (54).

- (54) a. kick the bucket
 b. chew the fat
 c. shoot the breeze (Vega-Moreno 2003: 306)

While some idioms are indeed non-compositional (e.g., *kick*, *the*, and *bucket* are not useful in determining the meaning of *kick the bucket* (Vega-Moreno 2003: 304)), many require some amount of compositionality in order to interpret them. For example, *miss the boat* retains the semantics of *miss* and can be applied metaphorically to a specific context (e.g. missing a deadline). The idioms in (54) are the exception rather than the rule. Vega-Moreno notes that *kick the bucket*, while a popular example, is not representative of all idioms; she states that “for most idioms, we can establish some relation between their meaning and their form” (2003: 304), such as the idioms in (55).

- (55) a. pop the question
 b. miss the boat
 c. cry your eyes out

It is easy to see how proverbs and idioms may be alike, and in some respects they are. According to Norrick (2014), as mentioned in 3.1, idioms fall under the category of proverbial phrases because they do not make a complete sentence on their own (e.g. see (54) and (55)). In

fact, Norrick goes on to say that proverbs *are* idioms in that “they have SPIs [base meanings] which are distinct from the literal readings which would be assigned to them on the basis of straightforward compositional semantic principles” (1985: 3). However, there is more to the distinction between proverbs and proverbial phrases, as will be shown in this section.

Vega-Moreno lists a couple of major traits of idioms which we will be applying to proverbs as well: analyzability (i.e. compositionality) and transparency (2003: 306).

Idioms lie on a continuum of compositionality (2003: 305) where some are more compositional than others. If proverbs were placed on this spectrum, they would be partly compositional. For example, in (56) the constituents *flock together* are useful in determining the meaning of the proverb (i.e. they are compositional) whereas *of a feather* will require implicit knowledge of the proverb in order to interpret it (i.e. non-compositional).

(56) Birds of a feather flock together.

Proverbs will likely be more compositional than idioms because there is always a degree of metaphorical application of the form to the explicature and of the form to the current context.

Because of this dual nature of proverbs, meaning needs to be more apparent and analyzable so that it could at least be explained in context if the hearer happens to be unfamiliar with it. Idioms are more unidimensional which leads to a greater chance of non-compositional idioms.

Vega-Moreno states that idioms vary in terms of their transparency (2003: 316), that is, in terms of how easy it is to infer conclusions from any given idiom within a given context.

Proverbs will also vary in terms of transparency, although to a different degree. For both proverbs and idioms, there will be some that a hearer will not be familiar with and have a harder time understanding; these cases are less transparent and for the same reason (lack of familiarity).

However, proverbs are more likely to exhibit lesser degrees of transparency than idioms since proverbs are more complex. On the one hand, proverbs constitute an entire conversational contribution whereas idioms will constitute only a portion of a conversational contribution.

Within a proverb, there is typically no grammatical expression referring to a particular referent in the context. Since idioms are part of a larger set of words, the lacking portions of the sentence (typically the subject of the sentence) will guide the hearer into a relevant understanding of what or whom the idiom is referring to. This is not always so clear in proverbs. For example, (57) and (58) represent examples of an idiom and a proverb respectively, without a given context. The referent for the pronoun *he* is more transparent in (57) than in (58) because *he* must have a real world referent for (57) where this is not the case for (58).

(57) He was crying his eyes out.

(58) He who hesitates is lost.

Another difference between idioms and proverbs is in the stability of form. While idioms may have less flexibility in their meaning, they appear to be more flexible in their forms.

Consider the idiom variations in (59; Vega-Moreno 2003: 304, 318). The idioms *to leave no stone unturned* and *to pull strings* have been enriched through the use of adjectives.

(59) a. The most important thing is that we *leave no legal stone unturned*.

b. I think his father must *have pulled a few political strings* to get him out of jail.

c. He didn't *spill a single bean*.

While proverbs are not completely static, the variation in forms is usually quite small. (See Silverman-Weinreich (1978) for an example of a language (Yiddish) with no variation.) One case of slight variations is shown by Mieder, Kingsbury, & Harder (1992: 265) who list 19

variations of the English proverb *the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence*. Some of these are shown in (60).

