ISSA Proceedings 2010 – Argumentation Schemes In Proverbs

1. Proverbs and argumentation

It is widely known and accepted that proverbs can fulfil argumentative functions in communication. Mostly, the argumentative force of proverbs is ascribed to their authority as pieces of popular folk wisdom. In terms of argumentation theory that would mean that proverbs are arguments from authority themselves which derive their persuasiveness from their broad acceptance among speakers.

In view of this interpretation, proverbial argumentation has often been criticized alongside a growing general scepticism against authorities and tradition especially since the 70ties of the last century. Proverbial argumentation seemed to have lost most of its persuasiveness, since arguments whose credibility is based only on tradition and their publicity among the folk were systematically doubted and questioned.

Nevertheless, proverbs are still common language devices among speakers – not only in ironic or playful language use. And although the argumentative function of proverbs was initially described as only one among several other pragmatic functions, Kindt (2002) has shown that even those seemingly non-argumentative functions contain implicit argumentation initiated by the use of the proverb. One of his examples is the complex speech act of consolation which includes mostly a relativization of the event that is complained about. The relativization itself is often justified by a reason, e. g. the mentioning of the proverb *Every beginning is difficult* relativizes the importance of the event by describing it as an inevitable but time-limited handicap.

The question is then, if there is more to the argumentative attractiveness of proverbs than their identity as arguments from authority.

An important point from the linguist point of view is that proverbs are usually phrased as universal propositions or can easily be reformulated as such (e. g. *All's well that ends well*; *Haste makes waste* → All things done in haste are bound to

waste). This means that proverbs usually can be used to express an inference rule from A to B (A → B). What is really interesting here, is to take a look at the substantial nature of this rule. Under many aspects proverbial inference rules and argumentation schemes, which are an issue at the centre of argumentation theory, are similar to each other. Already some attempts have been made (e. g. Goodwin & Wenzel 1981, Wirrer 2007) to show parallels between often described argumentation schemes, such as the argument from sign, and proverbs that more or less represent these schemes in terms of everyday language.

2. Proverbs and presumptive argumentation
Before looking at these concrete parallels between individual proverbs and argumentation schemes, it is worthwhile to specify the general nature of proverbial inference rules by comparing them to a certain kind of argumentation, namely presumptive argumentation as described by Godden & Walton (2007) and Ullmann-Margalit (1983 & 2000).

Presumptive argumentation differs from deductive argumentation since presumptively drawn inferences do not necessarily lead to right conclusions in the way deductive logic does. Instead presumptive argumentation schemes convey only plausible links from A to B, which allows to infer conclusions on a presumptive basis. These tentative inferences can be subject to refutation for example if new information becomes available that makes the original inference obsolete. Their validity is thus context dependent. Inferences on the basis of presumptive argumentation schemes have to be carefully questioned to evaluate their applicability in specific contexts.

Nevertheless, they are a very important part of everyday argumentation, especially since they entitle discussants to continue arguing even if not all relevant information is available but circumstances demand prompt decisions on the basis of what is currently known. Argumentation that aims at making a decision about how to act in a given real life situation is called practical argumentation and it is often associated with the dialogue type of deliberation. That is where presumptive inference rules account for a great part of the arguments put forward. Presumptive inferences are thus practical, context-dependent and refutable.

Now, what about proverbs? Proverbs also represent specific inference rules that function as short-cuts for speakers to cope with already known recurrent problem situations in everyday life. These situations typically call for a decision on how to

act further. In this regard they function as evaluations and (indirect) directives according to the problem situation. For example *A cobbler should stick to his last* is linked with an abstract problem situation where an individual is given the chance to gain authority or to assume some kind of higher position. The proverb clearly gives the advice to keep up the status quo instead of risking overextending oneself.

Their practical orientation towards decision making, their context-dependency as well as their status as non-deductive inference rules show important similarities between the status of proverbial reasoning and presumptive argumentation schemes.

3. Proverbs as representations of presumptive argumentation schemes
And in fact, as was already mentioned, many proverbs can be analysed as linguistic representations of already known presumptive argumentation schemes, even though they are mostly less generally formulated and often relate to specific contexts. In 1981, Goodwin & Wenzel have already shown that for many argumentation schemes English proverbs can be found whose inference rules coincide with more abstract argumentation schemes.

For my own study I took a slightly different approach: Instead of taking known argumentation schemes as a starting point to look for matching proverbs, I began with collecting a corpus of German proverbs to see what different groups of inference rules they established. One important thought here was that maybe some proverbs constituted abstract argumentation schemes that are not yet discussed in argumentation theory. Moreover, I analysed not only the isolated proverbs but their usage in concrete contexts by compiling a second corpus of German newspaper articles with mentions of all the proverbs.

One benefit of this second corpus is that, because of some proverbs being semantically underdetermined, the true character of their inference rules can only be detected by analysing their usage in specific contexts.
In addition to that, it is interesting to note that if proverbs actually systematically represent everyday schemes of argumentation this could explain a lot about their continuing popularity among speakers even though their persuasiveness on the basis of mere genre authority may have dwindled. Also, it could show why proverbs have some argumentative force, even if their literal meaning is clearly not acceptable as a general rule, e. g. *All good things come in threes*. Because if they are not used as literal rules for inference but as loose references to an

underlying argumentation scheme, their benefit for the argumentation could lie in that reference and the applicability of that scheme in the given context.

