

AVARICE IN PAREMIOLOGICAL LITERATURE

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Abstract

Paremiological literature is an inexhaustible treasure trove of wisdom, with rules of moral authority, especially regarding the vices and shortcomings of human communities from ancient times, generally valid in contemporary society. Our literature has as a keystone in this sense the ten volumes of Iuliu A. Zanne, who recorded an impressive corpus of proverbs to demonstrate the creative ability, language, and wisdom of the Romanian people. Along with other vices, avarice occupies a central place, being represented and harshly criticized in many proverbs and sayings.

Keywords: *proverbs, avarice, greed, niggardliness, greedy*

Résumé

La littérature parémiologique représente un trésor inépuisable de sagesse, avec des règles d'autorité morale, spécialement en ce qui concerne les vices et les défauts des collectivités humaines d'anciens temps, généralement valables dans la société contemporaine. Notre littérature a pour clé de voute dans ce sens les dix volumes d'Iuliu A. Zanne, qui a consigné un important corpus de proverbes pour démontrer le langage, la capacité de création et la sagesse du peuple roumain. Avec les autres vices, l'avarice occupe une place centrale, représenté et très critiqué dans de nombreux proverbes et dictons.

Mots-clés: *proverbes, avarice, cupidité, couteux, avare*

1. Importance of paremiological literature

Through proverbs we have the opportunity to travel back in time to the dawn of humanity, and to observe that, despite the differences in evolution (language, traditions, customs, etc.), the way people relate to vices and shortcomings is, in essence, the same. Proverbs have been passed down from generation to generation, from the most remote centuries, circulating long before any written recordings. "By means of them, primitive peoples entered upon a heritage of sound wisdom and good working common-sense, and had ready to hand counsels of prudence, hints for the conduct of life, warnings of its pitfalls"¹.

Dumitru Stanciu made the pertinent remark that the attempts to define the proverb tend to include philosophical criteria ("The proverb is the spirit of one and the wisdom of

¹ See F. Edward Hulme, *Proverb Lore. Many sayings, wise or otherwise, on many subjects, gleaned from many sources*, The Project Gutenberg EBook of Proverb Lore, 2010, p. 10 (publication as eBook of the first edition that came out in London in 1902).

all”), ethical ones (“The whole common sense of mankind is in proverbs”), sociological ones (“Proverbs are the children of experience”), etc., each author thus trying to bring a note of originality in capturing its features. However, the axis of defining proverbs is “what is essential in the ‘being’ of the proverb, namely that it is a species of popular literature, which belongs to the short genre”², entrenched exclusively in the sphere of folk creation. Thus, in this context, the proverb marks “an age of human respite and return to self, to one’s own experience and to an effort to fix it in an economical way”³.

2. Iuliu A. Zanne or the exhaustive collector of popular wisdom

The author of the largest collection of proverbs and sayings in our literature, Iuliu A. Zanne was the son of the 1848 revolutionary Alexandru Zanne, exiled to Turkey after the failure of the 1848 Revolution in Wallachia. Despite his profession as an engineer (at the railways, at the technical service of the Bucharest City Hall or at the service of bridges and roads), inheriting his writing talent from his father, he cultivated in parallel his passion for popular literature, materialized in the publication between 1895 and 1903 of the ten volumes that make up the monumental collection entitled *Proverbele românilor din România, Basarabia, Bucovina, Ungaria, Istria și Macedonia. Proverbe, zicători, povățuiri, cuvinte adevărate, asemănări, idiotisme și cimilituri, cu un glosar român-francez/* ‘Proverbs of the Romanians from Romania, Bessarabia, Bukovina, Hungary, Istria, and Macedonia. Proverbs, sayings, counsel, true words, similarities, idioms, and riddles, with a Romanian-French glossary’. The impressive corpus of proverbs and sayings is supplemented by “counsel, idioms, language disturbances, riddles from cult literature or existing in the oral circuit, with the foreign correspondence of Romanian proverbs (...) extracted from chronicles and religious writings, from the manuscript of ‘parables’ of Iordache Golescu⁴, from ‘The Story of Speech’ by Anton Pann, from the collections of I.C. Hîntescu and P. Ispirescu, from classical writers”⁵.

