Non-canonical proverbial occurrences and wordplay: A corpus investigation and an enquiry into readers' perception of humour and cleverness

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HAL Id: hal-01922337
https://hal.univ-lyon2.fr/hal-01922337

Submitted on 4 Nov 2019

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Non-Canonical Proverbial Occurrences and Wordplay: A Corpus Investigation and an Enquiry Into Readers' Perception of Humour and Cleverness

Abstract: This article is an investigation of wordplay – defined as the clever and humorous formal manipulation of language strings – in the use of proverbs in written discourse. A set of 303 occurrences of six English proverbs was collected in the Corpus of Contemporary American English and the non-canonical occurrences were analysed and classified. It appears that most of these manipulations are simple contextual adaptations including noun-phrase substitutions, and only very few occurrences could qualify as instances of wordplay. To verify this, a questionnaire with 32 of the non-canonical occurrences was administered to a group of 12 native speakers who rated them for humour and cleverness. A comparison of the five occurrences with the highest ratings and the five with the lowest ones confirmed that the simple contextual adaptation of proverbs does not create wordplay, which requires semantic complexity combined with humour.

Keywords: cleverness, English, humour, phraseologism, proverb, semantic complexity

1 Introduction[*]

The research presented here deals with wordplay in proverbs. Langlotz (2006: 195) notes that in general, "*wordplay* is a fairly vague term for which no clear-cut definition exists," and our first task is therefore to reach an operationalizable definition of the term. A useful starting point is Guiraud's (1979: 97) distinction between witticisms (Fr. *mots d'esprit*), which only concern ideas (e.g. *Youth would be an ideal state if it came a little later in life*; Herbert Henry Asquith), and wordplay (Fr. *jeux de mots*). Wordplay must involve word manipulation, but, that said, different positions are to be found in the literature. According to the

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broad definition given by Nilsen and Nilsen (1978; cited in Lippman and Dunn 2000: 185–186), wordplay refers to any use of language that has a purpose beyond the direct communication of ideas. Most definitions, however, explicitly include humour, like McArthur (1992: 787), who defines wordplay as "[a]ny adaptation or use of words to achieve a humorous, satirical, dramatic, critical, or other effect." We will retain this component and add to it the component of cleverness, following Attardo (1994: 324), who claims that, since humour requires extra processing, it is linked with cleverness, and also Lippmann and Dunn (2000), who investigate the perception of these two variables in manipulated jokes. We therefore define wordplay as the clever manipulation of the form of a language string or the use of polysemy resulting in an amusing effect. The term *language string* covers manipulations on segments, words and phraseological units.

We define proverbs as exhibiting the following characteristics (see Arnaud 1991: 8–11):

a) they are lexicalized (they are phraseological units of the lexicon);
b) they are syntactically autonomous (they constitute sentence-level phraseologisms);
c) they are endowed with textual autonomy (they do not depend on a conversational turn or include exophoricity);
d) they express general truths (contrary to "sayings"; Moon 1998: 62);
e) they have no known author (vs. aphorisms and slogans).

These conditions are necessary and sufficient, i.e. we do not consider that other criteria should restrict the category of proverbial units further, like tradition (Norrick 1985: 69), metaphoricity (Greimas 1960; Rodegem 1972), or rhythmic characteristics (Anscombre 2003). This is not incompatible with a prototypical view and, within the category, a unit like *Great oaks from little acorns grow* is obviously a more prototypical proverb than *Enough is enough*. A notable fact is that there is considerable variation in the knowledge of proverbs by individuals (see Arnaud 1992 and Ettinger 2012 on French; Cox 1999 on German).

The study of phraseologisms is notoriously difficult, not only because their taxonomy is complex, but also because in many cases their occurrences tend to differ from the form that is recorded by lexicographers (the canonical form). Longer phraseologisms have more potential for modification, and since proverbs are usually sentence-level phraseologisms, they tend to be long units. Moon (1998: 115, 172) has found that some proverbial variants, in particular

truncated forms or VPs, may be institutionalized,[1] as is the case with "is in the eyes of the beholder," which never occurs with its canonical subject (*beauty*) in Moon's corpus. To Langlotz (2006: 54), a model of idiom representation and variation should account for the distinction between systematic variability and wordplay. Which modified occurrences of proverbs contain wordplay?[2] The principal aim of the present research is to answer this question.

2 Corpus Study

2.1 Methodology

A corpus search was preferred to day-to-day collection for its coverage and rapidity of execution. Examples of earlier work on corpora in the field of phraseology are Lennon's (2004: 17) apparently manual investigation of allusions in newspapers, and electronic corpora were used by Moon (1998) on idioms and fixed expressions as well as by Partington (2009) on wordplay.

The search was undertaken on the 1990-2011 section of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (henceforth *COCA*), which was created by Mark Davies at Brigham Young University[3] (Davies 2009). It was decided to concentrate on an exhaustive search on a restricted number of well-known proverbs selected for their imagery and potential for manipulation as estimated from the number of possible substitutions. The proverbs were drawn from an unpublished pedagogical selection; they all feature in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (Simpson and Speake 1992) and the *Dictionary of American Proverbs* (Mieder 1992).

(a) A drowning man will clutch at a straw.
(b) A leopard does not change his / its spots.
(c) Actions speak louder than words.
(d) Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.[4]
(e) The pen is mightier than the sword.
(f) Variety is the spice of life.

