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Cultural Narratives in Proverbs: A Sociocultural Perspective on Transmission and Adaptation

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Abstract

Proverbs are concise expressions of cultural wisdom, symbolizing societal values and moral lessons that have been transmitted across generations. This study examines the role of proverbs as tools for cultural preservation and moral guidance through the lens of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. The findings reveal that proverbs, introduced in communal settings, are internalized through social interactions, where guidance from more knowledgeable individuals fosters the development of reasoning, decision-making, and moral evaluation. By transforming from shared cultural expressions into personal cognitive tools, proverbs bridge collective heritage and individual thought. Their adaptability ensures their significance in current contexts, providing pragmatic frameworks for progressing through modern ethical and social challenges. This research highlights the dual role of proverbs in shaping individual cognition and maintaining cultural identity, as well as contributing to their continuing significance. The study concludes by emphasizing the need to explore how proverbs evolve in response to globalization and digital communication, ensuring their continued impact in diverse and changing societies.

Keywords: Scaffolding, Zone of Proximal development, Paremiological minimum

Introduction

Defining a proverb is a complex task, as no single definition can capture its diverse linguistic, cultural, and functional aspects. Taylor (1931) remarked, "The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking" (Taylor, 1931, p. 3), emphasizing the indefinable nature of proverbs. He argued that an "incommunicable quality" often distinguishes a proverbial sentence, making universal criteria difficult to establish. Linguistically, proverbs have been described as "phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic entities" (Honeck, 1997, p. 11), while functionally, they are defined as "familiar, fixed, sentential expressions that express well-known truths, social norms, or moral concerns" (Gibbs, 1994, as cited in Cieslicka, Year, p. 173). Different disciplines provide distinct perspectives:



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historians and anthropologists study their origins and cultural significance, psychologists examine their cognitive and figurative dimensions, and linguists analyze their structure and semantics. Together, these perspectives contribute to a multidimensional understanding of proverbs as cultural expressions.

For the purpose of this study, proverbs are defined as “short, generally known sentences of the folk which contain wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form, handed down from generation to generation” (Mieder, 1985, p. 119; Mieder, 1993, p. 24). These concise expressions reflect human experiences, struggles, and cultural characteristics, functioning as essential components of language. They enhance communication, bridge past and present, and preserve societal knowledge. Although proverbs share common features across cultures, their variations often reflect distinct linguistic and cultural contexts (Yu, 2019). By acting as intergenerational bridges, proverbs transmit wisdom and moral lessons while remaining adaptable to changing societal norms. Through this, they enable societies to communicate core values and ensure their continuity across generations.

This study investigates the role of proverbs in transmitting cultural wisdom and moral guidance, particularly how they summarize communal values and influence moral thinking across generations. Utilizing a collection of proverbs in both Urdu and English, the research highlights their universality as cultural tools while also addressing their unique linguistic and contextual expressions. By applying, Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the role of cultural tools and social interaction in shaping cognition, this study examines how proverbs convey societal customs, values, and wisdom. This research further seeks to analyze the mechanisms by which proverbs, transmitted orally and learned through social interactions. Ultimately, this research aims to uncover how proverbs not only reflect cultural traditions but also adapt to meet the challenges of modern contexts, ensuring their continued significance in diverse societies.

Literature Review

Proverbs as Cultural and Social Tools

Russian paremiologist Grigoriy L. Permyakov introduced the concept of the **paremiological minimum**, which refers to the set of proverbs widely recognized and frequently used in a specific speech community or culture. These proverbs form the core repertoire of proverbial knowledge by highlighting the shared values, norms, and priorities of the culture. While, expanding on this idea Mieder (2015) defined paremiological minimum as a collection of specific expressions commonly known by most speakers, which act as a cultural foundation as it facilitates proper social interaction in a same community. This concept is particularly useful in understanding how proverbs act as cultural tools that summarize cultural wisdom, facilitate the transmission of social norms, and maintain cultural continuity across generations.

