Argumentative structures in Mexican proverbs[1]

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Abstract

Proverbs are linguistic units that only function within a given discourse, they resist the wear and tear of the time and are able to pass from one culture to another while maintaining their original functions or adapting to new circumstances of reception. In this article, Herón Pérez starts from the idea that the most important cultural function that proverbs play in discourse is to be an argumentative instrument, that means, proverbs are mechanisms of debate rather than truths of action. Therefore, the form of proverbs is closely linked to their argumentative function. The present work focuses on the problem of the textual structures by which sayings perform their argumentative function in discourse. Thus, it focuses on the search for the argumentative structures existing in Mexican sayings of speech in the 20th century, regardless of their origin or provenance. The results obtained make an interesting contribution to the theory of discourse.

Keywords:
Paremiology.
Proverb.
Spanish.
Mexico.

Resumen

Título: «Estructuras argumentativas en refranes mexicanos».
Los refranes son unidades lingüísticas que únicamente funcionan dentro de un discurso determinado, resisten al desgaste causado por el tiempo y son capaces de pasar de una cultura a otra manteniendo sus funciones originales o adaptándose a las nuevas circunstancias de recepción. En este artículo, Herón Pérez parte de la idea de que la función cultural más importante que el refrán desempeña en el discurso consiste en ser un instrumento argumentativo, esto es, los refranes son mecanismos de debate más que verdades de actuación. Por eso, la forma de los refranes está estrechamente ligada a su función argumentativa. El presente trabajo aborda el problema de las estructuras textuales mediante las cuales los refranes desempeñan en el discurso su función argumentativa. Por eso, se centra en la búsqueda de las estructuras argumentativas existentes en los refranes mexicanos del habla en el siglo XX, independientemente de su origen o procedencia. Los resultados obtenidos contribuyen aportaciones interesantes para la teoría del discurso.

Palabras clave:
Paremiología.
Refrán.
Español.
México.

Résumé

Título : « Structures argumentatives dans les proverbes mexicains ».
Les proverbes sont des unités linguistiques qui fonctionnent seulement dans un discours concret, ils résistent à l'usure provoquée par le temps et peuvent être transmis d'une culture à l'autre en conservant leurs fonctions originales ou en s'adaptant aux nouvelles circonstances de la réception. Pour élaborer cet article, Heron Perez part de l'idée que la fonction culturelle la plus importante que le proverbe apporte au discours consiste à être un procédé argumentatif, c'est-à-dire, les proverbes sont plutôt des mécanismes de débat que des vérités d'action. Voilà pourquoi la forme des proverbes est étroitement liée à leur fonction argumentative. L'auteur de ce travail étudie le problème des structures textuelles à travers lesquelles les proverbes jouent leur fonction argumentative dans le discours. Cherchant alors les structructures argumentatives présentes dans les proverbes mexicains du parler du XXe siècle, indépendamment de leur origine ou leur provenance. Les résultats obtenus contribuent à faire des apports intéressants pour la théorie du discours.

Mots-clés :
Parémiologie.
Proverbe.
Espagnol.
Méxique.

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INTRODUCTION

In exploring from the discourse theory, the main characteristics of "lapidary speech", as we have called it when speaking in, with and by proverbs (Pérez Martínez 1996), the analysis of its discursive characteristics advanced from the most general to the most particular. As a result, problems appeared that could neither be glimpsed nor, much less, tackled within a more general investigation occupied, in the first instance, with verifying the existence or not of a type of discourse, the lapidary, as well as its main characteristics and, of course, its functioning mechanisms. Thus, more specific problems arose, such as the characteristics of a paremiological taxonomy, the use of the functional concept of form to carry out a classification of the proverbs of a corpus or, finally, the problem of textual structures by means of which proverbs perform, within the larger discourse in which they are embedded, their argumentative functions, which we therefore call argumentative structures. The present paper refers to this last matter. When we speak here of argumentative structures, we refer to the paremiological structures in all their levels: from the whole to each one of its components. Therefore, it is argumentative structure as much the logical interlocking that sustains the proverb and passes on to the texts in which it is inserted, as well as that of each one of its logical-semantic components, either on themselves or according to their combinatory possibilities. Therefore, in the search for these argumentative structures, it is just as important, depending on the case, to focus the investigation on the logic of the whole, as it is to focus on the argumentative force of each one of the elements that compose it, regardless of their type or the function they play in it.

