

Review Article

Equating and Contrasting in English Men and Women Proverbs: Critical Stylistic Analysis

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Abstract: Proverbs are popular and wise sayings. These two marked features make them intriguing and worth the time and effort put into their analysis; they reflect how people's traditions and thoughts on a specific matter. For this reason, this paper is devoted to analyzing ten English proverbs in order to unearth how the English-speaking countries (have) viewed men and women. However, what makes this paper slightly different from most of the research which has been done on proverbs is that it employs an analytical tool—which is called Equating and Contrasting—taken from critical stylistics to uncover sexist ideologies in English proverbs. The critical-stylistic analysis has shown that English proverbs construct a world in which men and women are equated to specific entities and contrasted with others. Furthermore, men and women are stereotyped in English proverbs which emphasize different notions when it comes to dealing with men and women.

Keywords: English proverbs, men and women, equating and contrasting, critical stylistics.

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs have attracted a lot of attention as they reveal how a culture perceives the world. However, not much research has been done regarding the stylistic properties of proverbs. That is, there are some dictionaries that mention some of the linguistic features of proverbs, yet their descriptions are limited, since they are dictionaries. Even books which are dedicated to the field of proverbs are mainly interested in interpreting proverbs in terms of their forgotten makers and the messages they would like to convey. For these reasons, the present paper is an attempt to analyze a group of men and woman related English proverbs based on their critical stylistic features.

However, having an interest in how proverbs are constructed stylistically does not mean that the paper will mainly concentrate on the linguistic forms of the proverbs. On the contrary, much attention will be paid to the reasons of using these forms. In other words, the analysis will focus on the forms and their functions in order to have a better understanding of the ideologies which are structured in the proverbs. Because this paper revolves around forms, functions and (sexist) ideologies found in some English proverbs, the ideal model would be critical stylistics (CS). Furthermore, this model is fundamentally an approach to ideologies in language. Whether these ideologies are in the form of a politician's speech or a literary text, CS has the right tools to uncover them (see Jeffries, 2010).

It is worth noting that this model has ten tools to be used while analyzing discourse. Employing the entire toolkit of this framework is a difficult task to do here since there is no room to explain and exemplify them and then applying them to the data. Thus, only one tool will be used here. This tool is called *Equating and Contrasting*, and it can be particularly handy because depicting men and women as equivalent or different is very common in (English) proverbs (Schipper, 2004, pp. 25-26).

The last point to tackle here is how the data is collected. The data basically consists of ten English proverbs. These proverbs are taken from three different books:

- Lois Kerschen (1998), "*American Proverbs about Women*",

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- Mineke Schipper (2004), “*Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet*”, and
- Anna T. Litobkina (2019), “*Women through Anti-Proverbs*”

The proverbs selected from these sources will be analyzed on the basis of the analytical tool taken from CS (i.e. Equating and Contrasting). In the analysis process, the proverbs will first be introduced and then their stylistic triggers of equivalence and opposition will be tackled. Doing so is necessary in order to create a (hypothetical) context in which the proverb may have used for the first time or will probably occur. However, before delving into the data, proverbs and the model adopted here should be defined and explained in order to fully understand the concepts addressed in this paper.

Defining Proverbs

Defining a proverb may seem a simple task, especially for laypeople. That is, it is because they use proverbs in their daily communication; some believe that a proverb is just a group of words which are put together to describe a state of affairs. This is probably true, but it is just the tip of the iceberg. Scholars from around the world have given definitions which seem to have some features in common and are different at the same time. This is because they agree on points such as what a proverb is when it comes to its stylistic features; however, they seem to be after different goals. To clarify this point, multiple definitions and arguments from some dictionaries, books and papers will be mentioned here.

