

Conceptual Metaphors as Motivation for Proverbs Lexical Polysemy

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Abstract: This paper deals with the lexical polysemy of proverbs from the standpoint of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The thesis that proverbs take on many meanings is widely discussed and commonly accepted in the literature on proverb understanding and use at large (Milner, 1969; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1973; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Honeck, 1997; Gibbs & Beitel 1995, etc.). Yet much attention has been paid only to the proverb discursive polysemy. On the premise that proverbs have stable meanings, there is every reason to believe that some proverbs are lexically polysemous because of their metaphorical structurings. That is, the lexical polysemy of proverbs is motivated by some given conceptual metaphors the interplay of which gives rise to a range of lexical meanings, which may serve, in turn, as bases for inferring eventual contextual meanings.

Keywords: Proverbs, Conceptual Metaphors, Lexical Polysemy

1. Introduction

Despite the massive literature on proverbs, many issues still need in-depth investigation. It is of great interest to account for what naturally qualifies as common and even automatic in proverbs understanding and use. One important topic worth studying amounts to demonstrating what, for instance, motivates our understanding and use - either in isolation or in discourse contexts - of the same given proverb in different meanings. The question that arises then is whether these meanings are lexical or contextual or both.

Nothing is really interesting in stating that a proverb acquires a range of meanings, depending on the contexts of use. More crucial is rather the need to know whether a proverb might or not be lexically polysemous. Though many researchers acknowledge that some proverbs may have, either intra-linguistically or cross-linguistically, more than one meaning, the lexical polysemy in the field of proverbs is not deeply tackled. Nor is the difference between proverbs lexical and contextual meanings well delineated. Focusing attention exclusively on the discursive dimension of proverbs does not help distinguish them from non proverbial statements.

Linguists and paramiologists are still at pains to define proverbs - Gibbs & Beitel [1] point out that “Empirical

attempts to define proverbs have revealed as many as 55 different definitions” (p.134). Yet, they all seem to be agreed that proverbs have many common characteristics ([2]; [3]; [4]). These characteristics provide a strong basis upon which proverbs can be identified as such, that is, as being distinct from non proverbial statements. One important common characteristic proverbs share resides in their relatively fixed form [1]: “Proverbs have relatively fixed form, similar to idioms, clichés, and other speech formulas” (p. 134). This fact has a crucial implication relative the nature of proverbs meanings. In fact, conceiving of proverbs as having relatively fixed form supports the assumption that they are conventionally associated with relatively stable meanings. Such an assumption is best corroborated by what is known in the literature as *idiomatic proverbs* [5]. On the premise that such sub-category exists, one has to admit that, at least meanings of idiomatic proverbs are conventionalized, and somehow stored in memory¹. The neural modeling of language provides another strong piece of evidence in favor

¹ M. White [6] holds in this respect that “In searching for candidate sayings, we discovered that it is quite difficult simply to retrieve proverbs from memory at will. They resist introspective recall. However, given the right set of circumstances, the appropriate proverb seems almost to leap to mind” (p. 157).

of such an assumption [7]; [8]; [9]. It is commonly assumed in neurolinguistics that ideas, concepts, schemas, and the like are “fixed brain circuits, with synapses strong enough to make them permanent” [10] (p. 10). Applied to proverbs, this fact would mean that there is a neurally permanent connection between proverbs fixed forms and the meanings they express. In short, the hypothesis that proverbs are lexically polysemous rests on the fact that they have stable or conventionalized meanings.

The main aim of this paper is to achieve a double purpose; firstly, to show that any proverb does have a relatively stable meaning, which will be referred to here under the label *lexical meaning*; and secondly to argue for the lexical polysemy of proverbs, placing thereby a particular emphasis on the paradigm of proverbs that express inherently opposite meanings. Special attention will be devoted to pointing out how underlying conceptual metaphors motivate both the lexical and the contextual meanings of proverbs.

This topic will be dealt with here from the perspective of both *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* [11] and *Great Chain Metaphor Theory* [12]. An outline of the latter will be given while discussing Lakoff & Turner’s view.

2. Some General Views on Proverbs

It is better, as a prelude to the main topic, to start by examining some of the most representative theoretical views made chiefly in the linguistic literature on proverbs. The purpose is to highlight the fact that such views, despite being mostly context-based, do postulate for proverbs some stable and somewhat schematic meanings that look like what is called here *lexical meanings*.

2.1. Milner’s View

Albeit being generally overlooked, the lexical polysemy assumption is central to many studies on proverbs at large. And, surprisingly, when dealing with proverbs expressing opposite meanings, most researchers quote the following:

1) A rolling stone gathers no moss

Most analyses of this proverb start by underlining its contradictory meanings. To begin with, Milner [13] came to note that proverb (1) expresses opposite meanings in line with the opposite values the concepts ROLLING and MOSS have acquired. In the light of an experiment reported by a paper published in *The Times* on 27 October, 1966, Milner stated that the Scottish and the British interpret differently the above concepts: for the Scottish, ROLLING is positive whereas MOSS is negative. Conversely, for the British, ROLLING is negative while MOSS is positive. These different ways of conceiving of the same concepts result then in making the proverb lexically polysemous:

- For the Scottish: moving all the time is efficient.
- For the British: moving all the time is inefficient.

Obviously, such meanings are not context-dependent, because the participants did not interpret the proverb online in real situations of communication.

2.2. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s View

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [14] conducted the same experiment. She proposed the same proverb to a class of 80 students and asked them about the senses they made of it. The students made three readings: “(1) a rolling stone gathering no moss is like a machine that keeps running and never gets rusty and broken; (2) a rolling stone is like a person who keeps on moving, never settles down, and therefore never gets anywhere; (3) a rolling stone is like a person who keeps moving and is therefore free, not burdened with a family and material possessions and not likely to fall into a rut”. She concluded that the source of the proverb multiple meanings is a matter of four factors: “(1) what is understood by the image presented in the metaphor (stone roller, stone brook); (2) what is understood as the general principle expressed by the metaphor (movement promotes efficiency, stability promotes tangible gains); (3) how the general principle is evaluated (tangible gains are worthwhile, tangible gains are not worthwhile); (4) the requirements of the situation in which the proverb is used regardless of what one actually believes in principle (does one want to console or criticize the stable person, does one want the console or criticize the wander” (p. 111). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett claimed that every proverb has a kind of “base meaning” which is negotiated along with others factors, such as “convergences of social situation, participant evaluation, and interactional strategy” (p. 118). Thus, a proverb base meaning lends itself as its lexical meaning.

According to the author’s view, a proverb may have one or two, nay several (at least, theoretically), base meanings, depending on whether the concrete images motivating the understanding of the proverb are multiple or single. The base meaning of “a rolling stone gathers no moss” is in fact multiple, because it is structured by two concrete images. The latter bring about two opposite metaphors; one emerges from the image *stone roller* and the other from the image *stone brook*. Conversely, proverbs with single base meaning are those that are motivated by one metaphor. That seems to be the case (following the author) of the proverb “money talks”.

It is clear that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett does acknowledge, however implicitly, that some proverbs might be lexically polysemous. Nevertheless, for her, as Honeck [15] points out “proverb meaning should not be the focus but, rather, the proverb performances, which she defined in terms of participants’ evaluations of the situation, their understanding of the proverb base meaning, and the proverb users’ strategy” (p. 124).