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1 A unit is said to be institutionalized when its meaning has been established in a particular domain within a community (Bauer 2004: 56).
2 We are well aware that some proverbs include wordplay in their canonical forms (e.g. *Haste makes waste*; *Might is right*), but no such proverbs are included in this study.
3 All the following examples have been taken from *COCA*.
4 This is originally an aphorism by William Congreve, but it fits our definition of the proverb as it has become anonymous for most users.

Appropriate queries were formulated to extract as many occurrences as possible. For instance, in the case of (a), the following requests were used:
– clutch / ing / es / ed at
– drowning man / woman
– drowning [...] straw(s)
– at (a) straw(s)

As expected, this method returned a lot of noise and redundant hits, which were eliminated manually. We were well aware of the fact that 100% detection of modified proverbs in a corpus of the size of *COCA* is not possible.[5] For instance, Rosamund Moon mentions a serendipitous occurrence of the proverb *He who sups with the Devil must have a long spoon* in the sentence *I do not have a straw that is long enough to take a drink with him*, in which the only two surviving words are *have* and *long*, but the proverb is still recognizable in the context (Arnaud and Moon 1993: 325). An example from our own day-to-day collection – "For the United States and Iran the 1979 Iranian revolution [...] has proved to be the geopolitical divorce from hell" (Sadjadpour 2012), an occurrence of *Some marriages were made in heaven* where none of the original words is to be found – has led to the introduction of antonyms and co-hyponyms in some of the queries, and this increased the recall to a large extent.

Another problem arose from strings in which the presence of the proverb was uncertain. For instance, in the case of *Actions speak louder than words*, which of the following hits should be retained?
(a) "silence speaks louder than a thousand words"[6]
(b) "the tale of the tape spoke louder than a husband's plea"
(c) "a picture that spoke louder than the politicians' words"
(d) "in him the convert spoke louder than the ecumenist."

It appears that when the only substring that corresponds to the proverb is *speak(s) / spoke louder than*, the proverb is not evoked by informants in an informal oral query, so (b) and (d) can be rejected.

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5 See also Lennon (2004: 16) on allusions in the press.
6 This modification is probably the result of a blend with *A picture's worth a thousand words*.

2.2   Data

Like all lexical units, proverbs have different frequencies of occurrence. Table 1 shows the total number of occurrences of each of the six proverbs under investigation. *Actions speak louder than words* is by far the most frequent of the units. Note, incidentally, that Arnaud and Moon (1993) have found that the relative frequency of proverbs does not necessarily correspond to their ranking by degree of knowledge by a sample of speakers as measured on a questionnaire.

Tab. 1: Number of occurrences and percentage of canonical forms for each proverb

	number of occurrences	number of canonical forms	percentage of canonical forms
A drowning man will clutch at a straw.	20	2	(10.0%)
A leopard does not change its / his spots.	34	2	(5.9%)
Actions speak louder than words.	154	34	(22.1%)
Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.	26	11	(42.3%)
The pen is mightier than the sword.	45	5	(11.1%)
Variety is the spice of life.	24	13	(54.2%)
All	303	67	(22.1%)

In the following, we examine and categorize the occurrences. Many publications include taxonomies of phraseological modifications, which have been refined and expanded with the development of this field of research, and Barta's (2005, 2006) is a good basis. This author distinguishes three main categories: metaplasms, metasemes, and metalogisms. Metaplasms involve segments and include deletions, additions, substitutions and permutations (examples will be found further on in our analyses of occurrences). Metasemes are semantic modifications, like demetaphorizations, uses of antonymy, inversions of polarity, and questions. Metalogisms include tautologies, but have apparently more to do with "anti-proverbs," i.e. playfully fabricated proverbs, which are marginal in our data. Please note that a given occurrence may exhibit several modifications and thus belong to multiple categories, like the following, *My thoughts spoke louder than the words we exchanged*, where the main verb is in the past

tense, the first NP results from a substitution, and the second NP is made definite and expanded by a relative clause.[7] As a result, some of the categories are not mutually exclusive, so that the totals may exceed 100%. The number of categories was limited in order to prevent a combinatory explosion, which might have led to placing many occurrences in categories of their own.

Table 1 also indicates the numbers and percentages of occurrences where the canonical form is reproduced in its entirety, whether it constitutes an independent sentence, a declarative clause, or is interrupted by an incidental clause. Taken together, the six proverbs appear in their full form 67 times, that is in 22.1% of their occurrences only, which confirms that proverbs are no exception to the variability of phraseologisms. The number of canonical occurrences relative to their overall frequency is significantly different from one proverb to another (χ^2 = 17.85, p < .01, 5 d.f., Yates's correction), which shows that proverbs have different contextual behaviours: *Variety is the spice of life* is the most resistant unit, while *A leopard does not change its / his spots* has only 5.9% of its occurrences in canonical form. An explanation can be suggested: a metaphorical proverb may invite manipulation through its images (see Moon 1998: 170), while a more literal one may be less open to modifications.

Other occurrences have undergone minor syntactic modifications. For instance, in some cases, the main verb is in the past tense or the -ING form, or one of the NPs is pluralized, as in *Leopards don't change their spots*, which may be considered a simple variant. In other cases, a canonically singular closed-class occurrence like a possessive is in the plural due to agreement with a plural substitute NP as in the preceding example. It is worth noting that these syntactically modified occurrences may exhibit other modifications as well. Table 2 shows the numbers and percentages of such occurrences and, here again, large differences appear. These syntactic modifications *per se* are simple adaptations of the canonical form, which may either remain otherwise unmodified or have additionally undergone changes involving lexical words.

