

Introduction

What is an authentic American proverb? This question is easily asked, but the answer is tied to all sorts of difficulties. American English is based on the English language, which is widely used beyond Great Britain, and which in turn goes back to Indo-European origins and is particularly rich in classical, Biblical, and medieval Latin language material (Mieder 2015b). Many proverbs in this world language are loan translations from those old sources, but added, of course, is an abundance of indigenous proverbs that are familiar in English only. Immigrants have brought foreign-language proverbs to America that were sometimes translated into the local language, such as the German proverb “Man muß das Kind nicht mit dem Bade ausschütten” from the sixteenth century, which has been known in the United States since the nineteenth century as “Do not throw the baby out with the bath water” (Mieder 1991b). This proverb is appropriately listed in the *Dictionary of American Proverbs* (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1992: 33), but it is not a proverb that originated in America. This is true for a large number of the more than fifteen thousand proverbs in that collection, whose title should more aptly be “Dictionary of Proverbs Current in America.” This is a problem that can be found in almost all national proverb collections, because they also register, with only a few exceptions, borrowed proverbs from other languages that have gained currency in translation in the particular language.

It must also be pointed out that there are also some Native American proverbs, but, despite scholarly attempts by anthropologists, folklorists, and linguists, only very few proverbs have

been registered. In fact, it remains a conundrum why there is such a dearth of proverbs in the Native American languages, among them “A deer, although toothless, may accomplish something” (Tsimshian from British Columbia; one should not judge another person by outward appearances) and “If one talks loudly, the cave will answer” (Tzotzil from Chamula in southern Mexico; anybody who acts antisocially does not deserve to live in a house but rather in a cave). Regrettably, as far as is known, the few proverbs that have been found have not entered the English language as common proverbs. It appears that Native Americans communicate their generational wisdom by way of metaphors and narratives and not by formulaically expressed proverbs (Gossen 1973; Mieder 1989a: 99–110). There have been calls for a renewed effort of trying to find Native American proverbs (Mieder 1989b), but not even Keith Basso’s excellent book *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (1996) deals with proverbial matters because of their rare occurrence. On the other hand, African American proverbs have entered the mainstream of American proverbs, as Sw. Anand Prahlad has documented in his seminal book *African-American Proverbs in Context* (1996) and as proverbs such as “Different strokes for different folks” and “What goes around, comes around” in the present collection make abundantly clear.

Many of the English language proverb collections (see list in the bibliography), at least since the 1950s, include more and more truly American proverbs, which have gained international circulation in English or in translation due to the significant linguistic and cultural influence of America. But if one looks at major collections such as *English Proverbs Explained* (Ridout and Witting 1967), *English Proverbs* (Mieder 1988), *Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings: Over 1,500 Proverbs and Sayings with 10,000 Illustrative Citations* (Titelman 1996), *Dictionary of Proverbs and Their Origins* (Flavell and Flavell 1997), *Dictionary of Proverbs* (Pickering 1997), *The Facts on File Dictionary of Proverbs: Meanings and Origins of More*

Than 1,500 Popular Sayings (Manser and Fergusson 2002), and *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (Speake 2008), they are always compilations in which American proverbs are underrepresented, even though they offer exquisite historical examples (Doyle 2007). Promising collections that use the word “American” in their titles, such as *Dictionary of American Proverbs* (Kin 1955), *American Proverbs, Maxims & Folk Sayings* (Smith 1968), *101 American English Proverbs: Understanding Language and Culture through Commonly Used Sayings* (Collis 1992), and *American Proverbs* (Reitman 2000), are largely unscientific compilations of English proverbs that lack any proof of American origin, and simply string together British texts without further commentary. This picture looks significantly better in case of the substantial proverb collections by the American paremiologist Bartlett Jere Whiting, because his collections are based on historical texts taken from literature and other publications in America: *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* (1977), *A Dictionary of American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases, 1820–1880* (1958, coauthored with the renowned paremiologist Archer Taylor), and *Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings* (1989). Other dictionaries to mention here are *The Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Familiar Phrases* (Stevenson 1948), *A Dictionary of Anglo-American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases Found in Literary Sources of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bryan and Mieder 2005), and *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012; see Doyle 1996; Mieder 2014b: 80–130). Like the massive collections of Bartlett Jere Whiting, these as well are scholarly compilations, but most of the material is “English,” and “American” refers basically to proverbs that are frequently used in America without necessarily having originated in this country. The one exception is my collection “*Different Strokes for Different Folks*”: *1250 authentisch amerikanische Sprichwörter* (2015), which I put together for German readers interested in proverbs of American origin. Upon further scholarly work, I have now added 250

more proverbs and am pleased to publish this new collection of 1,500 authentic American proverbs in English here in the United States. Both the German and now expanded English collections represent the first-ever attempt to list proverbs based on considerable research to prove their American (in rare cases Canadian) origin. For each proverb, the date of the earliest written text was identified with substantial effort and (where appropriate) explanations for words and meaning are added. Despite this effort, however, it must be said that the historical dates do not always have to be the final answer, because with the help of ever-larger databases containing written texts of any kind, it will certainly be possible to push back some first references even further. But at least here now is a collection of 1,500 proverbs that deserves the label “American proverbs.”

Origin

So, where do proverbs come from in general, and what are the sources for English proverbs overall and for American proverbs in particular? Each proverb has its origin with an individual who expresses a thought, an observation, or an experience in a particularly concise and catchy form for the first time. This individual utterance is then taken up by other speakers of the same language, which may lead to variants. Initially, the new orally transmitted proverb may be known only within a family, but then one hears it possibly in a whole village, in a city, a county, a state, a nation, and finally, through loan translations, in neighboring countries or nowadays even globally (Winick 1998; Honeck and Welge 1997; Mieder 2015b). Of course, proverbs have written origins as well, such as William Shakespeare’s “Brevity is the soul of wit” from *Hamlet* (1600). Originally, this was a literary quotation that, linked to Shakespeare, over time became a winged word that one cites in certain situations orally or in writing without reference to *Hamlet*.

Eventually, even the connection to Shakespeare is lost, and the quotation has become a popular proverb. A person competent in literature may still associate the proverb with Shakespeare, but the general population regards it as an anonymous proverb.