The precision that this paper deals with argumentative structures "in Mexican proverbs" refers to the circumstance that the corpus that sustains them is made up of proverbs in use in 20th century Mexican speech, regardless of their origin or provenance. Nowadays Paremiology knows that proverbs are not only discursively parasitic texts but also culturally nomadic texts. Parasites, because they only function discursively embedded in major discourses. Nomadic, because today it is already axiom of Paremiology the postulate that proverbs do not have a homeland, nor do they require a passport to pass from one culture to another, but they move freely from mouth to mouth wherever they please and are installed where they are well received, either resuming their original functions or adapting to the new functions that the reception circumstances assign them. Marcel Bataillon (1982: 51) rightly calls them "ordinary coin polished by centuries of use, but whose relief is marvellously resistant to the wear and tear of the times". We start here, moreover, from the paremiological axiom that the most important cultural function that the proverb plays in speech is that of an argumentative tool. Proverbs are, in fact, primarily debating mechanisms rather than acting truths. The way how proverbs perform in the major discourse their argumentative function is through an enthymematic structure (Pérez Martínez 1996: 69ff.).

1. THE TOPIC AS AN ARGUMENTATIVE STRUCTURE

A good part of the processes referred by the expression "argumentative structures" has to do with the difficult problem of the topic in Paremiology and, therefore, with the old problem of the possibilities and functioning of a thematic taxonomy in Paremiology (Pérez Martínez 1996: 177ff.) Indeed, there are two ways by which, in the Mexican proverb collection, the proverbs are enclaved in the main discourse in which they work: one of acoustic type and another of logical-semantic nature. In fact, we have already mentioned elsewhere (Pérez Martínez 1996: 366ff.) that the mechanism by which the exclamatory proverbs of the Mexican proverbs, whose discursive function is preponderant of embellishment, are inserted in the greater discourse is of acoustic

type: the exclamatory proverb connects with the main discourse by means of its first or its first two words. In addition, one of the first elements that enter the determination of the contextual range of a proverb and, therefore, of its argumentative capacity, is its referential universe founded on a set of constituent elements of what we could call the theme of the proverb. It is the logical-semantic insertion, in which the proverbs have an enthymematic function. In this modality, the mechanism by which a proverb is inserted to the main discourse is its referential significance that usually works through a process of metaphorization that equates the situation either to the theme of the proverbs in the case of the proverbs "SN + que" ("*Perro* que ladra no muerde"), to the first noun of the proverb ("Para cada *cáscara* hay puerco"), to the main verb ("No por mucho *madrugar* amanece más temprano"), or to the meaning of the globally assumed proverb ("Nunca dejes camino por vereda").

It would seem, in principle, as if this discursive functioning of the proverb exempts us from dealing with the thorny and still unresolved problem of the topic in Paremiology and, in general, in discourse theory. This would be, from the outset, a success since, let's say it right away, there is not yet a sufficiently stable and precise concept of topic that can be used without problems in Paremiology. In the current discourse theory, in fact, it is agreed, for example, that the topic of a text is that of what that text "speaks"; in that semantically, let us say it as J. P. Richard, the topic constitutes "a beginning of organization, a scheme or a fixed object around which there would be the tendency to be constituted and to unfold a world" (Bergez, Gerard and Robrieux 1994: 208ff.); and in which, named "thematic" by the critic, the topic is the matter of a statement that refers in subterranean form to the cosmovision of the writer. It is also agreed that, arising from rhetoric, the topic was originally the thesis to be proved or developed by the speaker in the discourse. But there are many more problems that these minimum agreements pose. For example, and regarding proverbs, what determines the topic of a proverb?

