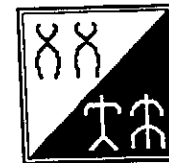

SIMPLE FORMS

**An Encyclopaedia of Simple Text-Types
in Lore and Literature**

edited
by

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WELLERISM

1. **Definition:** W. is the now internationally accepted scientific term for a special type of proverbial phrase. Sayings of this kind generally consist of three parts: (a) an introductory utterance, which represents the basis (*dictum*), (b) a middle part, in which the speaker of the utterance is announced, and (c) a final part, in which the situation of the utterance is characterized (*factum*). Thus, one can regard the w. as a special kind of quotation (Cirese 1969).

2. **Examples and Analysis:** A typical example of this form is the following:

- (1) "Every beginning is hard", said the thief, when he began by stealing an anvil.

The term w. originates with the character of Samuel Weller in *The Pickwick Papers*, a novel by Charles Dickens (1837). Because of Weller's predilection for sayings of this kind, the term w. has been generally accepted for this special proverbial type. It exists as a category in the oral tradition of many cultures, but it has been referred to by a number of different names. In Germany, for example, it was initially treated as a separate category by Schütze (1800, 1806: IV, 93), who termed it '*apologisches Spruchwort*'. There are, however, several other terms still in use - an indication of the problems when dealing with the w. as a genre. The following terms, all of which contain specific characteristics of the genre, have been in use simultaneously in Germany: '*Anekdotenspruch*', '*apolog(et)isches Sprichwort*', '*Beispiel(s)-Sprichwort*', '*Sag-(sprich)wort*', '*Schwankspruch*', and many others (cf. Hofmann 1959: 18ff.). The international introduction of the term w. should be credited to Taylor's influential book *The Proverb* (1931). His naming and separate treatment of this genre led to a number of national and regional studies, which, in turn, made international comparisons possible.

The best known and most familiar variant of the three-part basic form of the w. is that in which a proverb is quoted in the first part (*dictum*), as in (1). The utterance which the *dictum* consists of need not necessarily be a 'frozen' word complex (i.e. a linguistic cliché accepted within a whole culture); it may be only locally known or even be an individual utterance. Simon (1988: 12), for example, has found that only 20% of her Lower German collection contain proverbs or proverbial sayings in the *dictum* - in most cases, the *dictum* is represented by any individual utterance. Such sayings can cause comprehension problems for an uninformed listener, in particular because of their often dialectical form.

In the second part of the w., the quotation is put into the mouth of a real or imagery subject who often appears as a stereotype. Here, the field of projection (i.e. the persons to whom the utterance is attributed) is very wide. Usually, the figures' specific characterization leads to their generalization (Taylor 1959, Järviö-Nieminen 1959). The following groups, in particular, crystallize into fields of projection: those based on professional functions (such as peasants, shepherds, millers, clergymen) or pseudo-professions; 'telling' names; proper names; figures such as the Devil or Eulenspiegel; and, last but not least, animals (cf. Bykova 1984: 284ff.). In case of the latter, they are particularly those animals which also appear in *fables, such as the fox and others. One should not assume, however, a genetic connection between the w. and the fable because of this link. Rather, these animals represent culturally stereotyped qualities or values.

From a technical point of view, the middle part of a w. represents a 'bridge' between the *dictum* and the *factum*. One might distinguish between two types of 'bridge' functions: either the projection works on the basis of a functional ambiguity in relation to the introductory and the final parts [A ← (B) → C], as in (2), or it simply represents a neutral transition between the two frame parts, which are in themselves ambivalent [A - B - C], as in (3):

- (2) "Virtue in the middle", said the Devil, and seated himself between two priests.
- (3) "It will come back", said the man, when he gave his sow pork.

Whereas (2) works only because of the specific relationship which the Devil has to Virtue as well as to priests, the speaker of (3) might easily be altered. Here we see an obvious contrast between *dictum* and *factum*, a contrast which may become apparent on the semantic (1, 4), pragmatic (5), or stylistic-syntactic (6) level:

- (4) "I punish my wife with good words", said the peasant and threw the Bible at her head.

Ex. (1) works only because of the polysemy of 'hard', and ex. (4) because of the metaphorical meaning of 'good words'.

- (5) "I hate law suits", said the man, who gave his daughter in marriage to six persons.

Here we have an apparent contrast between the utterance and the action connected to it.

- (6) "Practicus est multiplex", said the peasant, and tied up his shoes with a stalk of wormwood.

In this case, the inappropriateness of the situation is caused by the peasant's (improbable) choice of Latin as everyday language.