As mentioned before, there are many proverbs in national languages that one can trace far back (see Mieder 2008c: 9–44 for the following four major areas of origin). Many sayings commonly known in Europe come from Greek and Roman antiquity and through the Latin *lingua franca* and the *Adagia* (1500–) of Erasmus of Rotterdam have been spread all over Europe and beyond, where they have occurred for centuries until today as direct loan translations with significant frequency—for example, “Big fish eat little fish,” “One swallow does not make a summer,” “One hand washes the other,” and “Love is blind.” The Bible is the second major source of common European proverbs, with such familiar texts as “There is nothing new under the sun” (Proverbs 1:9), “Man does not live by bread alone” (Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4), “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12), and “The prophet is not without honor, save in his own country” (Matthew 13:57). The third source of common European proverbs consists of many well-known texts that have their origin in medieval Latin, having been translated in parochial schools and by humanists into the developing national languages—for example, “Strike while the iron is hot,” “All that glitters is not gold,” “The pitcher goes so often to the well that it is broken at last,” and “New brooms sweep clean.” The popular proverb “All roads lead to Rome” belongs in this group, because it relates—perhaps surprisingly—not to the imperial but the papal Rome.

Although these three processes of derivation had a significant impact on the shared set of European proverbs, as evidenced in Gyula Paczolay’s comparative collection *European Proverbs in 55 Languages with Equivalents in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese* (1997) and other useful collections of this kind (Mieder 2011a: 17–36), one must not forget that proverbs

of later origin also migrated from one language to another, especially among linguistically related and geographically neighboring languages. Because Europe is growing together more and more in modern times by general globalization (politics, mass media, business, Internet, tourism, etc.), old and new proverbs will certainly continue to be disseminated through direct borrowing or loan translations (Mieder 2000e). Eventually, native speakers will no longer be aware that certain proverbs are not originally from within their own linguistic culture. These days, one often finds introductory phrases such as “a German proverb says” or “as the old German proverb goes,” which are then followed by only recently translated proverbs, such as “Der frühe Vogel fängt den Wurm” (the English proverb “The early bird catches the worm,” from 1636; Mieder 2010c: 285–296) or “Ein Apfel pro Tag hält den Arzt fern” (the American proverb “An apple a day keeps the doctor away,” which originated in 1870; Mieder 2010c: 307–321). Nowadays, translated proverbs are relatively quickly absorbed into a language by the media and become folk wisdom. What previously took years or decades to occur can happen today in a flash.

This leads to the fourth and most modern source of proverbs that are in use across linguistic and cultural borders. It is based on the fact that British English, as well as other “Englishes” of the world, have developed into today’s international *lingua franca*, which obviously includes, with great importance, “American English.” It must be stressed that most of the proverbs that originated on British soil have not been translated into German, for example, but circulate in their original English version only. One of the exceptions is “Don’t put all your eggs into one basket” (1662; Mieder 2010c: 297–306), which has been heard since the early 1980s as “Man muß (soll) nicht alle Eier in einen Korb legen (tun)” with such frequency that it can be viewed as a new German proverb. But the following texts that originated in England are, in fact, circulating in English only: “He who sups with the devil should have a long spoon” (1390), “Fore-

warned is forearmed” (1425), “Birds of a feather flock together” (1545), “Beggars can’t be choosers” (1546), “Cleanliness is next to godliness” (1605), “A penny saved is a penny earned” (1640), “It is no use crying over spilt milk” (1659), “Appearances are deceptive” (1666), “A hedge between keeps friendship green” (1707), “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” (1742), “Any port in a storm” (1749), “Waste not, want not” (1772), “Accidents will happen in the best regulated families” (1819), “A watched pot never boils” (1848), and “Curiosity killed the cat” (1873). As expected, these English proverbs, and countless others, are very common in America, but they are not original American proverbs. To carve truly American proverbs out from the plethora of English proverbs is indeed a laborious and vexing task. These authentic American texts have their origin during the past four centuries. They range from the oldest proverb, “It is harder to use victory than to get it” (1633), to the newest proverb, “There is an app for everything” (2010), which refers to the modern plethora of “application software,” such that one can now find, in fact, an application for practically everything. Another and very popular American proverb from the early computer world is “Garbage in, garbage out” (1957), which can now also be found abbreviated as “GIGO” in verbal conversation.

Loan Translations of Anglo-American Proverbs

Before distinctive characteristics of truly American proverbs are discussed, a few additional comments regarding the fourth group of proverbs with worldwide distribution should be added here, a group that nowadays includes, besides English proverbs, quite certainly also American proverbs. A particularly interesting example is the Biblical saying “A house divided against itself cannot stand” (Mark 3:25). The proverb in the quoted wording is from the masterfully translated King James Version (1611), and it appeared for the first time in 1704 in America, where it

became a popular proverb, just as in England, while Martin Luther's less successful translation, "Wenn ein Haus mit sich selbst uneins wird, kann es nicht bestehen," did not become proverbial in German. The circumstances were quite different, however, in religious America, where the Bible text went through a process of secularization and appeared in the eighteenth century already as a metaphor for social and political conditions. Well-known Americans such as Thomas Paine and Daniel Webster used the proverb, and, in his famous "House-Divided" speech of 18 June 1858 in Springfield, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln raised it to the level of a national slogan. He repeatedly used it as a verbal leitmotif to argue against the dissolution of the young democracy, against the imminent civil war, and especially against slavery. Since that time, Lincoln's name is associated with this Bible proverb, and most Americans consider him the original author! When Willy Brandt, then still mayor of Berlin, was invited to Springfield in 1959 to speak at a celebration of Abraham Lincoln's 150th birthday on 12 April, he actually mentioned him in his English lecture as the man who "quoted the passage from the Bible about the house divided against itself," in obvious reference to his divided city of Berlin in a divided Germany. Brandt kept using this proverb, and when he gave speeches in various cities in Germany at the time of reunification, he concluded them repeatedly with a reference to Lincoln by citing the English proverb "A house divided against itself cannot stand" along with his own (!) successful German adaptation, "Ein in sich gespaltenes Haus hat keinen Bestand." His use of this version has prevailed in the German language, because thousands of people followed his speeches on television and radio or read excerpts in newspapers and magazines. Mass media has spread his words to the entire population, and so his wording of the Bible text has become a German proverb by way of Abraham Lincoln (Mieder 2000a: 57–102). Today, many examples can be found that prove beyond doubt that this is a loan proverb derived from American English (and not so much from the Bible).