This position might be found wanting mainly in two respects. First, the base meaning seems to be nothing but the proverb literal meaning. Such a stance gives rise to some paradox insofar as it entails that the relatively stable meanings of proverbs remain fundamentally etymological in character. For instance, if the concrete images presented in the metaphors *stone roller* and *stone brook* still count as crucial keys in the overall complex meanings of “a rolling stone gathers no moss”, there is little likelihood anyone

ignoring those images would fathom the proverb. This evidence is supported by the experiment itself. Logically, if the concrete images are indispensable elements in the proverb understanding, no reading would have been provided by the students, unless, surprisingly, some Scots and some British, who happened to be aware of the role of the concrete images, were among them. Further pervasive evidence is provided by a series of studies on people's mental imagery for proverbs. The experiments showed that participants asked to write down their mental images for the proverb "a rolling stone gathers no moss" seemed to have consistent mental images: they imagined *rolling stone* as a smooth and round stone that rolls down a grassy hillside [16].

Second, the third factor, that is, "how the general principle is evaluated" raises a further problem. Given that participants' evaluations are context-dependent, the likelihood of variation in interpreting a given proverb is maximal. Participants' evaluations are made relative to a background of assumptions and values. Thus, they depend to some extent on whether the base meanings are positively or negatively valued. For instance, given a proverb that expresses opposite meanings, participants are not free to use it in any sense. Let us suppose, for example, that proverb X has Z and Y as its opposite meanings. Let us suppose furthermore that meaning Z is positive for participant A and negative for participant B, and conversely, meaning Y is negative for A and positive for B. Then what are the chances for both participants to have a felicitous verbal exchange? In other words, given the different ways the Scottish and the British conceive of ROLLING STONE and MOSS, how could they use and understand the proverb in spontaneous communication situations?

This question is intended to emphasize the fact that participants' evaluations depend to a large extent on the values conventionally coded in the proverb base meanings. This means that the participants interpret the proverb through a cognitive process in terms of which they are led to readjust the original values to the requirements of the communication situation. In other words, participants' contextual evaluations consist either in elaborating one of the coded values or in readjusting both values to the overall illocutionary force of the proverb in the given communication situation. For instance, from an intracultural perspective which stresses sub-cultural differences, the evaluations the Scottish and the British would make of the proverb are responsive to the values the proverb encodes. That is, the proverb would convey always a reproach whenever the receiver is supposed to think differently of the images evoked by *roller stone* and *moss*. By contrast, from an intercultural perspective which overrides the sub-cultural differences between the Scottish and the British, the proverb understanding and use draw essentially on the necessity of readjusting its coded values to only one value, the value which is likely to obtain with respect to the involved communication situation. In this case, the proverb would convey either a reproach or an exhortation.

2.3. Honeck's View

Generally, most recent theories on proverbs focus on the importance of what Sperber & Wilson [17] call "cognitive environment", that is, the whole information and knowledge relative to participants. Such theories share the assumption that proverb comprehension is fundamentally context-dependent. This claim is best represented by Honeck's theory [15], known as the *Extended Conceptual Base Theory*. According to this theory, proverb comprehension draws maximally on the shared background conditions underlying the participants' cognitive environment. The most shared view in this respect is that communication could not be possible or, at least could be made difficult if language users do not share background information. Proverb understanding within this framework involves the use of an overall understanding process consisting of four phases, that is, (1) the development of a literal meaning model; (2) the literal transformation phase; (3) the figurative meaning phase; and (4) the instantiation phase.

For Honeck, the overall proverb understanding process obtains both in irrelevant and relevant contexts. The author started his demonstration by imagining a situation where "a stranger walks up to us on the street and says, *Not every oyster contains a pearl*" (p. 128). Honeck assumed that in irrelevant contexts the receiver has to construct the proverb figurative meaning. The receiver first interprets literally the proverb, that is, he builds its literal meaning model. Second, since the literal assertion lacks any immediate referent with the situation, and given that communicators always intend something which is relevant to communication situation [17], the receiver moves, on the basis of the linguistic form of the proverb and on what the author calls "appraisal factors", to a deeper understanding of the proverb. The receiver's reasoning ends up rejecting the literal interpretation and adopting instead a newer and more preferred meaning. Third, (s)he gets this meaning on the basis of his encyclopedic knowledge about oysters, pearls and their causal relationship, especially about the fact that oysters habitually make pearls, but not all the time. This general knowledge helps draw a new meaning that turns out to be the proverb figurative meaning. Finally, once the figurative meaning is gotten, the proverb can apply to many particular situations. The author proposed a further name for this final phase, "the revised meaning phase", so as to put a special emphasis on the dynamic aspect of proverbs figurative meanings.

The understanding process prevails also in relevant situations, except that it is concerned with a further issue, the issue of how to match up the proverb figurative meaning and the situation topic. For Honeck, the issue qualifies as a "connection problem", because what proves important in uttering a proverb is not "what might motivate the receiver to move from the literal level, but how to connect the utterance with the topic" (p. 131). Noticeably, in relevant situations, the starting point of proverb understanding and use does not coincide with the literal meaning model, but rather with the final phase, that is, the instantiation phase. At this level, of

course, the receiver is intended to have background knowledge of the proverb figurative meaning. Accordingly, his/her major goal in the appropriate context is not to construct the figurative meaning, as (s)he would do in an irrelevant context, but instead, to reconfigure it so as to connect the proverb overall information to the situation topic. In this way, proverb figurative meaning is highly abstract, and serves as a grid that may be filled in by many particular cases. Most crucial of all is the nature of the proverb figurative meaning: Honeck delineated it cognitively as a “conceptual base”. As such, it is neither linguistic nor imagistic; rather, “it is proposition-like” (p. 132).

Nevertheless, a closer look at Honeck’s claim shows that the proverb understanding process plays different roles with respect to irrelevant and relevant contexts. Indeed, since an irrelevant context is topicless, it is assumed that the receiver’s first task is to construct the proverb figurative meaning. In this case, the whole process phases are equally salient and crucial: no phase could be overridden or bypassed. As a corollary, the proverb understanding process lends itself somehow as an identifying process insofar as it helps recognize a literal assertion as a special statement, that is, as a proverb. By contrast, in a relevant context, there is always a motive behind the use of a proverb. The receiver’s main purpose is thus to connect the already well-identified proverb to the topic or the referent of the situation, generating thereby new context-dependent meanings rather than constructing context-independent ones. Clearly, in this case, the process phases are not salient to the same extent in proverb understanding.

On the other hand, a problem arises with respect to the irrelevant context imagined by Honeck himself: it is not clear whether it is the irrelevant context or the receiver’s ignorance of the involved proverb that prompts the understanding process. There is every reason to hold that if the receiver does not know the proverb, there is little chance that (s)he would be able to construct its figurative meaning, because (s)he shares no background information with the user. Here the irrelevance is total, and there would be no need for the receiver to engage in an effortful understanding process. By contrast, if the proverb is part of the receiver’s knowledge, then the understanding process would not be devoted to constructing the figurative meaning, but rather to making it match the situation topic. Because the situation is topicless, however, to find out what might be the user’s intention the receiver has only one cognitive strategy, that is, to muse over particular instantiations of the proverb. Yet this cognitive operation is too effortful to be thoroughly undertaken in spontaneous situations of communication.

In summary, the overall conception the Extended *Conceptual Base Theory* makes of proverbs allows conceiving of the notion of “conceptual base” as what is labeled here *the lexical meaning* of proverbs. The conceptual base is considered abstract and general. As such, it appears to be stable enough to be shared within given speech communities. Simply put, the conceptual base lends itself as the meaning that is conventionally associated with the

proverb. Moreover, if any proverb is understood in irrelevant contexts as being “about itself”, as Honeck holds himself, it is evidently because it does have a relatively fixed meaning. Such a meaning, in addition, is what provides the basis for deriving newer meanings in accordance with the users’ intentions and the contexts topics.