Therefore, as seen from the enunciation theory, the subject of a statement is the object of the act of enunciation on which information is given. In the case of the proverb "Perro que ladra no muerde" the topic would therefore be "perro que ladra", since it is spoken about him. The predicate, then, is the information given on that topic: "no muerde". The topic, as can be seen, is figuratively assumed: a barking dog, a boiling pot, a bricklayer without a rule. However, this only works in declarative proverbs. For performative proverbs the topic is complicated to the extent that it is the entire proverb that must be reduced to a figure. A proverb is always reducible to a figure. The reduction of a proverb to a figure is one of the most solid pillars of lapidarity (Pérez Martínez 1996: 420ff.). According to the enunciation theory, it should not be difficult to establish the subject of the above-mentioned proverbs, although it is difficult to do so with others such as "No por mucho madrugar amanece más temprano" that require further analysis. In any case, these types of complexities clearly show us the need for a coherent approach to the question of the subject in gnomic texts such as those in the corpus of proverbs that work in contemporary Mexican speech, to which this paper refers.

Moreover, the various proposals on how to determine the topic of a proverb have so far proved problematic. Thus, the resolution of the topic of a proverb from its "characteristic words" (Maloux 1995: 561ff.) or keywords has not been sufficient either for the simple reason that the characteristic word does not always coincide with the topic, or because the concept of keyword is not very precise. Although, for example, it is possible to assume as the subject of a proverb the one already expressed by the orational subject in declarative texts, or by the object of the verb in performatives, which is as arbitrary as to do the opposite (Maloux 1995). Indeed, the same proverb can, depending on the interest of the analyst, be assigned more than one keyword depending, of course, on what is to be understood by it. What is, for example, the keyword of a proverb such as "El que

no conoce a Dios dondequiera se anda hincando"? Is it "Dios"? Is it "no conocer"? Is it "andarse hincando"? Is it "dondequiera"? Or is it a text figuratively organized around the expression "dondequiera se anda hicando"? This seems to suggest, for example, the variant of the proverb: "A cualquier diablo se le hinca". And, after all, is the meaning of this proverb "religious"? We therefore agree with Florence Montreynaud (Montreynaud 1989: 352) when she states that "any thematic classification is arbitrary to the extent that, depending on the circumstances of use, a proverb can receive many interpretations and can therefore be classified under different headings"[3].

This shows, in any case, that the question of how to determine the topic or content of proverbs can be solved in a wide range of more specific questions related to the subject of the contents of the proverb and, of course, with its argumentative virtualities. In short, for obvious reasons of pertinence, let us stick to the question of whether the subject of a proverb is determined by its textual references, by its logical-semantic structure or, finally, by its paremiological meaning. Depending on the case, we could then speak of a paremiological taxonomy based on a subject of a referential nature; or of a logical-semantic taxonomy; or, finally, of a taxonomy that we could call a topic.

2. THE PAREMIOLOGICAL SENSE

As it is known, in a proverb one thing is the referential meaning that emanates from the words contained in its text; another, very different, its logical-semantic structure; and, ultimately, another is the fundamental meaning of the proverb on which that small text constructs all its argumentative functions and which we have called paremiological sense elsewhere (Pérez Martínez 1988: 39ff.). In the proverb "Hay veces que un ococito provoca una quemazón", for example, when the adverbial sentence "hay veces" or "a veces" is removed, whose main meaning is grammatical and which lexically only adds to the whole the sense of an eventual temporality, in order to determine the topic, only the words "ocotito", "provoca" and "quemazón" would remain, which, of course, are not the ones that determine the topic of the proverb. What is, then, its meaning as a proverb? What is its paremiological meaning? The paremiological sense of a proverb is its underlying principle that, although built on, and evoked, by the referential significance of the proverb, is not reduced to it but is resolved, in general, either in a semiotic contraposition, in a serial verification of at least two analogous semic figures, (Courtés 1980: 47ff.) or, finally, in a simple verification[4].