A second example of a proverb that is falsely attributed to Abraham Lincoln as well can also be mentioned, but in this case extensive research has shown that it is an authentic American proverb. The American president had used this proverb on 9 June 1864 when he was being encouraged to run for a second term: “I have not permitted myself to conclude that I am the best one in the country, but I am reminded, in this connection, of a story of an old Dutch farmer, who remarked to a companion once that ‘it was not best to swap horses when crossing streams.’” The earliest American example dates from 1834 and proves that Lincoln is not the author of this proverb, which nowadays is mostly used in the standard form “Don’t change horses in mid-stream,” or as the variant “Don’t swap horses in the middle of the stream.” Of course, Lincoln never alleged that the catchy proverb was his invention. Nevertheless, his name is still associated with this phrase, which is even the case for the use of the German translation “Mitten im Strom soll man die Pferde nicht wechseln,” which appears in the media and in dictionaries of quotations and sayings with reference to Lincoln (see Mieder 2007b and 2010c: 323–340).

Since all good things come in threes, as we know, a somewhat recent example of how the American language and its proverbs are spread globally shall be mentioned here, because the following loan translation does not only occur in German. This time it was President Ronald Reagan who enabled the modern American proverb “It takes two to tango” to leap across the big pond. This proverb goes back to the popular song “Takes Two to Tango” (1952), with lyrics by Al Hoffman and music by Dick Manning and made very popular by the African American singer Pearl Bailey. Reagan knew the song and proverb, and when he was asked, after Leonid Brezhnev’s death, whether or not the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union under Yuri Andropov would improve, he said on 11 November 1982 quite spontaneously, “For ten years détente was based on words from them [the Russians] and not deeds to back those words up. And we need some action that they—it takes two to tango—that they

want to tango too.” About a week later, on 19 November 1982, the German journalist Theo Sommer cited Reagan’s statement in a convincingly translated headline for his front page article in *Die Zeit*: “Zum Tango gehören immer zwei” (Mieder and Bryan 1983). Since then, this phrase has established itself in slightly shortened form as “Zum Tango gehören zwei” as a German loan proverb, and this is true for other European languages as well. In addition, the short American original is used every now and then in English—a further proof that the Anglo-American language really is the *lingua franca* of Europe and around the world. This phenomenon has been described in more detail in “Many Roads Lead to Globalization’: The Translation and Distribution of Anglo-American Proverbs in Europe” (Mieder 2014b: 55–79).

International Loan Translations of American Proverbs

Here are just a few examples to show that American proverbs have been spread internationally. From the nineteenth century a frequently employed American proverb has been “Good fences make good neighbors” (1834), which gained prominence by way of Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall” (1914); it deals with the pros and cons of building a wall—a dilemma that has perplexed humankind to this day, be it building a fence among neighbors, or to keep immigrants out, or to separate peoples of different nationalities from each other (Monteiro 1976; Mieder 2003b). It is easily translated word for word, and it has caught on in Europe in various loan translations (Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Slovakian, Slovenian, Spanish, and Swedish):



Good fences make good neighbors.

Bul: Dobrite ogradi pravat dobri sasedi.

- Cro: Dobre ograde čine dobre susjede.
 Fre: Les bonnes clôtures font les bons voisins.
 Ger: Gute Zäune machen gute Nachbarn.
 Hun: A jó szomszédság záloga a jó kerítés.
 Ita: I buoni recinti fanno buoni vicini.
 Lit: Gera tvora – geri kaimynai.
 Pol: Gdzie dobre płoty, tak dobrzy sąsiedzi.
 Por: Os bons muros fazem os bons vizinhos.
 Slk: Vysoké ploty robia dobrých susedov.

•(⇔)•

Another example is an extremely popular and innocuous American proverb from 1870 that counts as a “medical” proverb of sorts and has certainly become well-established in Germany since about 1990 (Mieder 2010c: 310–314). The nineteenth-century wisdom that “an apple a day keeps the doctor away,” with its rhyme and commonsense message for good dietary practices, has become so widespread that it is frequently changed into an anti-proverb in advertisements, cartoons, greetings cards, T-shirts, etc. (Mieder 1991a). As can be seen, it has found its way into numerous European languages:

•(⇔)•

An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

- Bul: Edna yabalka na den darzhi doktora dalech ot men.
 Cro: Jedna jabuka na dan tjera doktora iz kuće van.
 Est: Üks õun päevas hoiab arsti eemal.
 Fin: Omena päivässä pitää lääkärin loitolla
 Fre: Une pomme par jour éloigne le médecin (pour toujours).
 Ger: Ein Apfel pro Tag hält den Arzt fern.
 Gre: Ena milo tin inera / ton giatro ton kani pera.
 Hun: Naponta egy alma a doktort távol tartja.
 Ita: Una mela al giorno toglie il medico di turno.
 Pol: Jedno jabłko dziennie trzyma lekarza z daleka.

- Por: Uma maçã por dia afasta o medico.
 Rus: Po iabloku v den' – i doktor ne nuzhen.
 Slk: Jedno jablko denne udrží doktora d'aleko.
 Slv: Eno jabolko na dan prežene zdravnika stran.
 Swe: Ett äpple om dagen håller doktorn borta från magen.



More modern American proverbs (not older than the year 1900 as far as their origin is concerned) have also been spread in Europe and far beyond globally as well, the latter still having to be investigated in more detail. There can be no doubt that the Englishes of the world have a major influence linguistically and culturally as the international *lingua franca*, with British English and American English playing the major roles. In fact, having spoken of the three earlier catalysts of spreading proverbs beyond national boundaries being classical antiquity, the Bible, and medieval Latin, I maintain that English is the fourth catalyst (Mieder 2000e, 2005b, and 2010c). *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (2012), edited by Charles Clay Doyle, Fred R. Shapiro, and me (see Mieder 2014b), provides much detail regarding the origin, history, and meaning of these proverbs. It should come as no surprise that the proverb “One picture is worth a thousand words” was coined as early as 1911 in the United States, where the visual has gained a particular dominance by way of film, television, advertisements, cartoons, comic strips, etc. (Mieder 1990; Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012: 196). As the following loan translations show, it has become solidly established in numerous European languages:



One picture is worth a thousand words.

- Bul: Edna snimka kazva/govori poveche ot hilyadi dumi.
 Cro: Slika vrijedi tisuću riječi.
 Est: Üks pilt ütleb rohkem kui tuhat sõna.
 Fin: Yksi kuva kertoo enemmän kuin tuhat sanaa.