The third part of the standard w. may take various shapes as well. It need not be represented by a short narrative (e.g. in form of a temporal or relative clause). In fact, it may involve only an adverbial expression or an object, as in (7):

- (7) "These are fine cuffs", said the thief of his handcuffs.

Elaborations on the level of the *factum* may lead to blendings with other genres and their humoristic transformations (such as *fables, for example).

3. Typology: The described three-part welleristic *basic form* represents the majority of examples: in Simon's (1988: 11) collection of Lower German w.s, they count for 90%. In addition to it, a number of special types have developed. The *short form*, for example, results from the omission of one of the three parts; mostly, this will be the *factum*, as in (8):

- (8) "Something to the eye", said the blind man.

or in (9):

- (9) "It has happened", said the girl.

Such 'incomplete' examples have also been called 'latent wellerisms' (Loukatos 1967, Loukatos 1972).

A further type is the so-called *rhyme form*. In German, for example:

- (10) "Irren ist menschlich", sprach der Hahn und stieg von der Ente.

exists along with:

- (11) "Vertan, vertan", sprach der Hahn und stieg von der Ente.

The rhyme form may lead to a real *play form*, which emphasizes the mere joy of playing with words by using the welleristic structure to the point of actually dismantling it (Hofmann 1959: 30f.).

A further category is the so-called *macaronic form* (Taylor 1931:

207); this type, for which a foreign language (e.g. Latin) *dictum* is characteristic, seems to be primarily an invention of the second half of the 16th century, when students consciously created examples such as the following during the time of Humanism:

- (12) "Barbati praecedant", said the Devil, and pushed his mother-in-law down the steps.

Such an example is unlikely to have been a product of oral folklore traditions.

Finally, there is the *double form*, which consists of two w.s put together and thus forms a small dialogue:

- (13) "Nur keine Angst", sagte der Hahn zum Regenwurm, da fraß er ihn. - "Habe ich auch nicht", sagte der Regenwurm, da kroch er hinten wieder hinaus.

This may sometimes lead to the creation of short narratives consisting only of w.s (Neumann 1968/69). In such cases, the first w. may be also independently documented. All the subsequent ones, however, usually are formal analogies of the first w. They are new creations with regard to the contents, but they would not make sense, if individually extracted. One should not forget, however, that all these special types together represent only 10% of the whole welleristic treasure.

4. History: The history of the w. is obscure and hard to trace; the question of mono- or polygenesis in particular remains unsolved. In this context, the distinction between *folk w.s* and *literary* or *secondary w.s* as proposed by Bykova (1984) may be quite useful. She maintains that the welleristic structure represents a basic speech structure which had merely a 'second birth' in literature.

Examples can be found in Greek and Latin literature, such as:

- (14) "All the women we need are inside", said the bridegroom, and closed the door on the bride. (Theocritus)

One need not go as far as Seiler (1924: 2f.), however, who maintains that the w. as a genre is categorically classical in its origin and a direct descent from antiquity. The lack of a direct moral or didactical turn may be responsible for the w.'s scarcity in proverb collections from the 11th to the 16th centuries (Taylor 1931: 106). Only at the time of Humanism does the genre reappear to a certain degree; yet, this does not necessarily provide evidence for the categorically antique origin of the w., because it did not spread equally in all cultures influenced by Humanism.

5. Related Forms and Transformation: *Proverbs and proverbial sayings in specific are often explicitly included in the w., mainly in its *dictum*; nonetheless the w. as a whole shows some structural similarity to the *joke, and, most of all, to the *schwank, the *fable, and the *anecdote. Whereas Taylor (1931: 215) assumes that not many w.s have arisen as condensations of fables and apologues, Petsch (1938: 118) maintains that they originated in those short fables ('anecdotes') which tend to be witticisms. The arguments of Seiler (1924: 3) and Röhrich (1977b: 12) are similar to Petsch's; Röhrich even calls w.s '*Mini-Schwänke*'. Hofmann (1959: 36), however, argues in favour of flexible alternations between the processes of condensation and elaboration. His argumentation is supported by the results of Neumann (1968, 1968/69), who actually finds instances of both kinds of influences.

Parallels to the riddle are shown by Taylor (1960) and Cray (1964), who recorded examples among American high school students, such as:

- (15) "What did one ear say to the other ear?" - "How come we never met before, we both live in the same block?"

This could easily be phrased as a w. in a form such as:

- (16) "How come we never met before, we both live in the same block?", said one ear to the other.

