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Use of Proverbs in Political Discourse by US President Barack Obama and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

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Abstract:

Every political action is prepared, accompanied, influenced and played by language. Politicians are dedicated to all the arts of language such as idioms, proverbs, maxims, and sayings to reach the public and influence them because such proverbial language adds metaphorical and emotive expressiveness to the politicians' addresses.

Present research explores a number of proverbs employed in speeches of well-known politicians of today, US President Barack Obama and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who make frequent use of them in their political messages, and also looks at the specific use of proverbs and their pragmatic function.

Obama and Erdoğan are influenced to a considerable degree by proverbs and proverbial expressions in particular when they address native speakers at home, but they also draw on this folk wisdom when speaking to audiences abroad. They are aware of the cultural and linguistic background of their audience and the proverbs that they use are a part of their political discourse. Because they understand the context of the proverb and use it in an appropriate way, the proverb has the desired effect on their recipients.

Keywords: Proverb, politics, Turkish, discourse

Language is essential to politics in order to put certain political, economic and social ideas into practice because every political action is prepared, accompanied, influenced and played by language. Because politicians have to meet the expectations of the people, they have to use strong language to impress the people while addressing them.

Nowadays, with the development of technology, politicians not only target audiences in the public square, but also via radio, television, Internet, newspapers and magazines. They are also dedicated to all the arts of language such as idioms, proverbs, maxims, sayings to reach the public and influence them. Such proverbial language adds metaphorical and emotive expressiveness to the politicians' addresses. When the politicians use proverbs, they are communicating effectively and convincingly with the people who know the expressions in their traditional sense and who understand their innovative manipulations.

For the definition of the proverb, it can be said that "The proverb which is locally mentioned at that time but reached to the level of universal usage is a reflex of the folk to their encountered events, containing wisdom for the future generations; apart from the accuracy, the poignancy makes them easily remembered and repeated".

It can be argued that, in this world of globalisation, the use of proverbs and their function have decreased due to some earlier traditional and specific folk elements in them. As is known, the proverbs inevitably come to mind as pre-stated and pre-formed verbal units and

help to express ideas freely and more indirectly in both oral speech and written word. Although the frequency of their use may differ among people, depending on their social status and contexts, proverbs are a significant rhetorical force in various modes of communication, not only in friendly chats, powerful political speeches, best-selling novels, but also, in the influential mass media such as everyday conversations, newspaper editorials, advertisements and even accompanying pictures and cartoons.

Proverbs can be a kind of verbal weapon which is sometimes difficult to argue against. Because they are colourful linguistic formulas, politicians choose the opportunity to speak to people in a way that combines colloquial language with political messages. Powerful politicians make frequent use of proverbs and proverbial expressions in their speeches because the serious meaning of a proverb and its usage by an intelligent politician strengthens his argument with the emotions of traditional wisdom. The use of proverbs by politicians definitely gives proverbs certain vitality and those proverbs help them be a cheer leader. Thus, the pragmatic function is to persuade people to believe in honesty and the importance of the message. Obama's two books, "Dreams from My Father" (1995) and "The Audacity of Hope" (2006) are filled with proverbial language, and his approximately three hundred speeches during his steady move towards the presidency of the United States help us see how he bore efficiently and used time tested wisdom to convince the world for a change. (W.Mieder 2010)

Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan is also good at persuading the crowds and showing how important he is in the democratic history of Turkey for getting 50 % of voters in 2011. As a person who reads much and has knowledge of the religion of Islam and the Holy Book Koran, he is good at speech and choosing the right word in the right time both in foreign policy and domestic policy.

Proverbs perform many functions. They can be used as warnings, encouragements, judgements, morals, advice. They might also be used by people to support one's truth, attitude or belief. Very often proverbs are encountered in press, television and radio programmes, literature, education, songs, political speeches, legal documents, slogans, caricatures, comic books and greeting cards.