- Fre: Une image vaut mille mots.
 Ger: Ein Bild sagt mehr als tausend Worte.
 Gre: Mia ikona axizi xilies lexis.
 Hun: Egy kép többet mond ezer szónál.
 Ita: Un'immagine vale mille parole.
 Lit: Vaizdas vertas tūkstančio žodžių.
 Pol: Jeden obraz jest więcej wart niż tysiąc słów.
 Por: Uma imagem vale mais do que mil palavras.
 Rom: O imagine face mai mult decat o mie de cucinte.
 Rus: Odná kartina luchshe tysiachi slov.
 Slk: Obraz je viac ako tisíc slov.
 Slv: Slika pove več kot tisoč besed.
 Spa: Una imagen vale más que mil palabras.
 Swe: En bild är värd mer än tusen ord.



The proverb “Think globally, act locally” from 1942 is older than one might have expected, but its first printed reference found thus far makes it perfectly clear that today’s prevalent thought about a global world was already present in the early forties: “Our vision of a better world is limited to our vision of better communities. We must think globally, but first act locally” (see Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012: 256). Since the proverb does not contain a metaphor and exhibits a simple parallel structure containing but four words, it was easily translatable into other languages to become a proverbial slogan of sorts for a concerned world citizenry:



Think globally, act locally.

- Bul: Misli globalno, deystvay localno.
 Cro: Misli globalno, djeluj lokalno.
 Cze: Mysli globálně, jednej lokálně.
 Est: Mõtle globaalselt, tegutse lokaalselt.
 Fin: Ajattele globaalisti, toimi paikallisesti.

- Fre: Penser global, agir local.
 Ger: Global denken, lokal handeln.
 Hun: Gondolkodj globálisan, cselekedj lokálisan.
 Ita: Pensa globale, agisci locale (Pensare globale, agire locale).
 Lit: Galvok globaliai – veik lolakiai.
 Pol: Myśl globalnie, działaj lokalnie.
 Por: Pensar global, agir local.
 Rus: Myslit' global'no – deistvovat' lokal'no.
 Slk: Mysli globálne, konaj lokálne.
 Slv: Misli globalno, deluj lokalno.



Just these examples show most clearly that the time of creating new proverbs is not over and that some proverbs of more modern times can reach an international distribution. This process is in fact feasible at a much-accelerated pace due to printed and electronic mass media (Mieder 2014c). The time has definitely come to pay more attention to modern proverbs of various languages and also to the spread of some of them beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries (Piirainen 2012–2016). Numerous modern proverbs have reached an impressive “wide-spread” status in recent times. The proverb “It’s a small world,” with its American origin from 1896, does indeed hold true for the international spread of proverbs today.

Obvious American Proverbs

Some proverbs will immediately appear as limited to the United States, especially those that contain the name of the country: “See America first” (1910), “Don’t sell America short” (1922), and President Barack Obama’s already proverbial statement “If you invest in America, America will invest in you” (2008). The same applies to proverbs with connections to baseball as the national sport and that have a general significance, yet require some

knowledge of the game: “Three strikes and you’re out” (1901), “You can’t steal first base” (1915), “Nobody bats a thousand” (1930), “You can’t hit the ball if you don’t swing” (1943), and “Step up to the plate” (1965). Even specific proverbs such as “Boston folks are full of notions” (1788), “Good Americans, when they die, go to Paris” (1858), “What is good for General Motors is good for America” (1953), “Don’t mess with Texas” (1985), and “What happens in Las Vegas, stays in Las Vegas” (2002; see Bock 2014) are based on distinct American aspects and are not always immediately comprehensible to those outside the country.

Before looking at the language, style, imagery, origin, tradition, and meaning of American proverbs, an important warning is in order. Repeatedly, studies have tried to draw conclusions about a certain national or group character based on a proverb collection of a specific language community. Studies about the national traits of the Dutch, Irish, or Russians need to be carried out with great caution, or better not at all, because they can quickly lead to questionable generalizations on the basis of small numbers of texts. Likewise, the fifteen hundred proverbs from several centuries of American history listed in this collection do not allow for such conclusions. Nevertheless, some general statements can be made, of course, to describe the dominant trends in these proverbs. This occurs to some degree in *American Proverbs: A Study of Texts and Contexts* (Mieder 1989) and *American Cultural [and Proverbial] Baggage: How to Recognize and Deal with It* (Nussbaum 2005), but it once again needs to be pointed out that the majority of recorded texts are not authentic American proverbs, but rather proverbs of different origin and tradition that appear in American usage in oral and written communication. The one exception is the new study on *The Worldview of Modern American Proverbs* (Mieder 2020), which is indeed based exclusively on proverbs of American origin. In any case, most of the fifteen hundred proverbs of the present collection belong to the folk wisdom that has found a nationwide distribution in their vast country of origin, with many of them belonging to the paremiological minimum

of American English (Mieder 1992b: 185–203; Lau 1996; Chłosta and Grzybek 2004; Haas 2008; Grzybek and Chłosta 2009; Čermák 2010: 58–71).

Structures and Variants

Like English proverbs in general, American proverbs consist on average of about seven words. The shortest texts have only two words in which the first word indicates a certain topic and the following verb presents a commentary. For example:

•(⇌)•

Safety first. (1818)

Think big. (1907)

Manners matter. (1909)

Speed kills. (1939)

Everybody shits. (1968)

•(⇌)•

More common are proverbs that express a plausible folk wisdom in three short words. Here, indeed, the soul of wit is in brevity, as can be seen in the following selection:

•(⇌)•

Facts don't lie. (1748)

Talk is cheap. (1843)

Work before play. (1894)

Hurry and wait. (1930)

Can't never could. (1952)

•(⇌)•

Particularly frequent are proverbs that consist of four words, which often show a parallel structure to enhance the memorability of such short, but concise, wisdom:



Late children, early orphans. (1742)

Crime does not pay. (1874)

You can't have everything. (1893)

All talk, no action. (1948)

Aim small, miss small. (2000)



A small special group is formed by those proverbs that follow the modern structural formula “My X, my Y.” These may also lead to variants in which the personal pronoun “my” is replaced by “your”:



My game, my rules. (1963)

My money, my rules. (1975)

My house, my party. (1979)

My house, my rules. (1983)

My party, my rules. (2003)



Of course, there are also much longer proverbs, but they can make memorization difficult, and they do occur less frequently because they are too cumbersome, especially in rapid oral conversation. Not surprisingly, these complex proverbs generate variations. It is often sufficient for the more familiar lengthy texts to simply allude to them in a shortened way:



A lie can go around the world and back while the truth is lacing up its boots. (1885)

Variant: A lie can travel round the world while the truth is tying up its shoestrings.

