

CULTURAL MESSAGES OF METAPHORS

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The Cultural Function of Metaphors

The genius, wit and spirit of a nation are discovered in its proverbs.

(Francis Bacon)

Culture's first purpose, as we usually understand it, is to guide us through a physical, social and moral world fraught with ambiguity and a bewildering number of hermeneutical possibilities by limiting our choices. Culture offers us a locally standard way of relating to the complexity of the world surrounding us (Hidasi, 2005). The cultural heritage and accumulated wisdom of a people has to be transferred from one generation to the next. This is essential for two reasons: one, to preserve the culture, and two, to facilitate the perception and understanding of the world for the new generation.

One way to transfer knowledge and experience is through the use of metaphors. In this study we will use the concept of metaphor to cover proverbs, sayings and idiomatic expressions involving metaphorical elements. It is assumed that proverbs and sayings reflect a good deal of wisdom and cultural heritage of the people using them. All kinds of metaphors – proverbs, sayings and idiomatic expressions – are hence often used to convey the common-sense wisdom and experience of a certain cultural group. In a certain sense, these metaphors serve as “guides” in coping with the complexity of the surrounding reality. As Lakoff and Johnson pointed out, “Yet, as rich as these experiences are, much of the way we conceptualize them, reason about them, and

visualize them comes from other domains of experience”. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 45.) Metaphors therefore serve the purpose of rendering the unknown world more structured and comprehensible. Abstract ideas and concepts become comprehensible through the use of images that are familiar to us. These are called “conventional metaphors.” Many of them appear in the form of proverbs.

A metaphor is a phrase that is used connotatively, in other words, the symbol is tied primarily to its concept and not to its object. In many cases, it is actually necessary to ignore the symbol’s usual object and to apply the concept to a new object or phenomenon according to the context in which it appears. Metaphors expand the literal meaning of words, or more precisely, expand the concept of the original symbol. In proverbs, words are often used as symbols that trigger the concept associated with something concrete. However, through the long-term use of various metaphors formulated as proverbs, the concept of the word broadens considerably so that the symbol ultimately develops a far greater reference of meaning than it originally had. Due to this more encompassing, broader reference of meaning, metaphors embedded in proverbs serve as vehicles for transmitting a certain concept. Proverbs, in their turn, often develop a life of their own.

The Origins and the Types of Metaphoric Sayings

Proverbs and aphorisms – as a particular subgroup of metaphors – are short statements of general validity often used in a community. In their apparent simplicity, they state complex truths. In most cases, they refer to human attitude, nature or action, and they often have no known author. They are considered “collective wisdom” and as common cultural heritage. As pointed out, however, by Taylor (Taylor 1931, p.1.) in Europe and by Chen Zuo-chun (1973, p.1.) in Hong Kong, many of them can be traced back to literary origins. Paczolay in his comprehensive study (2002, p. 669.) argues that some 57% of the European proverbs in current common use in fact go back to writings mostly from the literary heritage of European culture: writings of the Greek and Roman classics, or the Hebrew and Greek Bibles, or to medieval Latin writings.

Poetic metaphors – or “living metaphors,” as Makiuti (1994) labeled them – are attributable to a certain author or source. However, some of the metaphors that originated in literary works have, in the course of history, come to be generally accepted as “wisdom” and they became gradually

“folklorized” due to their frequent use. Thanks to their idiomatic nature, today they have the same rank as **conventional metaphors** and proverbs, both in terms of familiarity and in terms of frequency of usage. A good example would be the

(1) L¹: *Non omne quod nitet aurum est*

{All that glitters is not gold}

H: *Nem mind arany, ami fénylik*

that as a proverb has its equivalent in all languages of Europe (Paczolay, 1997, pp. 125-130.). In Asian cultures with a Confucian legacy, many sayings of Confucius have been transformed to become truisms of common thinking. The Chinese

(2) Ch: (闻一知十) *Wen yi zhi shi*

{Hear one, understand/know ten }

J: 「一を聞いて、十を知る」 *Iti wo kiite, juu wo shiru*

is a good example as it is believed to originate from the (孔夫子---论语) *Lun Yu* {The Analects of Confucius}, and to have spread to most cultures of Asia in the form of a proverb (Paczolay, 2002, p.672.). Sanskrit scriptures and other Chinese philosophers or thinkers constitute another rich source of sayings, often quoted as proverbs in current use in many countries of Asia (Takasima, 1985).

