Quantifying Paremiology in Literature: The Quixotic Golden Ratio

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Abstract: The present paper proposes a system that allows for an unequivocal collation of different literary works in relation to the number of proverbs included in them. Taking several pre-existing quantitative analyses of the use of proverbs by various authors from different periods as a starting point, the proposed formula is applied to them, reaching the conclusion that *Don Quixote's* generally accepted status as the pinnacle of the use of proverbs in literature is well-deserved. The aptness of this consideration is substantiated by the data provided in this study, which justifies the attention that Cervantes' work has received, and continues to receive, from paremiologists. Until another literary work is found which includes a more abundant use of proverbs, *Don Quixote* remains the paremiological touchstone for literary compositions. As shall be seen, and as was to be expected, when compared to Cervantes' best-known work, even pieces that show a remarkable proverbial awareness pale by comparison, rarely exceeding a density of paremiological uses higher than 0.4 proverbs per thousand words, far from the rate of proverbial uses found in Cervantes' novel.
Keywords: Paremiology. Proverb. Literature. Narratology. *Don Quixote*.

Título: «Cuantificando la paremiología en la literatura: la proporción áurea quijotesca».
Resumen: El presente trabajo propone un sistema que permita la comparación en términos inequívocos de diferentes obras literarias en relación con la cantidad de refranes que se incluyen en ellas. Tomando como punto de partida varios análisis cuantitativos sobre el uso de refranes por parte de diversos autores de diferentes periodos, la fórmula propuesta les ha sido aplicada, llegando a la conclusión de que el estatus, ampliamente aceptado, de *Don Quijote* como el culmen de la literatura proverbial es merecido. Lo acertado de esta consideración queda confirmado con los datos que se proporcionan en este estudio, los cuales justifican la atención que la obra de Cervantes ha recibido, y continúa recibiendo, por parte de la comunidad paremiológica. Hasta que aparezca otra obra literaria que presente una mayor abundancia en el uso de los refranes, Don Quijote se mantendrá como la piedra de toque paremiológica para composiciones literarias. Como se verá, y como era predecible, en comparación con la obra más conocida de Cervantes, incluso composiciones que muestran una notable conciencia paremiológica palidecen, raramente superando una densidad de usos paremiológicos superior a los 0,4 refranes por cada mil palabras, lejos del número apreciado en la novela de Cervantes.
Palabras clave: Paremiología. Refrán. Literatura. Narratología. *Don Quijote.*

Titre : « Quantifier la parémiologie dans la littérature: Le nombre d'or de *Don Quichotte* ».
Résumé : Le présent article propose un système permettant une collation sans équivoque de différentes œuvres littéraires en relation avec le nombre de proverbes qu'elles contiennent. En partant de plusieurs analyses quantitatives préexistantes de l'utilisation des proverbes par différents auteurs de différentes périodes, la formule proposée est appliquée à ces analyses, aboutissant à la conclusion que le statut généralement accepté de *Don Quichotte* comme l'apogée de l'utilisation des proverbes dans la littérature est mérité. La pertinence de cette considération est étayée par les données fournies dans cette étude, ce qui justifie l'attention que l'œuvre de Cervantes a reçue, et continue de recevoir, de la part des parémiologistes. Jusqu'à ce qu'une autre œuvre littéraire soit trouvée comprenant une utilisation plus abondante de proverbes, Don Quichotte reste la pierre de touche parémiologique pour les compositions littéraires. Comme on le verra, et comme on pouvait s'y attendre, par rapport à l'œuvre la plus connue de

Cervantes, même les pièces qui montrent une conscience proverbiale remarquable pâlissent en comparaison, dépassant rarement une densité d'utilisation parémiologique supérieure à 0,4 proverbes par millier de mots, loin du taux d'utilisation proverbial trouvé dans le roman de Cervantes.
Mots-clé : Parémiologie. Proverbe. Littérature. Narratologie. *Don Quixotte*.