[3] The Russian researcher G. L. Permjakov, who considers the classification of proverbs as the true scandal stone of Paremiology, in exploring the possibilities of a theory of the classification of proverbs, proposes a double classification of these small but powerful texts. Namely: a structural and a semantic classification. Permjakov understands by structural classification the possibility of classifying proverbs by formal elements such as the metaphorical or direct formulation of proverbs, according to whether or not there is a binary opposition in them, by the grammatical nature of the keyword, by the kind of proposition that constitutes the proverb –whether it is simple or compound, for example– according to the positive, negative or performative sense of the proverb. The semantic classification of proverbs attempted by Permjakov is instead based on a methodology analogous to that employed by Vladimir Propp for the study of functions in fantastic bowls (Propp 1977). Based on it, Permjakov postulates that the millions of proverbs are only variants of a hundred situations that can be reduced, in turn, to four logical-semantic invariants that would be like boxes coded in logical terms to classify a proverb according to its content (Pérez Martínez 1996: 179).

[4] We assume the concept of "meaning" from the terminological proposal of Eugenio Coseriu (e.g. Coseriu 1981: 283-286 and Coseriu 1992: 104ff. and 204-208) for whom meaning is the "specific content of the text" which, therefore, does not only refer to the extralinguistic reality nor is carried out only through the semantic quadriculation of that reality by a historical language "but expresses attitudes, opinions or intentions of the speaker" (Coseriu 1992: 204).

The paremiological sense would be, then, the content that, projected by a proverb, expresses the intentions and the calibration of the situation made by the speaker expressed both through and from the textual reference to the extralinguistic reality with the different meanings of the language in which the text is coded, which in our case is Spanish. Therefore, the term "paremiological" denotes not only that the text to whose meaning we are referring is a proverb but that its semantic-discursive structure is organized in function of that proper sense of proverbs determined by its enthymematic function. In general, the paremiological sense of a proverb can be assumed as the result of a deep structure permanently projected on the external level of the proverb which, in the form of a principle of an absolute nature, is argumentatively indisputable.

It is precisely the semantic-discursive structure of a proverb, whose central nucleus is its paremiological sense, which serves the small text as an argumentation mechanism by which it can perform its discursive functions as a proverb which, as we have pointed out, are its primary *raison d'être*. The logic to which the argumentative interlocking is held, always ending in an incontrovertible evidence, is sustained, in our case, in the principle that "Las apariencias engañan". In this example, there is an obvious figurative contraposition between the magnitudes of "ocotito" –in affective diminutive– and of "quemazón" –an augmentative word (Alonso 1968: 294ff. and Belio 1982: 87ff.) that connotes not only the great magnitude of the phenomenon but also the disaffection towards it, related to each other by the causative verb "provocar". The whole refers, of course in the form of an exception, to the underlying principle that there is a reciprocal proportion between the cause and its formulable effect as "According to the cause is the effect" and *vice versa*. In the Mexican proverbs this same principle is adduced, for example, in the proverb "Según el sapo es la pedrada". The proverb would sound, then, to a principle of the type of "Small causes sometimes produce great effects" or "Not always the effect is proportionate to the cause" which would be the paremiological sense of the proverb in question. For the rest, we have already studied elsewhere (Pérez Martínez 1996: 380ff.) the mechanisms of universalization that this proverb uses to be able to fulfil its argumentative function.

As can be seen, in this case a principle coming from the evidence and therefore argumentatively unobjectionable is used, which is contradicted by a double line of argument that, as a whole, is more forceful than the dominant principle extracted from the evidence: on the one hand, by the same evidence line it is stated that as "Every rule has its exception" –"Hay veces que un ocotito provoca un quemazón"– and, on the other hand, by means of the *exemplum*, more convincing, as is known, than a thousand words. In Paremiology, therefore, for the purposes of discourse analysis, the paremiological sense is much more important than the inquiry into the possible topics of a proverb. It is evident, moreover, that all argumentative virtualities of the proverb, if they are in discursive function, depend on its paremiological sense.