The Aim and Method of this Study

Since the number of metaphoric sayings and expressions is extremely great in any culture, we will restrict our study to a certain subcategory. First, we will confine our attention to **metaphors of the conventional category**, irrespective of their origin. Secondly, within the rich inventory of metaphoric expressions and sayings of a given language, we will limit our focus on **proverbs** that are in current use. Thirdly, we will limit our study to proverbs in the contemporary **Hungarian** and **Japanese** cultures respectively. Finally, we will limit our semantic study to metaphors related to **knowledge acquisition**.

Hence, in this study, Hungarian and Japanese proverbs and sayings associated with knowledge acquisition – teaching and learning – are analyzed and compared. The reason that these

¹ Ch=Chinese; H=Hungarian; J=Japanese; L=Latin

seemingly distant cultures have been selected is based on the notion that Hungarian culture – in spite of the country’s present location in the Central-Eastern part of Europe – ultimately goes back to Asian origins (Nanovfszky, 2004). By focusing on metaphors having to do with acquiring and transmitting knowledge in the above-mentioned two cultures, we will attempt to determine the common ground, if there is any, as well as identifying the ones that set the two cultures apart.

The Hungarian language is fairly rich in sayings and proverbs. The *opus magnum* in the field of proverb research, published by the famous Hungarian linguist O. Nagy, contains over 23,000 entries (O. Nagy, 1985). In Paczolay’s shorter collection of present day Hungarian proverbs (Paczolay, 1991), out of the 750 entries listed, more than 170 can be related to messages on learning, acquiring knowledge, accumulating experience, ways of gathering skills and memorizing things. They often imply advice, warning or encouragement – in other words, how to acquire knowledge in an efficient way, how to keep and store it and how to apply it.

The Japanese proverbs and sayings related to acquiring knowledge are even greater in number: they constitute a huge part of the cultural messages that metaphors carry (Takasima, 1985). The great dictionary of Japanese proverbs (*Kotowaza Daiziten*, 1982) contains 43,000 entries, out of which some 1,200 can be related to learning in the broad sense. This is presumably attributable to the fact that the importance and impact of the parent-child relationship is particularly articulated in Japanese traditions, partly as a consequence of the Confucian legacy in general and partly as a consequence of the historically unique nature of the human relationship development in Japanese society (see also Okutu, 2000, p. 143.). The parent-child relationship involves many elements of education, the family being the primary social setting where a child acquires culture.

The frequency of proverb usage also sets cultures apart. People in the West who overuse maxims tend to come across as old-fashioned or bookish. In present-day Hungarian language proverbs are used sparingly, but metaphoric idioms are abundant both in the common language and in literary works. In Hungary, when proverbs are used in writing or in speech, they are likely to serve as a conclusion to a piece of discourse. In Japan, where the knowledge of proverbs is a highly valued cultural asset and the common reaction to them is a solemn nod of respect. It is also appreciated if one begins a story or an essay with a proverb.

In Japan, entertainment utilizing verbal games used to be part of the pastime in popular culture

prior to the cartoon era. The tradition of playing *karuta* games (some versions of which are based on proverbs or aphorisms) teaches proverbs to children from an early age. In this game, pairs of cards containing the beginning and the end of a saying or proverb are separated. Somebody reads the first part out aloud and the players have to find other half of that saying among the randomly scattered pairs – the faster the better. The winner is the first player to correctly identify the pairs. Although personalized video games are pervasive nowadays, surprisingly, the average Japanese is still a connoisseur of proverbs and sayings. Since most educated people are familiar with famous sayings and proverbs from an early age, references are made to them in everyday conversation as well as in political debates and academic discussions. As a recent example the 「米百俵精神」 *kome hyappyō seisin* {the spirit of the one hundred bales of rice} phrase can be mentioned. It was used by Prime Minister Koizumi in 2001 in one of his speeches (Koizumi 2001), and has often been quoted ever since. Originally the title of a play from the Meiji era (1868-1912), the phrase refers to an event when instead of consuming their rice, people sold it to build a school (Yamamoto, 2001). The metaphor tells us that immediate sacrifices are needed for future gains.

Another reason why frequent references to proverbs and wise sayings are popular in Japan has to do with the particular communication style of the Japanese. Instead of giving laborious explanations, the Japanese often make a brief reference to a proverb, which can function as a proxy for the elaboration of thought. This serves the purposes of the listener-oriented communication style (Hidasi, 2003) of the Japanese and provides ample room for interpretation.

