

The Matti Kuusi International Database of Proverbs

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Introduction

The Matti Kuusi International Type System of Proverbs database consists of three core elements:

1. A special library of proverb collections in the folklore archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki
2. A database of international proverb types and literature references on the Internet
3. A thematic and structural classification of international proverbs

The concept of proverb type alternates between a concrete proverb title and a cluster of proverbs embodying the same idea; the type system gathers together similar proverb titles from different nations under an international—or even global—type encapsulating that common idea (Lauhakangas 2001).¹

The Background and Aims of the Relational Database of Proverbs

The original owner of the library of proverb collections, the compiler and author of the card-index with tens of thousands of literature references, and the architect of the international type system of proverbs was Matti Kuusi (1914-1998). Kuusi was Professor of Finnish and Comparative Folk Poetry Studies (today called folkloristics) at the University of Helsinki from 1959 to 1977. One of his areas of expertise was paremiology, the research of proverbs. This especially floating genre of folklore led him to establish contacts with scholars around the world. One of the most esteemed paremiologists ever, Professor Archer Taylor (1890-1973) from California, urged him to found the journal *Proverbium* and act as its first editor-in-chief. Kuusi's pioneering and active paremiological period at the head of the journal lasted from 1965 to 1974, during which time a strong net of paremiologists developed as he invited proverb scholars to contribute to this forum. The journal continues today under the same name as a yearbook of international proverb scholarship edited by Professor Wolfgang Mieder. New contacts brought in

¹ For further information on issues related to the type system, see Kuusi 1972, 1994 [1954], 1994 [1969].

proverb collections from every part of the world, and Kuusi was also eventually able to acquire many other significant European collections with the assistance of his personal antiquarian. Kuusi wrote (1988:107), “Many antiquarians and publishers found out the address of the Folklore Department of Helsinki University, and I rarely ignored a missing collection.”

These collections were the basis of Kuusi’s systematic index of international proverb types. Starting from comparisons of Finnish proverb texts with Nordic and European equivalents, he broadened his search to all possible language areas and to comparisons between proverbs beyond those found in Finnish. Kuusi would continue with his type system of proverbs well into his retirement, with his daughter starting to transfer the proverb index of literature references into a relational database in 1990. At the same time they developed Kuusi’s classification of international proverb types. This database was made for the purpose of folkloristic and linguistic research. The aim was not and is not to collect all possible proverb texts from every possible language area into one large pool, but to study structures of proverb texts and the main themes of proverbial thinking.

Searching for Global Similarities and National Specificities

In order to move the Matti Kuusi database of proverbs to the Internet for international use, the authors had to study the generality of proverb types. The language and cultural areas that together form the global brand are: African (sub-Saharan), Islamic, European, Orient (old Eastern cultural area), Pacific. American cultures are not viewed as separate from European influence. If a proverb type is common to most of these language areas, it is considered a global type. The meaning and use of a specific proverb can vary according to culture.

Alongside the original index of Finnish proverb titles, the titles of the international proverb types had to be translated into English if original English equivalents were not available. The result was that the number of proverb titles decreased from 8,287 Finnish entries to 1,808 English entries. Still, the classification remained the same as in the original Finnish type system, and the reduction did not cause any empty subgroups. The tempting possibility to find any proverb you are interested in cannot yet be fulfilled for those who are unable to use the Finnish part of the database; however, in the near future the shortage of international representativeness will be overcome by means of collaboration among proverbs scholars and enthusiasts from around the world via social media.

A Database for Cultural Researchers, Translators, and Proverb Enthusiasts

Both the proverb library and Kuusi’s exceptionally systematic checking over every multilingual, bilingual, and national proverb collection guarantee that the Matti Kuusi International Database of Proverb Types is an excellent tool to use for basic questions about the themes and structures of proverb-lore. For translators and researchers of culture and cultural history, this database is a good guide and a starting point for further exploration; for journalists

and other interested individuals the database can act as an implement for understanding nuances of their interviewees' language use and for studying their own proverb repertoires.