But, how do you extract the paremiological meaning of a proverb? Which universes does it belong to? The answer we give to the second of these questions obviously depends on the answer we give to the first. To answer it, let's take a couple of examples. Firstly, a proverb belonging to the most frequent paremiological structure in Hispanic proverbs: I refer to the structure "SN + that"[5]: "Casados que no se besan no se tienen voluntad". Firstly, this proverb could be called semiotic. A proverb, whose logical structure is of the significant-meaning type: the protasis acts as a significant while the apodosis expresses the meaning. That is: the first member of the proverb contains a semiotic mark whose interpretation key is provided by the second member; otherwise, it supposes a general conduct that, nevertheless, is contradicted by the case presented by the proverb. This general conduct, in this case, contains a double law: firstly, that married persons must have will and, secondly, that that will must be expressed externally, with kisses, for example. The proverb

[5] As we have profusely pointed out both in *Refrán viejo nunca miente* (1997) and *El hablar lapidario* (1996).

is logically structured in such a way that according to that logic the first thing between married people is to have will, and that this must correspond, as a second thing, to an external conduct of which kissing is part of. The structure of the proverb goes, as we can see, from the outermost which is the least important–significant to the innermost which, as the case may be, is the most important –meaning. Of course, the underlying principle is of the type "Obras son amores, no buenas razones" or, if you like, "Amor que no se expresa no es amor": this is the paremiological sense of the proverb and, apparently, it comes from experience. Its argumentative value comes from universal experience, not from evidence; and therefore, it has an argumentative capacity that makes it irrefutable.

Indeed, from the argumentative point of view, evidence is the oldest criterion of truth of Western culture; (Abbagnano 1974: 476ff.) while experience, recognized since ancient times as a resource of knowledge other than intuition, made its entrance to the philosophy of knowledge as a resource of verification supported by intuition. As Abbagnano (1974: 495) says: the use of experience "was an appeal to intuition". In any case, in relation to their argumentative vigour, experience and evidence have intuition as their source. There are, then, in the Mexican proverb collection proverbs whose paremiological sense is based on evidence and others whose paremiological sense has the experience as an immediate argumentative resource, although it is finally based on evidence. There is a third type of proverbs whose paremiological sense and, therefore, its argumentative force does not come from evidence but from belief.

To see how one can reach the paremiological sense of a proverb and how one formulates the paremiological senses whose argumentative force comes from belief, let us analyse the following proverb: "Dios aprieta, pero no ahoga". This proverb is also structured in the form of a confrontation between two truths argumentatively accepted as such and related to each other in such a hierarchy that the first, the adverse truth, is given a certain pre-eminence over the second, the adversarial truth. Therefore, the proposition "Dios aprieta" is assumed by the proverb as something indisputable; the second, equally indisputable truth, functions as a limit to the first. The argumentative strength of both lies in the belief that God is love and as such, according to the proverb that "Quien bien te quiere te hará llorar", is demanding but, at the end of the day, trust prevails that nothing bad can come of him. The meaning of this proverb, strictly speaking, would be the conception that Western culture has of God in whose name are summed up all the good attributes and all the dreams of the human being: undeniably the author of the present order in the entire cosmos[6]. The paremiological sense of this proverb can be formulated either as "God is love", "God is good" or "God is a kind father" and, in general, with all the "good" attributes coined by Western imagery. The argumentative force of this type of proverb, as vigorous as the previous ones, comes ultimately from faith and refers to a world in which religious convictions had as much argumentative validity as convictions coming from evidence. After all, in the history of Western culture, in which our proverbs were born, religious experience was just as valid as plain experience.

That the paremiological sense of a proverb is produced through the lexical meanings of the text is by no means limited to them, is well shown by groups of at least two proverbs whose paremiological sense is the same even though their lexical meanings are completely different. Think, for example, of a series of proverbs such as "me extraña" (*I wonder*) or "el que nace" (the one who is born) whose lexical meanings speak of completely different things and yet they have the same paremiological sense. As a variety of examples, I mention the following proverbs from the series *me extraña*:

[6] Remember what Northrop Frye (1988: 31-36) said, who, picking up an intuition from Vico, sketches the God's argumentative function in the "hieratic" stage to which the argumentability of proverbs is ascribed.