Wisdom and skills referring to ways of acquiring knowledge – perception, interaction; input, output; discovery, appropriation; contact, integration; confrontation, distillation; feeling, acting, etc. – are transferred from one generation to the next as part of the cultural heritage transmission. Acquiring knowledge can be explicit (conscious process) or implicit (unconscious process) (De Keyser, 2003). When explicit, it is usually connected to education, which in turn implies teaching and learning – the two sides of the same coin. In most people's expectations, teaching means conveying reliable and condensed (“canned” or at least “cannable”) information. Metaphors of learning can be conceived of as teachings about the ways of learning or about knowledge acquisition in a broader sense.

Layers of Meanings in Metaphors

It is assumed that there are three layers of meanings in metaphors that are instrumental in their comprehension. They are as follows:

- Meaning of the message
- Meaning of the image
- Meaning of the linguistic formulation

On each level, both universal and culture-specific metaphors are to be found.

The first layer is the level of message. A message conveying a common wisdom of learning and doing, such as “*to err is human*” is universal. The way it is expressed, however, is rather less universal – actually, in most cases, it is culture specific. This stands to reason, since the circumstances and the environment that people live in are always different. Consequently, the reality on the basis of which experiences are formulated, changes from culture to culture. Hence the same (universal) message can be conveyed in different (culture specific) forms of expression. The following expressions are culture specific:

(3) J: 「猿も木から落ちる」 *Saru mo ki kara otiru*

{Even a monkey falls from a tree}

(4) H: *A lónak négy lába van, mégis megbotlik, hát akinek kettő*

{Even a horse with his four legs stumbles, let alone (people) with their two }

The message being the same, the expression – both the mental image and the linguistic formulation – is culture specific. Hungarians would never use an expression referring to monkeys, since monkeys have never been (not even in their Asian past) a part of their cultural habitat.

One cannot state with certainty that all messages of metaphors – and for that matter of proverbs – are of a universal nature. For instance, one of the most often quoted Japanese proverbs is:

(5) J: 「出る杭は打たれる」 *Deru kui wa utareru*

{The nail that sticks out is to be hammered in}.

The concept itself - also known as the tall poppy syndrome - seems to have equivalents in some other cultures (Australian, Scandinavian, etc.) as well, but not in its Japanese reading. This proverb conveys a fundamental rule of behavior in Japanese society – “not to stand out from but to blend in with the group” – which in a sense is a behavior pattern unique to the Japanese. It applies to

conforming to social conventions, to finding harmony with others - even at the price of giving up common sense or individual interests. While most other cultures would also sanction standing out in the “bad way” or in an aggressive way, Japanese thinking censures standing out even in the “good way.” Hence the phenomenon is unique because it does not allow for excellence over the others in any way. Many other societies encourage demonstrations of excellence, a drive to compete and to stand out from the group and they would not wish to convey messages contradicting their values. Accordingly, there is no need in these cultures to have proverbs for conveying this particular message. Therefore they also lack verbal expressions for conveying this idea. In this sense, the Japanese proverb (5) can be considered a culture specific one even on the level of the message.

The Methodology of the Study

Proverbs and proverbial sayings related to knowledge acquisition in the Hungarian and Japanese languages will be compared in three semantic groups. The first group contains proverbs that refer to acquiring and structuring knowledge in general, the second group contains those that refer to teaching and learning, while the third group contains proverbs that refer to the lack of knowledge or lack of education. Usually the Hungarian proverb is given first, followed by the Japanese – if there is an equivalent in meaning. In some cases only the Hungarian proverb is introduced without a corresponding Japanese phrase and in a few cases only Japanese proverbs are presented – if so required by reason. Proverbs are generally followed by short comments or explanations shedding some light on their metaphoric elements. In cases where the metaphor is self-evident due to universal usage, no elaboration follows.

As a second step of analysis, the very same Hungarian and Japanese proverbs will be regrouped into three categories according to the level of equivalency in meaning – either on the level of message or on the level of image, or on neither.

Metaphors in Hungary and in Japan

Acquiring knowledge and skills in general

Many Hungarian proverbs give some advice about the benefits of patience and perseverance in acquiring knowledge and skills, such as:

(6) H: *Sok csepp követ váj*

{Many drops hollow the stone}

(7) J: 「石の上にも三年」 *Isi no ue ni mo sannen*

{Three years upon a rock}

The image of the stone and the rock respectively stands for hardness, although the linguistic formulation is slightly different: raindrops, no matter how small, if applied consistently might produce a hole; perseverance and endurance is above all. Both tell us that diligent effort produces results. The Hungarian

(8) H: *Senkinek sem röpül szájába a sült galamb*

{No roast pigeon will fly into one's mouth}

uses the image of roast pigeon which was a luxury dish in old Hungarian cuisine. It represents a goal that is hard to achieve. One has to work hard to attain something – one cannot wait for things to happen by themselves. Hence the message is that one has to work hard, one has to learn hard in order to achieve something special.