- (60)
- a. Grass always seems greener in foreign fields.
 - b. Grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.
 - c. Grass is always greener away from home.
 - d. Grass is always greener in somebody else's backyard.
 - e. Grass is greener on the other side of the stream.
 - f. The grass is always greener in the next man's yard.
 - g. The grass is always greener on the other man's lawn.

Most differences in this list are synonyms or near synonyms, such as *yard*, *lawn*, *backyard*, and *pasture*, etc. An example of another proverb is shown in (61).

- (61) You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

From 30 hits in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) database, the following list in (62) shows the only variations from the original form in (61).

- (62)
- a. The best way to teach an old dog new tricks. [Title of an article]
 - b. You can teach an old dog new tricks.
 - c. Teaching an old dog new tricks. [Title of an article]
 - d. It's tough to teach an old dog new turns.
 - e. It's hard to sell an old dog new ticks.
 - f. ... hard to teach an old dog new tricks.

There is one cited example which has a play on words (62e; *It's hard to sell an old dog new ticks*), called an anti-proverb, which is the only example which gives new meaning. However, the intended interpretation is the play on words rather than an enriched meaning of the proverb. The

other salient difference is those utterances which include *can* instead of *can't* (62b). This draws the attention to the fact that the proverb may not in fact be a universal truth and may shift the focus to the explicature of the proverb as well as its strong implicature.

We have seen that proverbs have less variation in form than idioms but they have a far greater variation in meaning. This major difference between idioms and proverbs comes down to the nature of the Privileged Interactional Interpretation. In general, the intended meaning that a speaker conveys with an idiom is an explicature and the intended meaning the speaker conveys with a proverb is an implicature. For example consider (63) and (64) from Vega-Moreno (2003: 320-321).

(63) After the Paddington derailment, trains arrive *at a snail's pace*.

(64) After she broke her hip, my grandma walks *at a snail's pace*.

The idiom *at a snail's pace* means “slow” or “very slow”. This is part of the explicature communicated by the utterance and that explicature remains the same in both (63) and (64); it is also the Privileged Interactional Interpretation of *at a snail's pace*. There are implicatures of course, and these differ between (63) and (64), most notably, the relative speed at which each of the subjects travel (e.g. slow for a train is much faster than slow for grandma). Likewise, (65) and (66) show a similar contrast with the idiom *in the twinkling of an eye*.

(65) My husband is very handy. He painted the house *in the twinkling of an eye*.

(66) My husband got dressed *in the twinkling of an eye*. (Vega-Moreno 2003: 321)

For each of these idioms, the explicature is “very fast”, but again the relative speed will differ. With idioms, the meaning that the speaker is trying to convey does not typically change from context to context (at least on the level of explicature which I am arguing is the Privileged Interactional Interpretation for idioms).

Meaning derivation is different with proverbs. For proverbs, the Privileged Interactional Interpretation changes with the context and is typically a strong implicature as in (53) above. As another example, compare the proverb given in (67) and (68), each with a different context.

(67) A: I am thinking about applying for a job at the local café.
B: But you've never been there before. **Look before you leap.**

(68) A: I am thinking about applying for a job at the local café.
B: Won't that put you in the hole? **Look before you leap.**

While the explicature of *look before you leap* is something similar to *consider X before committing to X*, the primary communication is the implicature in each of these contexts. For (67), B is bringing attention to the fact that A might want to spend some time at the café before applying for the job; this is part of the strong implicature and the intended communication. In (68), the cautionary advice has to do with the state of A's finances if he chooses to accept the job; A may want to count the cost of applying for the job. Notice how (68) also includes an idiom (*in the hole*) which will have an explicature of being in debt or short on cash.

Along a similar vein of comparison, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1973: 115-118) provides eight different contexts in which the proverb *money talks* could be used and understood differently. She notes that while the base meaning remains the same, the interpretation of the utterance is different in each new context.

Finally, another similarity between idioms and proverbs is the abundance of figurative language. As we will see in the following section, Relevance Theory does not treat metaphor as a special kind of language use but as a broadening of concepts (something which is done naturally on a smaller scale in most speech). Vega-Moreno notes that "idiom strings, both in their standard and variant forms, can be seen to involve just the same mechanisms as are employed in arriving

at the meaning intended by literally, loosely, hyperbolically and metaphorically used words” (2003: 312).

