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Yesterday, today and tomorrow in phraseology and paremiology

1 Perception of time

In this paper, I would like to concentrate on some important adverbs concerning time in phraseologisms and proverbs in European languages. In cultural sciences there have been long debates concerning conceptions of time as culturally specific or universal. Not going into detail regarding the discussion on scientific research on the perception of time in general (we are not able to perceive the future, because perception is a causal process, and we can only perceive earlier events, so every event is past by the time we perceive it and it is not really the present we perceive, in general we only perceive the recent past – because information needs time to reach our senses, but we feel it nonetheless as present, which by psychologists is called “specious present” (Le Poidevin 2004)), I will nonetheless make some preliminary remarks on time and temporal adverbs in cultural theory and linguistics. There is an enormous body of literature on conceptions of time in social and cultural theory. Anthropological or ethnographic studies recurrently try to prove that time conceptions are culturally dependent (Birth 1999, 2004). This may be true to some extent but it seems very difficult to prove that the experience of time differs in various cultures. Some cultures for example do not possess notions of past, present and future. In linguistics, supporters of linguistic determinism like Benjamin Lee Whorf claimed that the Hopi have a very different conception of time, that their language contains “no words, grammatical forms, constructions, or expressions that refer directly to what we call ‘time’, or to past, or future, or to enduring or lasting.” (Pinker 1995: 63). In an extensive study on the Hopi language Malotki (1983) tried to prove that Whorf was wrong when he wrote that the Hopi have no conception of time, but John A. Lucy (1996: 43) claimed that though they have words for temporal cycles and so on, they really do not have the abstract notion of time that we have.

In a famous and often quoted study Rammstedt (1975) developed a model of everyday perception and division of time, which in his opinion is culturally dependent and changing through history. Though he seems to claim universal

validity for this model I would prefer to restrict it to the culture(s) of the so-called Western world. For him there are only occasional conceptions of time (“occasionales Zeitbewusstsein”, Rammstedt 1975: 50) in early, simple and undifferentiated societies, which differentiate only between now and not-now. In early hierarchically structured societies he sees a cyclic conception of time (before – after), which changes in modern functional structured societies into a linear one, beginning with a closed future (past – present – future) and then leading into an open future (continuous movement and acceleration). This model has served as a pattern for analyzing the development of proverbs in German throughout history in the study of proverbs on time by Friese (1984). Friese tries to prove that older proverbs in the collection of German proverbs by Wander (1867–1880) reflect the occasional conception of time, while younger ones from the 17th and 18th century reflect the cyclical model and only those from the later 18th and the 19th century are linear. This is only a presumption because he has to admit that his findings have a limited relevance for the oral genesis and the provenance of these proverbs (Friese 1984: 67). Nonetheless it is interesting that according to Friese proverbs with the temporal adverb *heute* (*today*) at their beginning (in the middle ages up to the 16th century) are occasional (19 of the 141 “heute”-proverbs which we find in the collection of Wander), but they are already temporally directed because they mostly show not the contrast now – not now, but instead the contrast of today – tomorrow. Most of the 122 remaining “heute”-proverbs express the stoic indifference with regard to the direction and changing of time (cyclical conception of time). For Friese their heyday is the 17th century. In the 19th century Friese sees a paradigm shift from (stoic) proverbs with *today* to *time* (*Zeit*), when time becomes an objective value and tends to determine everything. He demonstrates the historical process of the changing models with various types of “time”-proverbs throughout history in the following table:

1. occasional (*Heut ist die Zeit*) – occasional (*Today is the time*);
2. den Gegensatz zwischen der occasionalistischen Gewissheit und dem ungewissen Morgen thematisierend (*Ein Heute ist besser als zehn Morgen*) – making the difference between the occasional certainty und uncertain tomorrow a central theme (*One today is better than ten tomorrows*);
3. stoisch (*Heute lieb und morgen leid ...*) – stoic (*Today beloved and tomorrow suffering – that is the constancy of the world*);
4. neuzeitliche, durch Arbeit determinierte Zukunft (*Was du heute kannst besorgen...*) – modern future determined by labour (*Don't leave for tomorrow what you can do today*) (Friese 1984: 49).

