

# ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Pragmatic Functions Of Korean Proverbs As Topoi In Critical Discussion



## *1. Proverbs and critical discussion*

Proverbs have many practical functions in every day conversations. According to the dictionary, a proverb usually expresses simply and concretely, though often metaphorically, a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of mankind. This description, of course, explains the meaningful characteristics of proverbs, but it is not sufficient for our purpose. We are going to focus on more practical uses that a proverb has especially in critical discussion.

Critical discussion is a type of discourse that purposes to resolve the differences of opinions about issues. In the process of critical discussion, argumentation is needed that is a verbal and social activity of reason aimed at increasing (or decreasing) the acceptability of a controversial standpoint for the listener or reader, by putting forward a constellation of propositions intended to justify (or refute) the standpoint before a rational judgment (van Eemeren, et al. 1996: 5). A proverb in critical discussion does not only express a truth but also justify the standpoint advanced by the participants.

One of the major precedent studies on proverbs as patterns of argument is Goodwin and Wenzel (1979). They turned their eyes to the strategic values of the proverbs in coping with some relatively common human problem or situation like Burke (1957). The proverbs and patterns of argument that they suggested are substantive argument (sign, cause, parallel case, analogy, generalization, classification, statistics), authoritative argument, and motivational argument. Their classification is really invaluable in understanding the function of proverbs as kind of argumentative schemes, but they lacked the dialectical perspectives, which we can find plainly through the data they used, you know, they depended their research on a proverb dictionary.

In order to understand the move of argumentation, I analyzed the real television

discussion transcripts. Television discussion is a sort of argumentative discourse, which deals with current issues to be resolved by the participants who have differences of opinions with each other. They sometimes use proverbs to justify their standpoints or persuade the opposites. I expect that the uses of proverbs can explain some practical and cultural aspects of critical discussion.

## 2. *Pragma-dialectical approach to a critical discussion and topos*

A *topos* is the “place” from which the attacker can get his arguments. Some translations of the word *topos* stress its “topographic” nature: “places,” “argument place,” “location,” “search formula.” A *topos*, however, is also a rule, law, or procedure, and this is what is stressed in other translations of the word ‘*topos*’: “argumentation scheme,” “argumentation schema,” “argumentation technique,” “procedure” (van Eemeren, et al. 1996: 38). They use the term “move” instead of *topos* including these two aspects. In this paper, however, I am going to use the term *topos* as having similar meaning with “places” and “move” in order to highlight the fact that they are kind of idioms registered on dictionary and that they function as premises in a critical discussion.

A pragma-dialectical approach purposes to evaluate argumentation, which purposes to resolve the differences of opinions, through the procedure of the discourse. In order to evaluate argumentation, we have to reconstruct the argumentative elements and judge the soundness of the speech acts in ideal norms. We happen to meet the difficulty in managing the proverbs that function as *topoi* in presenting the analytical overview of argumentative discourse.

Traditionally proverbs are understood as expressions that have unquestionable truth accepted by the users, but in critical discussion it is not always the case.

1. A: ... The introduction of a class action at the moment is untimely. ...

P: I think every system in the world has some side effects. In this sense, the person who has negative attitude to the introduction of a class action at the moment is, I think, similar to one “who hesitates to make bean paste because of the maggot.”

(Is the movement of a class action a right or interference? 2001.3.8)

2. *Topos*: If something has necessities and side effects, necessities have to be considered preferentially in doing it.

-> “Who hesitates ever to make bean paste because of the maggot?”

*Possible premises*:

R1. The introduction of a class action at the moment is necessary but it has some

side effects.

R2. It is more important that the class action system is necessary for the civic life.

R3. It is more important that the class action system has some side effects.

*Conclusion:* The introduction of a class action system at the moment is timely.

In the P's utterance, the proverb "Who hesitates ever to make bean paste because of the maggot?" takes the role that selects R2 as a premise to support the conclusion, which is opposite to the A's utterance. Even though the appearance of maggot could come true to its condition, making bean paste is necessary for a dietary life in Korea. So this proverb is a really strong warrant to the argument. By expressing the meaning metaphorically, it functions as a topos "If something has necessities and side effects, necessities have to be considered preferentially in doing it."

In the next section I will show some types that proverbs function as topoi whether they are generally accepted or not.

### *3. Argumentative moves of proverbs in critical discussion: an example*

A proverb is not used indirectly as topos, which is different from the general topos. In order to evaluate whether the proverb is sound or not, we have to externalize the implied meaning of it. The following example shows it:

1. P: Most western economists who have been to North Korea say that the physical distribution of North Korea has to be changed and SOC, that is, Social overhead capital has to be equipped sufficiently in order to change it, without which no western country's and our government's supports are *'to pour water down a bottomless barrel'* [i]....

A: ... I don't think so. You said *'to pour water down a bottomless barrel'*, but it is very important to give some meals to the starving children, for it is a behavior to save their life.

P: Of course, that's true.

(The relationship between South and North, how to resolve? 2001. 6. 4)

In this example, the protagonist used the proverb 'to pour water down a bottomless barrel' as a topos to support his standpoint as follows:

2. Topos: An economic perspective is superior to a humanistic one.

( $\rightarrow-\rightarrow-\rightarrow-\rightarrow$ ) From an economic perspective, no fruitless work should be done.