The work includes twenty-three chapters, each revolving around a general idea: physical nature (stars, earth, plants, seasons, etc.), animals (birds, quadrupeds, insects, fish), man and his organs, physical life (customs, clothing, houses, etc.), social life (justice, teaching, trades, etc.) or intellectual life (soul and its faculties)⁶.

Moreover, most of the proverbs are recorded with their variants (mentioning their attestation in popular speech or the use in cultivated language by writers), whereas texts related to customs, traditions, legends are also inserted in a large number.

All the aspects listed above make Zanne’s work a reference work in both

² See Dumitru Stanciu, *Paremiologia în optica cercetărilor și ideilor contemporane*, in „Anuar de Lingvistică și Istorie Literară”, XXVII, 1979-1980, p. 202.

³ Idem, *ibidem*, apud S.N. Kramer, *Istoria incepe de la Sumer*, București, 1962, p. 177-185.

⁴Iuliu A. Zanne continues the work of the boyar Iordache Golescu (1768-1848), the older collection of parables and proverbs of the latter being, in fact, the corpus of volume VIII, later published by Zanne.

⁵ See *Dicționarul literaturii române de la origini până la 1900*, București, Editura Academiei, 1979, p. 933.

⁶ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 934.

Romanian and universal literature, emphasizing the importance of paremiological literature from a moral point of view – by drawing rules of conduct regarding human actions and attitudes – and literary as well – through the capacity of inventiveness and constant enrichment of the Romanian language.

3. Avarice

Avarice is a vice reflected in many proverbs, being closely connected with another capital sin, namely greed. But avarice transgresses the limits of greed, encompassing selfishness, the exaggerate instinct of possession, materialism, and so on. Man becomes stingy when he abuses wealth, obsessively identifying himself with the material goods he possesses.

DEX₂ records the following definition: *zgârcenie*/ ‘avarice’ (f.n.), “the attribute of being stingy; the character of the stingy man; niggardliness, miserliness”. From a structural point of view, the term is a noun derived from the verb *a zgârca* + suffix – *enie*., with Slavic etymology: *sŭgrŭčiti*.

The noun *zgârcenie* has a notable synonymic series⁷: *avaritŭie*, *calicenie*, *calicie*, (bookish) *parcimonie*, (rare) *meschinărie*, (popular) *scumpenie*, (popular and familiar) *cărpănoşenie*, *cărpănoşie*, (old) *cumplitate*, *scumpătate*, *scumpete*, *scumpenie*, (figurative) *chibzuială*, *egoism*, *măsură*, *moderație*, *reţinere*, *socoteală*, *socotinţă*, *târguială*, *tocmeală* (*excessive bargaining*), *ŭgănie*.

From the moral (religious) standpoint, avarice is one of the seven capital sins, together with pride, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth (laziness)⁸.

Avarice or greed is seen as the excessive love for material things, an unquenchable thirst for them, characterized by the continual longing and concern to increase wealth and culminating in the tenacity to preserve the goods gathered exclusively for selfish purposes. Thus, avarice, either in the form of the greed to constantly gather goods, or in the form of giving nothing to anyone, or too little in relation to possibilities, leads to serious sins/ consequences in terms of the degradation of the human mind, but also of social relationships. The consequence of avarice is the lack of empathy towards those who lack possibilities; obsession with acquiring and preserving material things; fraud; deception, cunning, lying; betrayal of persons, etc.

Avarice thus becomes the expression of the grossest selfishness, having an antisocial character. We find it at the basis of all forms of human oppression and it is the

⁷ Luiza Seche, Mircea Seche, *Dicţionarul de sinonime al limbii române*, Bucureşti, Editura Academiei, 1982, p. 1462.

⁸ In theological writings, the capital sins are a series of acts that oppose the cardinal virtues, just as the sins against the Holy Spirit oppose the theological virtues. The name *capital* does not express here their gravity, because, in concrete cases, they can be light sins, but the fact that these sins are the source or the beginning from which many other and various sins come out. They are stable inclinations, vices, passions, rather than sinful acts. St. John of Damascus mentions in his work *On the Eight Spirits of Evil* — eight deadly sins. St. Gregory the Great establishes in the sixth century only seven, a number that was adopted by both the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

root of negative actions such as: theft, deception, social exploitation, wars (seen as a means used by certain individuals to increase their profits and sphere of exploitation, while ignoring the suffering caused to others).