Like Wozniak (2009: 186), who calls such occurrences *proverbes modifiés* and more basic changes *proverbes détournés*, we will call those occurrences that are only syntactically modified *adapted proverbs* and refer to other types (like those involving lexical substitutions) as *manipulated proverbs*. Again, note that the numbers and percentages in Table 1, col. 3 did not include occurrences that

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7 This, incidentally, implies losing the generic reading that was originally suggested by the use of the bare NP. In fact, many of the modifications result in the proverb losing some or all of its genericity.

have only been syntactically adapted. While three of the proverbs are left syntactically unaltered, "A drowning man [...]" has 80% of its occurrences adapted.

Clearly, Barta's (2005, 2006) taxonomy is more concerned with manipulated occurrences. The next type of modification in our data is semantic and therefore manipulative, since it involves a modification of the modal contents of the proverbs or their polarity, or else their transformation into an interrogative sentence, with possible combinations:

(1)   [...] the pen may be mightier than the sword [...]
(2)   A leopard does not necessarily change his spots.
(3)   Can a leopard change his spots?

Numbers and percentages of this type of modification are presented in Table 2, col. 3.

Tab. 2: Minor modifications

	syntactic modifications	modal and polarity modifications
A drowning man will clutch at a straw.	16 (80%)	0
A leopard does not change its / his spots.	15 (44.1%)	9 (26.5%)
Actions speak louder than words.	32 (20.8%)	22 (14.3%)
Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.	0	5 (19.2%)
The pen is mightier than the sword.	0	9 (20%)
Variety is the spice of life.	0	2 (8.3%)
All	63 (20.8%)	47 (15.5%)

Substitutions (Table 3), in which one or several NPs or other substrings of the canonical form are replaced by other substrings, constitute the most distinctive type of manipulation in the data.[8] Single substitutions with adaptation to the context are common manipulations, in which one substring related to the context is substituted for a substring of the canonical form, and the meaning of the proverb consequently applies to the context:

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8 For a discussion of substitution and wordplay, see also Jaki, in *The Dynamics of Wordplay* 2.

(4)   [About a famous football coach who felt victimized] Hell has no fury like a genius scorned.
(5)   Even in a democracy, where money speaks louder than words.
(6)   [About the fact that credit card and mail order purchases are scanned by business inter-
       ests] Our actions speak louder than the surveys.

Tab. 3: Substitutions

	single substitutions	multiple substitutions	all substitutions	single or multiple substitutions with simple adaptation to context
A drowning man will clutch at a straw.	2 (10%)	1 (5%)	3 (15%)	0
A leopard does not change its / his spots.	0	0	0	0
Actions speak louder than words.	23 (14.9%)	19 (12.3%)	42 (27.2%)	21 (13.6%)
Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.	5 (19.2%)	8 (30.8%)	13 (50%)	5 (19.2%)
The pen is mightier than the sword.	12 (26.7%)	8 (17.8%)	20 (44.4%)	10 (22.2%)
Variety is the spice of life.	6 (25%)	1 (4.2%)	7 (29.2%)	5 (20.8%)
All	48 (15.8%)	37 (12.2%)	85 (28%)	41 (13.5%)

This kind of occurrences clearly corresponds to Lennon's (2004) "allusions."
Half the occurrences of "Hell hath no fury [...]" include substitutions. This unit
has the added characteristic that it includes more multiple substitutions than
substitutions on a single substring. This is a case of a substring, "– hath / has

no fury like – ", becoming predominant and probably lexicalized in its own right (see above).

All of the substitutions analysed serve a purpose and fit the context (with one exception, see (16) below), but there are differences between them. Five cases are simple substitutions by a synonym, which do not change the meaning of the proverb and produce a mere variant, as in:

(7)   [...] I hung on to it like they say a drowning man holds on to a straw.

Such instances can hardly be considered as manipulations and presumably result from the presence of an approximate form in the writer's lexicon. Four substitutions result in a formal effect, as in the following complex occurrence:

(8)   Sometimes words speak louder than swords.

In (8), the graphic sequence <words> is repeated. We return to such occurrences in the Discussion (see below, 2.3).

Tab. 4: Deletions and additions

	deletions		additions	
A drowning man will clutch at a straw.	14	(70%)	3	(15%)
A leopard does not change its / his spots.	14	(41.2%)	6	(17.6%)
Actions speak louder than words.	7	(4.6%)	53	(34.4%)
Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.	0		0	
The pen is mightier than the sword.	14	(31.1%)	3	(6.7%)
Variety is the spice of life.	0		8	(33.3%)
All	49	(16.2%)	73	(24.1%)

The numbers and percentages of deletions are presented in Table 4.[9] Two of the proverbs, "A drowning man [...]" and "A leopard [...]" show a very high number of deletions and as many as 70% of the occurrences of the former are in a truncated form. Examples are:

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9 Again, some of the categories of manipulation are not mutually exclusive, so that the totals may exceed 100%.

(9) I know it's silly, not much more than a gussied-up version of computer dating, but *I'm clutching at straws*.[10]

(10) Barannikov's replacement, Nikolai Golushko, while vastly more able than Yerin, also embodied a talent for *changing his spots*.

