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by **Dan Mac Dougall**, 21st October, 2004

*Dan Mac Dougall tries to shed light on the importance of Spanish proverbs and why it is beneficial to every translator to know their source text proverbs.*

This article seeks to define the word proverb, offer examples for the usage of proverbs over time, and to provide some of their typical characteristics in Spanish. In addition, the benefits of learning these special sayings will be highlighted.

The following is a dictionary definition (1991:1087): a proverb is . . . a saying popularly known and repeated, usually expressing simply and concretely, though often metaphorically, a truth based on common sense or practical human experience. A stitch in time saves nine.

It is worth noting that Taylor (1996:14) states: . . . the man who says So help me God uses a proverbial formula already current in Roman speech. Foulet: (1927:301-24). And the following proverb, from Sephardic folklore, offers a view of the mores of fifteenth-century Spain (Alatorre:211): Café sin tutún, hamam sin sapún (café sin cigarrillo es como baño sin jabón: hamam es el baño turco). . . Sayings such as these provide contemporary readers an authentic insiders view of a culture. In the age of the sound byte with instant media coverage of world events, finding sources for sayings that might have taken centuries to develop can be an onerous task.

Readers of contemporary literature in the original language and in translation can be assisted immeasurably by accessing sources that provide examples for usage. While it may be true that the Chilean equivalent of the Spanish refrán Más vale pájaro en mano que buitre volando is Más vale pájaro en mano que ciento volando, as Orellana (1998:248) states, an English equivalent of a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush hardly does justice to the original. That being said, each of these sayings provides a mental picture that is readily comprehensible to educated readers of both Spanish and English. Furthermore, it highlights a characteristic of proverbs in any language, namely that of linguistic synergy: the meaning provided by the saying in toto is greater than that provided by the words individually.

Sources which provide readers not only a written equivalent of proverbs or idioms in another language, but also a visual cue in the form of drawings or sketches can greatly assist in furthering understanding. The idea that the more senses one employs in the learning process the greater are the possibilities of retention of information is a truism. In an age of instant information interactive media which engage learners are more likely to be of more lasting value than those which do not. In order to make maximum use of a computer one must be able to draw upon a variety of skills, not just visual. It should come as no surprise that an advertising consulting firm recently stated that advertising banners that flow across computer monitors on web pages are gaining a foothold in the advertising market. The key to their effectiveness could very well be their interactive nature.

The learning of proverbs can be a key element in the language acquisition process. Refranes, frases hechas, idioms, and proverbs can provide a snapshot of other cultures that allows for a more thorough understanding of both language and culture. Without grasping the meaning of these types of sayings we are limited to a unilateral understanding, providing fertile ground toward the development of cultural and linguistic ethnocentrism. We can become enriched as individuals and societies when we understand the viewpoints of others. This dovetails the management principle of the doublewin: both, individuals or groups, are able to benefit when each is vitally concerned with equanimity not only for themselves, but also others. This forces us to broaden our frame of reference, deepen our understanding, and improve our individual and group effectiveness.

As in translating from one language to another, a literal, word- for-word rendering pales in comparison to its natural counterpart. Its sound is stilted to the ear of a native speaker. For example, in Quintans (1999:1) the refrán: La cara es el espejo del alma, when translated literally does not sound natural to speakers of English. The English equivalent would be The eyes are the window of the soul. Those who commit to a thorough study and usage of proverbs will further their own understanding. Since no one collection is all-inclusive in its scope, keeping updated regarding new source material is essential.

Another feature prevalent in many proverbs in Spanish is that of rhyming, an excellent mnemonic device for students. The rhyme scheme often used is that of assonance (1991:83):  rhyme in which the same vowel sounds are used with different consonants in the stressed syllables of the rhyming words, as in penitent and reticence. For example: En tiempos de guerra, cualquier hoyo es trinchera, A rey muerto, rey puesto, and Lo que pienses en comprar, no lo has de alabar, all examples provided in Chen (1999: 1-2).

Fatalism is another characteristic of Spanish and Spanish- American proverbs, as evinced by Aroras (1998:1) analysis of 125 el que nace proverbs. For example: El que nace para AHORCADO, de arriba le cae la soga (1998:3) A Cuban equivalent of this attitude is found in Montes (7): El que nace para burro del cielo le cae el aparejo and Chens (1999:10) examples impart a similar view of life in these sayings: El que nace para mulo del cielo le cae el arnés/policía del cielo le cae el bolillo. He that is born to be hanged shall never be drowned. \* You cant escape your destiny.

It is worth noting that within the U.S. language-specific standards have been developed for grades K-16 for nine distinct foreign language groups. This fact underscores the seriousness with which the intellectual community is dealing with the study of foreign languages. The study of proverbs, idioms, and refranes fulfills at least three of the U.S. Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1996:9), namely: within the framework of Connections, Standard 3.2: Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures. Under the heading of Comparisons, Standard 4.1: Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own, and Standard 4.2: Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the culture studied and their own. As stated in the Introduction to the Standards (1996:11): To study another language and culture gives one the powerful key to successful communication: knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom.

**Conclusions**

The wisdom inherent in proverbs has demonstrated its value over an extended period of time. The valuable insights gleaned from their study and application will help students to better understand their own language and culture when analyzed comparatively. Translators, interpreters, and linguists also will benefit from constantly updating their understanding and use of these gems of wisdom, since they can offer culturally-specific insights. Rhyming, synergy, and fatalism are some of the characteristics of proverbs in Spanish. The most beneficial source materials couple a listing of sayings with explanations of their usage, in addition to drawings or sketches. The latter can further elucidate the meaning, thereby increasing the likelihood of comprehension.

**References**

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