2.4. Lakoff & Turner’s View

Lakoff & Turners’ important assumption is the conceptual complex they term *Great Chain metaphor* [12]. This mechanism is made up of the combination of four ingredients: “the commonsense theory of the Nature of Things + the Great Chain + GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor + Maxim of Quantity” (p. 112).

- *The Great Chain of being* is an unconscious cultural model about the way we conceive of objects on the basis of our interactions with the world. It mainly accounts for the hierarchical organization of forms of being. The latter are thought to occupy determined places on a scale varying from higher-levels down to lower-levels. Lakoff & Turner claim that, “we think of humans as higher-order beings than animals, animals as higher than plants, and plants as higher than inanimate substances” (p. 167). The most typical properties of forms at given order-levels on the Great Chain are the highest ones. For instance, properties such as the mental, the moral, the aesthetic, etc., are the most typical attributes of human beings. Instincts, on the other hand, are the highest attributes of animals.

- *The Nature of Things* designates our commonsense theory of properties of things. It particularly links properties of forms at given order-levels with corresponding functions or behavior. For Lakoff & Turner, we have “a largely unconscious, automatic commonplace theory about the nature of things, that is, the relationship between what things are like and how they behave” (p. 170). In short, what Lakoff & Turner call the *Nature of Things* is thus the causal connection we establish on experiential grounds between attributes and consequent behaviors of forms. The combination of the *Nature of Things* with the *Great Chain* ends up constituting a *Folk Theory*. Thanks to the knowledge the latter provides, we easily distinguish between the different order-levels on the Great Chain. We know for instance, as noted by the authors, that human higher attributes lead to higher behavior, animal instinctual attributes to instinctual behavior, biological attributes of plants to biological behavior, structural attributes of complex objects to functional behavior and natural physical attributes of natural physical things to natural physical behavior.

- *The Generic is Specific metaphor* fulfills a crucial role in accounting for what makes a proverb stand for the whole category. For instance, as Lakoff & Turner assume, we understand proverb (2) as “being not just about blind people but about a broader class of people, people who have some incapacity” (p. 162):

2) *Blind blames the ditch*

Such an understanding is due to the metaphorical mapping *Generic is Specific metaphor* achieves. On the literal level,

the proverb forms a complex expression compounded of some words. As such, the proverb evokes specific-level schemas which are rich in details and information. Applied to the proverb, the *Generic is Specific metaphor* extracts generic-level schemas from specific-level schemas, that is, generic-level meaning from specific-level meaning.

- *The Maxim of Quantity* places strong constraints on the broad knowledge the specific-schemas evoke. Indeed, using a proverb entails respecting the *Maxim of Quantity* insofar as properties likely to be picked out by the *Generic is Specific metaphor* are not the superfluous but the relevant ones, in this case, the highest ranking properties.

Let us report below, however laconically, the authors' own demonstration so as to illustrate how the Great Chain metaphor operates as a whole in proverbs understanding process. Consider the following proverb:

3) *Big thunder, little rain*

Our knowledge that proverbs pertain to human concerns is a central factor in proverb understanding. For instance, proverb (3) concerns humans, thought it is about storms. Such knowledge is due to the whole work of the Great Chain metaphor. First, the Great Chain links a source and a target domain, that is, storms and humans. Second, the Folk Theory picks out properties and corresponding behaviors of both domains. Third, the Maxim of Quantity selects the highest attributes of both storms and humans. Finally, the Generic is Specific metaphor extracts a generic structure from the specific structure evoked by storms, and then maps it onto the order-level of humans. In short, the Great Chain metaphor operates in the following way:

Thunderstorm is associated with an encyclopedic knowledge relating to its sub-parts (i.e. the thunder and the rainstorm). However, proverb (3) cannot just be understood in any way thanks to the Great Chain metaphor the role of which is to pick out over the broad knowledge about thunderstorms only relevant information, in this case, the causal relationship between the thunder and the rain. This relevant information, according to the authors, is the following (p. 176):

- “- A thunderstorm contains (at least) two kinds of causally related natural events within it: the thunder and the rainstorm.
- The thunder precedes and accompanies the rain.
- Before any occurrence of rain, at least one occurrence of thunder communicates to us that the rain will occur.
- Typically, the magnitude of thunder indicates the magnitude of rainstorm”.

For a full literal understanding of the proverb, the authors added the following information to the thunderstorm schema:

- “- In this case, the force of the rain is much less than what we would expect given the force of the thunder”.

Operating on this specific-level information, the Generic is Specific metaphor extracts the following generic-level information:

- “- There is a (natural physical occurrence) that contains at least two causally related kinds of (natural events) within it.
- The first precedes and accompanies the second.
- Before any (natural event) of the second kind, at least one

(natural event) of the first kind communicates to us that the second kind will occur.

- The second has the power to affect us.
- Typically, the magnitude of the first indicates the magnitude of the second.
- In this case, the force of the second is much less than what we would expect given the force of the first”.

The metaphorical mapping of thunderstorms onto human beings requires the application of both the Great Chain and the Generic is Specific metaphor: the Great Chain connects natural occurrences with human behaviors, and the Generic is Specific metaphor maps the generic-level information about natural occurrences onto the corresponding generic-level information about human behaviors. The result is the following generic-level structure:

- “- There is a (human behavioral sequence) that contains at least two causally related kinds of (human actions) within it.
- The first precedes and accompanies the second.
- Before any (human action) of the second kind, at least one (human action) of the first kind communicates to us that the second kind will occur.
- The second has the power to affect us.
- Typically the magnitude of the first indicates the magnitude of the second.
- In this case, the force of the second is much less than what we would expect given the force of the first”.

The issue relative to the Great Chain Metaphor Theory amounts to knowing whether the latter considers proverbs as having some stable meaning or not. In fact, the authors say nothing about the lexical meaning of proverbs. Yet this premise is taken for granted, and comes, furthermore, to play a central role in the proverb understanding process. This conclusion is substantiated by the cultural view the theory embraces. The cultural view rests on the basic postulate that proverbs are cultural products, particularly created and used for social purposes. Such a view sees proverbs meanings as stable enough to be understood in social interactions.

The Great Chain metaphor Theory implies that proverb understanding obtains both in irrelevant and relevant situations. In irrelevant situations, proverb understanding is function of its culturally shared meaning. That is, even in topicless contexts we can understand a given proverb, because the generic-level schema it evokes enables us to “muse over a range of particular situations to which it applies” (p. 165). In irrelevant situations, contrary to the *Extended Conceptual Base Theory*, we need not construct or compute a given proverb meaning, because the latter is somehow stored in the community cultural lexicon. We only know or do not know it. When we know it, on the other hand, we need to reframe it in such a way as to suit the topic of the involved situation.

In conclusion, despite being mostly context-based, the above theories seem to agree on the claim that proverbs have relatively stable meanings. Relatively stable meanings are, in fact, what helps us understand given proverbs in isolation. The terms “Base meaning” [14], “Conceptual base” [15] and “Generic-level information” [12] look like the lexical

meaning of proverbs. On the basis of such a premise the issue of proverbs lexical polysemy can be now raised. In short, since proverbs do have stable meanings, could some of them acquire many lexical meanings? That is, could they be lexically polysemous? The remainder of the paper is devoted to addressing this issue by focusing particularly on the crucial role conceptual metaphors play in proverbs multiple meanings at large.