Such cases were classified as deletions rather than substitutions, because, while they still evoke the canonical proverb and thus constitute allusions, they are far removed from the metaphor present in the whole proverb and are so numerous that the preserved segments acquire a lexical existence of their own (see Section 2.1). The NPs are also frequently substituted by personal pronouns or proper names, i.e. by NPs that do not denote classes of entities. A different example of anterior deletion is:

(11) [*song title*] Louder than Words.

No final deletions were observed, but there are some cases of central deletion, allowing the heads of the two NPs to survive, as in the following:

(12) Pen and Sword Books.

Additions constitute the third main category of formal manipulation. About one quarter of the occurrences are somehow expanded (Table 4). Various subtypes can here again be distinguished. The proverb may receive an appendix that adds a participant connecting it to the context, as in:

(13) Leopards don't change their spots and neither do men.

(14) Variety is the spice of life – and the bane of dieters.

Close to this type are occurrences where an extra participant is coordinated with one of the canonical NPs:

(15) Leopards and old dons don't usually change their spots.

(16) [...] unless Aristide has changed his spots or his stripes [...].

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10 The relevant segments of examples longer than one line are in bold type for better visibility.

Example (15) connects the proverb with the context, but (16) does not seem to fulfil any textual function beyond expansion of the proverb itself. In other cases, one of the NPs is modified, thus providing contextual relevance:

(17) America's actions speak louder than words.

(18) Plus variety is the spice of Angelina Jolie's red carpet life.

The last type of metaplasm, permutation, is marginal:

(19) Both Democrats and Republicans have demonstrated that "words speak louder than action."

Another set of 34 occurrences were found to include such complex and heterogeneous modifications that they were placed in a "various" category, whose comprehensive description is beyond the scope of this article. An example of this is (20):

(20) "From the sword to the pen" [...].

This involves central deletion, permutation of the NPs, and transformation into a verbless sentence consisting of two prepositional phrases.

Finally, we found 17 cases of "signalling" (Moon 1998: 305), in which the writer metalinguistically mentions the presence of a proverbial occurrence. The devices are varied:

(21) The pen, it is said, is mightier than the sword.

(22) [...] so it proves the old adage, "The pen is mightier than the sword."

(23) As we all know, actions speak louder than words.

2.3   Discussion

The data produced by the present corpus search are consistent with earlier research (see Arnaud and Moon 1993; Moon 1998; Lennon 2004), although with minor differences: for instance, Lennon (2004: 171) found only 4 out of 44 proverbial occurrences that were verbatim (9.1% vs. our 22.1%). Such differences are certainly attributable to the different corpora used, as Lennon's was made up of newspaper text only, and Moon (1998: 170) notes that in her corpus "exploitation," i.e. manipulation, is strongly associated with journalism.

Why do speakers (and in the present study, writers) insert proverbs into their discourse? Proverbs in context have a triple meaning (see Arnaud 1991): a propositional content or denotation (a piece of general truth about man or the world); a referential meaning or reference, in that they connect an occurrence (a situation) to a type; and a functional meaning, as they constitute an irrefutable argument by their appeal to an impersonal authority and – as intertextual elements – establish common ground on the basis of shared cultural knowledge between speaker / writer and hearer / reader.

Why do speakers / writers manipulate phraseologisms? First of all, because it is possible to do so without disrupting communication. Lennon (2004: 180) has found evidence of "highly structured correspondences of a lexico-grammatical nature" between canonical phraseologisms and their manipulated occurrences, which must be part of the reader's competence. He suggests that the newspaper reader must first identify phraseologisms in the text and establish their literal or allusive nature. Lennon further presents a taxonomy of the functions of allusions, among which the following seem particularly relevant here:

– to attract reader attention;
– to achieve physical economy of expression;
– to evaluate new information against existing cultural values and vice versa;
– to achieve ironic effects of ridicule or criticism;
– to achieve humorously grotesque effects;
– to convince by appeal to cultural values shared with the reader;
– to cognitively challenge the reader and encourage him to read on;
– to establish common ground with the reader;
– to impart aesthetic pleasure to the reader. (Lennon 2004: 235–243)

The reasons why writers manipulate proverbs and not simply phraseologisms in general can therefore be seen as a combination of the two sets of reasons above, with a reinforcement of the cultural and intertextual aspects. In addition, differences between a memorized canonical form and a modified occurrence result in defeated expectations, a frequent component of the humour in jokes (Chiaro 1992: 15).

We can now return to our goal and look at "the fragile and gradual distinction between systematic idiom-variation and idiom-based wordplay" (Langlotz 2006: 195). Applying our definition and combining humour and cleverness as a result of formal manipulation, it appears that many metaplasms like the following examples do not qualify as wordplay:

(24) Some of the most interesting people I've met are sixty and still don't know what they want to do with their lives. Chasing dreams is the spice of life.

(25) Now, because of him and his party, married couples will continue to be punished through higher taxes by the federal government for being married, and people who get divorces will be rewarded. The actions of Democrats speak louder than their words about families.

(26) [...] Mr. Roeper is a writer. His pen, or typewriter, is mightier than any gun or badge around.