Table 2 provides a summary and comparison of the distinctions between proverbs and idioms, especially under Relevance Theory.

Table 2 Proverbs and idioms

	Proverbs	Idioms
Form	relatively fixed form	relatively more flexible (with some exceptions)
Utterance meaning	varies in context	relatively fixed
Compositionality	partly compositional	partly compositional (with some exceptions)
Completeness	makes conversational contribution on its own	requires additional morphosyntax to make a conversational contribution
Communicated assumptions	communicates at least one strong implicature and one strong explicature	communicates at least one strong explicature
Privileged Interactional Interpretation	implicature	explicature

4.3 Proverbs and metaphor

Sperber & Wilson (2008) argue that metaphor is not as special or unique as it may seem. The meanings of words are in constant flux from context to context and strictly literal definitions are in fact hard to come by. This section will expand on the introduction of Relevance Theory and metaphor from Section 2.3.2 and discuss the ways in which Relevance Theory would account for metaphor in proverbs.

Again, Relevance Theory takes the perspective that there is a continuum between literal and figurative uses of language and that utterances will not always fit easily on one side or the other. This is also true of proverbs, where some are more figurative than others. However, it is not our concern with whether or not a proverb employs figurative language, since language will

be dealt with in generally the same way no matter where it falls on the spectrum (see ad hoc concept formation in section 4.4). In fact, it has been found that in many cases, processing time of literal utterances is not any faster than for figurative utterances (Gibbs 2001). The focus of Relevance Theory in these cases is to determine the broadening and narrowing of certain concepts within the utterance as it is being interpreted in the current context.

Sperber & Wilson's (2008) article "A deflationary account of metaphor" argues that metaphors are not a special kind of speech form and do not require a separate theory in order to be understood: "there is no mechanism specific to metaphor, no interesting generalisation that applies only to them." (2008: 84). With this in mind, our pragmatic theoretical applications should involve a similar process for metaphors as for other speech forms.

Sperber & Wilson state that "human communication is inferential communication" (2008: 87) rather than a code (where a stimulus encodes a message and the hearer decodes it). A code would imply a simple one-to-one correspondence of units of speech to meaning. In the case of metaphor, this correspondence leads to associations between the word and related words. For example, let's examine the phrase in (69).

(69) *Woman to uncouth suitor: Keep your paws off me!* (Sperber & Wilson 2008: 101)

With an associationist account, *paws* may offer several connotations such as clumsiness or bestiality which attach themselves to the meaning meant by *paws* in (69) which is HAND. And so, the original literal meaning of *paws* is discarded in favor of what it is associated with. Sperber & Wilson opt for an inferential approach; they find it odd that the original meaning of *paw* should disappear especially since there may be more subtle inferences that are communicated (2008: 101). A metaphor gives rise to many weak implicatures (and often some strong ones too) which are present as the hearer searches for the most relevant interpretation of the utterance.

And so, Relevance Theory claims that a new concept PAWS* is developed in the midst of the communication act. This new concept carries with it the connotations of *paws* which are weakly implicated (2008: 102) as well as broadening to include the hearer's hands as part of the definition. Most metaphors include a broadening of a certain concept to derive their ad hoc concepts.

In Section 4.1, we saw that the concept COVER from the proverb *don't judge a book by its cover* is broadened to the concept of OUTWARD APPEARANCE. Thus, a new concept COVER* is being communicated in the utterance of the proverb. Let us now look at another proverb, below in (70). This conversation occurred on PBS NewsHour (July 20, 2017) where the hosts were discussing the potential threats of artificial intelligence.