3. How Given Proverbs Could Be Lexically Polysemous

The theories discussed above - and many others not taken into account here - place a special emphasis on proverbs semantic plurality. Proverbs are assumed to take on many meanings, depending on contexts of use; hence their polysemy. But it must be noted that the polysemy at issue is context-dependent. Accordingly, little attention, if none, has been devoted to arguing for the lexical polysemy of proverbs. A general working hypothesis is needed to account for such a phenomenon. It mainly relies on the following fundamental assumption:

- The lexical polysemy of proverbs is function of the existence of a set of conceptual metaphors. The interplay between these metaphors results in a complex inferential structure that gives rise to a range of lexical meanings. This inferential structure serves also as a basis for deriving more specific interpretations.

This assumption is built out of the following sub-assumptions:

- Proverbs relatively fixed form is associated with conventionalized meanings.
- Proverbs conventionalized meanings stem from the causal combination of the concepts evoked by the used words. These concepts build up the proverbs complex concepts.
- Proverbs complex concepts are picked out by the Great Chain metaphor. They are what Lakoff & Turner [12] call "generic-level structure".
- Most importantly, some complex concepts are ambiguous whereas others are not.

An unambiguous complex concept is associated with only one conventionalized meaning, that is, one lexical meaning. As a result, the proverb is lexically monosemous. By contrast, an ambiguous complex concept consists of, at least, two conventionalized meanings. The proverb is thus lexically polysemous. But since most proverbs complex concepts are motivated by a given set of conceptual metaphors, why is it the case that not all proverbs are lexically polysemous? There is every likelihood that schematicity / specificity dimension plays a pervasive role in distinguishing between ambiguous and unambiguous complex concepts. Just as simple concepts vary along the parameter of schematicity / specificity [18], so some proverbs complex concepts may be more schematic than others. Most importantly, complex concepts that are ambiguous are highly schematic, and likely to be instantiated

by a number of more specific complex concepts².

Schematicity of complex concepts is a prerequisite for proverbs polysemy, but it does not work alone. There is still need to evaluate the complex concepts along positive / negative dimension. This claim relies on the cultural view according to which proverbs are cultural products, and are therefore culturally assessed relative to a background schema of positive and negative assumptions and values. Simply put, some proverbs are conventionally used and understood on negative grounds whereas some others on positive grounds. But more striking is the case of proverbs that are understood on both grounds, that is, negatively and positively. Such proverbs provide in fact the most obvious case of the lexical polysemy.

The remainder of this paper is devoted to demonstrating how conceptual metaphors combine, along positive and negative dimensions, and provide thereby a basis for deriving multiple meanings, which can be either completely opposite (section 3.1) or just distinct (section 3.4).

3.1. First Application: The Paradigm of Proverbs with Opposite Meanings

Let us consider at the outset the proverb (1), repeated below as (4):

4) *A rolling stone gathers no moss*

In general, the following two opposite lexical meanings are normally given as common readings of the proverb:

5) *Moving all the time is fruitful*

6) *Moving all the time is fruitless*³

It is noteworthy that numerous studies refuse to boil down proverbs metaphorical meanings to mere literal paraphrases, such as those in (5) and (6). The main reason is that, as Gibbs & Beitel [1] put it clear, "people have much more specific interpretations of what proverbs mean than is stated by the literal paraphrases of these sayings [and that is] because proverbs are partly motivated by conceptual metaphors" (p. 139). Gibbs & Beitel's claim is worth discussing here because of the particular stress they put on the primacy of preexisting conceptual metaphors in proverbs understanding at large. By way of illustration, they considered proverb (4), and concluded, on the basis of an experiment test, that it has a complexity of meanings. Such complexity extends beyond

2 This issue is interesting and needs in-depth investigation, which goes beyond the scope of this paper. One important aspect will be to show why some proverbs are antonymous yet related, as synonymous, to a common proverb. For instance, proverbs (i) and (ii) are considered antonymous. Even though, many dictionaries of proverbs suggest them as synonymous with the proverb (iii):

(i)- Clothes do not make the man / There is many a good cock come out of a tattered bag.

(ii)- Clothes make the man / A good horse cannot be of a bad color.

(iii)- Appearances are deceiving.

3 In discussing the general principles underlying the different interpretations of the proverb "A rolling stone gathers no moss", Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [14] proposed as general metaphors (1) "movement promotes efficiency" and (2) "stability promotes tangible gains". In my view, as indicated in diagram (9) (see below), ROLLING STONE evokes mainly INSTABILITY, which is considered positive and negative. In this sense thus "stability as tangible gains" is conceived of as an elaboration of meaning (6).

any typical paraphrase such as “a restless person keeps few possessions”. They argued, in addition, that this complexity of meanings is due in principle to the fact that the proverb is underlain by two conceptual metaphors, namely LIFE IS A JOURNEY and PEOPLE ARE INANIMATE OBJECTS. These mappings are what give rise to the complex entailments people infer in different discourse contexts. And because of the multiple entailments metaphors allow, people may not, the authors hold, “infer the same entailments each and every time they come across a proverb, and there may be significant individual differences in exactly which entailments are recovered” (p. 139).

The claim that conceptual metaphors play a prominent role in people’s understanding of proverbs is very promising. But it still needs to be systematized. That is, it must be spelled out which metaphors are directly involved in proverbs understandings. For instance, it is true that LIFE IS A JOURNEY and PERSONS ARE INANIMATE OBJECTS metaphors are inherent parts of the meaning of “a rolling stone gathers no moss”. But it is also true that the complex meaning of the proverb does not come only from the inferential entailments these metaphors imply. Furthermore, since the proverb has opposite meanings, as is commonly held, then how is it possible for non contradictory metaphors (that is, LIFE IS A JOURNEY and PERSONS ARE INANIMATE OBJECTS) to motivate its contradictory meanings?

There is every reason that proverbs with multiple lexical meanings are motivated by different conceptual metaphors and those with contradictory meanings by different contradictory metaphors. Some of these metaphors may be more complex, in that they are built out of other complex metaphors [19], which are made up in turn of atomic parts referred to as primary metaphors [20] and as image-schemas [21]. The metaphors directly involved in the proverb meanings will be looked at in more detail below. Let us return for the moment to proverb (4). On the assumption that it is lexically polysemous, two important questions arise:

- Is it associated only with meanings (5) and (6)?
- Given its multiple meanings, what piece of evidence might substantiate its lexical polysemy?

In general, all is a matter of how we commonly conceive of the concepts preserved in the proverb generic-level structure, that is, in its complex concept. Therefore, proverb (4) is polysemous because the metaphorical mapping via the Great Chain metaphor delivers a generic-level structure which is obviously ambiguous. Such ambiguity stems from the opposite conceptualizations people make of ROLLING STONE and MOSS. But what is worth noticing here is that people’s opposite conceptualizations are not just arbitrary. Rather, they are motivated in that they are culturally grounded in their everyday experiences. This view leads us to suggest that such conceptualizations, and hence such ambiguity, are underlain by a set of conceptual metaphors. Let us see how that works.

First, the Great Chain metaphor maps ROLLING STONE onto PERSONS, namely, onto persons’ higher-level

attributes. In this case, ROLLING STONE is mapped onto INSTABILITY. Second, to the extent that proverbs typically pertain to human concerns, the Great Chain metaphor maps MOSS onto ABUNDANCE. It must come as no surprise that the choice of the concepts INSTABILITY and ABUNDANCE, among many others, as mappings of ROLLING STONE and MOSS respectively, is due to the fact that metaphorical mapping occurs at the superordinate level [22]. And given that they are superordinate-level concepts, there is every chance that they are likely to be instantiated by more specific-level concepts.

To begin with, both INSTABILITY and ABUNDANCE are evaluated, with respect to a background of assumptions and values, on positive and negative sides. On either side, INSTABILITY is respectively motivated by the following conceptual metaphors:

- INSTABILITY IS A GAIN.
- INSTABILITY IS A WASTE.