Me extraña que siendo araña te caigas de la pared
Me extraña que siendo liebre no sepas correr en llano
Me extraña que siendo sastre no sepas pegar botones
Me extraña que siendo pato no sepas nadar en lago.

On the one hand, the lexical meanings outline the figures of a spider climbing a wall, a hare running across the plain, a tailor hitting buttons and, finally, a duck swimming in a lake. The paremiological sense, on the other hand, draws a situation that, as such, produces strangeness: the fact that an expert does not know his trade. The same thing happens with the proverbs of its formal variant "me admira" of the type of:

Me admira que siendo fraile no sepas el padrenuestro.
Me admira que siendo gato no sepas coger ratones.
Me admira que siendo galgo no sepas coger las liebres.

Then, we have the case of proverbs that, despite having a totally different designation and linguistic meanings, have the same paremiological sense. The same happens with other series like the mentioned series of proverbs "el que nace" of predestinationistic type where the proverbs of the series have the same paremiological sense despite the diversity of designated universes and, therefore, of linguistic meanings by which it is expressed. Here are some examples:

El que nace para buey del cielo le caen los cuernos.
El que nace pa' tamal del cielo le caen las hojas.
El que nace pa' maceta no pasa del corredor.
El que nace pa' dedal, del costurero no pasa.
El que nace para bule hasta jícara no para.
El que nace tepalcate ni a comal tiznado llega.
El que ha nacido pa ,trapo nunca llegará a ser toalla.
El que nació para ahorcado no morirá de ahogado.
El que nació siendo tlaco[7] aunque ande en los tostones.
El que nació para pobre aunque sea un Salomón.

These proverbs, despite the wide imagination on which they are based, suppose as an indisputable principle a predestination according to which everyone is born with a destiny that nobody can change, no matter what they do. Some of them, moreover, explicitly express that this predestination comes from God and, therefore, has its origin in "heaven"; and, finally, that this predestination refers, fundamentally, to the status or social class: the most striking case is, without a doubt, that of the individual whose destiny condemns him to poverty even if he is sage. The paremiological meaning of these proverbs can be formulated as follows: each one is irremediably tied to his own destiny. For the rest, it is not difficult to find groups of proverbs with the same paremiological sense although they do not constitute a series structurally speaking. Thus, the proverb "Ayúdate que Dios te ayudará" has fundamentally the same paremiological sense as the old proverb "A Dios rogando y con el mazo dando". All the above authorizes us, in any case, to assume the paremiological sense as the most important argumentative structure of proverbs.

Indeed, the paremiological sense is an argumentative structure in more than one sense. On the one hand, as we said, the unobjectionable argumentability is based in the paremiological sense of a proverb to the extent that it is ultimately reduced to a principle indisputably accepted within the cultural group in which the proverb works. The relationship between paremiological sense and

[7] A very cheap coin used in New Spain.

referential significance in a proverb is, as can be seen, of a semantic nature and can be compared to the relationship established at the postulated syntactic level by the generative-transformational grammar of Chomsky. The relationship between a deep and a superficial structure, that is. Also, at the semantic level, in the superficial structure of a proverb, there is a series of marks that evidence a range of operations carried out within the paremiological phrase and that ultimately refer, as the semiotics of Greimas has shown, to fundamental postulates of experience or ideology. The deep structure of a proverb, then, would be constituted by its paremiological sense and would consist in an absolute principle of high argumentative capacity in the social environment in which it functions reducible, in last term, to some of its argumentative topics in vogue in the discursive system of the culture in question. This deep structure of semantic nature of each proverb is related textually, as I said before, with its respective superficial structure –constructed either on a fact of the experience or on a postulate of the ideology –by means of a process of metaphorization, of variable depth, whose hermeneutic referent is always the deep structure. The argumentative elements of the deep structure are indeed projected in the superficial structure by a series of marks, generally lexical, that are those that allow the proverb not only to be inserted in a greater discursive context but, of course, to construct its figurative nature and to unchain with it its argumentative effectiveness. Among these argumentative elements that function at a superficial level is, for example, the enunciative nature of each proverb that depends, in any case, on the function that this small text plays in the sociocultural reality in which the proverb functions. The result of this double structure is a set of emblematic type in which the superficial level acts as a motto while the deep level, which by nature is figurative, acts as a figure.