Zhao (2012), in the study *An Analysis of Social Proverbs from the Perspective of Cultural Semiotics*, builds upon this idea by emphasizing Wen Dunazheng’s



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classification of proverbs into two categories: **natural proverbs** and **social proverbs**. Natural proverbs pertain to knowledge about production and nature, while social proverbs focus on aspects of human life. This research will emphasize social proverbs, which compress abstract ideas, beliefs, and practical lessons drawn from shared experiences. As Zhao (2012) explains, social proverbs not only provide knowledge of everyday life but also promote ethical principles in a community. In addition to these cultural functions, proverbs teach behavioral guidelines and act as a piece of advice for individual.

Another study conducted by Al Khanaif sawy's (2023) titled, *A Pragmatic Study of Proverbs: Sociocultural Perspective* further explores this aspect by emphasizing that proverbs function as tools for conveying practical knowledge and strengthening social norms. He defines proverbs as indirect means of expression, describing them as "a way of saying something implicitly rather than explicitly, supporting arguments with popular wisdom" (Al Khanaif sawy, 2023, p. 718). In addition, proverbs are characterized as "an indirect way of conveying a set of assumptions about a shared thought between hearer and speaker rather than directly stating them" (Al Khanaif sawy, 2023, p. 718). This indirectness enables proverbs to resonate in cultural contexts and to function effectively in various communicative roles, such as implicit criticism, advice, warnings, or capturing universal human experiences. Proverbs not only echo societal values but also guide behavior and understanding in both specific and universal contexts by embedding shared notion and cultural knowledge. They align individual behavior with collective norms, while contributing to the well-being of the society. In line with this, Rebecca and Fanany (2016) in the study *Proverbs And Cultural Consonance* argue that proverbs in a society play essential role in reinforcing cultural norms, and societal perceptions. They further argue that proverbs not only transmit cultural knowledge but also create cultural models that guide individual actions and societal expectations. These proverbial models align individuals' experiences with the cultural values they internalize and maintain cultural continuity by transmitting worldviews. As White (1997) notes, "Proverbs combine a cognitive economy of reasoning with pragmatic force aimed at influencing other people" (White, 1997, p. 152). In this way, proverbs are integral to the cultural fabric, ensuring the alignment of individual experiences with societal expectations.

Although prior research has examined the linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions of proverbs, there is limited exploration of how proverbs summarize and transmit abstract cultural ideas and societal norms within evolving contexts. Most studies have emphasized the classification, implicit nature, and communicative roles of proverbs, yet little attention has been given to how these proverbial expressions adapt to modern societal changes while preserving traditional wisdom. This study seeks to address these gaps by analyzing the dual role of proverbs as preservers of cultural heritage and adaptable tools for contemporary ethical and social guidance. By focusing on how proverbs function in both traditional and modern contexts, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of their enduring relevance and transformative potential within



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diverse communities.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory: A Lens for Studying Proverbs

To further understand the role of proverbs, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides a compelling framework. This theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural tools in shaping cognitive development. Sociocultural theory, posits that social interactions and cultural contexts play a fundamental role in shaping human learning and development. Over time, this theory has been applied across disciplines, including psychology, linguistics, education, and anthropology, as it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals acquire knowledge and cognitive skills through their interactions within society. Vygotsky argued that learning and cognitive development are inherently social processes, ingrained in meaningful interactions with others. As Daneshfar and Moharami (2018) state, "These social interactions provide connections to cultural tools such as symbols, language, and concepts, which are important for evolving higher mental functions" (Daneshfar and Moharami, 2018, p. 600).

According to Vygotsky, higher mental functions, such as moral judgment, decision-making, and reasoning, do not emerge in isolation. Instead, they originate as external social processes before being internalized by individuals. He emphasized this transition, stating,

"Any higher mental function was external because it was special at some point before becoming an internal, truly mental function. It was first a social relation between two people. The means of influencing oneself were originally means of influencing others or others' means of influencing an individual" (Vygotsky, 1981b, p. 162).

In this context, proverbs, deeply embedded in social interactions and cultural frameworks, can only be fully understood and appreciated within their communal settings. Proverbs arise from the collective experiences, values, and practices of a community and are passed down through social relationships. They align closely with Vygotsky's description of higher mental functions: initially external, shared tools for influencing others, which are later internalized as cognitive frameworks guiding moral and social reasoning. When proverbs become disconnected from their cultural and social contexts, they lose their significance and applicability, emphasizing their rootedness in collective wisdom.