It's not the size of the dog in the fight that matters; it's the size of the fight in the dog. (1911)

If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it's a duck. (1948)

In order to get where you want to go, you have to start from where you are now. (1965)

When you're up to your ass in alligators, it's hard to remember you're there to drain the swamp. (1971)

Variant: When you're up to your ass in alligators, it's too late to start figuring out how to drain the swamp.



Proverbial variants are by no means limited to longer proverbs. On the contrary, particularly orally transmitted proverbs develop into fixed standard texts only over time, and often one or even two variants continue to exist on the side. Here are a few examples:



Shoot for the stars. (1847)

Variant: Aim for the stars.

Don't judge someone till you have walked a mile in his shoes. (1930)

Variant: Don't criticize a man till you have walked a mile in his moccasins.

A messy desk is a sign of a messy mind. (1974)

Variant: A cluttered desk is a sign of a messy person.

God doesn't make junk. (1975)

Variant: God doesn't make trash.

Never bring a knife to a gunfight. (1988)

Variant: You don't take a knife to a gunfight.



Of course, decency sometimes creates euphemistic variants, as, for example, in the case of these two offensive proverbs:



Fuck them and forget them. (1922)

Variant: Fool them and forget them.

Shit happens. (1944)

Variant: Stuff happens.



With these texts, we come to the topic of scatology and sexuality in proverbs, which has been suppressed in most proverb collections to date. However, it is a fact that such proverbs exist and that they occur in oral use and in literary works (just think of William Shakespeare or a number of modern writers), movies, songs, etc. with considerable frequency. They should not be omitted because of prudishness, and so the present collection contains a significant number of scatological and sexual texts for keywords such as “fuck,” “piss,” “sex,” “shit,” etc., to wit these examples:



Scatology:

Shit or get off the pot. (1935)

Shit in one hand and hope in the other; see which
one fills up first. (1941)

The one who smelt it dealt it. (1971)

You can't kill shit. (1997)

Sexuality:

Situation normal – all fucked up. (1941)

If you've got it, flaunt it. (1968)

Bad sex is better than no sex. (1969)

Old enough to bleed, old enough to breed. (1971)



For some proverbs that express sexuality only indirectly, explanations of words and metaphors are necessary to clarify the meaning—for example:



The blacker [skin color] the berry, the sweeter the juice. (1929)

It's not the meat [penis], it's the motion. (1951)

It's not what you've got [penis size], it's what you do with it. (1934)

If there is grass [female pubic hair] on the field, you can play ball. (1998)



In contrast to such often not only offensive but also brutally aggressive proverbs, there is the following metaphorical proverb: “No glove, no love” (1982). Here “glove” stands for condom, and the proverb has the very important message of “safe sex” in light of the AIDS epidemic.

As one would expect, certain structural patterns form the syntactic basis for a considerable number of proverbs. While many proverbs are simple words of wisdom, such as “A true friend is the best possession” (1744), “Great minds think alike” (1856), “Children are our future” (1920), and “It's not easy to be green” (1970), others are sentences of negation or imperatives utilizing the following structures:



You can't . . .

You can't ever tell what a lousy calf will come to be.

(1836)

You can't fight city hall. (1933)

You can't be a little pregnant. (1942)

You can't make chicken salad out of chicken shit.

(1980)

Don't . . .

Don't kick a fellow when he is down. (1809)

Don't bite off more than you can chew. (1895)

Don't rock the boat. (1920)
 Don't rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic. (1991)

Never . . .

Never say die. (1814)
 Never give a sucker an even break. (1923)
 Never try to teach a pig to sing; it wastes your time,
 and it annoys the pig. (1973)
 Never play leapfrog with a unicorn. (1977)

•(⇔)•

Then there are such proverbs that occur as interrogatives that might need an explanatory comment at their citation in the collection:

•(⇔)•

Why buy milk when you've got a cow at home?
 (1957)
 A bird may love a fish, but where would they live?
 (1964)
 Why go out for hamburger when you can eat steak
 at home? (1971)
 Where's the beef? (1984; see Barrick 1986)

•(⇔)•

But there are also structural formulas that are well-suited to express modern wisdom (Mieder 2014c). Some particularly productive base structures are the following:

•(⇔)•

No X, no Y
 No guts, no glory. (1945)
 No body, no crime. (1947)
 No dough, no go. (1952)
 No harm, no foul. (1956)

X is (are) X

- Facts are facts. (1760)
 A bet is a bet. (1857)
 Bosses are bosses. (1907)
 A deadline is a deadline. (1933)

X is better than Y

- A friend nearby is better than a brother far off. (1682)
 The chase is better than the kill. (1904)
 A live trout is better than a dead whale. (1941)
 A long shot is better than no shot. (1947)

X is a journey, not a destination.

- Success is a journey, not a destination. (1933)
 Education is a journey, not a destination. (1936)
 Happiness is a journey, not a destination. (1937)
 Marriage is a journey, not a destination. (1943)

If you can't X, Y

- If you can't beat them, join them. (1882)
 If you can't be good, be careful. (1902)
 If you can't dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them
 with bullshit. (1972)
 If you can't run with the big dogs, stay on the
 porch. (1985)

There are no X, only (just) Y

- There are no dull subjects, just dull writers. (1922)
 There are no problems, only opportunities. (1948)
 There are no bad dogs, only bad owners. (1949)
 There are no bad students, only bad teachers. (1958)

There's more than one way to X

- There's more than one way to beat the devil around
 the bush. (1776)

There's more than one way to skin a cat. (1843)
 There's more than one way to cook a goose. (1941)
 There's more than one way to peel an orange.
 (1954)



Counter Proverbs and Anti-Proverbs

Yet new proverbs are not only based on such structural formulas, they also arise from disagreement with traditional words of wisdom when they become questionable. Proverbs are not philosophical constructions built on logic, but contain and reflect the contradictions of life. Therefore, there are proverbs that rephrase an existing proverb into its opposite. Charles Clay Doyle has coined the term “counter proverb” (Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012: xi–xii). A few examples of this phenomenon:



Size doesn't matter. (1903)
 Counter proverb: Size does matter. (1964)
 (the size of a penis)

Good enough is not good enough. (1907)
 Counter proverb: Good enough is good enough.
 (1910)

Not all publicity is good publicity. (1915)
 Counter proverb: All publicity is good publicity.
 (1925)

Flattery will get you everywhere. (1926)
 Counter proverb: Flattery will get you nowhere.
 (1938)



More prevalent are those reactions to common proverbs that I have called “Antispruchwörter” (anti-proverbs), which are

humorous, ironic, or satirical modifications that contain new insights and generalizations, with the possibility of becoming new proverbs (Mieder 2004b: 150–153; Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012: xi). Here are a few examples:



Beauty is only skin deep. (1615)

Anti-proverb: Beauty is only skin. (1963)

Experience is the best teacher. (1617)

Anti-proverb: Expedience is the best teacher.
(1966)

Nobody is perfect. (1763)

Anti-proverb: No body is perfect. (1958)

If at first you don't succeed, try, try(, try) again.
(1838)

Anti-proverb: If at first you don't succeed, try read-
ing the instructions. (1962)



Even ancient proverbs such as “Tempus fugit” or “Time flies” may lead to new insights through anti-proverbs: “Time flies when you are having fun” (1939). The same is true for Bible proverbs: “Love thy neighbor” (Galatians 5:14) turns into “Love thy neighbor, but do not get caught” (1967), and the Biblical golden rule “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12) has been competing for a hundred years now with the pitiful wisdom “Do unto others before they do unto you” (1915).

Proverbs with Known or Attributed Authors

For most proverbs, the author is obviously unknown, but this new collection contains a considerable number of proverbs that go back to well-known public personalities and specific

dates of American politics (Mieder 2005: 147–186 and 2014b: 198–229):



- Give me liberty, or give me death. (1775)
 (revolutionary slogan of Patrick Henry)
- All men are created equal. (1776)
 (President Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence; see Mieder 2015a)
- These are the times that try men's souls. (1776)
 (publisher and revolutionary Thomas Paine)
- Sounds often terrify more than realities. (1796)
 (President George Washington)
- Happy is the country which has no history. (1807)
 (President Thomas Jefferson)
- Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. (1837)
 (President Andrew Jackson)
- My country, right or wrong. (1847)
 (President John Quincy Adams)
- All men and women are created equal. (1848)
 (feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton; see Mieder 2014a)
- The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. (1853)
 (abolitionist and preacher Theodore Parker; see Kraller 2016)
- If there is no struggle, there is no progress. (1857)
 (escaped slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass; see Mieder 2001)
- Broken eggs cannot be mended. (1860)
 (President Abraham Lincoln; see Mieder 2000f)
- Equal pay for equal work. (1869)
 (feminist Susan B. Anthony; see Mieder 2014a)
- Honor lies in honest toil. (1884)
 (President Grover Cleveland)

- Speak softly and carry a big stick. (1900)
 (President Theodore Roosevelt)
- The business of America is business. (1925)
 (President Calvin Coolidge)
- The only thing we have to fear is fear itself. (1933)
 (President Franklin Delano Roosevelt)
- Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.
 (1958)
 (civil rights leader Martin Luther King)
- Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what
 you can do for your country. (1961)
 (President John F. Kennedy)
- Freedom is not given, it is won. (1967)
 (civil rights leader Martin Luther King; see Mieder
 2010a)
- What is good for Main Street is good for Wall
 Street. (2007)
 (President Barack Obama; see Mieder 2009c)



Revolutionaries, presidents, and social reformers have contributed to the richness of American proverbs, and that is especially true for the diplomat, inventor, scientist, businessman, politician, journalist, revolutionary, and early American par excellence Benjamin Franklin. Between 1733 and 1758, he published his *Poor Richard's Almanack* for the enlightenment and entertainment of his compatriots; it contained about forty proverbs as didactic stopgaps in each annual edition (Franklin 1964; Barbour 1974). In 1758, he added the essay “The Way to Wealth” to the last edition, which basically consisted of a selection of 105 proverbs that were intended to show readers the way to a healthy, busy, and decent life. This article has become a kind of bible for “puritan ethics” and was translated into many languages. Some ten thousand copies of the *Almanack* were printed each year, and with its many proverbs became sort

of a secular bible. The proverbs, however, were largely copied from older English proverb collections (Franklin eventually admitted to this in 1788). But the *Almanack* also included texts that he created, and these have long become popular proverbs (Gallacher 1949; Gallagher 1973; Meister 1952; Mieder 1989a: 129–142; 1993a: 98–134; and 2004b: 171–180; Newcomb 1957). Without doubt, Franklin has to be regarded as the greatest known author of American proverbs. Among the proverbs that he actually coined himself are the following:



By diligence and patience the mouse bit in two the cable. (1735)

Some are weatherwise, some are otherwise. (1735)

Industry need not wish. (1739)

There will be sleeping enough in the grave. (1741)

Experience keeps a dear school, but fools learn in no other. (1743)

Drive thy business, or it will drive thee. (1744)

If passion drives, let reason hold the reins. (1749)

Laziness travels so slowly, that poverty soon overtakes it. (1756)

Sloth makes all things difficult, but industry all easy. (1758)

Three removes is as bad as a fire. (1758)



Even though some of these texts have long been forgotten, Franklin's creations and his deep interest in proverbs were instrumental in bringing about an American worldview informed by the capitalistic emphasis on hard work and steady progress as a society. Franklin's repeated citation of proverbs as rules for a productive life (Templeton 1997) reached a point that "his" proverbs became part of American material culture by way of cups and saucers with the inscriptions of "Poor Richard's" prov-

erbs and pedagogical drawings. Franklin's influence on the social life of America can still be observed today. However, the popular proverb "Time is money" did not originate with him. He did reference it in his "Advice to a Young Tradesman" (1748) as a wise saying: "Remember that Time is Money." In his *Poor Richard's Almanack* for 1751 he repeated the proverb in a short paragraph: "In vain did she [a wife] inculcate him [her husband] *That Time is Money.*" And yet, it has now been ascertained that this statement had originally been printed on 18 May 1719 in London in the newspaper *Free Thinker*. It reappeared in 1723 and 1739 in compilations of small prose pieces. Franklin must have encountered the earlier reprint when he was employed as a typesetter during the year 1725 in London. When he published it verbatim twenty-five years later he did not cite his source, an action that would be considered plagiarism today (Villers and Mieder 2017). Nevertheless, people continue to believe that Franklin coined the proverb when in fact he only helped to popularize it as the motto for solid work ethics (Manders 2006: 148–154). It might be added here that Franklin was also only the popularizing agent of the fifteenth-century English proverb "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise," which most Americans believe he came up with by himself. (Mieder 1993a). The fact that "Time is money" gained its international currency in the United States justifies its inclusion in this collection with a short accompanying note. However, since the "early to bed" proverb has a long tradition in England before arriving in America, it is understandably not listed.