To begin with, English dictionaries give good definitions of the word *proverb*. For example, *Oxford Wordpower* (2015, p. 625) defines this word as: “a short well-known sentence or phrase that gives or a general truth about life.” This definition seems to be somehow convincing, yet it raises some questions. These questions could be about how long/popular a sentence/phrase should be to be considered a proverb and whether proverbs express objective or subjective truth. Before discussing these points/questions, another definition is provided here. However, this one is from a source which specializes in the study of language. In his dictionary, David Crystal describes what a proverb is in a way similar to the definition taken from *Oxford Wordpower*. What makes his definition different Oxford’s is that he adds further details such as a proverb is “rhythmical” and has some special syntactic features. Also, he mentions the different terms which can be used to refer to a proverb (e.g. maxim and adage) (1992, p. 319). His definition takes this part (i.e. Defining Proverbs) a step forward. Nevertheless, it does not tackle the points mentioned earlier. For this reason, this part will resort to books which center around proverbs.

In their “*English Proverbs Explained*” (1967), Ridout and Witting state that a sentence/phrase can become a proverb when language users decide to make it so. Put another way, it is people who have the power to include a saying in their heritage. They also say that proverbs are usually old sayings. This is because a saying might take some years to become popular with a group of people. What is more, it is difficult to determine whether a proverb has gone out of use or is still in use since it may have disappeared in an English-speaking country, yet it might be found alive in another one. These authors also pay some attention to the notion of pithiness. They state that the old sayings which have been accepted as proverbs are pithy. That is, being short and stylistically neat is characteristic of proverbs — this is how proverbs gain popularity. However, proverbs must have more than just linguistic beauty: they have to be wise and true to stand out. That has been said, who is to say that proverbs possess objective wisdom and truth?

In the case of this study, proverbs related to men and women are analyzed based on their linguistic equivalence and opposition. And if a proverb has sexist bias, will it remain wise and true? To answer this question, proverbs should be defined in terms of what they do rather than what they are considered to be (Kerschen, 1999, pp. 2-3). It should be noted that proverbs are considered a folklore genre. This means that they are similar to stories, jokes and myths; they are a part of the oral tradition of a culture. These proverbs may reveal how a community views the world, yet they are not necessarily true. This is because proverb makers — who are usually forgotten (see Ridout and Witting, 1967) — create proverbs based on what they see or how their attitude is toward reality (Kerschen, 1990, pp. 2-3). Therefore, the proverbs which will be analyzed here should not be considered to be bearing absolute truth. That is, an analytical tool from critical stylistics will be employed to unearth how men and women are perceived in English proverbs in terms of what they are contrasted/compared with. To clarify the framework on which the analysis will be based on, below is a part which is dedicated to the model adopted in this study.

Equating and Contrasting: A Linguistic Model

In this part, a linguistic model of equivalence and opposition is provided. However, before delving into this model, some details will be given about its origin; and to be more specific, the framework from which this model has been taken will be tackled. To begin with, it should be noted that *equating and contrasting* is an analytical tool which is technically a part of *critical stylistics* (CS). CS is best known as an approach to social meanings, power, and ideology in language (Norgaard, *et al.*, 2010, pp. 12-13). It also features a wide range of analytical tools which are intended to analyze things such as stylistic forms and their functions as well as how texts and their makers represent the world through language. Importantly, all of the notions on which CS focuses are scrutinized in order to uncover any possible ideologies, which may be structured in texts (Jeffries, 2010, pp. 5-8).

CS has ten analytical tools; and *equating and contrasting* is one of them. This tool has specifically chosen to get a better understand of how English proverbs compare and contrast men and women. However, one may say that CS is a critical approach which is designed to unearth ideologies in political texts. In other words, it is probably not feasible to analyze proverbs and other similar types of texts based on CS. This is not quite true because texts can make meaning basically the same way. That is, whether they are literary or non-literary texts, the tools provided by this framework can be used to “perform all kinds of text analysis” (Burke, 2014, p. 408).

As the entire framework has been discussed briefly, the rest of this part will be dedicated to the tool which has been chosen to analyze the proverbs. It is said that texts construct different worlds for language users to read/hear. Meanwhile, these texts also tell their recipients the things which are to be considered equivalent and those which are contrasting. Moreover, according to Jeffries (2010), language is always loaded with ideologies. If this belief is to be followed, linguistic equivalence and opposition are made to communicate and perpetuate ideologies in society.