As cultural tools, proverbs facilitate the transmission of social norms, moral values, and cultural knowledge. They act as bridges between collective societal practices and individual cognition, ensuring that shared wisdom is both preserved and adapted over time. This transition from socially shared expressions to internalized cognitive tools exemplifies how proverbs mediate thought processes and contribute to communal understanding while shaping individual reasoning.

Vygotsky's concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding provide further understanding into the mechanisms through which proverbs are learned and internalized. The ZPD represents the range of tasks that a learner



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cannot perform independently but can accomplish with the assistance of a more knowledgeable other (MKO), such as a peer, parent, or teacher. Scaffolding refers to the tailored support provided by the MKO, enabling the learner to progress from dependence to independent competence. Vygotsky described this dynamic as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

In the context of learning proverbs, these concepts illuminate how individuals acquire cultural and moral wisdom through social interaction. Proverbs are introduced, discussed, and applied in realistic situations by more experienced community members, providing learners with guidance and context. Over time, the learner internalizes the wisdom summarized in proverbs, transforming them from external tools into personal cognitive frameworks for reasoning and moral evaluation. This process highlights the social origins of proverbs and their role in bridging individual understanding with cultural values.

By applying Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory, this study explores proverbs not merely as linguistic expressions but as dynamic cultural tools that guide behavior, shape moral reasoning, and foster cultural continuity. Proverbs operate within an individual’s ZPD, where wisdom is transmitted through meaningful social interactions. This ensures that cultural knowledge is not only preserved but also actively shared, adapted, and internalized, reinforcing both individual development and societal cohesion.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate the role of proverbs as cultural tools for conveying wisdom, societal norms, and moral guidance. Analyzing through the lens of Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory, the research explores how proverbs, introduced through social interactions, are internalized and adapted across generations. A collection of proverbs from both Urdu and English languages was analyzed to examine their universality and contextual uniqueness. The proverbs analyzed were gathered from secondary sources, including published collections, academic studies, and cultural archives. The selected proverbs cover themes related to moral guidance, societal values, and practical wisdom, combining both traditional and contemporary perspectives.

The analysis employed thematic analysis, categorizing the proverbs based on their cultural, linguistic, and moral dimensions. Recurring themes, including ethical reasoning, social norms, and intergenerational wisdom, were identified, with each proverb examined for, metaphorical significance, and typical usage context. Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory provided the theoretical framework for this study, with concepts such as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding applied to understand the transmission and internalization of proverbs through social interactions. This perspective highlighted the function of proverbs as mediators of learning, reasoning, and cultural continuity, extending their analysis



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beyond mere linguistic expressions.

The study focuses on proverbs from Urdu and English, representing two distinct cultural and linguistic traditions. While this approach presents insights into the universality and adaptability of proverbs, it does not fully capture the variations of proverbs in other languages and cultures. Future research could expand this scope to include a range of linguistic and cultural contexts, thereby enriching the understanding of proverbs as universal yet context-specific cultural tools.

Findings and Discussion

Proverbs as Cultural Tools for Preserving and Transmitting Knowledge

Proverbs function as **cultural tools** that preserve and transmit collective wisdom across generations. They capture societal values and information into **memorable expressions** that can be easily shared through social interaction. This preservation of cultural knowledge confirms that these principles remain significant across time, guiding individuals in their personal and social lives.

جیسی کرنی ویسی بھرنی	The consequences of your actions will return to you, whether good or bad
جاے لاکھ رہے ساکھ	Better to lose wealth than to lose honor
ہر چمکنے والی چیز سونا نہیں ہوتی	Not everything that glitters is gold
A bad workman blames his tools	An unskilled person habitually blames peripheral factors, such as their tools or circumstances, for their failures instead of accepting responsibility.
نادان دوست سے دانا دشمن بہتر ہے	A wise enemy is better than a foolish friend.