These passages appear as routine, perfunctory allusions. Some of the functions of Lennon's list, like the achievement of economy of expression may be fulfilled, but the components of our definition of wordplay (manipulation of a language string, clever and amusing effect) are apparently absent. Examples cannot be multiplied for reasons of space, but most of the manipulated proverbial occurrences in the data are equally unremarkable in this respect.

Some occurrences, however, fulfil the criteria for wordplay to a greater extent. The following example rests on repetition:

(27) Well, I trust you're a critic, young man, a budding one at least. But has no one told you that *the pen is mightier than the ... pen knife*?

Pen knife is a loose co-hyponym of *sword* for which it is substituted ("objects with a blade"), it repeats the occurrence *pen*, and it presumably adapts the proverb to the notion of a beginner in journalistic criticism, so it is much more than a simple substitution. The next example combines two effects:

(28) Powerful computers and high-tech scanners now enable marketers to closely monitor how, where and when you spend your money. *These electronic transactions speak much louder than words* because they reflect actual behavior.

The more salient one is a pun by addition of a segment (*actions* > *transactions*), and in the less conspicuous one *speak* takes on a less metaphorical meaning than in the canonical proverb, as electronic data are *read* by the computers and scanners.

Reduced to its NPs, *The pen is mightier than the sword* becomes "the pen / the sword," and we have already seen an instance of this type of central deletion in example (12). In (29), the two terms are inverted, which provides a salient formal effect, and they refer metonymically to a former weapon site turned into a school. This is a pun by permutation:

(29) Few schools are able to say that their campus once harbored missiles. Talcott Mountain Science Center, perched upon a ridge overlooking Hartford, Connecticut sits on a former Nike antiaircraft missile site. "*From the sword to the pen*," says Donald La Salle, Talcott's director.

We reach marginal areas of wordplay with the last two occurrences:

(30) "You can't change the spots on a leper." Or a leopard, for that matter.

This is an anti-proverb based on a paronymic pun with a one-segment phonetic deletion. It is a direct-speech quotation, so it is self-contained, and the substitute for *leopard* does not have to produce meaning within the context. Independently from the context, it may be efficient, however, because of the formal proximity between *leopard* and *leper* and because, encyclopaedically, both leopards and lepers have spots (and, *terribile dictu*, leper jokes are attested). Other examples are presented in the questionnaire below (see Section 3).

Between these few identifiable cases of wordplay and the many routine substitutions, a few occurrences may fit our definition, like the following:

(31) [About the role of the Internet in toppling dictators] The key pad is mightier than the sword.

In this case, where *the sword* still metonymically represents violence, *the keypad* is a loosely co-hyponymous substitute ("writing implements") and still functions metonymically, but with less distance between source and target.

3 An Investigation of Readers' Perceptions of Proverbial Occurrences

To summarize the data collected in the *COCA* corpus, 77.9% of the occurrences of the six proverbs investigated are non-canonical. Based on a definition of wordplay with, on the one hand, formal manipulation and, on the other hand, the perception of humour and cleverness, most of the non-canonical occurrences do not seem to constitute wordplay, because only the formal condition is satisfied. They are routine manipulations of a rather mechanical nature. Only nine occurrences (3%) can be seen as cases of wordplay. Some of these were

already discussed in the preceding section (8), (19), (27)–(29), (30), (31); the other occurrences are:

(32) The penis is mightier than the sword.
(33) No, everything doesn't have to be spicy. Variety (remember?) is the spice of life. And that means a variety of flavors, textures, aromas, colors, serving styles.
(34) His expression was that of a man who had clutched at the last straw and caught the whole bale.

Wordplay depends on the intention of the speaker / writer (which in the case of a corpus study can only be inferred, as we did), but it also depends on the hearer / reader's reaction: intended wordplay may well fall flat or pass unnoticed and thus fail as such. To observe how wordplay is perceived and thus confirm our analyses, we administered a paper questionnaire to native speakers of English. The questionnaires were filled out on a volunteer basis and in their own free time by 12 respondents, 6 of whom were British and 6 American, 10 female and 2 male, aged 21 to 70, who were present in Lyon at the time.

The questionnaire consisted of a sample of 32 of the occurrences in the corpus with the necessary context, selected in order to include the six proverbs of the investigation represented in a variety of non-canonical occurrences. In particular, those occurrences we had identified as wordplay were included to confirm our definition of cleverness and humour as essential ingredients of wordplay. The participants were asked to circle a number corresponding to one of four categories:

  0 - I do not even recognize the allusion.
  1 - I do not find this example particularly clever and amusing.
  2 - I find this example moderately clever and amusing.
  3 - I find this example clearly clever and amusing.

The presence of four options precluded attraction by a central option. Two versions in different random orders were used so as to counter the effects of questionnaire fatigue. One of the versions is reproduced in the appendix. The responses were converted into 0 to 4 scores, which were standardized, and the mean standard score of each item was computed. The items were then classified in decreasing order of mean z-scores.

We now examine the five occurrences with the lowest mean scores and then the five with the highest scores. The scores appear in Table 5. The occurrence that was perceived as the least clever and amusing (rank 32) was:

(35) I mean, this is information that's been available for at least – in their records for 30 years. I don't know what has transpired over the last year that allows them now to make this, I think, PR move. I think *in many respects the leopard really hasn't changed its spots*. I mean, if you carefully look at the language that they've used, they agree with a consensus. I mean, nicotine is addictive and smoking causes various diseases.