And finally, from a linguistic perspective, the parallel between argumentation schemes and proverbs could add to a better understanding of the different pragmatic functions proverbs can fulfil in communication. My idea here is that maybe the fact that a specific argumentation scheme is represented in a proverb has an influence on the possible pragmatic functions this proverb can fulfil.

In this paper I would like to concentrate on the following questions: Do proverbs systematically represent presumptive argumentation schemes? And if so, can proverbs even be seen as a resource for the formulation of new argumentation schemes? These are some of my results.

4. Some Results

The analysis of 348 German proverbs resulted in the identification of 23 represented argumentation schemes. Five different ways of representation can be distinguished: 1) Clearly assignable proverbs, 2) proverbs that can be assigned to different schemes according to the context they are used in, 3) metaphorical double-representation, 4) proverbs that represent lesser-known or new argumentation schemes and 5) proverbs that warn against fallacies. Aside from newly formulated schemes I used the collections of argumentation schemes by Walton (1996) and Walton, Reed & Macagno (2008) as a starting point for my observations. Since my corpus consists of German proverbs I translated some of them for the following examples if equivalent English versions cannot be found.

Among the clearly assignable proverbs representations could be found of e. g. the argument from sign, causal argumentation (especially the argument from consequences), the ad minore argument and the argument from commitment.

The German proverb *Wer A sagt, muss auch B sagen (Who says A, must say B, too)* is a good example for a proverbial representation of the argument from commitment, whose linking premise is formulated by Walton, Reed & Macagno as follows: „Generally, when an arguer is committed to A, it can be inferred that he is also committed to B." (Walton, Reed & Macagno 2008, p. 335).

An example for a representation of the argument from sign is *Too much laughter discovers folly*. The original argumentation scheme for the argument from sign by Walton, Reed & Macagno (2008, p. 329) is:

(1) *Specific Premise*: A (a finding) is true in this situation.
General Premise: B is generally indicated as true when its sign, A, is true.

Conclusion: B is true in this situation.

The reconstruction of the proverb as a representation of this argumentation scheme could look like this:
(2) *Specific Premise:* Person x laughs too much.
General Premise: It is generally a sign of folly when people laugh too much.
Conclusion: X commits folly in this situation.

Proverbs that could be assigned to different argumentation schemes either at the same time or depending on the context were e. g. *All good things come in threes,* which can be used as a quasi-inductive argument or in the sense of a means-to-end argument, which is also called a practical inference. For example, if an athlete, asked about his chances to win an upcoming contest, answers: "I have already won two times. I'm optimistic. *All good things come in threes.*", the proverb adds to a quasi-inductive argument which uses the outcome of two previous events as a basis for a prediction about the future. Other possible usages can be found in other contexts.

Metaphorical proverbs often represent two schemes: One on the metaphorical level and one on the meaning level: A German example here is *Wie man in den Wald hineinruft, so schallt es auch heraus* (*As you call into the woods is how it sounds back*). On the metaphorical level a causal argument is represented, and even a strong one as it refers to the laws of physics. But what is rather meant here, is an argument from reciprocity, which has as a general premise a rule like *If A treats B in a specific way, A will have to expect similar treatment from B*. The point here may be that the persuasiveness of the metaphorically represented argument from cause adds to the acceptability of the presumptive argumentation scheme of reciprocity.
Also, some schemes could be identified that aren't yet discussed in argumentation theory or have not been given much notice recently, but which nevertheless may be important for everyday argumentation since more than one proverb makes use of this abstract inference rule. An example here is one which I called the argument from a given opportunity, whose general premise I identified as *If A is given an opportunity x, A should make use of x*. Representations of this rule can be found in proverbs such as *Make hay while the sun shines*, *Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today* or *One must celebrate when one has the chance*.

An example of an argument scheme which scholars have already described but

which recently did not receive much attention is the aforementioned argument from reciprocity. A lot of proverbs can be represented by this scheme such as *What goes around comes around*, *Tit for tat*, *One good deserves another* and the German *How you call into the woods is how it sounds back*.

And last but not least there are proverbs that either warn against common fallacies or which can be used to derive counter arguments. *One swallow doesn't make a summer* or *All that glitters is not gold* warn against the fallacy of hasty generalization while *People in glasshouses should not throw stones* can be interpreted as a warning against the fallacy of inconsistent commitment. If the fallacy has already been committed they can also be used as counter arguments.

5. Conclusions
As a consequence of my findings, I think that some proverbs can indeed be said to systematically represent abstract argumentation schemes. They even seem to constitute some kind of folk logic, as Goodwin & Wenzel already suggested. Many proverbs thus can be interpreted as linguistically fixed and contextually adapted versions of argumentation schemes often used in everyday argumentation.
Also, proverbs indeed prove to be an interesting resource for the identification of new argumentation schemes.
And finally, the analysis of my second corpus gives some promising hints that there is a parallel between scheme representation and pragmatic functions of proverbs in contexts. For example, proverbs that represent means-to-end argumentation are mostly used either as commendations or as retrospective explanations.

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