INTRODUCCIÓN

Literature often provides some of the most incontestable proof of the existence of proverbs in a language. As a matter of fact, in the paremiographical tradition of the English language, literature, as well as journalistic pieces, is often presented as evidence of the existence of a certain paremia in the language. This can be observed in most reference works for proverbs in English and, as an example of this, J. Speake, in her *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (2008), provides confirmation of the use of the proverb "after a storm comes a calm" (Speake, 2008: 3) going as far back as the year 1250 with a use of the proverb in *Acrene Riwle*, a monastic rule for anchoresses, but also a little over a century later in W. Langland's *Piers Plowman*, published in 1377. This practice is invaluable for scholars trying to establish the etymology of a certain proverb in English, as well as providing examples of its use throughout history. Yet very few works provide a clear quantitative assessment of the use of proverbs in literary compositions.

Despite this scarcity of quantitative accounts, the use of proverbs in literature has been analyzed in depth, both for its stylistic and narrative purposes, as in the cases of the works by Abrahams and Babcock (1977), or more recently, C. C. Doyle (2014). For the present study, the analyses on the use of proverbs by various authors of fiction in English and Spanish such as C. Dickens, A. Pérez-Reverte, C. J. Cela, A. C. Doyle, and J. L. Barnes, conducted by Boquera Matarredona (1994), Jaime Lorén (2016), Oddo Bonet (2002), or Tosina Fernández (2023b) respectively, will be used to test the suitability of the method proposed here to compare different literary works in terms of the frequency of use of proverbs in them as examples of paremiological analyses of literature that bluntly provide the number of proverbs found in the works analyzed.

Paremiological analyses of the use of proverbs in literature with different purposes abound and, as is the case with many other aspects of Paremiology, the works of W. Mieder in this regard deserve a special mention, particularly those published in collaboration with his late colleague G. B. Bryan. These publications analyze the use of proverbs by such relevant authors to world literature as G. B. Shaw (Bryan and Mieder, 1994) or C. Dickens (Bryan and Mieder, 1997), apart from the composition of an index of proverbs in world literature (Mieder and Bryan, 1996). All these works provide insight into how various authors resort to proverbs as narrative devices. Yet, a question remains unanswered: how do different literary works compare quantitatively with each other regarding their use of proverbs? It is in relation to this question that the present work was devised as an attempt to provide a system that allows for a scientifically sound juxtaposition of literary works for their use of proverbs. This is believed to be of special interest for their application to works of fiction rather than poetic compositions, in which the inclusion of proverbs may be conditioned by the rhetorical devices that often manifest in proverbs (Villers, 2022).

1. RESEARCH PROBLEM

As stated above, the use of proverbs in literature is a well-documented practice. Yet, no system has been proposed that allows for a well-grounded, rigorous, quantitative comparison of the use of proverbs across different literary works. It must be borne in mind, though, that we will focus exclusively on fiction, the reason for which is the fact that it provides more readily approachable corpora than other genres. In this regard, it seems a more suitable genre for our

analysis inasmuch as it lacks some of the peculiarities of other genres, which may lead to inconsistencies. An example of this is the inclusion of stage directions in drama, which may contain proverbs, but which are not verbalized as they are omitted in representations, therefore posing questions about the appropriateness for an analysis like the one conducted here. Additionally, the very nature of drama, which is devised to be performed in front of an audience, emulating real-life communicative exchanges, is believed to be more prone to the inclusion of proverbs due to that very intention of representing everyday interactions, where proverbs are more naturally used among speakers. Conversely, the more limited extension of poetry makes it a rather irrelevant genre for the comparison of specific poems with regards to their frequency in the use of proverbs. Furthermore, the fact that proverbs often include poetic devices, such as rhyme, alliteration, metaphor, or metonymy, among others (Villers, 2022), may lead to a specific poetic use that does not take place in fiction. Examples of this are lyrical compositions articulated around a series of proverbs, as in those by A. Guiterman or C. Sandburg analyzed by C. C. Doyle (2014: 264-65). Certainly, while there are whole poems articulated around proverbs, there are also many other poetic compositions that do not include them. However, it seems unlikely that a novel of an average-length completely lacks proverbial utterances or allusions to proverbial knowledge, either by the narrator or any of the characters included. It is with the purpose of proposing a system that allows to establish a clear quantitative comparison among different narrative texts that this paper was formulated.