There are certain techniques to be suggested for reaching one's goal, such as

(9) H: *Ha rövid a kardod, toldd meg egy lépéssel!*

{If your sword is too short, let your feet make it longer!}

Hungarians, traditionally skilled in the technique of fighting, have often made use of metaphors from the martial arts. The application of physical force does not exclude, however, the importance of thinking, as in

(10) H: *Többet észszel, mint erővel*

{More to be gained by wit than by force}

The idea of the necessity of prior thinking is reinforced by the Japanese proverb

(11) J: 「学なびて思わざれば則ちくらし、思いて学ばざれば則ち殆うし」

Manabite omowazareba sunawati kurasi, omoite manabazareba sunawati ayausi

{Learning without thinking: darkness; thinking without learning: danger}

The idea that hardships are good educators is well articulated in a number of Japanese proverbs and sayings as well, including

(12) J: 「可愛い子には旅をさせよ」*Kawaii ko ni wa tabi o saseyo*

{If you love your child, make him travel}.

Travel here stands for unforeseen hardships that one might experience in new, unusual environments often accompanied by misery and the feeling of loneliness. To learn new things, one must bear with these difficulties. The message here is that people who are exposed at an early age to the hardships of an unfamiliar environment are likely to develop perseverance. As a consequence of this preparation, they are assumed to be able to successfully overcome hardships in the future and to better cope with difficulties in their adult life.

A good many Hungarian proverbs warn about the dangers of heedless utterances, with the projection of meaning about the dangers of uncontrolled action.

(13) H: *Előbb járjon az eszed, utána a nyelved*

{Use your mind before you use your tongue}

(14) J: 「念には念を入れよ」*Nen ni wa nen wo ireyo*

{Double-check before taking action}

Considering one's words is not the same as being overly stingy with them, as reflected in

(15) H: *Jobb kétszer kérdezni, mint egyszer hibázni*

{It is better to ask twice than to err once}

(16) J: 「聞くは一時の恥じ、聞かぬは一生の恥じ」

Kiku wa ittoki no hazi, kikanu wa issyōno hazi

{To ask once is shame for one time, not to ask is shame for all one's life}.

It is interesting to note here that the act of asking – i.e. acknowledging one's ignorance – is thought of as shameful in Japanese culture. Hungarians – unlike the Japanese – are not trained in the skills of *isin-densin* 「以心伝心」 {communication by tacit understanding}, hence as an encouragement for speaking up, the following proverb is often used

(17) H: *Néma gyereknek az anyja sem érti a szavát*

{Even a mother cannot understand the words of a silent child}

This also expresses the idea that one has to stand up for his own interests and take the initiative in interactions with others if he wants to get things done.

A piece of wisdom warning of the deleterious nature of ambition is expressed in the Hungarian and in the Japanese respectively as

(18) H: *Aki magasra hág, nagyot esik*

{He who climbs high, makes a great fall}

(19) H: *Ki sokat markol, keveset fog*

{He who grabs much will hold little}

(20) J: 「二兎を追う者は一兎も得ず」 *Nito wo ou mono wa itto wo mo ezu*

{Chase after two hares and catch none}.

The Hungarian

(21) H: *Lassan járj, tovább érsz*

{Go slow, get far}

corresponds to the Japanese

(22) J: 「急がば回れ」 *Isogaba maware*

{If you are in a hurry go round-about}.

The concept of development is symbolized in both cases by the idea of forward motion. Changes take place in the course of development: the idea of change is represented by verbs of motion. Both proverbs express the same idea: ample time is needed for real achievements – a warning which pertains to the field of learning as well.

Proverbs on teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are sometimes difficult to separate. It is better to learn as much as possible at an early age, as expressed in Hungarian

(23) H: *Tanulj tinó, ökör lesz belőled!*

{Learning makes an ox out of the calf}

One has to learn while young to become a respected adult. The metaphor taken from cattle breeding reflects the Hungarian tradition of livestock farming. The same idea is often expressed in Japanese by gardening metaphors. In a culture rich with traditions of bending and shaping trees, experience shows that trees and plants should be shaped while young.

