A Developmental Study of Proverb Comprehension

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Growth in proverb comprehension was hypothesized to result from the gradual emergence of cognitive abilities reflected in a sequence of increasingly complex abilities: story matching, transfer of relations, desymbolization, proverb matching, and paraphrase. Items for these abilities for each of 10 proverbs of two structural types were administered in three test sessions to 438 students in grades three to seven. An analogy subtest was used to measure general intelligence. ANOVA yielded significant main effects for grade, tasks, and proverbs (all p's < .01). A significant task × proverb interaction (p < .01) revealed the difficulty of precise control over the language of the items. Proverb structure had no measurable impact on difficulty. Analogy score was a significant factor in performance (p < .01) but not as potent as age (p < .01). The sequential order of abilities received only weak confirmation, though tasks did correlate among themselves with medium strength (r's = .50–.70). Individual interviews added a qualitative dimension to the findings. The suitability of cognitive hierarchical models for proverb comprehension was questioned.

INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the development of proverb comprehension in children and attempted to account for that development by examining the
sequential emergence of specific underlying abilities. The study was prompted by the rich variety of cognitive and linguistic phenomena involved in the development of proverb comprehension: the transition from the concrete to the abstract mode (Goldstein, 1940), from concrete to formal thought (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), and from concrete to metaphoric symbolism (Werner & Kaplan, 1950).

Recent reviews of metaphor research (Ortony, Reynolds, & Arter, 1978; Billow, 1977) mention the few developmental studies of proverb comprehension that exist. The work of Richardson and Church (1959) is essentially taxonomic, demonstrating that the form of responses in proverb comprehension (e.g., from literal to figurative) changes across ages. However, they limit themselves to a description of the changes without discussing the correctness of the responses. Billow (1975) attempted to correlate proverb comprehension with a measure of formal operativity without great success. Reasons for the failure are detailed in Ortony et al., 1978. More recently, Honeck, Sowry and Voegtle (1978) demonstrated proverb comprehension among some of their first- to third-grade subjects by utilizing a pictorial assessment technique aimed at neutralizing potential confounds due to metacognitive demands, information overload, production (vs. comprehension) difficulties, etc. While the new technique is welcome, the results are problematic because second- and third-graders scored no better than first-graders and the overall positive performance may well derive from the top five students in each grade. Moreover, the assessment task does not tap the meaning of a proverb (i.e., a generalized statement of advice, as defined anon) so much as the ability to perceive in a new concrete setting the relationship on which the proverb was based.

As this brief literature review indicates, research in the development of proverb comprehension has heretofore proceeded without a clear conception of the nature of proverbs. The current study proceeded from an analysis of proverbs as both analogies and metaphors. Seitel’s (1973) analogic model of proverbs asserts that the relationships between the terms of a proverb are declared equivalent to the relationships in the situation to which the proverb refers. Hence, proverb use reflects the structure of a classical analogy item A:B::C:D, where A and B are terms in the proverb and C and D are their referents in the situation at hand (though the number of symbolic terms in a proverb and in the situation at hand may be greater than two).

Previous research has not been strong enough in its theoretical base to allow the formulation of specific research hypotheses. Therefore, the basic question examined was whether development in proverb comprehension could be accounted for by the hierarchical emergence of the ability to transfer relationships followed by the ability to desymbolize