2. METHODOLOGY

When one thinks of proverbs in literature, *Don Quixote* (Cervantes Saavedra, 2004) will likely come to mind as the quintessential proverbial piece of literature and, arguably, the novel that has been analyzed most frequently from the scope of Paremiology. Considering this as the most paremiologically inclined composition in world literature, the question emerged of how other works compare to it. More specifically, the need to establish a comparison to determine the frequency of proverbs was noted after having found an unexpected abundance of proverbs in another prominent literary composition, J. Joyce's *Ulysses*[1]. Thus, having found well over a hundred proverbial uses and allusions in Joyce's seminal work, one may be led to consider whether *Ulysses* might in fact include a larger number of proverbs than *Don Quixote*. To determine this and establish a rigorous comparison between literary works from different periods and, most importantly, of different lengths, a system must be devised. To achieve this, the idea arose to measure the ratio of proverbs per thousand words, considering that this would provide a fairly accurate means for comparison of literary works from a paremiological perspective. It may be argued, though, that the comparison is between different units and that it is in fact like comparing apples and oranges, to use the popular stereotyped comparison, given that proverbs are multi-word units by definition. However, other approaches, specifically counting the sentences in a novel, proved ineffective as, contrary to words, no text-processing software allows for an automatic recounting of sentences and, in some cases, this textual division is either ineffective or not observed by the author, whether for stylistic, narrative, or other reasons. A good example of this is found in the very work that motivated this proposal as in the last episode in *Ulysses*, i.e., "Penelope," which recounts Molly Bloom's interior monologue, punctuation is completely omitted. Moreover, despite the text's arrangement in paragraphs, this hardly allows for its consideration as a unit of measure to compare this work to others under common terms. For this reason, and in order to facilitate the application of the

[1] A paremiological analysis of *Ulysses* is under way and the resulting study will be submitted for review prior to publication in the coming months.

methodology that is being proposed here, the following formula was used to determine the number of proverbs included in a given novel per every thousand words, considering a word to be every unit surrounded by spaces on both sides in a text. Thus, to calculate the terms of a comparison among literary works, the following formula is suggested: (NP/NW) x 1000.

Here, the NP is the number of proverbs found in the novel, which is divided by the number of words that make up said novel; the result of this calculation is then multiplied by 1000, resulting in the number of proverbs per thousand words. Applying this formula to the number of paremias found in both parts of *Don Quixote*, which according to Cantera Ortiz de Urbina, J. Sevilla Muñoz, and M. Sevilla Muñoz (2005) amounts to 388 in the 382,855 words that make up the standard edition of parts 1 and 2 of the novel, it results in a proverbial density of 1.01 proverbs per thousand words. We may round this down to 1 proverb per thousand words, therefore providing a nice, round number that marks what we may label as "the paremiological golden ratio" for literary works as, seemingly, no other literary work, particularly of that length, shows such a frequent use of proverbs. Regarding the number of words to apply the formula, it was established by running the text extracted from a digital edition through word-processing software, MS Word in this case. Furthermore, according to Cantera Ortiz de Urbina, Sevilla Muñoz J., and Sevilla Muñoz (2005: 25), 79.12% of the total number of proverbs found in *Don Quixote* appear in the second part of the novel, i.e., 307. Of these, 175 are uttered by Sancho (Cantera Ortiz de Urbina, J. Sevilla Muñoz, and M. Sevilla Muñoz, 2005: 26), the literary character that has received most attention from Paremiology. The reason for this might have to do with Cervantes' realization of the usefulness of proverbs as a narrative device and the popularity that the character must have gained by the time the author wrote the sequel. Finally, and contrary to what was mentioned above about drama and its use of elements such as stage directions, which are omitted in representations, the titles of the chapters in fiction are relevant to Paremiology as they have been found to include proverbs quite often thanks to their pithiness (see Konstantinova, 2014). For this reason, they have been considered as an essential element to establish the total number of proverbs in a novel.

3. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Despite the importance of literature as a medium for the dissemination of paremiological knowledge and its usefulness to prove the existence of a given proverb, the number of academic articles that present clear-cut quantitative analyses of proverbs in literary works is comparatively scarce. Here, some of them will be mentioned briefly to determine how they compare to Don Quixote in terms of their use of proverbs. To achieve this, the aforementioned formula will be applied to them under the consideration that the chosen examples are limited to works in their original language of publication as translations will result in a different number of words, therefore providing flawed results. Oftentimes, this is due to the difficulties that idiomatic uses of language, such as proverbs, pose to translators, who may find equivalents or may have to resort to circumlocutions to deal with a particularly elusive phraseologism. For this reason, six papers presenting a straightforward quantitative analysis of various literary works in English and Spanish have been scrutinized for the number of proverbs that they found in the respective novels. These are:

- C. Dickens' *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (Boquera Matarredona, 1994)
- A. C. Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Tosina Fernández, 2023a)
- C. J. Cela's *La Familia de Pascual Duarte* (Oddo Bonet, 2002)
- A. Pérez-Reverte's *Hombres Buenos* (Jaime Lorén, 2016)
- J. L. Barnes' *The Inheritance Games* (Tosina Fernández, 2023b)

Before assessing the proverbial density of these literary works, a few remarks must be made. First of all, scholars often confuse various phraseological and paremiological categories, often leading to an overrepresentation of allegedly proverbial references that may in fact be other types of phraseologisms. This is the case in Jaime Lorén's (2016) analysis of A. Pérez-Reverte's *Hombres Buenos*, in which, nevertheless, the author specifies that not only proverbs, but also idioms have been collected. This leads to the realization that proverbs are not as frequently used in the novel as it may seem. Some examples of phraseologisms mentioned by the author, which are different from proverbs in various aspects, but particularly with regard to the fact that they are not complete, independent sentences in themselves are:

1) *A palo seco* (Jaime Lorén, 2016: 209), meaning "on its own, without anything else" (Seco, Andrés and Ramos, 2009: 727, own translation).[2]
2) *Dimes y diretes* (Jaime Lorén, 2016: 210), meaning "hearsay or comments" (Seco, Andrés and Ramos, 2009: 396, own translation).[3]
3) *Loco como una cabra* (Jaime Lorén, 2016: 213), i.e., "crazy like a goat" (Seco, Andrés and Ramos, 2009: 221, own translation).[4]

As a result, Jaime Lorén includes in his glossary phraseologisms such as adverbial locutions, i.e., 1), nominal locutions, i.e., 2), or stereotyped comparisons, i.e., 3). Thus, out of the 192 phraseological units that the author claims to have found, once items that are not proverbs have been expurgated, 51 sentences remain that fulfill the requirements to be considered proverbs, even if the author does not provide any paremiographical evidence to support this. In any case, the proverbial density of the novel, after applying our formula, results in 0.33 proverbs per thousand words, far from the 1.25 p/1000w that would result from the consideration of all the items listed by Jaime Lorén and which, were they proverbs, would overshadow *Don Quixote* as the, presumably, most proverbial work in Spanish literature and, possibly, world literature.

The other articles reviewed are more straightforward regarding their analyses of the use of proverbs in literature. Of these, Boquera Matarredona's findings about Dickens' *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1994) are noteworthy for the underwhelming number of proverbs, ten in total, found in a work of literature that, otherwise, gave birth to a phraseological category of its own: wellerisms, named after the character of Sam Weller (Mac Coinigh, 2014: 120-21). Anyhow, Boquera Matarredona affirms that there are 10 proverbs in the novel, which she analyzed in relation to their translation into Spanish. Considering that the length of the standard, unabridged version of the novel is 300,363 words, its proverbial density results in one tenth of that found in Perez-Reverte's work, staying at 0.033 proverbs per thousand words.

The third and fourth examples are taken from Tosina Fernández's expansion on the quantitative study of the Sherlock Holmes canon published by the late G. B. Bryan (1996). According to this piece of research, the two, arguably, most popular novels in the Holmesian canon, *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, show a proverbial density of 0.36 and 0.17 proverbs per thousand words respectively, a number comparable to the first work commented and within what seems to be the usual ratio for works of fiction.