Tab. 5: Perception of humour and cleverness in occurrences

rank	occurrence	mean z-score
1	If it helps, [...]	0.7099
2	Tyasan [...]	0.5790
3	Shane had never [...]	0.5319
4	Is it possible [...]	0.5063
5	Both Republicans [...]	0.4929
[...]		
28	Elsewhere Farhan [...]	0.4197
29	We don't think [...]	0.4329
30	Governor [...]	0.5637
31	She reaches for [...]	0.7818
32	I mean, this [...]	0.8118

The verb form shows that (35) is an adapted proverb, and it exhibits modalization. Connection with the context is provided by the substitution of the definite article for the indefinite. These simple adaptive modifications of the canonical form obviously are not sufficient to evoke cleverness or humour. In addition, the modalizing effect of the three occurrences of *I mean* and the two occurrences of *I think* may have cumulatively weakened the perception of the speaker's possible humorous intent by the informants.

(36) She reaches for Walt's hand and, as he feels her grope for him, he grabs her. Takes hold of her before she can take hold of him. It is a reflex between them. *He clutches at her like a drowning man*, but it doesn't bother her as it does at home.

In (36), the main verb of the canonical form appears in the main clause and its canonical subject appears in a comparative prepositional phrase. A pronoun is substituted for the indirect object of the canonical sentence, thus connecting the occurrence with the context. This is an obvious allusion, but its effect is

simply to intensify and dramatize the scene, without apparently attracting attention to the form itself.

(37) GOVERNOR: "*Actions speak louder than words. And the President's actions* are killing jobs in this country." REPRESENTATIVE: "He has failed all Americans when it comes to job creation."

Example (37) is an item with a canonical form which was placed in the questionnaires as a control. Although the connection appears in the second occurrence of *actions*, this is a simple case of appeal to shared knowledge.

(38) "We don't think that it is the license threat that is going to get the broadcasters to move, but public activity," she said. "Once the Parents and Teachers Associations rouse the community, once ratings start to drop, then the stations will begin to care. *The networks aren't going to change their spots*," Miss Charren says.

Example (38) results from the separate lexicalization of *change one's spots* (see Section 2.2), and since nothing in the context has anything to do with literal leopards or spots, what we have here is the simple use of an idiomatic phraseologism.

(39) Elsewhere Farhan states that the [Muslim] Brotherhood "will not spill one drop of blood or vandalize any public or private property." This derives from a belief that "*Sometimes words speak louder than swords.*"

We stated earlier that a simple occurrence of *speak louder than* should not be taken as an instance of the proverb *Actions speak louder than words*. However, in (39), we have a substitution of the prepositional complement of the canonical form (i.e. *words*) for the subject (*actions*), i.e. a partial inversion. Furthermore, as already mentioned, a visual pun may have been intended as the graphic segment <words> is repeated in <swords>. If this was the case, the low rating by our subjects shows that a spelling-based pun is less efficient than a pronunciation-based pun.

The next five occurrences received the highest ratings for humour and cleverness ((40) is repeated from (19)).

(40) Both Republicans and Democrats have demonstrated that "*Words speak louder than action.*"

Contrary to the preceding occurrence, this manipulation of *Actions speak louder than words* is efficient. It is a simple case of metaplasm by noun-phrase inversion, which defeats expectations and negates the received wisdom in connection with a cliché about politicians.

(41) Is it possible that a group of expedient men in Washington could have deliberately withheld critical intelligence data from the officers at Pearl Harbor? And why would they do such a terrible thing? Simple: They needed an excuse to rouse and unite the country to war. Because *Hell would have no fury like a nation broadsided from its sleep on Sunday morning*.

In (41), the occurrence is grammatically adapted by the verb form, but more conspicuously, the final NP, *a woman scorned*, has been substituted by a much longer one, which defeats expectations as to sentence length. The concept *fury* is activated by *rouse* and *nation* by *country*, and *hell* is an echo of *Pearl Harbor* and *war*. In contrast, the notion of sleep on a Sunday morning may appear trivial, but it also underlines the attention given to the news of the attack. This is clearly a semantically complex case.

(42) Shane had never been one for *words*, he'd always believed *actions spoke louder than explanations*. But sometimes the truth needed to be spoken – not just implied or assumed.

In addition to the adaptation manifested by the verb form, example (42) involves substitution (by the name of a contiguous concept) of the final NP, which is however activated by an occurrence of *words* earlier in the sentence, thus producing another case of defeated expectations.

(43) Tyasan looked up. His expression was that of a man who had clutched at the last straw and caught the whole bale.

This is another complex case in which the *last straw*, a separately lexicalized segment of *It is the last straw that breaks the camel's back*, is fused into an occurrence of *A drowning man clutches at a straw*. *Straw* is thus very much in focus, and the second feature is an addition by coordination which includes a hyperbolic increase (*bale*) within the field of associates of *straw*, hyperbole being a source of humour.

(44) If it helps you to start a dish with supermarket roast chicken or pre-chopped salad greens or already-layered puff pastry, just grab it and get cooking. No, everything doesn't have to

be *spicy. Variety (remember?) is the spice of life.* And that means a *variety* of flavors, tex-
tures, aromas, colors, serving styles.