As far as equivalence is concerned, it is believed that no two lexical items are completely identical. That is, even words which are considered near-synonyms may have different grammatical properties (e.g. the verbs *raise* and *rise*). Also, even nouns that indicate the same referent are not quite similar. For example, the nouns *toilet*, *loo*, and *bog* refer to the same room, but they differ in connotations and formality levels. On the other hand, antonyms have clearer boundaries than those of synonyms — they are easier to identify. For instance, the antonyms *large* and *small* share semantic content related to size but differ in extent.

However, equating and contrasting are not always found in isolated words. In fact, there are multiple syntactic triggers which can create equivalence and opposition in texts. A good example can be the construction *It is X not Y* as in *It is a material art class, not a math class*. It is known that there is not an actual semantic relation between these two activities. Nevertheless, the syntactic construction and the context — in which this sentence occurs — define its message. Simply put, in a context in which different courses are taking place, one course may be thought of as more masculine and taxing than the others. For this reason, unearthing opposition and equivalence in the data of this paper may require going beyond the wording of the proverbs. However, this does not mean that there is no linguistic model of opposition and equivalence. In fact, there are many lexical and syntactic triggers which can create these two notions. And in order to consolidate the linguistic model, which is adopted here, below are a diagram and a table that summarize some of the possible triggers to look for whilst analyzing the proverbs.

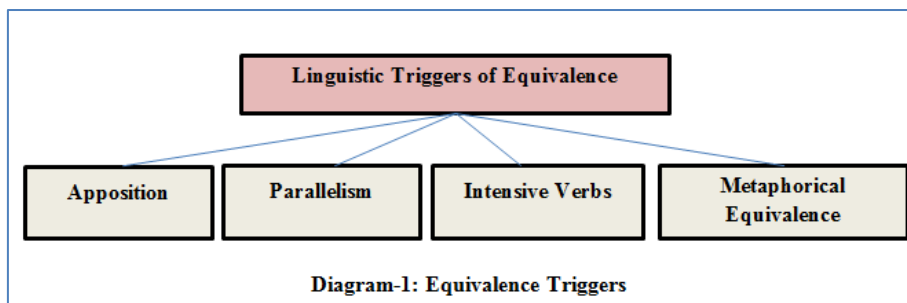


Diagram-1: Equivalence Triggers

Table-1: Possible Syntactic Triggers of Opposition

1	Contrastives	X, but Y
2	Explicit opposition	X as opposed to Y
3	Parallelism	Your job is X, mine is Y
4	Concessive opposition	Despite X, Y
5	Replacive opposition	X rather than Y
6	Comparative opposition	Less X than Y
7	Transitional opposition	X turns into Y
8	Negated opposition	X not Y

DATA ANALYSIS

The previous part has clarified and talked about the model employed here. As the analysis tools haven been established, the present part will present ten English proverbs to analyze based on the model aforementioned. However, before delving into the data analysis, note that the analysis follows a pattern. First, each proverb will be discussed briefly so as to set up a (hypothetical) context in which it may be used by language users. After that, the proverb will appear

alongside the source from which it is taken. Finally, critical stylistic analysis of equivalence and opposition in the proverb will take place.

The first proverb to be tackled here is related to how wives are frequently portrayed in English proverbs. This is because it is believed that the overwhelming majority of English proverbs center on women as wives. That is, they give men advice and warn them about a variety of things. And the proverb below is a good example for it shows how most women fail to live up to their husbands' expectations:

“*Lots of men get women, but few get wives.*” (Kerschen, p. 19)

The proverb at hand consists of two clauses which are connected by a coordinate conjunction. This construction is a good instance of syntactic *parallelism*. However, the use of the conjunction *but* makes the two clauses opposites. This type of opposition is called *contrastive*. Like other ways of *contrasting*, it creates a world in which the two concerned entities/situations are different.