Another work that was analyzed from the scope of paremiology to determine the frequency of proverbs in it is *La Familia de Pascual Duarte*, by Spanish Nobel laureate, C. J. Cela.

[2] The original reads, *sin más, o sin otra cosa* (Seco, Andrés and Ramos, 2009: 727).

[3] The original reads, *habladurías o comentarios* (Seco, Andrés and Ramos, 2009: 396).

[4] "Crazy like a goat" is a word for word translation. An idiomatic equivalent in English would be "crazy like a fox" (Ayto, 2010: 78).

According to Oddo Bonet (2002), Cela included 15 proverbs in his novel, leading to a proverbial density of 0.43 proverbs per thousand words in the 34,649 words that comprise the narration, again, close to the results found in the rest of the works analyzed.

Lastly, we have J. L. Barnes' novel *The Inheritance Games*, the first installment in a young adult series published in 2020, which makes it the most recently published of the works analyzed. As C. C. Doyle (2014: 269) states, "literary works like novels […] are less likely [than poetry] to revolve about a single key proverb" and it is in relation to this that *The Inheritance Games* is a remarkable work from the scope of paremiology as it does not revolve around a single proverb, indeed, but around several. In the novel, proverbs play a significant role in the development of the plot from the beginning as they are clues to solve the mystery that articulates the narration and their importance is made clear from the introductory chapters, in which Avery, the protagonist, sits through a Literature lesson on the use of proverbs by Shakespeare. Despite the importance of proverbs to the plot, which, among other reasons, may be remarkable due to the general assumption that proverbs are falling in disuse and are more readily associated with older generations, this does not lead to the overabundance of paremias that was to be expected, as only 34 proverbial uses were found in the novel, some of them repetitions of the proverbs used in the deceased grandfather's will as clues to the mystery that will grant access to his fortune. Considering that those 34 proverbial uses are found in the 88,280 words that make up the novel, this results in a proverbial density of 0.38 proverbs per thousand words. Again, this proverbial ratio is within the usual figures resulting from the other titles analyzed, albeit unexpectedly low for a narration that, at least during its first half, gives proverbs a vital importance in the mystery that the protagonist must solve. Finally, although the sample of texts analyzed does not allow for the establishment of definitive conclusions and more novels would need to be subjected to the system proposed to reach a more accurate idea of the median number of proverbs present in narrative works, it is still remarkable that most of the works analyzed here fluctuate around the 0.3 proverbs per thousand words mark, which can be observed in the chart below:

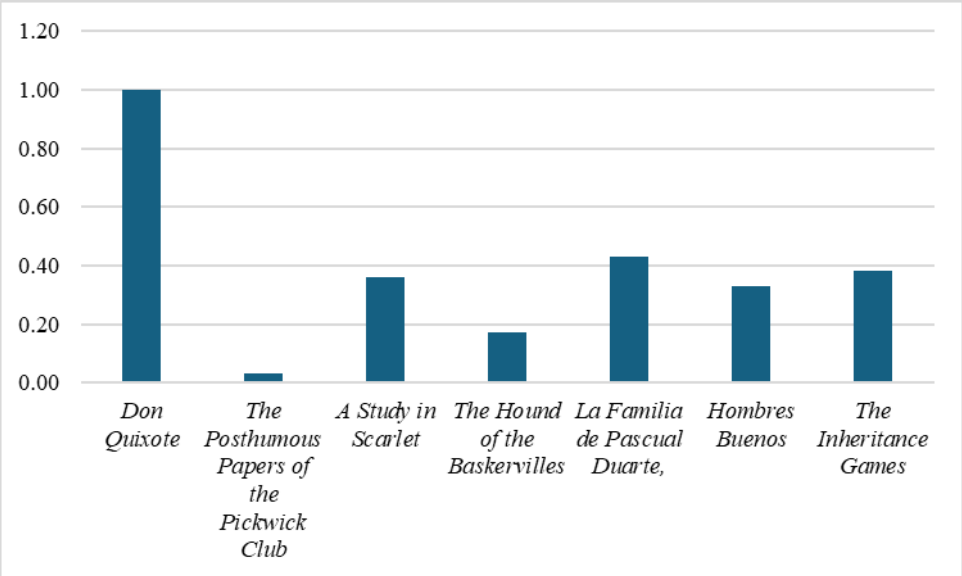


Fig. 1: Paremiological density of the works analyzed.