In (44), the most highly rated occurrence, which is metadiscursively sig-
nalled (see Section 2.2), the topical connection is provided by the pre-
occurrence of *spicy* and the post-occurrence of *variety*. In the proverb, *spice* is
metaphorical, but in a context referring to cooking and tastes, it takes on its
non-figurative meaning: this is an example of demetaphorization, therefore of a
metaseme. The passage superimposes two meanings for one form: the meta-
phorical one of the proverb alluded to (with the addition of *remember?* to drive
the point home), and the literal one in the context. The presence of two mean-
ings for one form means that we have a homonymic pun, which is also
metasemic, and we are here well beyond simple allusion.

If we compare the two groups of occurrences – those judged most humor-
ous and clever and those judged least so – in the light of our initial definition of
wordplay, this confirms that simple uses of proverbs or lexicalized proverbial
segments and / or simple adaptations to the context (whether syntactic or in-
volving lexical substitution) do not constitute wordplay. Impressions of humour
and cleverness require both defeated expectations and semantic complexity.

4 Conclusion

In this study, we extracted from the 1990-2011 *COCA* corpus the 303 occurrences
of six English proverbs and examined their modifications in the 77.9% of occur-
rences that were not canonical. Based on a definition that includes formal ma-
nipulation, humour and cleverness, very few – nine, i.e. 3% – of these modified
occurrences seemed to constitute wordplay. Native speakers rated a sample of
32 occurrences for humour and cleverness, and a comparison of the items with
the highest and lowest ratings confirmed that simple adaptations to the context
without an additional semantic motivation are not perceived as wordplay and
that some semantic complexity is necessary in addition to the formal manipula-
tion. As some of the possible examples of wordplay were not particularly highly
rated, it appears that only a tiny minority of manipulated proverbial occurrenc-
es are actually perceived as wordplay.

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6 Appendix

An Enquiry about Wordplay

We are investigating the nature of wordplay, and for this purpose we have assembled a collection of examples of 6 proverbs used in texts (articles, books, screenplays, etc). The proverbs are:

– A drowning man will clutch at a straw.
– A leopard does not change his / its spots.
– Actions speak louder than words.
– Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.
– The pen is mightier than the sword.
– Variety is the spice of life.

Please circle the number corresponding to your reaction to each of the examples below:

0   I do not even recognize the allusion
1   I do not find this example particularly clever and amusing.
2   I find this example moderately clever and amusing.
3   I find this example clearly clever and amusing.

(if you are doing the task on your computer, please use other means like highlighting the relevant number, substituting an "X" for it, etc.). Please do the questionnaire in your own time. It is anonymous, but we need the following information:

your age?   your sex?   M / F

Thank you very much for your participation.

[In the film "It Happened one Night" (1934), Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert need a lift. He repeatedly fails at thumbing a car. She then stops the first passing car by displaying one of her

legs.] Claudette Colbert, an escaped heiress, teaches the hero that the "limb is mightier than the thumb" when it comes to hitchhiking.

0 1 2 3

Powerful computers and high-tech scanners now enable marketers to closely monitor how, where and when you spend your money. These electronic transactions speak much louder than words because they reflect actual behavior.

0 1 2 3

"Did you see his expression?" M. Lousteau asked, smiling conspiratorially. "You thwarted his efforts to protect you from... well, from me, I guess. Hell hath no fury like a man prevented from inflicting his good intentions on others."

0 1 2 3

"We don't think that it is the license threat that is going to get the broadcasters to move, but public activity," she said. "Once the Parents and Teachers Associations rouse the community, once ratings start to drop, then the stations will begin to care. The networks aren't going to change their spots," Miss Charren says.

0 1 2 3

Elsewhere Farhan states that the [Muslim] Brotherhood "will not spill one drop of blood or vandalize any public or private property." This derives from a belief that "Sometimes words speak louder than swords."

0 1 2 3

"If we were competitors in business, would you expect me to suppress my own best interests simply by virtue of the fact that we were friends, or whatever?" She laughed. "Dalmar, you don't know me very well. Competition is the spice of life. I thrive on it. You can try to best me at my own game, but I give you fair warning, in business, I always go for the jugular."

0 1 2 3

V told me Roger has been so sweet and charming lately, bringing her flowers, cooking dinner, blah blah blah. Ever since he moved back in, he's been the model husband. "Do you think a leopard can change his spots?" she asked me.

0 1 2 3

If it helps you to start a dish with supermarket roast chicken or pre-chopped salad greens or already-layered puff pastry, just grab it and get cooking. No, everything doesn't have to be spicy. Variety (remember?) is the spice of life. And that means a variety of flavors, textures, aromas, colors, serving styles.

0 1 2 3

"Well, I trust you're a critic, young man, a budding one at least. But has no one told you that the pen is mightier than the... pen knife?"