(24) J: 「古い木は曲がらぬ」 *Oi ki wa magaranu*

{An old tree does not bend}

Just as in many other social actions, a good start counts for quite a lot in learning as well. This is expressed both in Hungarian and in Japanese with the same idea:

(25) H: *Jó kezdet fél siker*

{A good start takes you halfway to success}

(26) J: 「始め半分」*Hajime hanbun*

{The beginning is half}.

The success of teaching might well depend on the innate qualities of the learner as well. As the Hungarian saying goes:

(27) H: *Korán meglátszik, mely tejből lesz jó túró*

{Which milk makes good curd can be told early}

Hungarians in their history of nomadic wanderings and since their settlement in the Carpathian Basin have been breeding milk-producing livestock. A high-fat milk produces good curd, but a low-fat one never yields good dairy products – in other words, a child with a good character has a promising future as an adult.

Expressions referring to the deceptive nature of sensory experience are abundant both in the Hungarian and in the Japanese cultures, as in

(28) H: *Többet hiszünk a szemnek, mint a fülnek*

{More credit is given to the eyes than to the ears}

(29) J: 「百聞は一見に如かず」 *Hyakubun wa ikken ni sikazu*

{To see once is worth a hundred words}.

To be on the safe side, one should rely on collective wisdom, as in

(30) H: *Több szem többet lát*

{The more eyes, the more seen }

(31) J: 「三人寄れば文殊の知恵」 *Sannin yoreba monzyu no tie*

{Three persons have the wisdom of Monzyu (from Buddhism)}.

This in fact reflects the tendency of Japanese people to discuss issues and make decisions in group settings. The Hungarian saying:

(32) H: *Jól nyisd ki a füledet!*

{Open your ears wide!}

is a piece of good advice, urging one to listen carefully to what others say or do in order to understand and learn.

The way you learn things stay with you forever, as expressed in

(33) H: *Ki hogy tanulta, úgy járja a táncot*

{You dance the way you learned to do it}

The metaphor here is taken from the folk heritage of Hungarians who have traditionally practiced

dances as a form of pastime.

The advice for 'never give up' goes like:

(34) H: *Kiteszik az ajtón, bejön az ablakon*

{If thrown out the door, he comes back through the window}

The corresponding Japanese saying for this is:

(35) J: 「七転び、八置き」 *Nanakorobi yaoki*

{Fall on seven tries, get up for the eighth}

The term “life-long learning” might be new to our educational and societal vocabulary, but the idea has been around for many centuries in the cultures of both Hungarians and Japanese, as reflected in:

(36) H: *A jó pap holtig tanul*

{A good priest keeps learning until his death}

and in

(37) J: 「八十の手習い」 *Hatizyuu no tenarai*

{To learn at eighty}.

Even priests, considered in medieval times to be the ultimate fonts of wisdom, continue to polish their minds, therefore no one can afford to discontinue learning. The proverb:

(38) H: *A pap is csak diák volt*

{Even the priest was a student once}

reminds one of the importance of perseverance in learning with all its difficulties. The corresponding Japanese proverb says:

(39) J: 「初心忘るべからず」 *Syosin wasuru bekarazu*

{Never forget the beginner's spirit}.

The famous saying attributed to Francis Bacon “*knowledge is power*” has an exact equivalent in Hungarian in the form of

(40) H: *A tudás hatalom.*

The same idea can be found in Japanese

(41) J: 「知っているに超したことはない」 *Sitte iru ni kosita koto wa nai*

{Nothing exceeds knowledge}.

Knowledge should be treasured, since it accompanies you everywhere.

(42) H: *Jó utitárs a tudomány*

{Knowledge is a good traveling companion}.

A *traveling companion* here obviously makes use of the metaphor of life as a journey. Although there is no direct reference made to a journey but the phrase “traveling companion” triggers concepts associated with journeys. Life is often conceptualized as a journey, as one moves from birth to death. As all journeys, this one is accompanied by hardships, by obstacles that one has to overcome. In the process of the journey, knowledge comes in handy – it might help and protect one during his mission. The phrase “traveling companion” hence gains a far broader meaning than it originally had: it refers to the concept of a faithful companion one can rely on during a testing enterprise.

Knowledge is accumulated gradually, as expressed in

(43) H: *Egyik nap a másiknak a tanítványa*

{Every day is the disciple of the previous one},

meaning that each day adds something new to the body of knowledge acquired before.