It seems very difficult to believe that there has been really such a historical development of proverbs concerning time. I will therefore not treat phraseologisms and proverbs historically and will take my examples from collections of European phraseologisms and proverbs regardless of their possible historical origin.

2 Temporal adverbs as shifters

The conceptions of time and temporal adverbs have been the object of various proverb studies, some of which refer partially to the adverbs *yesterday*, *today*, *tomorrow* which I am dealing with in the paper. But all of the authors failed to notice that these adverbs in European (and in most of the languages of the world) are so-called shifters, that they do not have a constant meaning, that their meaning depends on the situation in which they are used. So in her study on temporal adverbs in German proverbs Steigüber (1988) compares the exact numerical measurement of time and the information about time we get of proverbs with temporal adverbs. She assumes that a difference between natural and social time does not exist, and that the main difference between exact numeric time measurement and the information about time we find in proverbs is that the first one is unique and specific whereas the second one has a binding force not only concerning the dimension of time but also concerning social norms and patterns. This, according to Steigüber (1988: 182), is due to the ambivalent character of most of the temporal adverbs. The ambivalent character of temporal adverbs in proverbs is due to the fact that they do have different meanings in proverbs. As temporal shifters like *yesterday*, *today* and *tomorrow* are bound in their meaning to a certain situation they must undergo a sort of metaphorical or similar process to get their concrete meaning in proverbs. This is always the case when we quote proverbs as texts without a context. This may not always be the case when we use proverbs in a concrete situation. We will return to this issue later.

First of all, I want to make some remarks on temporal shifters in general and the specific shifters *yesterday*, *today* and *tomorrow*. Temporal shifters seem to be one of the linguistic universals in language:

It seems that every human language does have 1st and 2nd person pronouns, at least two demonstrative adverbs ('here' and 'there') and either grammatical or lexical (or both) temporal shifters. (Dixon 2012: 10)

But there is a difference between grammatical tense and temporal shifters like for example *yesterday*. For Elisabeth Leiss (2012: 52), this difference

consists in that “TENSE is essentially phoric, whereas temporal adverbials are deictic.” Others, like Diewald (1991), characterize shifters as elements with strong deixis, in contrast to weak deixis in grammatical categories. I think the notion of “phoricity” instead of weak deixis is more appropriate. I agree with Leiss (2012: 51) who writes:

In contrast to temporal adverbials, tense is not deictic, but phoric, because it displaces and splits the speaker’s origo. The speaker travels mentally into the past or into the future.

I will use the following examples and the line of argumentation of Leiss (2012: 51) to show the differences between adverbials with absolute (2) and relative (1) reference and between (past) tense (3), which splits the speaker into speaker and viewer:

- (1) *An earthquake devastated Japan yesterday.* (relative temporal adverbial // computed reference, simple displacement // deictic function)
- (2) *An earthquake devastated Japan on March 11, 2011.* (absolute temporal adverbial // direct reference // compares with the referential function of proper names)
- (3) *An earthquake devastated Japan.* (past // double displacement // phoric function)

Maybe one of the reasons why previous studies concerning temporal adverbs in paremiology and phraseology do not even mention the deictic nature of these adverbs is that the deictic nature is often bound to the direct context in which they are used or it has vanished because of their new metaphorical non-deictic nature. On the other hand, though we have lots of proverbs, and phraseologisms with *today*, *yesterday* and *tomorrow* in all European languages in direct and in transformed meanings, it is astonishing that in great ethnological encyclopedias like the Russian Slavjanskije drevnosti (1995–2014) we find entries for *vremja* and *sutki* (including *den’* and *noč’*) and the days of the week but we do not find entries for *yesterday*, *today* and *tomorrow*. The same holds for the German Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens (1927–1942).