The first and second metaphors are prototypically instantiated by such concepts as TRAVEL and WANDERINGS respectively. These are elaborating concepts that reflect our opposite conceptualizations of INSTABILITY: on closer inspection indeed, we consider TRAVEL positive and WANDERINGS negative.

Also on either side, ABUNDANCE is structured in terms of two opposite metaphors, that is:

- ABUNDANCE IS WEALTH
- ABUNDANCE IS A BURDEN

Elaborating concepts such as RICHNESS and TROUBLE can be suggested as prototypical instantiations for these metaphors respectively. They are neither arbitrary nor ad hoc. They are instead largely unconscious and automatic in people’s thinking, and hence come to structure a myriad of linguistic expressions such as the followings:

7) ABUNDANCE IS WEALTH

- *Plenty is no plague;*
- *Plenty is never enough;*
- *Money talks;*
- *Etc.*

8) ABUNDANCE IS A BURDEN

- *Money does not buy happiness;*
- *Much coin, much care;*
- *Etc.*

As depicted in diagram (9), four lexical meanings are commonly associated with proverb (4). These meanings need not be context-dependent, inasmuch as they are inherent in the proverb lexical structure. They arise from the combination and cross-combination of the conceptual metaphors underlying INSTABILITY and ABUNDANCE. In other words, Proverb (4) carries out distinct conceptual blending⁴. Each one generates a distinct meaning, which fits

4 In interpreting a proverb we set up what Fauconnier and Turner [23] call a “conceptual blending”: a conceptual blending “operates largely behind the scenes. We are not consciously aware of its hidden complexities, any more than we are consciously aware of the complexities of perception involved in, for example, seeing a blue cup”. Given this conception, it is quite reasonable to consider each meaning in (9) as being yielded on the basis of a hidden merging of two

a wide range of particular situations.

9)

a. ROLLING STONE → INSTABILITY ⁽⁺⁾5 (*Travel*) + No MOSS → ABUNDANCE ⁽⁺⁾ (*Richness*) (= INSTABILITY IS A GAIN + ABUNDANCE IS WEALTH)

b. ROLLING STONE → INSTABILITY ⁽⁻⁾ (*Wander*) + No MOSS → ABUNDANCE ⁽⁻⁾ (*Trouble*) ⁶ (=INSTABILITY IS A WASTE + ABUNDANCE IS A BURDEN)

c. ROLLING STONE → INSTABILITY ⁽⁺⁾ (*Travel*) + No MOSS → ABUNDANCE ⁽⁻⁾ (*Trouble*) (=INSTABILITY IS A GAIN + ABUNDANCE IS A BURDEN)

d. ROLLING STONE → INSTABILITY ⁽⁻⁾ (*Wander*) + No MOSS → ABUNDANCE ⁽⁺⁾ (*Richness*) (=INSTABILITY IS A WASTE + ABUNDANCE IS WEALTH).

In (9a), the complex concept is structured in terms of the merging of INSTABILITY IS A GAIN and ABUNDANCE IS WEALTH metaphors. On the premise that these metaphors are elaborated positively by TRAVEL and RICHNESS respectively, their causal combination yields the following lexical meaning “Continuously travelling is poverty”. The latter is obviously negative, though TRAVEL and RICHNESS are considered positive. But this is due only to the negative word *No*. Such a meaning is what we grasp when we conceive of somebody who is travelling all the time as being subject to poverty. There is widespread agreement that this is the way sedentary people understand the proverb. For proponents of sedentary lifestyle, nomadic lifestyle does not help accumulate wealth.

In (9b), the complex concept is motivated by INSTABILITY IS A WASTE and ABUNDANCE IS A BURDEN metaphors. These metaphors are taken, furthermore, to be elaborated respectively by WANDERINGS and TROUBLE. Thus, their causal combination results in this lexical meaning “Wanderings are release”. This is another way we may understand the proverb lexically, that is, out of any context of use. To put it clear, along negative dimension, INSTABILITY is mapped onto WANDERER and ABUNDANCE onto TROUBLE. Given the negative form of the proverb, the meaning is positive. In this sense, the conceptual domain WANDERINGS is considered useful inasmuch as it provides amusement, freedom, enjoyment, etc. Such a meaning may apply, for instance, to the bohemian lifestyle, which is highly prized in poetry.

Equally, each meaning in (9c-d) stems from the cross-combination of two conceptual metaphors. In (9c), the

conceptual metaphor INSTABILITY IS A GAIN is cross-combined with the conceptual metaphor ABUNDANCE IS A BURDEN. On the assumption that positive INSTABILITY is elaborated by TRAVEL and negative ABUNDANCE by TROUBLE, the resulting lexical meaning is: “Continuously travelling is worthwhile”. This meaning is so widespread and commonly shared that it appears to be somehow prototypical: travelling is mostly conceived of as very helpful and of great benefit to travelers.

Conversely, what is emphasized in (9d) is a negative evaluation of the complex concept. Accordingly, the latter emerges from the cross-combination of INSTABILITY IS A WASTE with ABUNDANCE IS WEALTH metaphors. Assuming that negative INSTABILITY is instantiated by WANDERINGS and positive ABUNDANCE by RICHNESS, the resulting meaning is the following “Wanderings are disgraceful”.

It should come as no surprise that the concepts INSTABILITY and ABUNDANCE are structured each by two metaphors. In general, a single given conceptual metaphor for a single given concept provides only limited mapping; it accounts only for one aspect of the concept logic. But since our cultural experiences of concepts are complex and rich, and given that we use metaphors to reason about concepts, most of our common concepts are structured by multiple metaphors. Lakoff & Johnson [19] call this phenomenon “metaphorical pluralism”. Many studies have provided evidence in support of this claim, such as those conducted by Kovecses [24], [25], [26] and [27] on the multiple metaphorical structurings for LOVE. In short, the whole set of metaphors structuring a given concept reflect how people, within a given culture, think unconsciously of that experience as a whole.

Given the metaphorical pluralism for concepts, there must be nothing strange about claiming that proverb (4) is lexically polysemous. Indeed, if we assume that its complex concept is motivated by some conceptual metaphors, then there is really no reason why their combination and cross-combination would not result in different conceptual blends that bring about different lexical meanings.

Nevertheless, proverb (4) might still express in isolation only one meaning for some people, that is, either meaning (5) or meaning (6). Proponents of meaning (5) (*moving all the time is fruitful*), such as the Scottish, would understand and use the proverb positively with respect to INSTABILITY IS A GAIN metaphor. This metaphor, moreover, would be at the root of the interpretation Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s students made of the proverb, that is, “a rolling stone gathering no moss is like a machine that keeps running and never gets rusty” (see above subsection 2.2). On the other hand, advocates of meaning (6) (*moving all the time is fruitless*), like the British, would understand and use the proverb negatively on the basis of INSTABILITY IS A WASTE metaphor. The latter would also underpin the second reading made by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s students, namely, “a rolling stone is like a person who keeps on moving, never settles down, and therefore never gets anywhere”. In either case, the

conceptual metaphors. This cognitive operation ends up creating a new situation (a blend) which uses some elements of both metaphors and some others of its own.

5 The symbols (+) and (-) indicate the positive and negative dimensions of the involved concepts.

6 The interpretation of “moss” as meaning “trouble” is not suggested on an ad hoc basis; rather it is grounded in daily experiences in many cultures. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett pointed out, in Scotland “moss” is evaluated negatively as unwanted; hence the negative interpretation Scottish people give to the proverb. In the same way, in French, the term “moss” has acquired the negative meaning “trouble” as in the phrase “se faire de la mousse”, which means somehow “to have trouble; to get worried”.

proverb would appear to be monosemous. But proverb (4) is notwithstanding commonly considered polysemous, associated as it is with both meanings. This implies that it is motivated by both metaphors. And since these metaphors are opposite ways of conceiving of INSTABILITY, the proverb is mostly understood as opposite in meaning.