In case of the w. it seems therefore most reasonable to side with Permyakov's (1970: 147) view of the "conversion of genres" and to regard the various types of folk sayings as "paradigmatic forms of one and the same entity (paremias in general), in which some aspects of internal and external structures are transformed".

6. Geography: The geographical distribution of the w. is as curious as its obscure origins. It seems to be spread all over Europe, but is most frequently found in North Germanic countries, in the North and North West in particular. It is widespread in Scandinavia and Germany (particularly in Lower Germany), the Netherlands, and England. However, its existence has also been confirmed in France and Belgium (van Gennepe 1933/34, 1934), Italy (Speroni 1953, Tucci 1962/63, 1966), the Switzerlands (Sutermeister 1869, Singer 1941/42), and many other countries - even in Asia Minor (Hofmann 1959: 26) and among the Yoruba in Nigeria/Africa (Dundes 1964a), for example. It is rarely documented in Slavic cultures, however, and it is not easy to say if the w. is a universal form.

7. History of Interpretation: One of the first scholars to regard the w. as a separate genre was the German J.F. Schütze (1800, 1806). Later,

A. Hoefer (1844) was responsible for an early consideration of the w. from a more or less theoretical point of view. He maintained that a w. represents a truth which is not true as such, but is demonstrated in and by an example, an assumption which is shared by Bartels (1930). - Important collecting work was done by E. Hoefer (1855) and Herzog (1882), who compiled the first collections containing w.s exclusively, which had previously been included in collections of proverbs without differentiation.

Seiler (1924: 3) sees his book as the first historical summary and detailed theoretical treatment of this genre. Taylor's subsequent chapter on the w. in his book *The Proverb* (1931) is of great importance; he argues against Seiler's assumption of the w.'s classical origin. Yet, both agree that the lack of didactical purpose and the characteristic comical impact are essential functions of the w. - After Taylor's important book the w. attracted increasing attention, which is reflected by a number of national and regional investigations (see above). The work of Hofmann (1959) and Järviö-Nieminen (1959) reaped particularly important results. These two scholars not only collected w.s and examined the welleristic form, but also investigated its social usage. They found that the w. may well serve manifold purposes in addition to comical functions. In such a case, the main function of the w. is to express communicative (didactical, aggressive, criticizing, and other) functions in a diluted and veiled manner.

This view is partly supported by recent structural-semiotic work following field investigations such as the above-mentioned. Permyakov, for example, who initially treated the w. as one of the subtypes of fablettes and one-scene anecdotes (Permyakov 1970), more recently has regarded the w. as an intermediate form between phrasal and supra-phrasal paremias. In his more recent work, the dominant function of the w. turns out to be a *modelling* one; in other words, the w. "provides a verbal (or thought) model (scheme) of some real-life (or logical) situation", which possibly serves other pragmatic text functions as well, i.e. instructive, prognostic, entertaining, and other functions (Permyakov 1975: 141ff.). This view is consistent with Bykova's (1984) assumption that in the case of the w. there are essentially two utterances and two situations: one utterance-situation pair would involve the real speaker and the actual situation in which the w. is uttered, and the other pair would turn out to be clichéized verbally and therefore a language rather than a speech phenomenon. In this respect, the w. displays some specifics which also characterize a similar, non-folkloristic form, the *apophthegm. Thus, structural-semiotic work may succeed in systematically explaining the earlier observations made by Hoefer (1844) and Bartels (1930). Additional systematic investigation must still be done under a common catalogue of questions, however, in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the welleristic genre and its functioning

(Neumann 1966a).

8. Collections: van Gennep 1933/34, 1934; Herzog 1882; Hoefler, E. 1855; Hofmann 1959; Järviö-Nieminen 1959; Singer 1941/42; Speroni 1953; Sutermeister 1869; Tucci 1962/63, 1966.

9. Bibliography: BARTELS 1930; BYKOVA 1984; CIRESE 1969; CRAY 1964; DUNDES 1964a; van GENNEP 1933/34, 1934; HERZOG 1882; HOEFER, A. 1844; HOEFER, E. 1855; HOFMANN 1959; JÄRVIÖ-NIEMINEN 1959; KJÆR 1971; LOUKATOS 1967, 1972; NEUMANN 1966a, 1966b, 1968, 1968/69; PERMYAKOV 1970, 1975; PETSCH 1938; RÖHRICH 1977b; SCHÜTZE 1800, 1806; SEILER 1924; SIMON 1988; SINGER 1941/42; SPERONI 1953; SUTERMEISTER 1869; TAYLOR 1931, 1959, 1960; TUCCI 1962/63, 1966, 1968.

P.G.