3 The frequency of *today*, *yesterday* and *tomorrow*

It seems to be an interesting fact about the temporal adverbs *today*, *yesterday* and *tomorrow* in the European languages that they show great differences in their frequency of use. It is evident that the use of *today* is more than twice as frequent as that of *yesterday* and *tomorrow*. In Russian, for example, *segodnja*

has a frequency of 497 (frequency rank 203), *tomorrow* 278 (345), *yesterday* 204 (410) (Zasorina 1977); in Czech *dnes* 1672 (frequency rank 102), *zítra* 267 (716), *včera* 256 (749) (Jelínek, Bečka, Těšitelová: 1961). In contemporary American English the frequency of *today* is six times the frequency of *tomorrow* and *yesterday*; out of 450 million words *today* has a frequency of 183.724 (rank 215), *tomorrow* 3098 (1341) and *yesterday* 26215 (1514) (Word frequency data). I will not go into details about the frequency relation between *tomorrow* and *yesterday*, but it seems that in European languages *tomorrow* is a bit more frequent than *yesterday*. The proportions for the use of these temporal adverbs are similar in the proverbs in which they occur. Thus Wander (1867–1880) lists 146¹ proverbs with *heute*, 42 with *morgen* and 12 with *gestern*. In Mieder's Dictionary of American Proverbs (1992) we find 15 proverbs (with lots of variants) with *today*, 14 with *tomorrow* and 5 with *yesterday*. In the collection of Polish proverbs by Krzyżanowski (1969–1978) we have 26 proverbs with *dziś*, 16 with *jutro* and 3 with *wczoraj*. In the collection of Russian proverbs by Dal' (1879) we find 20 proverbs beginning with *segodnja* and only 4 beginning with *zavtra* and 4 with *včera*.²

4 Importance of time in America and of the present in European languages

Before we start to analyze the use and the “meaning” of these temporal adverbs in phraseologisms and proverbs I would like to make a few remarks on a very concise study by Kimberly J. Lau (1996) on the »Ten Proverbs Most Frequently Used in Newspapers and Their Relation to American Values«. Lau found out that the ten most frequently used American proverbs all had to do with time. Among them there are such widely known proverbs as *Time is money*, *Time flies*, *Time will tell* and *Better late than never*. But the conclusions from these findings concerning a possible world view of the Americans are very

1 The total number differs from the number indicated by Friese (1984) because Friese excluded some of Wander's examples as “non-proverbs”.

2 But on the whole the situation seems different. In Dal's collection I found 37 proverbs with *segodnja*, 70 with *zavtra* and 17 with *včera*. A count in an internet collection of Russian proverbs showed similar results: *segodnja* 43, *zavtra* 70, *včera* 13, but the reason may be that often instead of *segodnja* we have *nyně* or *nynče* in Russian proverbs cf. *nyně na nogach, zavtra v mogile, odno nynče lučše dvuch zavtra* (Poslovicy i Pogovorki u Russkogo Naroda). In Dal's collection I found 66 occurrences of *nyně*, which can, of course, not always be replaced by *segodnja*.

“moderate” and differ from conclusions which we know from Russian or Polish “worldview”-studies on proverbs and phraseology. For the author it is obvious that the frequency of these proverbs correlates “with contemporary American values and attitudes” (Lau 1996: 136) but on the other hand it is clear that they do not “conform to a single, neat model which succinctly articulates American worldview” (Lau 1996: 146). In some sense Lau’s study confirms the theory of Fries (1984) that in modern times there seems to be a shift from the use of *today* or *day* in proverbs to the use of *time* because the temporal adverbs *today*, *tomorrow* and *yesterday* are not used in these proverbs.

The frequency of the temporal adverbs used seems to be an indicator of their value. So it is obvious that in general in European proverbs *today* has positive connotations, whereas *tomorrow* and *yesterday* are mainly negative. This can be seen by the use of a widespread idiom in European languages, derived from the Bible Job 8,9 *for we are but of yesterday and know nothing*, Germ. *von gestern sein* ‘to be outdated, outmoded’, *Schnee von gestern* ‘that’s old hat, yesterday’s chip paper’ or *nicht von gestern sein*, Engl. *not born yesterday*, Dutch *niet van gisteren zijn*, Croatian *ne biti od jučer* ‘experienced’, Slov. *ljudje od včeraj, ti niso od včeraj*, Pol. *albo ja to wczorajszy?*. In general the meaning of *yesterday* in these idioms is ‘old’, ‘outdated’, cf. Germ. *was kümmert mich mein Geschwätz von gestern*, French *ne pas être né d’hier*, Russ. *čelovek včerašnego dnja* ‘behind the time, outmoded’, *žit’ včerašnim dnem, iskat’ včerašnego dnja*.