It must be noted, however, that meanings (5) and (6) stem only from the metaphorical structurings of INSTABILITY. As a result, the conceptual domain ABUNDANCE is overlooked, and so are its structuring conceptual metaphors ABUNDANCE IS WEALTH and ABUNDANCE IS A BURDEN. Do these metaphors play no role in the proverb understanding? Obviously, any affirmative answer must reduce the proverb understanding to meanings (5) and (6). Then, how to account for the third reading Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's students made, that is, "a rolling stone is like a person who keeps moving and is therefore free, not burdened with a family and material possessions and not likely to fall into a rut"? Evidently, such a reading does not emerge only from the metaphorical structurings of INSTABILITY, for if it did, it would be difficult to find out how moving all the time help avoid getting worried about life issues. To account entirely for this reading, we need to combine one of the metaphors underlying INSTABILITY with one of those underlying ABUNDANCE. All in all, the reading is consistent with (9c) because it arises from the conceptual blending of INSTABILITY IS A GAIN and ABUNDANCE IS A BURDEN metaphors. Accordingly, just as this reading is predictable on the basis of the meanings in diagram (9), so further readings might be made.

3.2. Moving on from Lexical Meanings to Contextual Readings

Four conceptual metaphors have been so far distinguished. They combine in different ways and give thereby rise to four lexical meanings. Are these meanings the only possible ones? If there might be more, then what is their nature, lexical, discursive, or both?

There is every reason to assume that no clear-cut limit could separate lexical meanings from contextual ones. And even though proverb understanding involves both kinds, each one seems to exist on its own. The main reason is that proverbs are not only understood in discourse contexts but also in isolation. Most importantly, the latter case obtains because proverbs have relatively stable meanings that arise from conceptual metaphors. Therefore, the claim that proverbs have stable meaning should come as no surprise insofar as conceptual metaphors are taken, within the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, to be conventionalized, entrenched and fixed for long periods of time [19]. On the other hand, proverbs contextual meanings are not completely separated from the lexical ones. That is, proverbs meanings are not exclusively context-dependent, for if they were only so, we could not see why different proverbs could not be used to express the same meanings in the same situations. For example, no matter how identical might be the conditions of use, proverbs (9) and (10) cannot be said to entail similar

contextual meanings. The reason is not because they are bereft of any conceptual metaphor, but, instead, because they are not underneath the same conceptual metaphors.

10) *Frog forgets he had a tail*

11) *Revenge is a dish best savored cold*

Accordingly, conceptual metaphors structure both lexical and contextual meanings of proverbs. But to the extent that the lexical meanings are schematic, they serve as bases for deriving the contextual ones. Simply put, conceptual metaphors give rise to a range of schematic lexical meanings and pre-determine in certain way the context-dependent readings. Let us flesh out this argument with respect to the proverb under consideration.

As stated above and depicted in diagram (9), the generic-level structure evoked by proverb (4) is ambiguous because it involves four lexical meanings that arise from the interplay between four conceptual metaphors. Such metaphors are different ways we conceive, along positive and negative dimensions, of INSTABILITY in causal connection with ABUNDANCE. The complex concept is highly schematic, built out from superordinate-level concepts. Expectedly, different specific-level concepts may come into play and elaborate the superordinate-level concepts. It has been suggested above to consider TRAVEL and WANDERINGS respectively as positive and negative elaborations of the conceptual domain INSTABILITY, and RICHNESS and TROUBLE respectively as positive and negative elaborations of the conceptual domain ABUNDANCE. Given such a premise then, only positive and negative specific-level concepts elaborating respectively INSTABILITY and ABUNDANCE are allowed. The result is that the generic-level structure cannot be instantiated by any expression, nor can it apply freely to any particular situation. Therefore, understanding and using the proverb in discourse contexts entail moving through a continuum from schematic meanings to more specific interpretations. In other words, INSTABILITY in causal connection with ABUNDANCE is likely to be elaborated by specific-level concepts belonging to many other conceptual domains, such as BEHAVIOR, THOUGHT, FEELING, etc. And whatever conceptual domain is evoked, when we use the proverb in relevant situations to comment on people's changeable stances, opinions, judgments, feelings, etc., we need not construct new meanings, as Honeck holds, because the specific interpretations we make are predicted by its schematic lexical meanings. Let us give an example to illustrate this idea.

In the particular conceptual domain of LOVE, possible specific interpretations in given relevant situations would be mostly predicted by (9a-d). Let us consider the situations where there is need to comment on people's continuously changeable hearts in love relationships. Irrespective of the situation topic, using proverb (4) amounts to implying either meaning (12) or meaning (13):

12) *Someone who does not keep on loving the same valuable person loses him/her and ends up with no tenderness*

13) *Someone who does not keep on loving the same*

bothersome person gets rid of him/her and becomes free

Both alternatives are motivated by the conceptual metaphors underlying meanings (9a) and (9c). What must be considered new relative to such meanings is that we have here different target domains. Given the conceptual domain LOVE, a permanently moving person is elaborated, along positive dimension, by INCONSTANT LOVER and ABUNDANCE by TREASURE⁷. Their combination gives rise to meaning (12). Noticeably, such a meaning is not completely new, in that it is predicted by meaning (9a). Furthermore, it is structured in terms of the same conceptual metaphors, that is, INSTABILITY IS A GAIN and ABUNDANCE IS WEALTH. Further, a permanently moving person along positive dimension is elaborated by INCONSTANT LOVER, and ABUNDANCE along negative dimension by BOTHERSOME BELOVED. Their causal cross-combination then yields meaning (13). Also here, this meaning is predicted by meaning (9c). Therefore, it is structured by INSTABILITY IS A GAIN and ABUNDANCE IS TROUBLE metaphors.

On the other hand, INCONSTANT LOVER may be elaborated, with respect to its negative dimension, by WOMANIZER. Such an elaboration is grounded in our everyday experiences insofar as most people seem to distinguish, however vaguely, between what is morally right and what is not with respect to the most shared ethics in love relationships. Accordingly, the combination and cross-combination of INCONSTANT LOVER, elaborated by WOMANIZER, with ABUNDANCE, elaborated by both TREASURE and BOTHERSOME, instantiate the meanings in (9b) and (9d). Thus, depending on whether we want to praise or to criticize womanizing in given relevant context situations, using proverb (4) would mean either (14) or (15)

14) *Someone who is interested only in temporary sexual relationships avoid getting bored with a long term and monotonous love*

15) *Someone who is interested only in temporary sexual relationships fails to find worthwhile love and thereby ends up disgracefully with no family*

The situation fitting the context-dependent meaning described in (14) is predicted by the lexical meaning (9b). The link between (14) and (9b) is that both meanings stem from the combination of the same conceptual metaphors, that is, INSTABILITY IS A WASTE and ABUNDANCE IS A BURDEN. Similarly, the context-dependent meaning (15) is tightly bound to the lexical meaning (9d), to the extent that they are both structured in terms of the same conceptual metaphors, in this case, INSTABILITY IS A WASTE and ABUNDANCE IS WEALTH metaphors.