(44) H: *Tanult ember nem pottyán az égből*

{The educated man does not fall from heaven}

Knowledge is not come by easily, one has to work hard to become an educated person. One can also learn a lot from watching others, as in:

(45) H: *Más kárán tanul az okos*

{The smart one learns from the trouble of others }

(46) J: 「人のふり見て、我がふり直せ」 *Hito no furi mite, waga furi wo naose*

{Correct your ways by watching others’}.

A good many proverbs express the futility of teaching someone who already possesses that skill. Not surprisingly many metaphors are taken from the animal kingdom: animals, as a matter of course, possess extraordinary skills.

(47) H: *Farkasnak mutat berket*

{To show the wolf around in his lair}

Wolves are not to be found in the territory of present-day Hungary, but were part of the natural environment of the ancient Hungarians. The same idea is expressed in Japanese by sayings such as:

(48) J: 「河童に水練」 *Kappa ni suiren*

{To show the water lily to water sprites}

Once in a while, the younger generation might exceed the elders in knowledge, as expressed by

(49) H: *A borjú akarja az ökröt vezetni*

{The calf wants to lead the ox}

which is also often used when trying to refuse unsolicited advice from younger or less experienced people. The corresponding Japanese proverb takes the metaphor from the domain of nature:

(50) J: 「負うた子に教えられ浅瀬を渡る」 *Outa ko ni osierare asase wo wataru*

{The child whom once you carried on your back shows you the path through the shallows}.

The metaphor here is a complex one: it refers to the Japanese custom of carrying children on the back; it also refers to the act of moving along “life’s dangerous path”. The danger is symbolized by the shallows – an image taken from life in rural Japan. To cross the shallows is not an easy enterprise: it demands wisdom and experience, hence the paradoxical idea of being instructed by a younger or less experienced person.

Proverbs on the lack of knowledge

A large number of proverbs and sayings referring to the dangers of ignorance point to the rich human experience accumulated in this field. As the Hungarian saying goes:

(51) H: *Parlagon terem a gaz*

{The weeds grow on fallow land}

meaning that wrongdoers tend to come from the uneducated. People of this type are not properly prepared for life, as expressed by:

(52) H: *Se íja, se tárgya*

{He has neither the bow, nor the target}.

The metaphor goes back to the times when Hungarians fought with bows and arrows. A person without his combat equipment is not prepared and cannot go a long way. In a figurative sense, it can express total cluelessness, not knowing a thing.

(53) H: *Aki keveset tud, annak jó az országút*

{For the one who knows little the main road will do}

Once again, the road is used as a metaphor for life: people with skills and knowledge can take less well-known paths and shortcuts, but those without these assets are advised to stick to the main road – which might be longer but safer for them. It also makes no sense to rely on instructions from people who themselves are not in possession of knowledge, as in

(54) H: *Vaktól kérdezi az utat*

{ Ask directions from the blind }.

The road metaphor apart from its etymological meaning of “path” here also connotes the “way to follow,” the road leading forward to a certain destination in the future. The concept of space is hence also connected with the concept of time. Time is seen as linear: a road leading into the unknown and unforeseen future. Those lacking the ability to see (i.e. the future goal and the road leading to it) are of little help in giving useful instructions.

At the end of this overview of Hungarian and Japanese proverbs, a warning is in order:

(55) H: *Akinek nincs a fejében, legyen a lábában*

{ He who has not enough (wit) in the head, should have (force to make up for it) in the leg }

“Head” as a metaphor stands for intellectual capacities, whereas the “leg” is associated with physical prowess. As a possible common denominator for head and leg, the concept of motion should be mentioned. Both head and leg can move slowly or fast - as expressed in a number of metaphorical sayings or idioms in Hungarian: *gyorsfejű* { fast-headed }; *sebes lábú* { quick-legged }; etc.

By presenting over fifty Hungarian and Japanese proverbs we aimed at pointing out the cultural messages inherent in them.

Similarities and Divergences in Hungarian and Japanese Proverbs

Theoretically speaking, the use of the layers of meaning (message, image, linguistic formulation) makes it possible to formulate the following scenarios as far as trans-lingual equivalencies are concerned.