In any case, nobody can compete with this master of proverbs, but here are some well-known authors whose proverbs circulate mostly anonymously today:



Stoop low and it will save you many a bump
through life. (1724)
(preacher and writer Cotton Mather)

- Hear before you blame. (1798)
 (Abigail Adams, wife of President John Adams)
- Be sure you are right, then go ahead. (1812)
 (patriot and folk hero David Crockett)
- It is a poor rule that will not work both ways. (1837)
 (writer James Fenimore Cooper)
- Behind the clouds the sun is shining. (1841)
 (writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)
- The houses hope builds are castles in the air. (1853)
 (Canadian writer Thomas Chandler Haliburton)
- Hitch your wagon to a star. (1862)
 (transcendentalist and writer Ralph Waldo
 Emerson; see Mieder 2014b: 261–283)
- It is not the trumpeters that fight the battles.
 (1887)
 (preacher and writer Henry Ward Beecher)
- It is difference of opinion that makes horse races.
 (1894)
 (writer Mark Twain)
- Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent
 perspiration. (1898)
 (inventor and businessman Thomas Alva Edison)
- The bigger they are, the harder they fall. (1905)
 (boxer Robert Fitzsimmons)
- History is bunk. (1916)
 (car maker Henry Ford)
- It's not over till it's over. (1921)
 (baseball player Yogi Berra)
- Gentlemen prefer blondes. (1925)
 (writer Anita Loos)
- There must be pioneers, and some of them get
 killed. (1928)
 (aviator Charles A. Lindbergh)
- Candy is dandy but liquor is quicker. (1931)
 (writer Ogden Nash)

- War will cease when men refuse to fight. (1933)
 (physicist Albert Einstein)
- You can't go home again. (1940)
 (writer Thomas Wolfe)
- You can run, but you can't hide. (1946)
 (boxer Joe Louis)
- Each generation is better than the last. (1954)
 (Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin D.
 Roosevelt)
- Everybody will be famous for fifteen minutes.
 (1968)
 (artist Andy Warhol)



Sometimes proverbs are attributed to famous individuals without providing any evidence—for example, in Germany the saying “Wer nicht liebt Wein, Weib und Gesang, der bleibt ein Narr sein Leben lang” (He who does not love wine, women and song remains a fool all his life) is accredited to Martin Luther, although the first written document was discovered only in 1775 in a short poem possibly written by Johann Heinrich Voss (Mieder 1993b: 80–89). Such unproven attributions often remain in place even if there are solid scholarly refutations. President Harry Truman has publicly stated that the two immensely popular proverbs “If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen” (1931) and “The buck stops here” (1942) were not coined by him. However, because he used them often, both proverbs are still quoted with a reference to him (Mieder and Bryan 1997). A special phenomenon is the origin of the well-known proverb “You can fool all of the people some of the time; you can fool some of the people all of the time; but you can't fool all of the people all of the time” (1877). It has been repeatedly asserted that Abraham Lincoln used this phrase on 29 May 1856 in a speech that is not documented. Although the proverb cannot be found in Lincoln's writings, on 27 August 1887,

the otherwise reliable *New York Times* attributed it to him. This claim has remained in popular opinion to this day, and it will probably not change. A number of such doubtful attributions are the following, where primary documents discovered so far often do not match the biographical dates of the alleged author:



- Taxation without representation is tyranny. (1761)
(revolutionary patriot James Otis?)
- Good fences make good neighbors. (1834)
(poet Robert Frost?; see Monteiro 1976; Mieder 2003b)
- There is room enough at the top. (1867)
(statesman Daniel Webster?)
- From shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations. (1874)
(industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie?)
- War is hell. (1880)
(general William Tecumseh Sherman?)
- Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door. (1871)
(transcendentalist and writer Ralph Waldo Emerson?)
- No one ever went bankrupt taking a profit. (1902)
(banker J. P. Morgan?)
- Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing. (1950)
(football coach Vince Lombardi?)
- When the going gets tough, the tough get going. (1954)
(Joseph P. Kennedy?, father of President John F. Kennedy)
- Trust but verify. (1966)
(President Ronald Reagan?)
- Old age is not for sissies. (1969)
(actress Bette Davis?)

In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity. (1975)

(physicist Albert Einstein?)

A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle. (1976)

(feminist Gloria Steinem?)



Sources from Songs, Films, and Advertisements

In regard to the identification of an exact origin for certain proverbs, it should be mentioned that the world of music, film, and especially advertising spread many new proverbs using the enormous influence of the media (Mieder 1993b: 135–151; Winick 2011 and 2013; Konstantinova 2015). Here are a few examples:



Songs

Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die. (1950)

(song title by Tommy Dorsey)

For every drop of rain that falls a flower grows. (1953)

(line from the song “I Believe” by Ervin Drake and Jimmy Shirl)

The world is a place. (1976)

(song title and chorus by the Rhythm Group)

Films

There are no rules in a knife fight. (1969)

(line from the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*)

No glove, no love. (1982)

(line from the movie *The World According to Garp*)

Life is like a box of chocolates. (1994)

(line from the movie *Forrest Gump*; see Winick 2013)

Advertising

When it rains, it pours. (1914)

(advertising slogan by Morton Salt company)

Reach out and touch someone. (1970)

(advertising slogan by AT&T phone company)

Shop till you drop. (1984)

(advertising slogan by Volkswagen in Los Angeles)



An indication of the enormous influence of American advertising agencies are the two early proverbs “It pays to advertise” (1868) and “Do not advertise what you can’t fulfill” (1919), whose messages obviously hold true today, where advertising of any kind appears in all media. It is not surprising, then, that short advertising slogans claiming a general validity become new proverbs.