This illustration helps understand that the proverb (4) context-dependent meanings are not constructed entirely online. Rather, they are predetermined to some degree by its lexical meanings. Accordingly, both lexical and contextual

meanings of the proverb are motivated by the same set of conceptual metaphors. These metaphors, as shown above, interact in such different ways along positive and negative dimensions, thereby giving rise to the range of the proverb lexical meanings, as well as to its discursive ones. On this view then, there must be no clear threshold at which lexical meaning stops and discursive one begins. In all likelihood, lexical and contextual meanings are bound to each other through a continuum residing in their common metaphorical structurings.

3.3. Second Application: The Paradigm of Proverbs with Distinct Meanings

Much focus has been so far put exclusively on one proverb (*a rolling stone gathers no moss*). Nevertheless, neither this proverb should be considered an isolated case. Nor should the account given be considered ad hoc. Rather, it applies similarly to the whole paradigm of proverbs with opposite meanings. It will be shown below how interaction between underlying metaphors accounts for another type of polysemous proverbs, that is, proverbs whose lexical meanings are not necessarily opposite. Let us re-analyze, for this purpose, a proverb which was first examined by Lakoff & Turner [12].

Lakoff & Turner made the claim that a proverb may have different readings. Each one is made relative to “a background of assumptions and values”. The authors suggested considering the following proverb:

16) *A jelly in a vise*

They held that this proverb may have different interpretations, depending on how JELLY and VISE are construed both in isolation and in causal combination. According to them, the Great Chain metaphor maps both lower-levels forms JELLY and VISE onto higher-level forms, in this case, PERSONS. More precisely, the Great Chain metaphor maps the higher-level attributes and behavior of JELLY and VISE onto the higher-level attributes and behavior of human beings. Given our folk knowledge of JELLY and VISE, the different readings their causal combination yields relative to human concerns hinges essentially on the variation of the backgrounds with respect to which the proverb is understood and used. On such a premise, Lakoff & Turner came to distinguish four readings. The first two readings are made relative to a background schema of competitive and antagonistic situations, where JELLY and VISE are in confrontation. The first reading relies on the need to avoid confrontation. Here JELLY, mapped onto a WILY PERSON, prevails over VISE, mapped onto an OPPRESSIVE PERSON. Such a reading is consistent with situations wherein wiliness proves efficient to escaping ruthless oppression. In the second reading, VISE, mapped onto an EFFICIENT PERSON, wins against JELLY, mapped onto an INEFFECTUAL PERSON. This case obtains in unavoidable confrontations where forceful persons often squash ineffectual ones. The third and fourth readings are framed in terms of a background schema pertaining to social interaction. In the third reading, JELLY is mapped onto a

⁷ *Treasure* is used here in the sense of “Someone who is very helpful and valuable to you” (Cambridge Dictionaries Online)

DECEITFUL PERSON whereas VISE onto a DOWNRIGHT PERSON. This reading seems to fit, for instance, the situations of anarchic behavior of persons living in orthodox societies. Finally, in the last reading, JELLY is mapped onto a DELICATE PERSON and VISE onto a FLAT-FOOTED PERSON. Interpersonal contact between such persons results in spoiling their social interaction.

Lakoff & Turner think of the reasons behind such readings to lie in the application of the same single mechanism, the Great Chain metaphor. Yet they assume that the latter applies in quite different ways. That is to say, by mapping the lower-level forms JELLY and VISE onto the higher-level order of human beings the Great Chain metaphor maps in each reading specific lower-level properties onto the corresponding higher-level properties.

Such an account might be found wanting for two reasons. On the one hand, the four different readings, albeit being results of the same metaphoric process, correspond to four different generic-level structures. It follows that the proverb "Jelly in a vise" is not a single linguistic expression for four meanings, but rather four linguistic expressions for an equal number of meanings. In this case, the proverb has to be considered homonymous. This alternative would be the right one if the involved meanings were not semantically bound to one another. This fact supports rather the claim that the proverb is polysemous. On the other hand, given that a generic-level structure is a template, any proverb, despite its potential multiplicity of readings, invokes only one generic-level structure which can be used to instantiate the whole range of appropriate cases.

It is important to notice at the outset that proverb (16) is quite different from proverb (4), in that it does not imply necessarily opposite meanings. Therefore, rather than being opposite, the conceptual metaphors underlying its complex concept are just different ways of conceiving of the same conceptual content. As a result, proverb (16) may have a wider range of lexical meanings, because its complex concept is likely to admit of many metaphors.

Let us note first that there is no need, contrary to Lakoff & Turner's claim, to distinguish between readings that are framed in terms of competitive background schema and readings that are made relative to a background of social interaction. Whatever the context of use, "Jelly in a vise" entails always antagonistic situations where JELLY and VISE are in confrontation. The reason is that JELLY and VISE have inherently opposite properties. Thus, their combined conceptualization preserves their conflicting nature. At last, the range of possible meanings depends on the causal interplay between the possible conceptual metaphors structuring both JELLY and VISE.

The analysis conducted here remains very close to the commonest ways these entities are thought of. Accordingly, there must be no surprise at stating that the Great Chain metaphor maps JELLY onto a FLEXIBLE PERSON and VISE onto a RIGID PERSON. Such mappings are motivated by our routinely entrenched thinking of JELLY and VISE as evoking respectively FELXIBILITY and RIGIDITY. On this

assumption then, the complex concept arises from the combination that connects causally FLEXIBILITY to RIGIDITY against a confrontational background schema. As a result, the Generic-level structure evoked by the proverb is ambiguous inasmuch as FLEXIBILITY and RIGIDITY are construed in different ways with respect to positive and negative dimensions. Such construals rely on a set of conceptual metaphors which are grounded in people's daily experiences. FLEXIBILITY is suggested to be structured, along positive and negative dimensions, respectively by the following metaphors:

- FELXIBILITY IS ASTUTENESS
- FLEXIBILITY IS INCONSTANCY

By the same token, RIGIDITY is structured positively and negatively by the followings metaphors:

- RIGIDITY IS RIGHTNESS
- RIGIDITY IS A TYRANNY

Moreover, it is assumed that FELXIBILITY IS ASTUTENESS is elaborated by WILINESS, FLEXIBILITY IS INCONSTANCY by SPINELESSNESS, RIGIDITY IS RIGHTNESS by STRICTNESS, and RIGIDITY IS A TYRANNY by OPPRESSIVENESS. Four lexical meanings result from the combination and cross-combination of these metaphors, as shown in the following diagram:

17)

a. JELLY → FLEXIBILITY⁽⁺⁾ (WILINESS) + VISE → RIGIDITY⁽⁺⁾ (STRICTNESS) (= FELXIBILITY IS ASTUTENESS + RIGIDITY IS RIGHTNESS)

b. JELLY → FLEXIBILITY⁽⁻⁾ (SPINELESSNESS) + VISE → RIGIDITY⁽⁻⁾ (OPPRESSIVENESS) (= FLEXIBILITY IS INCONSTANCY + RIGIDITY IS A TYRANNY)

c. JELLY → FLEXIBILITY⁽⁺⁾ (WILINESS) + VISE → RIGIDITY⁽⁻⁾ (OPPRESSIVENESS) (= FELXIBILITY IS ASTUTENESS + RIGIDITY IS A TYRANNY)

d. JELLY → FLEXIBILITY⁽⁻⁾ (SPINELESSNESS) + VISE → RIGIDITY⁽⁺⁾ (STRICTNESS) (= FLEXIBILITY IS INCONSTANCY + RIGIDITY IS RIGHTNESS)

These meanings are context-independent, because they are inherent parts of the proverb lexical structure. Disputing such a claim would amount to denying the existence of the metaphors motivating our different conceptualizations of FLEXIBILITY and RIGIDITY. Each meaning is made relative to an antagonistic background, and may apply to a range of particular situations.