- (70) [Referring to future A.I.]: Well, it could start a war by create – by doing fake news and spoofing e-mail accounts and fake press releases, and just by, you know, manipulating information. **The pen is mightier than the sword.** (COCA)

There are several metaphors at play in the proverb in (70). Here, we begin with the metaphor where PEN stands in for a related concept WRITTEN WORDS and SWORD which stands in for PHYSICAL HARM. But the interpretation does not stop there; a new concept PEN* emerges which is broadened to include the workings of a pen (i.e. the written word) as well as specific examples of words, none of which actually need a pen to create (e.g. news, e-mail, press release). The first broadening is for the base meaning of the proverb and the second broadening is for its implicature, relevant to the context. It is hard to imagine A.I. using pens to communicate. While broadening the notion of PEN* to include items which are written, PEN* is further broadened to include COMMUNICATION since physical written materials are not what have the power to overcome the sword in this proverb. The concept SWORD is likewise broadened, although with less detail, but it does implicate that the threatening A.I. has the ability or possibility to induce

physical harm. The connotations of violence from SWORD will remain attached to the new concept SWORD*.

The above explanation included the interpretation of a metaphor within the proverb. Of course, proverbs apply metaphorically to the current situation. Here is an example of metaphor in a proverb that does so from NBC Today (May 11, 2004) in (71). The context is when a talk-show guest, Dr. Saltz, is discussing a self-help topic about change.

(71) You can go to all the therapy in the world and ... as the saying goes, **you can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink**. (COCA)

In this example, there are several layers to the base meaning. First of all, there is the explicature of this proverb, its meaning outside of a particular context. This explicature is represented in (72).

(72) You can bring X [something or someone] to Y [goal or destination] but you can't make them partake of Y.

Then, there are further inferences that can be drawn from the base meaning without bringing up the current context. This base meaning of this proverb carries a further strong implicature that is communicated. This strong implicature is along the lines of (73).

(73) It is the responsibility of X [alone] to partake of Y.

How do we arrive at this interpretation? The concept of HORSE is broadened to include certain characteristics of being led or guided, being under authority yet having independence, and so on. These qualities allow for the new concept HORSE* to include human beings as part of its concept. The connotations that carry over from HORSE are enriched by the concept of LEAD as the preceding verb. If a horse is being led, that means someone has authority over it, and in this case the person leading the horse knows what the horse's needs are (i.e. water).

When it comes to the Privileged Interactional Interpretation, the most basic meaning that the speaker is trying to communicate, we may arrive at something like (74).

(74) You can lead people to the self-help they need, but you can't make them use that help.

In this context, that help is the knowledge and wisdom that Dr. Saltz is sharing on the news show. The point she is sharing is that it is up to the horse to drink the water, or that person to apply the wisdom to turn their life around. Here we have the application of the proverb by analogy to a current situation. The discussion will now turn to ad hoc concept formation more broadly.

4.4 Ad hoc concept formation

Many philosophers have exposed the problem that meaning construal is often complex; for example, Wittgenstein states that “the functions of words are as diverse as the functions of” tools in a toolbox (1953: 6). While words may seem conventional on the surface, such that our inner lexicon will determine their meanings, there is a lot more lurking underneath – especially when context is taken into account. As a further note from Wittgenstein, he admits that “what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly” (1953: 6; emphasis in original).

One of the more recent developments within Relevance Theory is the theoretical description of how the meanings of words are adjusted in context to fit a more specific meaning than their lexically coded definitions. The idea is that within a context, words become narrowed, broadened, or develop a concept that is specific to the situation at hand. This follows the work of Wilson & Carston (2007) whereby they attribute this ad hoc concept formation to the expectation of relevance. Within lexical pragmatics, words have a basic, lexically encoded meaning (an encyclopedic definition) which is then either broadened, narrowed, or loosened in its properties;

this is part and parcel of achieving a relevant implication of the proposition expressed. Consider the loosening of *flat* in (75).

(75) Holland is flat. (Clark 2013: 248)

Flat is not taken as literally flat; a hearer would not expect to arrive at that interpretation of FLAT based on the context of the utterance. It does not fit within the realm of relevance, nor is it a Privileged Interactional Interpretation. What would be more appropriate within a Relevance-Theoretic account would be to develop certain implications from the description of Holland as flat as in (76) (Clark 2013: 249).

- (76) a. Holland is not mountainous.
 b. The views in Holland will be those of a relatively flat landscape.
 c. It would be relatively easy to cycle around Holland.

There may be many more implications to the utterance in (75); however, what is clear is that a certain concept FLAT* is being developed in the interpretation of the utterance which is particular to a description of Holland, and perhaps more generally to a country or landscape. The original concept FLAT has thus been loosened. An example of narrowing can be found in (77).