A trans-lingual comparison of metaphoric equivalencies

Case	Meaning of the Message	Meaning of the Image	Semantic-linguistic Formulation
1	Same	same/familiar	same/similar
2	Same	different	different

3	Unfamiliar	familiar	cultural interpretation needed

Case 1. In Case 1, we experience similarities on all three levels of meaning, therefore this scenario usually presents no particular problems, as expressions in one language correspond to expressions of the other language. They are practically equivalents, as in proverbs like: (1) *all that glitters is not gold*, which has its equivalents in most European languages. The proverb (2) *hear one, understand ten* sounds semantically the same in Chinese and in Japanese. Both the metaphoric conceptualization and the semantic-linguistic formulation being the same we can safely regard them as full equivalents. However, full equivalents, more often than not, are so called “cross-translations,” which usually occur in areas of geographical proximity and/or cultural contact.

Case 2 is more complicated. This group includes proverbs with the same message in both languages (*anyone can commit an error = to err is human*) but their linguistic formulation is based on the respective “images” familiar to each culture: (3) *even the monkey falls from the tree* – for the Japanese and (4) *even the horse stumbles* – for the Hungarian. If the image stays within the limits of comprehension for the speakers of the other language, then the meaning-transfer is possible without difficulties.

The difference in the domain of experience results in different images that comprise the basis for the linguistic formulation.

Case 3 presents a special case. The image of nails sticking out and needing hammering in is a familiar one in any culture, still the message of the proverb – if not accompanied by an explanation – can be easily misunderstood. As we saw in the Japanese proverb (6), “to suppress anything that stands out” is a message particular to Japanese social behavior. This case can be a source of intercultural misunderstanding. Hence we can conclude that for mutual understanding the most essential meaning is that of the message – if it does not get through properly or is misunderstood, the social function of cultural transmission is not fulfilled in spite of the successful metaphoric conceptualization.

The Hungarian and Japanese proverbs introduced so far can be organized accordingly into three clusters.

1. Proverbs that are semi-equivalents in Hungarian and in Japanese;
2. Proverbs that have similar messages but different linguistic formulations due to the difference in cultural experience and background;
3. Proverbs reflecting divergent values in the Hungarian and in the Japanese cultures.

Semi-equivalent proverbs in Hungarian and in Japanese

No fully equivalent proverbs have been identified in the survey corpus limited to proverbs associated with learning and acquiring knowledge. However, a number of proverbs might be categorized as “semi-equivalents.” What makes them semi-equivalents is the similarity of their metaphoric conceptualization, even if their semantic-linguistic formulations are not fully identical. Both in (6) and in (7) the idea of perseverance is expressed by the concept of a stone, something that represents the apparently eternal and unchangeable – which, however, with diligent effort and patience can be modified over time. In (34) (H: If thrown out the door, he comes back through the window) and in (35) (J: Fall on seven tries, get up for the eighth) respectively, the idea of not losing hope is connected to the concept of human motion – with repetition and unceasing efforts, the goal can be achieved. Forward motion is the common central motif of metaphoric conceptualization of progress in (21) and (22). Both in (25) and in (26) the importance of a good beginning is emphasized by conceptualizing the process of achievement as a distance that must be traveled. A good beginning constitutes a great leap forward – achieving nearly half of the objective – on a figurative scale of motion.

Proverbs that have similar messages in the Hungarian and in the Japanese culture

The majority of proverbs compared in our study belong to this group.

Hungarian	Japanese
(4) Even a horse with his four legs stumbles, let alone (people) with their two	(3) Even a monkey falls from a tree

(10) More to be gained by wit than by force	(11) Learning without thinking: darkness; thinking without learning: danger
(13) Use your mind before you use your tongue	(14) Double-check before taking action
(15) It is better to ask twice than to err once	(16) To ask once is shame for one time, not to ask is shame for all one's life
(18) He who climbs high, makes a great fall	(19) He who grabs much will hold little (20) Chase after two hares and catch none
(23) Learning makes an ox out of the calf	(24) An old tree does not bend
(30) The more eyes, the more seen	(31) Three persons have the wisdom of Monzyu
(36) A good priest keeps learning until his death	(37) To learn at eighty
(40) Knowledge is power (42) Knowledge is a good traveling companion	(41) Nothing exceeds knowledge
(45) The smart one learns from the trouble of others	(46) Correct your ways by watching others'
(47) To show the wolf around in his lair	(48) To show the water lily to water sprites
(49) The calf wants to lead the ox	(50) The child whom once you carried on your back shows you the path through the shallows