In (17a), the concept WILINESS, elaborating the metaphor FELXIBILITY IS ASTUTENESS, causally combines with the concept STRICTNESS, elaborating the metaphor RIGIDITY IS RIGHTNESS. The result is the following meaning: "In confrontational situations, wily persons are clever enough to adjust their behaviors and attitudes to suit the needs of rigorous situations, avoiding thereby any undesirable issue". Such a meaning is instantiated whenever there is some tension, either covert or overt, between two opposite powers. The rigorous one is not willing to concede any of its power. By contrast, the flexible one shows much wiliness and therefore deals with the situation carefully by

making appropriate adjustments. Many particular cases may fit this meaning, such as cases of political relations characterizing competitive parties within a political system, or cases of economical relations linking hostile nations, or, at least, cases of interpersonal relationships. In all such contexts, FLEXIBILITY and RIGIDITY are defined along the positive dimension. Thus, their connection is positive as well. That is, both wily persons and rigorous persons win, because both of them are aware of the importance of keeping their interpersonal relations ethically in some kind of order.

In (17b), FLEXIBILITY and RIGIDITY are defined with respect to negative dimension. Thus, they are structured in terms of the following metaphors: FLEXIBILITY IS INCONSTANCY and RIGIDITY IS A TYRANNY. It is assumed furthermore that they are elaborated by SPINELESSNESS and OPPRESSIVENESS respectively. Their causal combination results in the following meaning: "In confrontational situations, spineless persons are always squashed by oppressive persons". Instantiations of such a meaning are much required in conflicting situations where wishy-washy persons are unequally subjected to unfair and tyrannical treatments. Here oppressive persons do not win, to the extent that - from a democratic standpoint - any kind of tyranny is considered an unacceptable violation of human rights. On the other hand, spineless persons do not win either, because they are passive enough to stand out against partial and unlawful behaviors.

In (17c-d), FLEXIBILITY and RIGIDITY are cross-combined on both positive and negative sides. Accordingly, each cross-combination gives rise to a distinct meaning. In (17c), FLEXIBILITY is structured positively in terms of FLEXIBILITY IS ASTUTENESS, and is thus elaborated by WILINESS. By contrast, RIGIDITY is structured negatively in terms of RIGIDITY IS A TYRANNY, and is therefore elaborated by OPPRESSIVENESS. The meaning that emerges from their cross-combination is something like: "In confrontational situations wily persons are clever enough to get the better of oppressive persons". Noticeably, wily persons win against oppressive persons, inasmuch as they prove sagacious and hence adopt practical adjustments in achieving their long-term goals. Finally in (17d), the cross-combination of FLEXIBILITY, negatively elaborated by SPINELESSNESS, with RIGIDITY, positively elaborated by STRICTNESS, ends up with the following meaning: "In confrontational situations, spineless persons stand no chance to resist to strict persons". Such a meaning favors strict persons. For instance, if spinelessness, as a kind of power, presents some risks of some kind, strictness is proved to be the rightful means to get control over the dangerous situations and therefore to maintain the established order.

Meanings (17a-d) provide the bases for deriving a great deal of context-dependent readings. By way of illustration, the first reading made by Lakoff & Turner is predicted by (17c): thus it is structured in terms of FLEXIBILITY IS ASTUTENESS + RIGIDITY IS A TYRANNY metaphors. The second reading is predicted by (17b); it is motivated by FLEXIBILITY IS INCONSTANCY + RIGIDITY IS A

TYRANNY metaphors. By the same token, the third reading relies on the cross-combination of FLEXIBILITY IS INCONSTANCY with RIGIDITY IS RIGHTNESS, as shown in (17d).

Nevertheless, none of the meanings depicted in (17a-d) could be at the root of the fourth reading Lakoff & Turner made "one in which there is a delicate, somewhat sticky situation to be dealt with, which will become messy if not handled with great care. Here the jelly is the delicate situation. There is a person who has to deal with it, but one who has no sense of delicacy at all. The only tool this person has for dealing with the word is the vise, which is completely inappropriate and makes a mess of the situation" (p. 189). Given the causal connection between JELLY and VISE, such a reading sounds pretty much common, except that it is not motivated by the set of conceptual metaphors described above. The reason is that the elaborating concept DELICACY does not instantiate FLEXIBILITY IS ASTUTENESS, nor does the elaborating concept FLAT-FOOTEDNESS instantiate RIGIDITY IS A TYRANNY. Therefore, there is likelihood that such a reading is underlain by different metaphors, namely the followings:

- FLEXIBILITY IS FRAGILITY
- RIGIDITY IS CRUDENESS

This claim does not sound paradoxical. As stated above, proverbs with opposite meanings are drastically constrained by the positive and negative dimensions along which their underlying metaphors are defined. For instance, proverb (4) is associated with four lexical meanings in accordance with four opposite metaphors. But unlike proverb (4), proverb (16) has not opposite meanings. This means that it may be structured in terms of many metaphors, depending on the possibly different ways the complex concept is conceptualized, that is, depending on its metaphorical pluralism. Here, the positive and negative dimensions do not limit the proverb semantic potential. The latter is even increased by virtue of the additional metaphors. Simply put, the metaphors underlying the reading made by Lakoff & Turner are not contradictory with those structuring (17a-d). As a result, the distinguished metaphors are not mutually exclusive, which entails that they may combine and cross-combine with each other, giving rise thereby to further lexical meanings.

4. Conclusion

Multiple meanings of proverbs are self-evidently a matter of polysemy. This is a claim that is commonly assumed within the wide literature on proverb understanding and use at large. Yet most theories conceive of the phenomenon of polysemy in this field as strictly context-dependent, that is, as discursive in nature. Such a stance is built on the rejection of the assumption that proverbs have relatively stable meanings. As a consequence, it has major difficulty accounting for our intuitive understanding of proverbs in isolation. All things considered, the meanings of proverbs need to be stable enough to be learnt, understood and used within given speech

communities.

An additional piece of evidence may be provided by the semantic network into which proverbs are organized. If proverbs meanings were only context-dependent, there would be no intuitive grounds on which we could know, as we really do, that proverbs are connected to each other in terms of different semantic relations, such as synonymy, antonymy, and the like. For instance, to realize that proverbs (18a-b) are synonymous and that proverbs (19a-b) are antonymous we do not need necessarily to construct their meanings online in real contexts of use:

- 18) a. *Blind blames the ditch*
b. *The girl who can't dance says the band can't play*
- 19) a. *Experience is the best teacher*
b. *Experience is the teacher of fools*

If proverbs meanings are relatively stable, then there is no paradox in stating that some proverbs may be lexically polysemous. Conceptual metaphors play a pervasive role in framing the lexical polysemy of proverbs in general. But the phenomenon best applies to the paradigm of proverbs with opposite meanings, such as “a rolling stone gathers no moss”. The reason is that such proverbs are necessarily polysemous, in that they are structured along positive and negative dimensions in terms of, at least, two opposite metaphors. In short, the whole involved metaphors interact in different ways and thus give rise to a range of lexical meanings. These meanings must be considered inherent in the proverbs conventional structure because the conventional metaphors they arise from are part of our conceptual system.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that lexical meanings of proverbs are schematic in nature. As such, they provide the bases for deriving more specific ones. In most situations, context-dependent meanings are less online interpretations than mere elaborations of generic-level concepts via specific-level concepts. Simply put, contextual meanings of given proverbs are not entirely new in being dynamic constructions that emerge exclusively through verbal exchanges. Rather, they are derived through elaboration process from the basic lexical meanings. On this view then, lexical and contextual meanings of proverbs should be thought of as distinct meanings, and yet they are tightly interrelated through the continuum formed by their common metaphorical structurings.

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