(77) My friend Sally is moving to London. Do you think you could introduce her to some men? (Clark 2013: 248)

Here, there is a concept MEN* that is developed specific to this context and that is narrower than the lexically defined concept of MEN. It is likely that Sally wants to be introduced to men who are single, available, looking for a relationship etc. This narrows the concept in context.

It was briefly mentioned in Chapter 2 that Relevance Theory could account for loose talk more readily than Gricean pragmatics. This is because Relevance Theory deals with an approximation of the speaker's meaning rather than merely the literal proposition. As Wilson & Carston state, "the ad hoc concepts created by the pragmatic interpretation of individual words

and phrases are seen as constituents of the proposition the speaker is taken to have expressed, rather than merely contributing to implicatures, as in the standard Gricean account” (2007: 3-4).

Similar ideas have been espoused in the past, for example, by Whorf (1942) who uses the term “elastic meaning”. For Whorf, any word can stretch and expand to fit the context at hand – meanings are never determinate. From the work of Ludlow (2014), a philosopher of Generative Linguistics, an argument arises that meanings are negotiated and ad hoc meaning boundaries are created in the midst of a conversation whether consciously or subconsciously. This means that language used in a particular context may broaden and narrow in meaning until some sort of conclusion is adhered to in that particular context. These ad hoc concepts are important in disambiguating the meaning of underdetermined lexemes, and Wilson & Carston (2007: 3) note that this may in fact pertain to *all* lexemes.

Here is another example: the word *raw* in *the steak is raw* (Clark 2013: 272) does not mean that the steak is completely raw in the context of a patron stating this after being served a steak in a restaurant. The intended meaning is that the steak is rawer than the eater expected (but still likely cooked enough for serving standards). In this instance, RAW* (i.e. rawer than the speaker expects) would be a concept applied to the lexical item *raw* for this particular context only. These adjusted concepts are also theoretically tied to interpreting utterances of metaphor.

4.4.1 Broadening and narrowing

It is important to note that narrowing is not the same as disambiguation (Wilson & Carston 2007: 19). Disambiguation has to do with choosing one of multiple different definitions (i.e. lexical entries) for a word. Narrowing begins with the lexical entry of the word and then narrows the concept into something more specific to fit the current context. Disambiguation will have already happened by the time the concept itself is narrowed. However, narrowing will include

interpreting one standard encyclopedic definition into a more specific context use (e.g. *fresh water*, *fresh laundry*, *fresh idea* etc.).

Wilson & Carston (2007) argue that narrowing/broadening is inferential rather than non-inferential. Inferential is logical; association is automatic. The inferential account is by default stronger merely because an associationist account will overgenerate the possibilities that are considered in the brain. If there are many possibilities considered, then there must be some rules as to how to remove some of them. According to Relevance Theory, “hearers have an automatic inferential heuristic for constructing the best interpretation given the evidence available to them” (Wilson & Carston 2007: 20). On associationist accounts, they state that “if the only associations exploited in lexical adjustment are inferential ones which narrow or broaden the denotation of the encoded concept, purely or partly associative accounts will vastly overgenerate, and some method for filtering out unwanted associations will be required” (Wilson & Carston 2007: 35). Relevance Theory constrains the amount of logical inferences of a particular utterance by the principles of relevance. According to a hearer’s expectations of relevance, they will be guided towards the most relevant ad hoc concept.

Seitel makes a comment on the constraint of certain concepts in his analysis of proverbs: “each term [in a proverb] may have a very large number of features associated with it, but when [they] are part of the same stated situation, only certain of the features apply” (1969: 136). He compares the use of *child* in the proverbs in (78) and (79).

(78) You can’t send a child to do a man’s work.

(79) A child on its mother’s back does not know the way is long. (1969: 136)

In (78), there are certain senses of the concept CHILD which are brought into focus, such as incompetence. In (79), other senses of CHILD come to mind such as ignorance. These are examples of narrowing and these add to the implicature of the utterance.

And so, when it comes to proverbs, many lexical items are adjusted ad hoc concepts like in the examples above. Let's consider an adjustment of TIME in the proverb *time flies* in (80) through (82).