In German, on the contrary, we have (even as a title of journals in GDR and in Western Germany) *die Frau von heute* ‘a modern woman’ (cf. Slov. *današnji človek*). There are other idioms in European languages, in which the use of *today* and *tomorrow* is idiomatic and they are not used in their deictic function. Cf. Germ. *heut oder morgen* ‘sometime, in the very near future’, *lieber heut als morgen* ‘quick, immediately’, *von heute auf morgen* ‘quick’, *hier und heute* ‘immediately – hic et nunc’, Slov. *rajši danes kakor jutri* ‘as quickly as possible’, *danes in jutri* ‘always’, *od danes do jutri* ‘unsteady’, ‘quick’, *danes ali jutri* ‘very quick’, Russ. *ne segodnja-zavtra* ‘any day, very soon, now’.

In Wander and in other European proverb collections we find some proverbs which demonstrate the positive connotation of *today*, which is better than *tomorrow* or *yesterday*: *besser heut als morgen*, *ein Heute ist besser als zehn Morgen*, *heut ist der Mann*, *heut ist der Tag*, *heut ist die beste Zeit*, cf. Engl. *today will never come again*, *yesterday is past*, *tomorrow may never come*, *this day is ours*, *yesterday is gone*, *forget it*, *tomorrow isn’t here*, *don’t worry*

about it, today is here, use it, yesterday is gone, today is going, tomorrow you may be gone, one today is worth two tomorrows, one hour today is worth two tomorrow, Pol.: lepszé jedno dziś niż dwoje jutro, Russ. odno segodnja/nynče lučše dvuch zavtra.

But very often proverbs express the vanity of life through the opposition, that what today may seem good will turn into something bad tomorrow. They are used as a sort of reminder of the transitoriness of our life. Most of the proverbs of the collection of Wander do have this structure, cf.: *Heute Fried, morgen Krieg, heute hoch und groß, morgen nackt und bloß, heut im Putz, morgen im Schmutz, heut in Freud, morgen in Leid, heut in Saus und Braus, morgen im engen Haus, heute Blume, morgen Heu, heute gesund, morgen auf dem Hund, heute Hui, morgen Pfui, heute rot, morgen tot.* We find a lot of proverbs of this type in all European languages, Engl. *today glad, tomorrow sad, fret today, regret tomorrow*, French *aujourd'hui chevalier, demain vachier, aujourd'hui en fleur, demain en pleur, aujourd'hui maistre, demain valet, aujourd'hui marié, demain marri, aujourd'hui en chère et demain en bière, aujourd'hui ami, demain ennemi*, Pol. *Dziś się żyje, jutro gnije*, Czech *dnes tlusto, a zejtra pusto*, Span. *hoy caballero, mañana vaquero*, Ital. *oggi creditore, domani debitore, oggi in figura, domani in sepoltura*, Dutch *heden rood, morgen dood, heden koning, morgen keutel*, Slov. *danes s betom, jutri s psom.*

Of course, we do have the opposite phenomenon (which we often find in proverbs) that the contrary is also “true”. But proverbs like German *heute arm, morgen reich* or Spanish *hoy vaquero, mañana caballero* are relatively seldom.