$\neg$ — No fruitless work should be done.

$\neg$  *To pour water down a bottomless barrel*)

*Possible Premises:*

R1. Most western economists said the same opinions.

R2. The system of physical distribution of North Korea has to be changed and SOC has to be changed sufficiently to change it, without which no western supports and our supports are fruitless.

R3. From an economic perspective, western countries' and our government's economic supports are fruitless.

R4. From a humanistic perspective, western countries' and our government's economic supports are not fruitless.

*Conclusion:* Western countries' and our government's economic supports to North Korea should not be done.

In order to support the conclusion, he used the topos in the highest level "an economic perspective is superior to a humanistic one", which was unexpressed obviously, but we can see that he inferred or changed it from the proverb's meaning. The topos then functions to select R3 as reason of the conclusion rather than R4.

In pragma-dialectical approach, fallacies are analyzed as incorrect moves in which a discussion rule has been violated. Especially related to the use of proverbs, the violation of rule 6, 7, and 10 were notable in discussions. Some proverbs were used in concealing a premise in an unexpressed premise (violation of rule 6), and some were 1) used as inappropriate argumentation scheme, 2) used incorrectly though it were appropriate argumentation schemes (violation of rule 7), and the others were used ambiguously (violation of rule 10).

#### *4. Cultural aspects reflected in the proverbs as topoi*

We can understand an argumentative culture of a language community by its topoi implied in proverbs. Korean proverbs reflect on its traditional thoughts, values, everyday life, etc. Of course, some of them are originated from Chinese, Japanese and Western language, but it is not my concern in this paper. I just want to point out the practically used proverbs in television discussions during the last year. They are like these:

- *To bell the cat ('s neck) (18, Jan.):*

1. To attempt something formidable or dangerous
2. To discuss vainly about something really hard to execute

\* It had better not to discuss something impossible to execute.

- *Repenting that it is too late (1, Feb.): Repenting of missing a chance*

\* (In most cases, it just describe the situation, but in some contexts it implies like

this English proverb:) Better late than never. It is no use crying over spilt milk.

- *Do I have hateful hairs? (1, Feb.): I don't know why, but that man rubs me (up) the wrong way.*

\* Sometimes, someone is disliked and rubbed up without proper reason.

- *Don't fasten shoestring in a melon field, and don't fasten hat-string under the pear tree. (22, Feb.; 12, Apr.; 28, Jun.)*

\* Avoid every cause of suspicion though you can explain yourself.

- *To correct a bull's horns eventually to kill him (22, Feb.): The remedy is worse than the disease.*

\*It is better not to correct something wrong than eventually to destroy it.

- *To exaggerate a small needle as if it is a big stick (22, Feb.): overstatement; make a mountain (out) of a molehill.*

\* If a statement is an overstatement, it is better not to accept it.

- *A dragon's head and a snake's tail (22, Feb.): a bright beginning and a dull [tame] ending; an anti-climax.*

\* It is not good to begin something brightly and end dully.

- *Who hesitates ever to make bean paste because of the maggot? (8, Mar.):*

\* If something has necessities and side effects, necessities have to be considered preferentially in doing it.

- *To pour water down a bottomless barrel (22, Mar.; 14, Jun.; 7, Dec.): Like filling a bottomless vessel; the beggar's wallet has no bottom.*

\* No fruitless work should be done.

- *A pear drops when a crow flies from the tree. (12, Apr.): It is just a coincidence that the two events have happened at the same time.*

\* We must not confuse the coincidence of cause and effect.

- *Like a living fish in the cat's hands (3, May; 27, Sep.): Don't set a wolf to watch the sheep.*

\* Don't entrust an important matter to the person that could do harm.

- *If the monk can't stand the temple, he should leave (17, May): If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen.*

\* If you can't stand the place where you are, it is better to leave there.

- *Ten persons don't prevent a thief. (7, Jun.): Many persons' effort can't prevent one person's bad thing.*

\* Anyway a bad thing may well occur, so any effort is useless to prevent it.

- *A clean downstream comes from a clean upstream. (21, Jun.): The fish always stinks from the head downward; Where old age is evil, youth can learn no good;*

*As the old cock crows, so crows the young.*

\* It is more important for the person on upper position to set an example than the reverse.

- *To flatter the world with perverted study (26, Jul.): To flatter the power with studies made with questionable intentions.*

\* It is undesirable to use disciplines in fulfilling private desires by distorting it.

- *Even though I say 'Badam-Pung', you should say 'Baram-Pung' (26, Jul.)**[ii]**: Even though I do something wrongly, you should do it correctly.*

\* (Used ironically) It is more important for the person on upper position to set an example than the reverse.

- *A frog in a small pond (who has never been out of it). (23, Aug.): The frog in her bog; He that stay in the valley shall never see what's over the hill.*

\* If one who is content with his current status, he never develops any more.

- *Every affairs return to its right way. (6, Sep.): a corollary; Right will prevail in the end; Truth wins out in the long run.*

\* It is right that every affair eventually becomes right than false.