(80) The day is over already? **Time flies.**

(81) The semester is over already? **Time flies.**

(82) My daughter moved out of our home last week. I can still remember holding her in my arms. **Time flies.**

In (80), the time period denoted in the utterance of the proverb is hours, in (81) it is months, and in (82) the time period denoted may be a couple of decades. In each, the concept of TIME is adjusted and narrowed to fit the context. The difference in the amount of time between these three cases is significant. The implicatures derived by the hearer will likely include the amount of time that has passed as in (83).

(83) a. Time [hours] passes quickly.

b. Time [months] passes quickly.

c. Time [years] passes quickly.

With this proverb, one would not expect the utterance of *time flies* in (80) to have the same implication as (82). This is a case of lexical narrowing wherein each different utterance of *time* has a narrowed ad hoc concept TIME* denoting the relative length of time that is meant by the speaker.

In the next example in (84), the context is taken from a magazine about astronomy which, in one of its articles, featured a list of ways to get more out of the hobby via Facebook (COCA; April 2012).

- (84) **Pictures are worth a thousand words.** Try posting a small photo album or three that relate to astronomy. Facebook has made it easy and then you can just watch the comments roll in.

The speaker is commenting on the fact that sometimes a visual representation of something is more informative than would be words that represent the same thing. This is part of the base meaning of the proverb. What is meant by *a thousand words*? Here we have a case of hyperbole. According to Relevance Theory, hyperbole is, again, not a unique phenomenon requiring its own theory. Instead it can be explained through ad hoc concept formation as a case of lexical broadening or loosening. Obviously, the speaker is not meaning that a picture is worth *exactly* one thousand words, no more and no less; how would one calculate that value anyway? Instead, the expression is used to mean any of (85).

- (85) a. many words
b. many, many words
c. countless words

A THOUSAND WORDS is thus loosened to [A THOUSAND WORDS]* where the exact count is not relevant but the significance of the amount is relevant. Here is another example of the proverb, this time including a broadening of the concept PICTURE in (86).

- (86) I wasn't sure he loved her, but then I saw them hugging at the airport. **A picture is worth a thousand words.**¹

¹ <https://www.engvid.com/english-resource/50-common-proverbs-sayings/>

What is interesting in this utterance of the proverb compared to (84) is that *picture* does not refer here to a literal picture; instead, through ad hoc concept formation, the lexically encoded concept PICTURE is adjusted and broadened to include ideas like:

- (87) a. A visual representation
- b. A visual scene
- c. A (relatively) static moment in time

All of these highly relevant notions of PICTURE are accessed in order to come up with the implication that the speaker's seeing the two people hug in the airport is a PICTURE. This leads to the ad hoc concept PICTURE* in the utterance of (86) which is extended to meaning a visual scene or a moment in time, not necessarily a photograph nor something that is painted or designed.

Reexamining the use of *a thousand words*, the emphasis must be on how a visual representation can achieve more than words could achieve, especially in the given scenario. Perhaps the speaker of (86) could have described the situation in words in (88) of the scene at the airport.

- (88) Because of the way they hugged when they saw each other, I could tell that they loved each other.

This sentence has exactly 19 words and probably described the scene sufficiently enough.

However, the use of the proverb denotes that the visual scene had meaning that was *deeper* (and more emotional) than mere words can describe, or that the scene was more *succinct* in its meaning than words would be, or even that the scene was able to communicate aspects of *love* that the speaker thought not possible to do so in words. This is a particularly interesting proverb in terms of Relevance Theory because it speaks to Relevance Theory's main principles: a picture achieves more cognitive effects for less processing effort than many words.

We will look at one more case of broadening in the proverb in (89).

(89) Beggars can't be choosers.

A lexical entry of *beggar* includes the descriptions in (90).

- (90)
- a. Someone who begs for money.
 - b. Someone who is not well off.
 - c. Someone who is in need.
 - d. Someone who is in a bad situation.

This sense of BEGGAR in (89) is broadened to include not only those who are in need of money but those who may need something (or are asking for something) and are not in a position to attain it on their own. The number of options available to them may be limited, or in fact may only be one as in (91).