CONCLUSIONS

Although quantitative analyses have limited applications and do not generally offer much insight into the literary quality of an author, this paper has presented a scientific approach to the analysis of the use of proverbs in literature with the purpose of providing a system that allows for the comparison of narrative works of different lengths with regards to their frequency of use of proverbs. To achieve this, our proposal is to calculate the number of proverbs per thousand words by applying the following formula:

(NP/NW) x 1000

This system has allowed us to confirm *Don Quixote*'s status as the quintessentially paremiological literary work, with, yet, an unmatched number of proverbs in it and which surpasses that of other novels with a noteworthy quantity of proverbial utterances by the various characters and narrators present in them. A good example of this is the case of *Ulysses*, which despite its remarkable 0.7 proverbs per thousand words falls short when compared to Cervantes' magnum opus. It is worth mentioning, though, that it is in fact the second part to *Don Quixote* where a more profuse use of proverbs is found, as in the first part, only 81 of the total 388 proverbs are included (Cantera Ortiz de Urbina, J. Sevilla Muñoz, and M. Sevilla Muñoz, 2005: 25). This leads us to believe that the use of proverbs was therefore a deliberate decision by Cervantes to take advantage of their possibilities as a characterization device, particularly in the case of Sancho, who uses only 28 proverbs in the first part but an astounding 175 in the second part (Cantera Ortiz de Urbina, J. Sevilla Muñoz and M. Sevilla Muñoz, 2005: 26). This exemplifies Abraham and Babcock's claim that "proverbs are frequently used —and deliberately misused— as a means of demonstrating literary competence and control on the part of the author" (1977: 417).

Clearly, the sample of literature analyzed does not allow us to draw many categorical conclusions and its expansion allows for future revisions of this paper. However, there does not seem to be an abundance of quantitative analyses of the use of proverbs in literature and, quite often, those that exist include other types of phraseologisms as well, preventing their straightforward comparison with other works in the terms that have been presented here. It is possible, though, that there are other such publications about literature in other languages that have gone unnoticed, and it is also possible that the literary works on which they are based show a higher number of proverbial uses than those that have been presented here. Should that be the case, the framework has been set for the comparison of those works to the piece that is widely regarded as the gold standard of paremiological literature: Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.

From the titles that have been analyzed in the present study, we can draw the conclusion that even works that acknowledge their paremiological awareness from the very beginning, as is the case of *The Inheritance Games*, their proverbial density tends to be between 0.3 and 0.4 proverbs per thousand words, far from the 1 proverb per thousand words found in both parts of *Don Quixote*. Moreover, such a carefully crafted novel with a remarkable number of paremias, as well as many other elements of popular culture and folklore, in it as J. Joyce's *Ulysses* comes up short when compared to *Don Quixote*. Various reasons might be adduced to explain this, among these are the fact that proverbs were not used at the same rates throughout different historic or literary periods, such as in the Renaissance, a period during which collections of proverbs proliferated; additionally, the use of proverbs varies across the literatures of different languages and from the sample analyzed, with the obvious exception of *Don Quixote*, proverbs seem to be used at similar rates in the literatures of both the English and Spanish languages.

Conversely, a novel that is often positioned in a place of privilege in phraseological works for its contribution to the development of a peculiar type of phraseologism, i.e., Dicken's *The Pickwick Papers* and 'wellerisms', shows a negligible number of proverbs, with a total of 0.03 proverbs per thousand words, far from the figures found in other works that, a priori, have received comparatively little paremiological attention as are the cases of C. J. Cela's *La Familia de Pascual Duarte,* A. Pérez-Reverte's *Hombres Buenos*, or the detecting classics by A. C. Doyle *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, all of which have been analyzed from the scope of paremiology not necessarily for their seemingly frequent use of proverbs but for their cultural relevance.

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