Proverbs from the World of Sports, Technology, Finance

Of course, the world of sports, which plays a dominating role in all kinds of media, has contributed many proverbs to the repertoire of American folk wisdom. It should be noted, however, that their use is not limited to sports alone, because their imagery and message usually have an indirect correlation to life itself. Of the many examples in this collection, only a few striking samples are given here, which, as mentioned before, do not necessarily have to refer to a competition or a game in the linguistic context:



You can’t win them all. (1918)

Play to win or don’t play at all. (1938)

Every game has a winner and a loser. (1943)

There is no “I” in team. (1960)

You can’t score if you don’t shoot. (1965)



It has to be surprising that the modern world of technology, by comparison, plays a very small role in proverbs. However, there are several proverbs that refer to the automobile. About ten years after the appearance of the American proverb “You can’t judge a book by its cover” (1897), the new proverb “You can’t judge a car by its paintjob” (1908) became popular, representing the same idea with a different metaphor. Also in America, the land of the automobile, the following piece of wisdom was created: “Nobody washes a rental car” (1985). And then there is the proverb “Dogs do not bark at parked cars” (1993), which has nothing to do with automobiles; the general meaning is that people do not show a reaction until something moves or changes. Finally, the car contributes the metaphorical image to a variant of the proverb “Trust in God, but lock your door”: “Trust in God, but lock your car” (1991).

The world of finance in the land of capitalism, on the other hand, plays a considerable role in proverbs. Money, stocks, trade, etc. have led to general rules and insights that have found their way into the proverbial language, such as these:



Money is power. (1741)

Competition is the life of trade. (1816)

Banks have no heart. (1853)

Buy low, sell high. (1895)

The customer is always right. (1905; see Taylor 1958)

Another day, another dollar. (1907)

Business goes where it is invited and stays where it is treated well. (1910)

If you have to ask the price, you can’t afford it. (1926)

You never accumulate, if you don’t speculate. (1941)

Money has no memory. (1991)



Dominant Themes of Success, Time, and Life

Of course, “success” plays a significant role in American proverbs because accomplishments in all aspects of life are undoubtedly an important objective, be it in college, at work, or in sports (White 1987; Arthurs 1994). As the following examples make clear, it does require proper commitment to achieve and to secure success:



- Nothing succeeds like success. (1867)
- Success comes in *cans*, failure in *can'ts*. (1910)
- Success is never final. (1920)
- Success is a journey, not a destination. (1933)
- The only place where success comes before work is in a dictionary. (1955)
- Success is always preceded by preparation. (1981)



As expected, there are also many proverbs that deal with “time,” because the element of time governs human life continually:



- Time and chance happen to all men. (1677)
- Lost time is never found again. (1748)
- Nothing is more precious than time, yet nothing is less valued. (1775)
- Time wasted is time lost. (1865)
- The best way to kill time is to work it to death. (1914)
- The time to shoot bears is when they are out. (1914)



And what can generally be derived from proverbs about “life”? They ultimately reflect a certain philosophy of life—as generalizations of human existence and also as a guide to a dedicated life. This collection contains thirty-five proverbs with “life” as

the key word, a clear sign of the preoccupation with the meaning, value, and purpose of life:



- Life has its ups and downs. (1853)
 You get out of life what you put into it. (1901)
 If life hands you lemons, make lemonade. (1910)
 Life is a bowl of cherries. (1931)
 Life is too short to waste sleeping. (1944)
 Life is not a spectator sport. (1958)
 Nobody ever said life is easy. (1965)
 Life is a bitch and then you die. (1982)
 If life gives you a bag of hammers, build something.
 (2000)
 Life comes at you fast. (2004)



American Values

The proverbial triad “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (1776) from Thomas Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence” includes the basic rights of all people (Mieder 2014b: 133–171). The phrase is considered self-evident for all Americans, along with the triadic definition of democracy: “Government of the people, by the people, and for the people” (1850), which has become proverbial via Abraham Lincoln’s famous “Gettysburg Address” on 19 November 1863. These two proverbs are, of course, to be understood only as desirable ideals (Mieder 2005c: 15–55). But here are some characteristic proverbs from America that refer in a very concise way to independence, individualism, initiative, freedom, and unlimited opportunities. These values are not limited to the American people (Nussbaum 2005; Mieder 2020), but the following proverbs—which all originated in the United States, a place generally associated with freedom

and liberty—may contribute somewhat to an understanding of the worldview in this large and differentiated country:



Paddle your own canoe. (1802)
 Hoe your own row. (1844)
 This is a free country. (1848)
 You have to pull your own wagon. (1907)
 The sky is the limit. (1909)
 Making a way out of no way. (1922)
 Freedom is not for sale. (1949)
 Go with the flow. (1962)
 Follow your own bliss. (1971)
 Think outside the box. (1971)
 Our choices define us. (1985)



Last but not least, the anonymous proverb “Different strokes for different folks” (1945), which was coined among the African American population, must be mentioned. It has been well known at least since 1968 because of the song “Everyday People” by the group Sly and the Family Stone (Mieder 1989a: 317–332 and 2006a; McKenzie 1996). The verses contain the wisdom of the proverb “All men are created equal” (1776) and its extension “All men and women are created equal” (1848), and draw attention to equality and equal rights for all people, no matter how different they may be:

Everyday People

Sometimes I'm right,
 Then I can be wrong.
 My own beliefs are in my song.
 The butcher, the baker, the drummer and then,
 Makes no difference what group I'm in.
 I am everyday people.

There is a blue one who can't accept the green one
or living with the fat one, trying to be the skinny
one.

Different strokes for different folks.
And so on and so on and scooby dooby doo.

We've got to live together.
I am no better and neither are you.
We are the same in whatever we do.
Love me or hate me; get to know me and then
You can figure out what bag I'm in.
I am everyday people.

There is a long hair who doesn't like the short hair
For being such a rich one who will not help the
poor one.

Different strokes for different folks.
And so on and so on and scooby dooby doo.

We've got to live together.
There is a yellow one that won't accept the black one
That won't accept the red one that won't accept the
white one.

Different strokes for different folks.
And so on and so on and scooby dooby doo.
I am everyday people.

Undoubtedly, the proverb "Different strokes for different folks" has to be considered the embodiment of the sense of individual freedom in America, where the people of this "melting pot" or "tossed salad" can develop more or less freely, as long as one's personal liberties allow for ethical coexistence with others. In principle, it is all about the human—all too human—existence, and this is not just the case for American proverbs, but also the proverbial folk wisdom all over the world.