With regard to the semantic content of the clauses, the proverb producer makes it clear that they would like to demonstrate how *men* may get deceived by what their prospective wives. That is, *men* go through two different stages when they decide on getting married. First, they get married. Second, they get shocked by their lovely wives. This claim is communicated through the use of quantifiers *Lots* and *few* — which are *opposites*. These quantifiers show how the majority of men do not have good *wives*. Also, the items *women* and *wives* are treated as opposites in the context of the proverb. In other words, although *women* and *wives* refer to human females, the roles they play in a man's life are different. This is because almost any woman may fulfill a man's needs, but only a good woman can become his loyal and good company (i.e. *a real wife*). Finally, it is worth mentioning that this proverb tells a story based on the man's perspective. That is, it would be considered subjective in the female sense. For this reason, the analysis above just shows what the proverb tries to say, and it is not to be considered a rule to follow.

The proverb above is centered on the notions of not all women are righteous wives as well as the importance of having a good wife. Similarly, the one below tells its recipients how crucial it is when it comes to getting married to a good wife:

“*A good wife is the workmanship of a good husband.*” (ibid)

It can be noticed that this one has two noun phrases plus the copula *is* which links them. This structure triggers *equivalence* in the proverb. Put differently, the use of the copular verb creates *equivalence* between the subject and the complement. It should also be noted that the copula (*to be*) indicates an *intensive relation* between the Carrier/subject (*A good wife*) and the Attribute/complement. In other words, it represents a stable and static relationship between being a good wife and making a good husband.

As far as the lexical items are concerned, the subject *wife* is modified by the same adjective which the word *husband* is modified by. Also, the noun *workmanship* is a *metaphorical use* of the word since neither the *wife* nor her *husband* is a product. What the proverb tries to say is that if a woman has positive qualities, she will make her husband a better man. Thus, she is *equated* with the ability to make a good husband.

The previous proverb shows the significance of having a supportive wife. In the same manner, the proverb below demonstrates the same proposition, but it does not focus on the concept of a *good wife*. Its producer explicitly expresses their preference when it comes to *bad women*:

“*Better to live with a dragon than with a bad woman.*” (Schipper, p. 26)

The structure of this proverb is intended to *contrast* bad women with dragons. That is, the use of *Better to live with ... than with ...* demonstrates how the concept of living with a bad woman could be more frightening than sharing your place with a *dragon*. Also, it is known that dragons are large imaginary animals that can breathe fire. These frightening animals are apparently chosen over bad women. To sum, the proverb at hand employs both syntactic and semantic *opposition* in order to warn men (or people in general) not to live with a *bad woman*. After having a critical stylistic look at the proverb, now it is time to ask one question regarding this proverb. Is the word *bad* objective by nature? This question will not be answered / discussed here as it is usually left for sociologists to answer.

In the proverb above, the notion of living with a bad woman is strongly disapproved. However, the proverb does not provide the reader/hearer with information about how to choose a good wife. In other words, choosing a wife sounds

like a vague process in which a man can easily be cheated. For this reason, there are proverbs which are chiefly concerned with distinguishing good and bad women. The proverb below can be a good example:

“*Like mother, like daughter.*” (Litovkina, p. 9)

Grammatically, the structure of this proverb seems incomplete. However, its proposition is clear as the conjunction *like* is used to create *equivalence* between mothers and their daughters. That is, the conjunction *like* basically means *similar to*, and it is employed here to tell the recipients of the proverb that a daughter is likely to have her mother’s traits. Therefore, mothers and their daughters are *equated* here. For this reason, this proverb suggests looking at the mothers of their wives-to-be in order to understand the women who they may live with in the future. In another hypothetical context, this *equivalence* might have been intended to teach people in general. Put another way, some people could look at young girls and recite this proverb as those girls remind them of their mothers.

As well as women’s traits, English proverbs concentrate on the importance of their appearance. Like the proverb above, the one underneath emphasizes what is to be valued in women compared to men:

“*A man without ambition is like a woman without looks.*” (Kerschen, p. 45)

In this proverb, the structure of the copula *is* and the conjunction *like* are used to *equate* men who do not have a strong desire to be rich and successful with ugly / average-looking women — it should be noted that the concept of beauty differs between one culture and another or even between one person and another.