The transitoriness of life is also expressed by a common European proverb, a sort of a *memento mori*, which in former times served as an inscription on gravestones: Germ. *heute mir, morgen dir*, Lat. *hodie mihi, cras tibi*, Engl. *me today, you tomorrow*, Slov. *danes meni, jutri tebi*, Czech *dnes mně, zítra tobě*, French *un jour l'un, un jour l'autre*, Russ. *segodnja mne, zavtra tebe*.³

The importance of the present for our lives is shown by widespread proverbs and sayings which stress the necessity that something has to be done now, today, and not to be delayed until later or tomorrow, which, of course, is related to the Latin *carpe diem*. Other proverbs characterize those who delay things until tomorrow as “bad” like German: *morgen, morgen, nur nicht heute, sagen alle faulen Leute*, cf. Germ. *was du heute kannst besorgen, das verschiebe*

3 In Jesus Sirach 38,22 *Remember that his fate will also be yours; for him it was yesterday, for you today* we have the opposite.

nicht auf morgen, Engl. *never put off until tomorrow what you can do today*, Ital. *non rimandare a domani quello che puoi fare oggi*, French *il ne faut pas remettre à demain ce qu'on peut faire aujourd'hui/le jour même*, Slov. *kar danes lahko storiš, ne odlašaj na jutri*, Croatian *što možeš danas, ne ostavljaj za sutra*. Russ. *ne otkladyvaj na zavtra to, što možno/možeš' sdelat' segodnja*, similar Pol. *co dziś opuścisz, jutro nie dogonisz*.

5 Truth in proverbs. Loss and reestablishment of the deictic function

On the other hand in most of the European languages we find proverbs meaning just the opposite, cf. Germ. *morgen ist auch noch ein Tag, was heut nicht wird, kann morgen werden, ist's heut nicht, so ist's morgen*, Engl. *tomorrow is a new day, there is always a tomorrow, never do today what you can put off until tomorrow*, French *demain il fera jour*, Slov. *jutri je še en dan*, Pol. *nie dziś, to jutro*.

There have been long discussions about the “truth” in proverbs. Burger (1998: 109) mentions the ambivalence of the claim to truth in proverbs and declares that proverbs do not represent timeless valid truths, but that the person “who follows the proverb makes it true interpreting it in a special manner and referring it to his situation” (“daß derjenige, der sich danach richtet, es wahr macht, indem er es in einer bestimmten Weise interpretierend auf seine Situation bezieht”). Burger and other authors emphasize the metacommunicative character of proverbs which refer to themselves and to a context in which they are used. Nahberger (2000: 49–56), who differentiates between the perlocutionary goals and the underlying original proposition/the original image of a proverb utterance, claims that the truths in proverbs are truisms, which offer guidance in a conventionalized system. But when a proverb is used it very often comes to a conflict between the perlocutionary goals of the speaker and the propositionally rooted truism of the proverb.

In his dissertation, Nahberger (2000) regarded proverbs as “mythical sentences” and tried to explore their functions in speech acts. In an empirical study he found out that speakers perform five illocutionary speech acts with proverbs and that among those the act of consoling is a very prominent one. “Morgen ist auch noch ein Tag”, thus the title of his dissertation, is only used in a consoling function.

What is more interesting is the function and the meaning of the temporal adverbs in these proverbs. In nearly all phraseologisms the temporal adverbs have a different meaning and no deictic function. In some proverbs they lose their deictic function and acquire a general meaning like in the following examples: *live today, for tomorrow may not come* ‘live in the present, enjoy the present, for you may die’, *never do today what you can put off until tomorrow* (where “never” implies several “todays”). In proverb collections proverbs cannot have a deictic function because there is no direct context. But many of them can be used in a direct situation and reestablish their deictic function. So you can admonish a lazy person in a concrete situation to do his work: *what’s done today, you don’t need to do tomorrow*, or *plan today for tomorrow*. But on the whole there are no proverbs with the temporal adverbs *today*, *yesterday* and *tomorrow* which are bound to their original situation and they can be used relatively independent of a deictic context implied by these time adverbs.

As a conclusion let me quote two German sayings differing only in their intonation or stress containing the temporal adverbs of my paper. Röhrich (1994: 711) is treating them as a joke. I however think they are sayings expressing a different meaning by different stress:

Héute so, mórgen so (consistency, ‘today and tomorrow the same’)

Heute só, morgen só (inconsistency, ‘today this way – tomorrow another way’).

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