In 2008 Nina Lampinen made a comparative study involving Spanish proverbs and their counterparts in the Finnish translation of the first part of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. A translator will not easily locate a proverb's equivalents in another language if she or he uses only word-for-word translations. But Lampinen gives an example of how she was able to use Kuusi's type system to deepen her interpretation of the novel's proverb *Donde una puerta se cierra, otra se abre*, literally "Where one door is shut, another opens," via the Finnish and English equivalents—*Kun yksi ovi suljetaan, avaa Jumala toisen* and *When one door closes, another opens*, respectively. The Matti Kuusi category is T3c "Trusting in the future, preparing for the future, dreaming, optimism or pessimism," and Lampinen describes the situation as follows (Lampinen 2008:367):

This proverb has a paremiographical and literal correspondence in all three languages and therefore can be found easily by a word search. Also, its category can be found quickly by browsing the main M. Kuusi categories, as its key idea is "hope" which is related to time.

Instructions for the Proverb Database on the Internet

For open access to the international proverb material on the Internet, some facilities of the original relational database had to be left out. For instance, word search is as of yet quite simple.² The database may be accessed directly at <http://lauhakan.home.cern.ch/lauhakan/fin/cerpfm.html> or via the "online materials" link located on the Finnish Literature Society's information service page (<http://www.finlit.fi/english/info/information-service.htm>). Instructions

• Coping and learning
 ◦ EXPERIENCE/PRACTICE : LEARNING
 ▪ learning from mistakes and accidents M9e

| Proverb Type | Code | Distribution |
|---|--------|--------------|
| If a man cheats me once, shame on him; if he cheats me twice, shame on me | M9e-10 | G |
| A burnt child shuns fire. (translation, belongs to the global type 14) | M9e-13 | G |
| Once bitten, twice shy | M9e-14 | G |
| Bitten skin is sore, stricken skin is smarting. (translation!) | M9e-15 | FO |
| He who makes no mistakes makes nothing | M9e-19 | G |
| By others' faults wise men correct their own | M9e-22 | G |
| One grain suffices to test a whole pot of boiled rice (translation Tamil/India) | M9e-23 | EwIO |

Distribution abbreviations:
 G Global
 F refers to Finnish or other related Baltic sea cultures.
 E stands for European in general;
 En = Northern Europe,

Fig. 1. Browsing the Matti Kuusi International Database of Proverbs. (Screenshot captured from <http://lauhakan.home.cern.ch/lauhakan/intmenu/index.html>.)

² In order to make complicated comparisons and analysis of proverb data it is recommended that one contact Outi Lauhakangas, the editor of the database.

for use of the database and explanations of its employed abbreviations are available on the “Introduction” page linked from the site’s homepage. Additional options are to “search proverb database” (for use in simple word searches), “search proverb collections of the [Matti Kuusi] database by language,” and “Matti Kuusi database browsing.” This last option is relevant if one is interested in studying the classification structure and locating specific themes. For example, issues such as “attitudes towards change,” “law and justice,” and “experience/practice in relation to learning” all provide subject subheadings that can be browsed and selected in order to find related proverb variants. As demonstrated in Figure 1, browsing to the M9 category of “Experience/practice: learning” leads to the M9e subgroup entitled “Learning from mistakes and accidents,” which in turn leads one to proverb types such as “Once bitten, twice shy” or “He who makes no mistakes makes nothing.”

Figures 2-4 illustrate the possibilities for simple word searches of the proverb database. If one searches for the term “one-eyed,” the result is the English proverb type “In the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is a king.” The accompanying code can then be selected to discover further information on the proverb type, and in this case clicking “E1e, 26” leads to the pages shown in Figure 3, which provides the main division (“E: Sense of proportion”) and subclasses (“E1: Relativity of ranking / the essential unity of differing things,”

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Search results:

| Proverb | Code |
|--|-----------|
| In the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is a king | E1e 26 |

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Fig. 2. Search results for “one-eyed” in the Matti Kuusi International Database of Proverbs. (Partial screenshot captured from <http://lauhakan.home.cern.ch/lauhakan/search.asp?q=one-eyed>.)