3. TOWARDS A POPULAR SPEECH TOPIC

This leads us basically to the conclusion that each proverb functions discursively as a topic and that, therefore, proverbs are true topics in the discursive netting of cultures. As is well known, the old rhetoric understood two different things as a topic: on the one hand, a method for drawing conclusions from plausible reasons through enthymemes; that is, a network of empty forms that guide the speaker in his search for contents and, on the other hand, a series of stereotypes or, if preferred, of classic themes (Barthes 1974: 57). Both old rhetoric and, in general, classic culture produced a good collection of topics. Barthes (1974: 59) cites several of these topics: an oratorical, a laughable, a theological and a sensitive topic. In several senses one can think of a proverb collection as a heritage made up of different topics since it is a great storehouse not only of subjects of everyday discourse whose primary function is argumentation, but, as we have seen, also a true collections of unobjectionable truths when they functioned discursively as a foot of enthymemes. Our Hispanic proverbs, like the Mexicans, are conformed by all kinds of these common places that function in the discourse through the paremiological sense of each proverb strictly as empty forms susceptible not only to provide content to any discourse but to be inserted in on an enthymematic way (Pérez Martínez 1997). The proverbs can be assumed, in fact, as the true topic heritage of popular speech.

Ernst Robert Curtius (1975), in his already classic *European Literature and Latin Middle Ages*, reviewing the corpus of topics that worked in the medieval Latin discourse, catalogues them in two major groups: some were topics relating to the art of making speeches itself and others referred to content types that could be used to fill the speeches. Therefore, there were topics that we could call rhetorical others that can be called general topics. Among the former, some of these "topics" referred to suggestions regarding specific parts of the discourse and sometimes consisted of concrete formulas to fulfil matters like the *captatio benevolentiae,* according to which the speaker should begin his discourse by grasping the benevolence of the audience, for example by presenting him-

self in a modest way. Curtius calls this topic "false modesty". Other rhetorical topics referred on the one hand to the exordium, on the other to the conclusion. But there were also topics of argumentative type, that strictly suggested contents: they were empty forms that served the orator to fill properly and use discretionally. Curtius mentions for the Latin Middle Ages, for example, the "topic of consolation": in view of the certainty of dying, the fact that even the greatest men died is comforting. And he gives examples of its use in the *Iliad*, in the *Odes* of Horace, among others, such as St. Augustine. For the paremiological topic to which we refer here, it is obvious that we speak of topics in this second discursive function. In their character of current and indisputable axiological principles in a culture, paremiological τόπος become referents of varied argumentative structures. In practice they come to function in form of empty argumentative schemes that can be applied to the different matters of discourses. To be able to carry out in the speech the function of argumentative scheme, nevertheless, the τόπος must have such a prestige, within the society in whose speech it works, that makes it an effective and sure resource to discover the ideas that have to feed the speech. In any case, it must be publicly accepted by all listeners.

A proverb, however, can work argumentatively both as a discursive topic from its paremiological sense and from a series of verbal connections that contracts with the larger context in which it is embedded. In the first case we will have proverbs whose argumentative structure is of a topical nature: in the second, however, we have proverbs related to its context by means of a semantic relation of argumentative type, according to the maxim that "the argumentation is in the language". This means that, if two segments of a discourse can be linked to each other by some argumentative relation, it is not only because these segments express facts that, according to the speaker, are actually related to each other, but also because the linguistic structure of these segments imposes a series of indications on their argumentative orientation, independently of the facts to which it refers (Ducrot and Schaeffer 1995: 469ff.).