- *'Choga'**[iii]** on every side (6, Sep.): The situation in which people are deeply depressed and feel helpless.*

\* (Mainly used to point out a situation, but it also could used to express following meaning): If someone has no one to depend on, he has to surrender unconditionally.

- *A lord who is satisfied does not know that his servant is hungry. (20, Sep.): He does what he likes regardless of other people's feelings.*

\* (Used ironically) In doing something what he likes, it is better to consider other people's feeling.

- *A licorice root in a drug store (The licorice root is included in almost every concoction of oriental herb medicine) (27, Sep.): a jack of all trades; a busy-buddy; a nosy parker; to stick one's nose into something; to have a finger in every pie; to be nosy*

\* (Positively or negatively) A certain element should be in all places.

- *Like seeing a fire across a river (11, Oct.): Remain a (mere) spectator; stand by and watch; stand by idly.*

\* (Used ironically) Remaining a mere spectator is worse attitude than taking part in the event.

- *Salt on a kitchen range is salty only when it is put in. (25, Oct.): Everything demands some work.*

\* Something that is valuable but unused is not better than normal thing.

- *Only by comparing it can you determine which is long and which is short. (25, Oct.): It isn't till it's over; It isn't over till the fat lady sings; He laughs best who laugh last; Do not hallow till you are out of the wood.*

\* If you get the correct size of two objects, it is better to compare them than just to see and guess it.

- *To count on the fingers. (7, Dec.): Estimate by rule of thumb.*

\* It is worse to count incorrectly than correctly.

- *To change the bones and to get rid of the amnion and the placenta (7, Dec.): a modification*

\* It is better to be changed positively than left unchanged.

- *A look to left and right (7, Dec.): looking around; irresolution; vacillation. being unable to make up one's mind wondering how other's opinions will be.*

\* It is worse to hesitate than to be confident

- *A centipede that keeps spit in its mouth. (14, Dec.): A person who is tongue-tied*

\* A person is in a bad condition is worse than the opposite.

- *He who is thirsty digs the well. (14, Dec.): He who really wants to get something makes an effort to get it.*

\* He who is in urgent need of something make the thing done.

- *To drink the kimchi broth before eating kimchi[iv] (21, Dec.): to count your chickens before they're hatched; catch your bear before you sell its skin; Don't sell the skin till you have caught the bear; Don't eat the calf in the cow's belly; Boil not the pap before the child is born.*

\* It is not good to try to get the results before a work is finished.

These examples show that every proverb could be interpreted as topoi in some context, but they just have different degrees of strengths.

## 5. Conclusion

The position of proverbs as topoi in critical discussion, let alone every day conversation, is flexible. We hesitate to use the proverb "It goes ill in the house where the hen sings and the cock is silent" because the time has been changed. Instead, the newly expression "An egg has been laid where the hen sings" is more generalized than the former. As you know in this example, historically the power of proverb as topoi has been changed.

On the other hand, some proverbs conflict to each other chronologically in their meaning and practical use. Next two proverbs are the examples: "Who hesitate to make bean paste because of the maggot" vs. "Don't fasten shoe-string in a melon field". This phenomenon is, of course, originated from the differences of

discussants' view or opinion. I couldn't see this example in television discussion, through which I inferred that the discussants wanted to avoid the situation that they looked unserious on the issues or has problems to draw a proper proverb from their lexicon. Instead, a case was that they correct the meaning of the proverb from their own perspectives. A discussant referred to the proverb "If the monk can't stand the temple, he should leave" and commented that he didn't like it. His opinion was that if there was problem in the temple the monk should make an effort to reform it."

According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca(1969), "loci are preferences of a particular audience which are of an extremely general nature and can, without any difficulty, serve as justification for statements made in argumentation addressed to that audience" (van Eemeren, et al. 1996:104). They said the arguer and the audience may disagree about the premises at three levels:

- (1) the status of premises,
- (2) the choice of premises,
- (3) the verbal presentation of premises. Applying this point, the proverbs are mainly argued in critical discussion related (1) and (2).

From a pragma-dialectical perspective, these are sometimes kind of fallacies and hinder the procedures to resolve the differences of opinions. From the arguer's view, it could strengthen or weaken the power of persuasion. So in order to get ideal argumentation, the participants have to discern the right use of proverbs from wrong use. In this point, we also have to turn our eyes to didactical application of this view.

First of all, the teaching of proverbs has to be done in discursive context to make an effect in argumentation not in the context that it is dealt as an isolated idiom. And the status of proverbs in critical discussion as topoi is to be learned and questioned compared to the context by learners. Another point is that proverbs are taught with pairs of topos and counter-topos.

## NOTES

- i.** This means 'like filling a bottomless vessel' or 'the beggar's wallet has no bottom'.
- ii.** Badam-Pung is the wrong pronunciation of Chinese character '風'
- iii.** 'Samyeonchoga (四面楚歌)' !: It is originated from ancient Chinese history in which the army of Dynasty Cho was depressed with their hometown' song sung by the enemies.



**iv.** Kimch is a traditional Korean dish of pickled vegetables.

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