(91) I was unemployed, and they offered me a job cleaning toilets. I didn't like the job, but I accepted it. **Beggars can't be choosers.**

Because the speaker is unemployed, he or she feels like there are not many options in terms of what they can do and so must accept an unsatisfying job. For the speaker and addressee, there must be a new concept BEGGAR* that emerges in a search for relevance over the Privileged Interactional Interpretation. This new concept includes *someone who is in a difficult situation*, *someone with few choices*, etc.

4.5 More examples

This section will include several examples from other languages in order to bolster the set of data provided by this thesis. Let us begin with an example that is overall more literal than figurative. Penfield & Duru's (1988) investigation of Igbo (Niger-Congo) dealt mainly with proverbs uttered to children. As such, many of the proverbs they gathered used less figurative language than the average Igbo proverb so as to be more easily intelligible to children. (92) was uttered by a parent to children of about five years of age.

- (92) I am telling you now with my one finger; do not allow me to bring out my five fingers.
(Penfield & Duru 1988: 125)

This proverb is a verbal warning to correct behavior; the consequence of further disobedience will be spanking (i.e. *five fingers*). The child must interpret the utterance first by noting that it is worth paying attention to, then achieving the relevant cognitive effects for the least effort. If the parent is wagging one finger at the child, waving four more fingers at him is likely not the intended punishment. The child realizes that this would not be the intended cognitive effect; the *five fingers* will represent something more. Because this proverb is engrained in the culture, the appropriate equating of the *five fingers* to *spanking* is likely conventionalized. The Privileged Interactional Interpretation that the child assesses as relevant might be (93).

- (93) Stop that behavior.

This is likely the strongest implicature of (92) in the situation. The implicature in (93) is not a part of the proposition expressed in (92) but it is the inferred meaning of that utterance. There may be further implicatures such as the list in (94) that may arise as the child considers the proverb.

- (94) a. Stop that behavior.
b. I do not like your behavior
c. Your behavior is not acceptable to me.
d. If you continue that behavior, you will receive a spanking.

Let us consider another example from Igbo. The proverb in (95) is also a warning and includes metaphor.

- (95) A rat which does not listen to warnings will listen when he's in a pot of soup. (Penfield & Duru 1988: 126)

In contrast to (94), this proverb is uttered towards the child when they are engaging in a behavior that would put them in danger; the dangerous situation is salient when interpreting the *pot of soup*. What could be a possible base meaning of the utterance? First of all, we must determine the relationship between the proverb and the context. The rat is the child, and the pot of soup is the harmful outcome. This would suggest that the base meaning of (95) could read something like (96).

- (96) A person (or child) that does not listen to warnings, will listen when they receive the harmful outcome of their behavior.

The strongly communicated implicature is below in (97).

- (97) That behavior is dangerous.

The implicatures for (95) will be similar to those in (94) but not entirely. The command to stop the behavior is less obvious, but it may be in the implicature. This is because (92) is uttered in the moment in which the behavior must stop and (95) may be uttered when talking *about* a behavior that the child has done in the past. Possible implicatures of (95) are listed in (98).

- (98) a. Stop that behavior.
b. You should listen to verbal warnings.
c. Dire situations are fast teachers.

Lastly, we have a proverb from Yoruba in Arewa & Dundes (1964). Typically, the proverb in (99) is uttered from one parent to the other about how one's behavior as the parent may transfer to the child.

- (99) The offspring of an elephant cannot become a dwarf; the offspring of an elephant is like an elephant. (Arewa & Dundes 1964: 75)

The context given is a father who acts out in anger and then is disappointed when his son acts the same way. The mother could reprove the father with (99). The explicature of the utterance may be along the lines of (100).

(100) The child of a parent who behaves in one way will not behave another way; the child of a parent who is one way will be the same as the parent.

It may even be lexicalized as something simpler as in (101).

(101) The child will be like the parent. It cannot be different.

And the Privileged Interactional Interpretation may be something like (102).

(102) Your child will act the way you act.

The implicature of the utterance of this proverb includes the identification of the *offspring* with the parents' son, thus the inclusion of *your* in (102) as this would be relevant in the exchange.