The Main Division E and SubClasses

| | E | En | Enx |
|-----|---------------------|---|--|
| E1a | Sense of proportion | RELATIVITY OF RANKING / THE ESSENTIAL UNITY OF DIFFERING THINGS | the incompleteness / uncertainty / relativity of everything |
| E1b | -" | -" | the esteemed also have their faults and imperfection (which must be endured) |
| E1c | -" | -" | an intelligent person can make mistakes, an able man can fail |
| E1d | -" | -" | minor, inferior, late etc. is better than nothing |
| E1e | -" | -" | the value of X increases through lack of Y |
| E1f | -" | -" | insignificant and despised things share basic features in common with the rest of us |
| E1g | -" | -" | the same origins / values / basic rights shared by human beings and nature |
| E1h | -" | -" | apparently opposite beings have basic features in common |
| E1i | -" | -" | 'coincidentia oppositorum'; the fusion of opposites |
| E1j | -" | -" | the wisdom of the 'middle road', avoidance of exaggerations and extremes, compromise is best |
| E1k | -" | -" | things look different when seen from different perspectives, paradoxes concerning luck in misfortune |
| E1l | -" | -" | internal contradictions among essential nature, action or situation |

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Fig. 3. Illustration of the classification structure surrounding the English proverb type “In the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is a king.” (Screenshot captured from <http://lauhakan.home.cern.ch/lauhakan/classrespond.asp?whichtopic=E1e>.)

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The literature references of the proverb type:

In the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is a king

Agu
Aquilina, J. / *A Comparative Dictionary of Maltese Proverbs* 1972 Malta: The Royal University of Malta MAL/TESE/ENG*ARAB/ENG/GER/ITA/FR/SPA/PERS/AFR/E*->FR* 445-55

Variation: A one-eyed man in the country of the blind is a king-sultan (Arabic) / An royaume des aveugles les borgnes sont rois / U. den Blinden ist der Einäugige König

BSm
Bosonov, N.L. / *Balkanska narodna madrost* 1968 Sofia: Balgarskata akademija na naukite BUL/G/ALB/GRE/RUM/RUS/SERB/TURK : 201

Bac
Bachmann, D.C. / *Japanese Proverbs and Sayings* 1965 Norman: Oklahoma U.P.JAP(transl.)/ENG*/ENG

Variation: A bat in a birdless village (Japanese)

BSd I
Budaev, T.B. / *Adel'stvope paslyvity i pogovorki raznykh narodov*, I 1963 Ulan-Ude: Burijskoe kni noe izdatel'stvo diff.->RUS* 189

Variation: Spedi slepoh i odnoglazij - radzha (Russian translation, Nepalian)

Cal
Celakovský, F.L. / *Murávsloví národu slovenského v přelátoch*, 1852 Praha: Nakladatelství Aloisa Hyška kmhkupecni SLOVAK/RUS* 217

Fig. 4. Literature references for “In the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is a king.” (Screenshot captured from <http://lauhakan.home.cern.ch/lauhakan/bookrespond.asp?whichcode=E1e&whichnb=26&whichproverb=In the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is a king>.)

Lampinen 2008

Nina Lampinen. "The Matti Kuusi International Type System of Proverbs in Practice." In *The 1st Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs. Actas ICP07 Proceedings*. Ed. by Outi Lauhakangas and Rui Soares. Tavira: International Association of Proverbs. pp. 363-73.

Lauhakangas 2001

Outi Lauhakangas. *The Matti Kuusi International Type System of Proverbs*. Folklore Fellows' Communications, 275. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.