Avarice and greed are, in other respects⁹, structurally similar to envy, the latter being associated with “the sour grape syndrome” and manifested by a hostile or aggressive attitude towards what others possess, and we do not, and even if we got that, we still wouldn’t be satisfied.

4. Avarice in proverbs: ways of representation

Analyzing the corpus of proverbs selected from Zanne’s volumes, we notice that the vice of avarice has been illustrated and harshly criticized in paremiological literature, based on the experience and moral laws passed down from generation to generation, from ancient times.

Ordinary people have satirized this human flaw in various situations, using in proverbs words that are part of the lexical field of food and drink / liquids (*honey, egg, bread, pie, radish, salt, vinegar, etc.*): *Sweeter the vinegar free of charge than paid honey.* (Zanne IV, 8959); *Sweeter received vinegar than bought honey.* (Zanne IV, 8960); *All the egg in the pie.* (Zanne IV, 8969); *From a radish four dishes are made: grated and not grated, creasy and sliced.* (Zanne IV, 9200); *No salt and bread does he taste.* (Zanne IV, 9222)

Another series of proverbs highlights this shortcoming by emphasizing the specific characteristics / actions (or not) of a zoomorphic participant (animal / bird):

the wolf: *The wolf still cares / Even for what it eats alone.* (Zanne I, 2021); *It’s hard to get it out of the wolf’s mouth.* (Zanne I, 2029);

the cat: *You don’t get fish from the cat.* (Zanne IX, 8180);

the pig: *The pig just after it dies / Saturates everyone with grease.* (Zanne I, 2354); *The pig keeps gathering, gaining weight well / But for others, not for itself.* (Zanne I, 2355);

the flea: *From the flea too he wants to get animal fat..* (Zanne I, 2424);

the crayfish: *He is as stingy as a crayfish on coals.* (Zanne IX, 1108);

the cow: *If I had begged a barren cow, it would have given me a spoonful of milk.* (Zanne IX, 8035).

A special category is represented by the paremiological units in which the terms that name the vice itself (*avarice*), as well as the bearer of this vice (*the niggard*) are replaced by the outdated and popular synonyms, *scumpete*, *scump* respectively¹⁰: *Averea scumpului, când în pământ se îngroapă, ca soarele când sub pământ se vâără, la nimeni*

⁹ See Gabriele Taylor, *Deadly Vices*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 43-44.

¹⁰ DEX₂ records the adjective *scump* with the old and popular meaning of “stingy”, used in expressions such as *a fi scump la vorbă* = “to be quiet”, *a fi scump la vedere* = “to show himself rarely in society, among other people; to be hard to find”; substantivized, we find it in the proverb *Leneșul mai mult aleargă, scumpul mai mult păgubește/* ‘The lazy one runs more, the covetous man loses’. The old and popular meaning of “stinginess, avarice” is also mentioned for the noun *scumpete*.

nu mai luminează./ ‘The fortune of the covetous man, when buried in the earth, like the sun when it goes underground, no longer shines on anyone’. (Zanne IX, 3011); *Nisipul cu cât mai mult se udă, cu atât mai mult se întărește și se împietrește; așa și scumpul, cu cât mai mult adună, cu atât mai mult scumpetea i se mărește./* ‘The more the sand gets wet, the harder it hardens like a rock; so the covetous man, the more he gathers, the more his covetousness increases.’ (Zanne IX, 3014); *Scumpetea pe scump ca o boală îl muncește./* ‘Covetousness is for the covetous man like a disease.’ (Zanne IX, 3015); *Scumpetea pe scump ca pe cal cu frâul îl ține./* ‘Covetousness is for the covetous man like a bridle for a horse.’ (Zanne IX, 3016); *Scumpul, ca măgarul, bogăție mare poate avea pe spinare, iar de demâncare numai fân are./* ‘The covetous man, like the donkey, can have great wealth on his back, but he eats only hay.’ (Zanne IX, 3017); *Scumpul mila și îndurarea nicicum nu le cunoaște, că pe amândouă le privește ca cel mai mare al lui vrășmaș, când gândul și-l pironează numai la avere./* ‘The covetous man knows nothing of mercy and kindness, for he regards both of them as his greatest enemy, when the thought nails him only to wealth.’ (Zanne IX, 3018); *Scumpul trăiește ca în pustietate, unde nicio demâncare nu găsește./* ‘The covetous man lives as if he were in the desert, where he can’t find any food.’ (Zanne IX, 3019).