Cultural Preservation: These proverbs summarize important life lessons such as **moral liability**, the **value of uprightness**, and the need for **discernment**. They are shared during moral lessons, familial gatherings, or in moments of reflection, ensuring that individuals internalize societal norms and values.

Transmission Process

Proverbs like "جیسی کرنی ویسی بھرنی" are passed down through stories, advice, and teachings from elders to younger generations, highlighting the understanding that actions have unescapable consequences. Similarly, "جاے لاکھ رہے ساکھ" is often used in situations of conflict to highlight the importance of maintaining one's reputation, while "A bad workman blames his tools" importance of self-reflection, skillfulness, and taking responsibility for one's actions or outcomes. As **cultural tools**, these proverbs facilitate the learners' understanding of social concepts and internalize these lesson to apply in their everyday life.



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Proverbs as Tools for Learning through Social Interaction and Interchange

Proverbs often emerge in **social contexts**, where they facilitate **collaborative meaning-making**. Through dialogue and interaction, proverbs help individuals **negotiate meanings**, resolve conflicts, and develop deeper cognitive and moral understandings. The process of learning proverbs involves **scaffolding** from more knowledgeable others, guiding learners to understand the deeper implications of these cultural tools.

اندھوں میں کانٹا راجا	Someone with even a slight advantage, skill, or knowledge can become superior or dominant among those who lack it entirely.
اندھوں نے باتھی، سب نے الگ الگ کہا	People with limited understanding may perceive the same thing in different ways based on their individual perspectives
سخی دے اور شرمائے، بادل برسے اور گرمائے	Generous person gives without seeking praise, and even feels a sense of modesty in doing so.

Collaborative Meaning-Making

In a group setting, proverbs like "اندھوں میں کانٹا راجا" prompt discussions about value of skills and attributes, that even partial knowledge or ability can be advantageous when others lack them entirely. Whereas "اندھوں نے باتھی، سب نے الگ الگ کہا" encourages participants to search **diverse perspectives** and how each individual's knowledge is limited. "سخی دے اور شرمائے" sparks conversations on **generosity and humility**.

Social Learning: These proverbs are often discussed in family settings, classrooms, or community meetings, where **scaffolding** occurs through interactions. As individuals involve in these discussions, they learn and **construct shared meanings** about the importance of humility, generosity, and the complexities of power and perspective. Proverbs in social dialogue help learners to understand the knowledge and they move from simple understanding to complex one.

Proverbs as Reasoning Scaffolds: Facilitating Social and Moral Understanding

Proverbs provide **intellectual scaffolding** by offering simplified frameworks for understanding complex social, ethical, or moral issues. They mediate thinking by presenting easily understood ideas that guide individuals through everyday challenges and dilemmas.



دریا میں رہنا اور مگرمچھوں سے بچنا	If you find yourself in a difficult or challenging environment, you must learn to coexist with its dangers or challenges.
A Live dog is better than a dead lion	It is better to be alive, even in a humble or less prestigious state, than to be in a position of power or greatness if it leads to downfall or death.
دودھ کا جلا چھاچھ بھی پھونک پھونک کر پیتا ہ	After a bad experience, a person becomes overly cautious in similar situations.
When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers	When powerful groups engage in conflict, it is the weaker or innocent people who bear the brunt of the consequences.

Rational Facilitation

Proverbs like "دریا میں رہنا اور مگرمچھوں سے بچنا" provide **pragmatic guidance** for adapting to **challenging environments**. This proverb helps individuals **understand and accept** the inherent difficulties of certain situations, advising them to coexist with challenges rather than oppose them. Similarly, "پڑھیں فارسی" highlights the **disconnection** between acquired knowledge and practical outcomes, facilitating understanding about the unpredictability of life's paths. "When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers" teaches the need for empathy and awareness of how conflicts between the strong can harm the weak. These proverbs act tool for providing rational understanding as well as **scaffolding** learners' thought processes and helping them handle complex situations. The repeated use of these proverbs in various contexts provides learners with frameworks that simplify decision-making and enhance **moral reasoning**.

Proverbs as Tools for Internalization: Shaping Personal Cognition and Worldview

Over time, proverbs become **internalized** as part of an individual's **cognitive framework**, guiding their decisions, actions, and perspectives. This process of internalization is central to Vygotsky's idea that cultural tools (such as language and proverbs) mediate and shape cognitive development.