Another point to be mentioned here is that the syntactic structure of the proverb is based on two *paralleled* structures: subject + prepositional phrase + *is like* + complement + prepositional phrase. This *parallelism* is intended to say that a poor man is as useless as an ugly woman. Another interpretation may be related to the feminist debate which stresses the notion of women who cannot succeed unless they are good-looking. On the other hand, it is claimed that men can achieve whatever they want with some honest effort.

So far, the proverbs have focused on the downsides of having a bad wife and on which criteria choosing a wife is based. Nevertheless, nothing has been mentioned about life after marriage. It appears that one of the major causes of disagreement between husbands and wives is the notion of who should be in charge of the household. For this reason, the proverb below is provided here:

“*Man is the head, but woman turns it.*” (Schipper, 39)

This proverb is somewhat of a riddle. Does it represent men and women as equals? Does it try to state that the man-woman relationship is unequal when it comes to who is in control? To answer these questions, it should first be noted that the relationship between the two clauses is based on *opposition*. Put differently, the coordinate conjunction *but* is employed to create a *contrastive relationship* between the two ideas. Therefore, it would be feasible to say the proverb does not encourage the notion of cooperation between a husband and a wife, or males and females in general.

As far as being equals is concerned, the proverb uses the word *head* to describe what men are in comparison with women. This word can be used to refer to a person who is in charge of something. Thus, men are expected to be responsible for their wives, children, etc. However, this power is not absolute. This is because it is defined by women: they are the neck that *turns the head* in any direction they would like, yet people may say that it is the head which commands the neck to turn. This claim sounds logical, but the structure of the proverb is intended to portray women as a driver who holds the steering wheel of a car. Put in another way, the proverb tells its readers/hearers that even though men seem to be in charge of everything, women influence their decisions. This is due to the arrangement of ideas in the proverbs. That is, men are represented as having absolute power, but then the conjunction *but* appears to *contrast* what is said in the first clause with what comes after it (i.e. *but*). For this reason, women, according to the proverb, have the power to control men’s thoughts and decisions.

In a more straightforward manner, some proverbs explicitly address the who-is-in-control paradox. Some of them are centered around men being the maestros of their households whereas others place emphasis on how women control men as if they were puppets. The proverb below is a good example of the way relationships between men and women are structured:

“*He who has a wife has a master.*” (Litovkina, p. 11)

This proverb does not have the verb *to be*, a *linking verb* (e.g. look), nor two paralleled clauses. However, if it is broken down, *equivalence* will be found. To clarify this, note that the syntactic structure of this proverb consists of their forms: the subject (He who has a wife) + the predicator (has) + object (a master). Within this structure, there are some details to be tackled. To begin with, it is noticeable that the subject *He* is modified by the relative clause *who has a wife* to limit the discussion to married men. After that, the predicator *has* appears. This verb belongs to a verb category called *relational processes*. It has this name because verbs which belong to this category express a relationship between the subject and the object or the Carrier and the Attribute (e.g. when using the verb *to be* to describe an entity). Also, the relationships that these verbs demonstrate are usually considered stable and long-lasting. For this reason, the use of the verb *has* here exhibits that being a married man is similar to being a slave.

In summary, the main proposition of this proverb lies in *equating* married men with slaves and women with the masters of married men. What is more, note that the notion of being slave (i.e. having a master) may be *hyperbole*. Put differently, the *equivalence* this proverb tries to convey the idea that wives can easily manipulate their husbands.

The proverb analyzed above stresses women's ability to influence men. This may sound frightening to some men. That is to say, that some men are fond of power; and the notion of depriving them of it may upset them. Some proverbs, nevertheless, highlight the need for having women in men's lives and/or people's lives in general. To exemplify this, consider the proverb underneath:

“A house without woman and firelight is like a body without soul or spirit.” (Litovkina, p. 12)

In this proverb, women are *equated* with things which are considered vital to some people. This *equivalence* is achieved by using the copula *is* followed by the preposition *like*. This construction (i.e. is like) creates a *simile* to compare places which do not have women to dead bodies. Also, the proverb put women alongside *firelight*. This implies that women provide homes with warmth and love. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the words *woman*, *firelight*, *soul*, and *spirit* are not actual synonyms. However, the proverb sets up a context in which these different entities/concepts are metaphorically equal. English language users might disagree on whether the words *soul* and *spirit* are different or not, though.