Following this, there are several potential weaker implicatures that may be communicated as well, shown in (103).

(103) a. You should be careful about the way you act in front of our children.

b. It is your own fault for being disappointed about our son's behavior.

4.6 Summary

Beginning with the Privileged Interactional Interpretation, we have seen how utterances of proverbs will typically communicate a strong implicature as their intended meaning. Hearers find optimal relevance not in the form of the proverb but in its application to the current context.

The biggest contribution of Relevance Theory to the interpretation of proverbs is likely the development of ad hoc concept formation. In most cases, lexical items in proverbs are broadened (while some are narrowed) to create concepts that will satisfy the presumption of optimal relevance.

I have shown that proverbs and idioms have more differences than earlier analyses suggest (e.g. Norrick 1985, 2014). I have made the claim that proverbs are unique in that they will reliably provide a strong implicature as the Privileged Interactional Interpretation and I have shown how Relevance Theory can account for proverbs in everyday conversation. The following, concluding chapter will tie together earlier pragmatic theories of proverbs with the conclusions of the current thesis.

5. Conclusion

Aasland has noted that “generally, proverb scholars have come out too much on one side or the other. Either they overemphasize the importance of the generic interpretation(s) or they give all center stage to the performative aspects of proverb usage” (2012: 24). It was my goal in this thesis to bring both of these aspects together with equal weight. I have done so by expressing the importance of the generic interpretation as a strong explicature and the contextual interpretation as a strong implicature.

If Relevance Theory is robust enough to account for the pragmatics of understanding and language use, then it should be more than able to account for proverbs. This was shown through Relevance Theory’s use of explicatures and implicatures as well as its description of ad hoc concept formation. The metaphorical nature and loose talk that is found in proverbs is explained by broadening and/or narrowing the concepts represented with the proverb itself. These meanings are expanded through the intentions of the speaker in specific contexts. This thesis has also compared proverbs with Relevance Theory’s explanation of a related linguistic phenomenon: idioms. Idioms are similar to proverbs in that they are conventional, often metaphoric phrases; however, they do not make a conversational contribution on their own and their meaning is much more fixed and more tied to the explicature of the utterance when compared to proverbs.

The major claim of this thesis was that the meaning of a proverb in context contains at least one strong implicature and one explicature, where the implicature is the Privileged Interactional Interpretation.

5.1 Questions and limitations

One question that arises is whether or not proverbs should be considered a special type or category under a Relevance-Theoretic account. Since Relevance Theory does not commit to stating that metaphor is a special type (e.g. Sperber & Wilson 2008), why should proverbs be granted this honour? Within the hypothesis provided by this thesis, I have shown that there are unique characteristics that apply to proverbs which do not apply to other linguistic expressions, such as idioms. Due to the fact that there are specific elements of the proverb (e.g. a strong explicature that is not the Privileged Interactional Interpretation and a strong implicature that is), it would be safe to place proverbs in their own category under Relevance Theory until more comparisons to other linguistic phenomena are made.

One limit to the current study is the lack of attention to novel proverbs. A proverb can be novel in a certain context either because the hearer is not familiar with it or because the proverb is relatively new in the life of the language. The former category could include created proverbs in fiction as well. In utterances of novel proverbs, Relevance Theory would treat their interpretation as creative metaphor and a hearer, in a search for optimal relevance, may recognize the cadence of the utterance as proverbial and search for more cognitive effects. I would theorize, if the communication is successful, that the hearer will arrive at a base meaning for the proverb as well as a strong implicature of its application to the current context (see Katz & Ferretti 2001 for the on-line processing of context in novel proverbs). In the case of a novel proverb, the base meaning has much more relevance since it is needed in processing the intended interpretation of the proverb. That is, the base meaning is not lexicalized and thus will be actively processed. However, more research could be devoted to the interpretation of novel proverbs under Relevance Theory.

Another area for further research is the application of this theory to other languages. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this will depend on a deep understanding of the language such that the proverbs are a part of the tacit knowledge of the researcher and/or participants.

The current thesis contributes to and expands upon the research done in Relevance Theory to account for various linguistic phenomena. Proverbs hold a special place in many languages, and Relevance Theory can bring a deeper understanding of their use.

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