He that would eat the fruit must climb the tree	In order to enjoy the rewards or benefits of something, you must first put in the effort or work required to achieve it.
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He that would eat the fruit must climb the tree	In order to enjoy the rewards or benefits of something, you must first put in the effort or work required to achieve it.
Two wrongs don't make a right	Responding to a wrong or injustice with another wrong does not justify the action or make things better.
جس کی لاٹھی، اس کی بھینس	The person with power or authority gets to control or decide the outcome.

Internalization

Proverbs like "جس کی لاٹھی، اس کی بھینس" help individuals internalize the changing aspects of **power and control**, influencing their worldview of how power structures function in society. "He that would eat the fruit must climb the tree" reinforces the **value of effort** in achieving success, guiding individuals to approach tasks with perseverance. "Two wrongs don't make a right" teaches the principle of **moral integrity** and the importance of resolving conflicts without perpetuating harm.

Through repeated exposure and **guided interactions**, these proverbs become part of the learner's **internal intellectual toolkit**, shaping how they interpret and react to the world. This internalization reflects Vygotsky's concept of how **cultural tools** mediate thought processes and influence personal development.

Proverbs as Tools for Reflective Learning: Guiding Personal Growth and Wisdom

Proverbs encourage individuals to engage in **reflective thinking** about their experiences, **shaping personal growth** and **wisdom**. They provide understanding of how to Progress through life's complexities, **nurture critical thinking** and help individuals to make sense of their personal journey.

A stitch in time saves nine	Addressing a small problem promptly can prevent it from becoming a much larger issue later on.
Don't count your chickens before they are hatched	One Should not assume or rely on a future outcome before it actually happens.
Believe nothing of what you hear, and only half of what you see	Information especially when received second-hand, can be distorted or unreliable.
نادان دوست سے دانا دشمن بہتر ہے	A wise enemy is better than a foolish friend.

Reflective Learning

These proverbs encourage learners to think about the importance of critical



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thinking and discernment in a world where rumors, misinformation, and deception are common. **Proactively address problems** "Believe nothing of what you hear, and only half of what you see", and **manage expectations** "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched". They guide individuals in learning from their mistakes, taking **preventive action**, and maintaining **realistic expectations**. Through **dialogic interactions** and **reflective practices**, these proverbs help learners develop more cultured, **rational and moral frameworks**.

Based on the analysis, the findings reveal that proverbs are far more than just words of wisdom, they serve as powerful cultural tools that encapsulate societal values, norms, and moral principles. By transmitting these values across generations, proverbs ensure the continuity of cultural traditions while also fostering adaptation to changing contexts. Viewed through the lens of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the process of internalizing proverbs comes to life in social interactions. Shared by more knowledgeable individuals in familial or communal settings, proverbs help learners progress from relying on guidance to independently applying the wisdom they carry. This gradual transformation turns proverbs from external expressions into internal cognitive tools, deeply influencing how individuals reason, make decisions, and evaluate moral situations.

At the same time, the adaptability of proverbs ensures their relevance in modern contexts. While rooted in tradition, they offer clear and actionable guidance for navigating today's complex social and ethical dilemmas. By bridging individual development with cultural continuity, proverbs maintain their role as vital tools for shaping worldviews and ethical conduct. They remind us that the wisdom of the past continues to resonate, connecting generations and providing timeless frameworks for both personal growth and collective harmony.

Conclusion

This study give emphasis to the role of proverbs as cultural tools that bridge collective wisdom and individual reasoning. Through the lens of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, proverbs are shown to operate not merely as linguistic expressions but as dynamic tools for learning and development. Shared in social contexts and guided by more knowledgeable individuals, proverbs are internalized through processes like scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development, evolving from external constructs into internal frameworks for reasoning, decision-making, and moral evaluation. Ultimately, this research highlights the dual role of proverbs in shaping individual reasoning and reinforcing societal cohesion. As both carriers of cultural knowledge and mechanisms for moral guidance, proverbs remain integral to human development and cultural preservation

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