Indeed, two sentences may refer to the same fact of extralinguistic reality and yet, depending on their linguistic structure, they may be oriented towards opposite conclusions. The inventory of situations that Coseriu makes in order to propose the concept of "sense" to which we have referred above can illustrate this well. Expressions, in fact, whose contrast is based on adverbs such as "ya" and "apenas" –"ya es viernes", "apenas es viernes"; or on the confrontation of structures such as "N + adj." and "adv. + N" – "este barril contiene pura agua" : either in the distinction of a name in function of direct object and an adverb –"yo he comido un poco", "es poco lo que yo he comido"; or between a structure "adj. + N" and a predicative structure–"hay una lenta mejoría", "la mejoría es lenta". If one of these two contrasted phrases belongs to a proverb and the other belongs to the larger text in which the proverb is embedded, we have a small example of the type of work that awaits paremiological research from the point of view of discursive structures, according to the proposal of Ducrot/Schaeffer that "the possibilities of argumentative coordination from a sentence are founded, directly, on the significance of this sentence without going through the facts to which the phrase refers" (Ducrot and Schaeffer 1995: 469ff.), which means that it is possible to analyse the Mexican proverbs, from the point of view of the mentioned maxim, describing the meaning of the proverbs without taking into account the realities associated to them in the standard use of the language. Without taking care of their referential value that is: considering them only as instruments for the discourse construction. This type of analysis can be carried out both at a lexical level and at a sentence level. As Ducrot and Schaeffer say:

> [...] even the words of the lexicon could, from this point of view, be characterized not by the type of objects they designate, but by the modes of discursive continuation they make possible. To describe the word "work", for example, would consist in indicating some argumentative principles

> called *topoi* that are linked to it and that decide the way in which a statement containing that word can be connected. These are principles such as "work exhausts", "work produces fruits", etc., principles that oblige us to use a conjunctive nexus of the "however" type if, after having said that work has been done, we want to point out that we are not exhausted, or that work is useless (Ducrot and Schaeffer 1995: 470).

At the lexical level there are indeed a series of stable configurations around which the discourse and, in general, the cultural symbolisms are structured. The enthymematic use of paremiological phrases, as already mentioned, presupposes, in fact, an equally large corpus of these argumentative *topoi* to which this paper wishes to draw attention. For the time being, it is not difficult to show how the argumentative use of proverbs in Mexican discourse modifies these lexical *topoi* through a series of "operators" of the "no por", "no hay... que", "hay quien..." type and other types of syntactic resources under the assumption that the meaning of a phrase contains clues about its argumentative potentialities. This kind of analysis can become a more precise tool when it comes to studying not only the logic underlying the Mexican proverbs but also the way it structures its discourse and, ultimately, the type of truths underlying the lapidary speech of any culture.

To illustrate this, let's take two seemingly opposing proverbs: "Al que madruga, Dios le ayuda" and "No por mucho madrugar amanece más temprano". Both, however, adhere to the lexical *topos* that "getting up early is beneficial" which the first proverb subscribes and the second combats. Most declarative proverbs can be analysed from this perspective. For example, the proverb "El que con lobos anda, a aullar se enseña" rests on a lexical *topos* of the wolf as a symbol of evil. In other cases, the argumentative structure is explicit in the entire paremiological phrase from the point of view of a paremiological sense, already referred to. The proverb "No porque traiga huaraches pienses que soy huacalero" supposes and combats a habitual double reasoning according to which, first, the one who wears huaraches is "huacalero" and, second, to be "huacalero" is something socially rejected by the enunciator. In fact, according to the *Diccionario de mexicanismos* of Francisco J. Santamaría (Santamaría 1983: 600ff.) the word "huacalero" refers to an individual belonging to a very low social class, it is almost equivalent to "indio", in its most derogatory sense. We have to conclude this paper settling down that once established the discursive functions of the proverbs and the mechanisms by means of which these small texts carry them out, the Paremiology can nowadays contribute to the contemporary theory of the discourse with very punctual observations on the way how the proverbs carry out their argumentative functions in the major discourse in which they are embedded.

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