In this group, the messages are similar but the images used in metaphoric conceptualization are various, due to the differences in environments and cultures. The proverbs belonging to this group tell us a lot about the particular cultures that they are used in – about the relevant life-styles, artifacts, social institutions, social structure, history and geography. Hence, the same idea is transmitted by metaphors using different images: for instance, Hungarians refer to the “livestock breeding” domain of experience, while the Japanese to the “gardening” domain of experience in proverbs associated with the function of one’s age in knowledge acquisition. This reflects the traditional importance of animal husbandry in Hungary and of gardening in Japan. This is not to say that there are no proverbs stemming from the experience of gardening in Hungary, or no Japanese proverbs having to do with livestock raising – but scales and trends can be clearly identified. The differences in the various domains of experience are clearly observable in the references to Buddhism or to the Christian Church: the former, of course, related to the Japanese and the latter to the Hungarian language.

Proverbs that reflect culture-specific values

As pointed out earlier, “solo” proverbs – i.e. proverbs with no equivalent in the other culture – are also to be found in the cross-cultural comparison of Hungarian and Japanese, though their number is not great. The Japanese (5) *nails standing out are to be hammered in* is unique, not in the sense of conceptualization – for the same image is transferable to many other cultures – but in the sense of its specific cultural message: that standing out from the group in any way is to be avoided.

The Hungarian proverbs (8: No roast pigeon will fly into one’s mouth) (9: If your sword is too short, let your feet make it longer!) (10: More to be gained by wit than by force) (34: If thrown out the door, he comes back through the window) (55: He who has not enough wit in the head, should have force to make up for it in the leg) are conceptualized metaphorically in diverse ways but they have a common denominator on the conceptual level. They all convey the message that in order to reach a certain goal or to achieve a particular aim, innovation and initiative are essential. The former idea is represented by “changing strategies” (9: “make your reach longer by adding a step to the length of your sword”; 10: “if force does not work, try to win by thinking” ; 34: “if not through the door, then through the window”; 55: “if not intellectually then physically,” etc.). Far-fetched as it may sound, one is attempted, nonetheless, to discover here some sort of culturally nurtured concept about how to acquire things. For many centuries, Hungarians were forced to develop an ability to cope with an ever-changing environment in the course of their wanderings. As a strategy for achieving goals, ingenuity was an imperative, and this has been handed down to new generations ever since.

Conclusion

Hungarian and Japanese metaphors, proverbs and sayings associated with learning and teaching were analyzed and compared. Differences and similarities in formulations and expressions with regards to acquiring (learning) and transmitting (teaching) knowledge were presented in the context of metaphoric conceptualization.

The number of proverbs and sayings that are similar in their message is striking, especially considering the physical distance separating these two cultures. It is also clear from the comparison that even semi-equivalents – proverbs or sayings identical on all three levels of meaning – are

relatively few. This fact can be attributed not so much to a mental but to a physical distance. Full equivalents, as a rule, are the products of cross-translations – an unlikely occurrence between cultures physically so far apart.

Hungarian culture and language – in spite of the country’s present location in Europe – are believed by mainstream scholars to go back to Asian origins (Benkő - Imre, 1972). There is linguistic evidence that in the process of moving from East to West, the Hungarian language has accumulated layers of vocabulary from the diverse languages it came into contact with (Hidasi, 1988). The study of “roots and routes” in the lexicon is an exciting academic enterprise. It is much harder, however, to detect the different layers of metaphoric expression for a number of reasons. For one, most of the time metaphoric images are also exchanged between peoples and cultures that come into contact with each other. Further difficulty arises from the lack of written documents. Metaphors of learning in the Hungarian language in the domain of institutionalized education are evidently products of much later periods. By the time the first university was established in 1367 by King Louis the Great in the city of present-day Pécs (the Sopianae of Roman times) the Hungarians had been settled in the Carpathian Basin in Central Europe for 500 years. But their contact with cultures and peoples of Asia dates from a much earlier period, going back perhaps millennia. Consequently, metaphors of “learning” in a systematic institutionalized educational context are products of and borrowings from the European cultural sphere.

Hungarian metaphors seem to have different layers of linguistic expression depending on their origin. Metaphors depicting wisdom related to general knowledge acquisition, perception or behavior can be considered earlier cultural products than the ones depicting behavior related to institutional education. The latter category, as a European development, exhibits many common features with proverbs common throughout Europe. The metaphors, however, that are thought to convey wisdom of a deeper layer of the cultural past, show great resemblance with Japanese proverbs and sayings. There is no proof, however, that they are products of a common Asian origin. They rather seem to constitute the universal component in the cultural heritage of the Hungarian and the Japanese people.

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