However, not all English proverbs seem to praise women. On the contrary, it appears that there are many derogatory proverbs which are made and used to devalue women. Moreover, their propositions are sometimes structured in them implicitly. Put another way, they tend to convey their messages indirectly and/or humorously. A good instance can be the proverb below:

“Two good days for a man in his life: when he weds, and when he buries his wife.” (Litovkina, p. 12)

This proverb is a good instance of how (the English) language can create *equivalence* and *opposition* without using specific linguistic triggers. In other words, the overall text can function as an equating / contrasting tool.

In the case of the proverb at hand, the proverb sets up *equivalence* between what considered *good days* in a man's life and the two events which are fundamentally the reason of making his days good. Put another way, the proverb first introduces what it is centered on (i.e. times at which men feel happy). Then, a colon is used to signal that the readers/hearers are about to learn the two events which make a man delighted. These two events refer to two extremes in marriage: when the people are newlyweds and death separates them. That is, the proverb implies that men perceive women as toys to play with and get tired of after a short period of time. Thus, they wish their wives dead. Unlike the proverb analyzed above, the last proverb to be tackled here looks at the world from the entire society's perspective, not only the man's point of view:

“A woman without religion is a flower without perfume. A man without religion is a horse without a bridle.” (Kerschen, p. 76)

This proverb consists of two *paralleled* clauses, each of which contains *syntactic equivalence*. However, they have different propositions. That is, as far as their semantic content is concerned, they express *opposition*. To clarify their internal equivalence and how they are opposed, more paragraphs will be dedicated to them here.

To start with, the first clause is centered on women. But not all types of women — it is about those who are not religious women (non-believers). This can be known by looking at the prepositional phrase (PP) *without religion* — which modifies the subject (*A woman*). After the PP, the copular verb *is* is used to *equate* female non-believers with flowers which has no scents. Equating this type of women with flowers, *without perfume*, implies that women would not

be considered corrupt if they have no religion. This is because the metaphor of *flowers* is intended to say that women are naturally virtuous.

On the other side of the proverb, male non-believers are described in the same syntactic manner — but with different words. The proverb depicts men who do not have any religious beliefs and uncontrolled horses (*without a bridle*) as equals. Thus, according to this proverb, men are in need of discipline since they are inherently amoral.

CONCLUSION

In the data analysis part, a variety of critical-stylistic practices have been highlighted in order to show how English proverbs construct a world in which men and women are equated to specific entities and contrasted with others. Also, the proverbs analyzed do not display a fixed stylistic pattern of equivalence and opposition. That is, different semantic and syntactic triggers have been spotted. These triggers can be simple like using a copular verb to create equivalence or a conjunction which explicitly creates opposition.

However, metaphors and similes have been employed, too. This figurative language seems to attack men and women equally. In other words, men and women are stereotyped, but it seems that the proverbs emphasize different notions when it comes to dealing with men and women. To clarify this point, below is a list which shows how men and women are stereotyped in English proverbs, and of course, these points have been extracted from the data analysis of critical-stylistic equivalence and opposition found in the proverbs:

- Men might get deceived by what their prospective wives.
- Women in general can fulfill men's physical needs, but only good ones can become their loyal and good wives.
- Poor man is as useless as a plain woman
- If a woman has positive qualities, she will be able to make her husband a better man.
- Men and people in general are warned not to live with a bad woman
- Mothers and their daughters have the same personalities.
- Men are expected to be responsible for their wives, children, etc. However, this power is not absolute. This is because it is limited by their wives.
- Married men are slaves and their wives are their masters.
- Women are considered vital to have in one's life.
- Wives are a burden, and their husbands feel delighted only when they see their wives at their weddings and when the wives die.
- Men who do not have any religious beliefs are depicted as uncontrolled horses whereas women — who have this in common with those unreligious men — are described as flowers because women are naturally virtuous.

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