0 1 2 3

Still, rock stars and social matrons alike seem willing to risk the leaks and blots of indelible misfortune for the dash and flair of a fountain pen. You buy them because you people like to show them off when you use them. I mean, it's a little bit of a throwback. It's moving away from the laptop. And while not even a collector would suggest the fountain pen is mightier than the laptop, you'll never have to replace a pen with the next latest model.
0   1   2   3

Shane had never been one for words, he'd always believed actions spoke louder than explanations. But sometimes the truth needed to be spoken – not just implied or assumed.
0   1   2   3

"Did – did you think the president took the easy way out on your question, Walter?" "No. I think it's a good point. I'm glad that he answered it that way because his actions will speak louder than his words."
0   1   2   3

Hell hath no fury like Al Pacino scorned. The descent into fire and brimstone territory happens within the first five minutes of this interview. Question: "As the devil in your new movie, you say that vanity is the best sin. Do you have any personal favorites?" Pacino gets that don't-mess-with-me Godfather face. His eyes go a little wild. "This is why I didn't want to come here today," he snaps.
0   1   2   3

I mean, this is information that's been available for at least – in their records for 30 years. I don't know what has transpired over the last year that allows them now to make this, I think, PR move. I think in many respects the leopard really hasn't changed its spots. I mean, if you carefully look at the language that they've used, they agree with a consensus. I mean, nicotine is addictive and smoking causes various diseases.
0   1   2   3

As a result of the political and social changes of recent decades, cultural pluralism is now generally recognized as an organizing principle of this society. In contrast to the idea of the melting pot, which promised to erase ethnic and group differences, children now learn that variety is the spice of life....
0   1   2   3

Few schools are able to say that their campus once harbored missiles. Talcott Mountain Science Center, perched upon a ridge overlooking Hartford, Connecticut sits on a former Nike antiaircraft missile site. "From the sword to the pen," says Donald La Salle, Talcott's director. "Where once stood instruments of destruction now only stand instruments of discovery."
0   1   2   3

"One way in which the U.S. can help bloggers and Twitter users trapped in repressive regimes is to spend money. And that we are doing, 25 million this year, according to an announcement today by Secretary of State Clinton to shield these users, Shannon, from jamming uncensor-

ship." –"Technology has certainly changed the way these protests develop and how they play out as well." –"The key pad is mightier than the sword."

0 1 2 3

JOHN QUINONES: But why would she make a list of Congressmen and their seating charts? RHODA BERENSON: It could be a list of people she was planning to interview. I have no idea. JOHN QUI-NONES: Might she have been involved in terrorism and you didn't know? MARK BERENSON: My daughter has been a totally non-violent person who, again, lives by the pen and not the sword. She said to me she has never touched, fired or held a weapon.

0 1 2 3

Both Republicans and Democrats have demonstrated that "Words speak louder than action."

0 1 2 3

SAM: "Are you in love with Charlotte? You're always together." WILL: "No, I'm just helping with the band." SAM: "She used to be a cheerleader and prom queen and all that. She was the kind of girl who'd never talk to…" WILL: "People like us?" SAM: "Leopards and cheerleaders don't change their spots. Let's get together soon to finish our project."

0 1 2 3

Is it possible that a group of expedient men in Washington could have deliberately withheld critical intelligence data from the officers at Pearl Harbor? And why would they do such a terrible thing? Simple: They needed an excuse to rouse and unite the country to war. Because Hell would have no fury like a nation broadsided from its sleep on Sunday morning.

0 1 2 3

 "If I'm ordered to go into the army, I have to go. I'll go whether I like it or not." Steve raised scornful eyes to his father. "You're pretty safe. They're hardly going to reach your age bracket." "Oh," he said almost gleefully, "there's a saying I came across last week. Somebody named Charles Edward Montague, I don't know who he was, but he wrote, War hath no fury like a noncombatant. That sums it up pretty well."

0 1 2 3

So, as he discusses his joy, he has no choice. Standing up, he looks around his nondescript hotel suite with a devilish grin. Then he jumps on the couch. Hands raised triumphantly above his head, he bounces up and down for a moment before taking his seat again. Of course, it's not the first time that Cruise's actions have spoken louder than his words.

0 1 2 3

GOVERNOR: "Actions speak louder than words. And the President's actions are killing jobs in this country." REPRESENTATIVE: "He has failed all Americans when it comes to job creation."

0 1 2 3

[script of a scene from the film *Austin Powers*] AUSTIN (singing) "Hey, watch out, squares… You make us bored! The penis is mightier than the sword." Austin does various groovy dance moves like the Rock'em sock'em robot and the Heavyweight.
0　1　2　3

Most of the typists, young women who worshipped at the shrine of the shopping mall, had long broken off for lunch. Only a few stragglers who were victims of tyrannical superiors were still at it, tapping at their keyboards and brusquely responding to telephone enquiries. Hell hath no fury like a woman done out of her lunch hour.
0　1　2　3

To Yogi Berra, 90 percent of baseball was 10 percent mental. To DeBerry, 99 times out of 10, the team that makes fewer mistakes is going to win. At 58, DeBerry isn't about to change his ways or his sayings. Because, as he likes to tell people, "You can't change the spots on a leper." Or a leopard, for that matter.
0　1　2　3

Will he do what he says? The best way to find out, says Joan Moody, public affairs director of Defenders of Wildlife, is to check his record. "Actions speak louder than words," she says. "If you look at the records, you'll be able to see through the rhetoric."
0　1　2　3

Tantalize him with a touch. Body language speaks louder than words, says Sharyn Wolf, author of *Guerrilla Dating Tactics* (Plume, 1998), so to pique his interest, brush a guy you're sweating subtly on the forearm while making a point or asking a question.
0　1　2　3

Tyasan looked up. His expression was that of a man who had clutched at the last straw and caught the whole bale.
0　1　2　3

She reaches for Walt's hand and, as he feels her grope for him, he grabs her. Takes hold of her before she can take hold of him. It is a reflex between them. He clutches at her like a drowning man, but it doesn't bother her as it does at home.
0　1　2　3