Equally sanctioned are the reactions / actions manifested by stingy people under the influence of this shortcoming:

avarice pushed to the point of obsession, with negative consequences on the way of living: *Pentru o para își pune ștreangul de gât./* ‘For a penny he puts the noose around his neck.’ (Zanne V, 12475); *Mai bine trăiește un sărac lipit, / Decât un bogat zgârcit./* ‘A very poor man lives better/ Than a stingy rich man.’ (Zanne V, 12761) *Rabdă parcă e de fier / Și-i crapă ochii de ger. /* ‘He endures as if he were made of iron/And his eyes crack with frost.’ (Zanne VII, 17343);

avarice manifested by gestures / habits specific to the stingy person, easily identifiable in the eyes of others: *Leagă paraua cu zece noduri./* ‘He ties the penny with ten knots.’ (Zanne V, 12469); *Punga la gură i-a făcut păianjeni./* ‘His bag is covered by a spider web.’ (Zanne V, 12609); *A avea nouă băieri la pungă./* ‘To have nine threads around the bag.’ (Zanne V, 12611);

avarice in respect of wealth / material goods: *De la bogatul calic / Nu poți apuca nimic./* ‘From the rich niggard/ You can’t grab anything.’ (Zanne V, 11228); *Să-i scoți un ochi și nu-ți dă nimic./* ‘Take out his eye and he won’t give you anything.’ (Zanne V, 11761); *Dă ca din ochii lui./* ‘He gives you as if he gave from his eyes.’ (Zanne V, 11762);

avarice as a disruptive element of social relations and ethical norms of the community in general: *Nici pe sine nu se pricopsește, nici pe altul nu folosește./* ‘He doesn’t get rich, nor is he useful to another.’ (Zanne V, 12586); *Săracului în loc să-i dea / Închide ochii a nu-l vedea./* ‘Instead of giving to the poor/ He closes his eyes not to see him.’ (Zanne V, 12772).

One should also note the proverbs referring to the bearer of this vice introduced

by the relative pronoun with generalizing meaning *cine* or adverbs with the role of generalization: *Cine strânge nu mănâncă.* / ‘He who gathers does not eat.’ (Zanne V, 12924); *Cine strânge să mănânce.* / ‘He who gathers should eat.’ (Zanne V, 12926); *Unde este comoara voastră acolo este și inima voastră.* / ‘Your treasure is where your heart is.’ (Zanne V, 11618); *Când ceri, n-are, când dai, n-are.* / ‘When you ask, he has nothing, when you give, he has nothing.’ (Zanne X, 11075).

5. Conclusions

Analyzing the corpus of proverbs dedicated to avarice, it can be concluded that, from a linguistic point of view, certain more or less productive patterns predominate, for example, in the process of generating variants. Thus, one can notice the *inversion* in the word order (procedure by which the order of the structural components is modified, aiming at highlighting another element of the construction)¹¹: *From the flea too he wants to get animal fat.* (Zanne I, 2424); *For a coin he hangs himself.* (Zanne V, 12475). Notable is the *lexical expansion*¹², by inserting adjective determinants with the role of semantic focus of the referential element: *Sweeter the vinegar free of charge than paid honey.* (Zanne IV, 8959); *Sweeter received vinegar than bought honey.* (Zanne IV, 8960).

From a stylistic point of view, the comparison prevails, which gives the proverb the quality of being easily remembered, the purpose being the wish to be transmitted on.

Avarice, along with greed, is manifested by an unreasonable attitude towards money or material possessions, especially when that amount of wealth exceeds what is necessary for man to live in accordance with his standard of living, and the obsession with accumulating and keeping it becomes a goal in itself in order to live.

Paremiological literature offers, through proverbs, numerous examples of situations when this vice influences and degrades human spirit and, implicitly, society, constituting a true source of norms and teachings for both the simple man of the past and the modern man of contemporary reality. Zanne’s volumes remain, in this sense, an important, available source to whoever would like to travel in time (and space) to prove the didactic and moralizing nature of the words of the spirit of the people.

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¹¹ See Liviu Groza, *Dinamica unităților frazeologice în limba română contemporană*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2005, p. 84.

¹² Idem, *ibidem*, p. 75.

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