Norrick (1985:28-29) emphasizes the authoritative character of proverbs, suggesting that they add certain authoritative tone and solidity to the speaker's words, especially when speaking to a younger individual, and make their relationship seem to be as "<...> one between the equals or one in which the speaker is one-up". Thus, the producer of the utterance acts as a teacher or a counsellor.

Moreover, Mieder (1997:3-4) has drawn attention to the importance of using proverbs in the political field. The scholar indicates that proverbs have been used by eminent orators and politicians, such as Cicero, Abraham Lincoln, Otto von Bismarck, Theodore Roosevelt, Winston S. Churchill, Adolf Hitler and many others as persuasive rhetorical devices to influence the members of society.

As a man of the political world, the polyglot Chesterfield had lived and traveled widely in Europe. Again and again he advises his son to study French, Italian, or German, and not surprisingly he makes use of the rich proverb repertoire of these languages and cultures. (Mieder, W., 2004)

But proverbs in political use are not without their problems. While they can do much good in creating solid communication based on generational wisdom, they can also be

misused to manipulate people into following the wrong leaders. Nazi Germany is a warning of how proverbs, especially anti-Semitic proverbs, became dangerous verbal weapons. People followed such proverbial invectives blindly, forgetting that proverbs are not absolute truths. As Joseph Raymond signaled in his article on “Tensions in Proverbs: More Light on International Understanding” (1956), proverbs can cut both ways in the political realm—as stereotypical invectives they can lead to tensions, but as metaphors of indirection they can in fact relax tensions. (Mieder, W, 2004.)

A planned political discourse should be systematic for a particular purpose and must help the speaker express his thoughts by stating them in a good way. Present research explores a number of proverbs employed in speeches of two well-known politicians of today: US President Barack Obama and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who make frequent use of them in their political messages, and also looks at the specific use of proverbs and their pragmatic function.

Examples of Obama’s use of proverbs in his political discourse

1. On June 3, 2012, President Obama explained that he telephoned Sandra Fluke in response to Rush Limbaugh’s controversial comments (calling her a “slut” and “prostitute”) because “I thought about Malia and Sasha, and one of the things I want them to be able to do is speak their minds in a civil and thoughtful way, and I don’t want them attacked or called horrible names when they’re being good citizens. I’m also mindful of the proverb, **“A man is judged by his deeds, not his words.”** So if you want to know where my heart lies, look no further than what I have done.”
2. President Obama sat down with six television networks Monday night September 16, 2013 to build public support for his request that Congress approve a military strike against Syria :

CBS: What do you need to see in a diplomatic deal?

OBAMA: Well, as I said, the key is, to paraphrase Ronald Reagan, **“that we don’t just trust, but we also verify.”** And so the important thing is to make sure that the international community has confidence that these chemical weapons are under control, that they are not being used — that potentially they are removed from Syria and that they are destroyed. (*Trust, but verify: The original Russian proverb is a short rhyme which states, Доверяй, но проверяй (doveryai, no proveryai).*)

3. Remarks by President Obama and President Calderón of Mexico at Joint Press: This is the progress that we’ve made today. It’s progress that calls to mind a Mexican proverb that I am told says, **“Tell me who you walk with, and I will tell you who you are.”** Mr. President, the United States is proud to walk with Mexico. And through our work, we’re reminded again who we are—which is two neighbors, two partners bound by a common vision of prosperity and security for both our people.
4. Remarks by The President in a toast at APEC Leaders Dinner, Hale Koa Hotel Honolulu, Hawaii: That’s the spirit of Hawaii. It’s what made me who I am. It’s what shapes my interactions with all of you. And it’s the spirit that I hope guides us in our work this weekend. And so I’d like to propose a toast with the words of a traditional Hawaiian proverb: **“A’ohe hana nui ke alu ‘ia. And that means, no task is too big when done together by all.”**

5. Remarks by President Obama and President Hu of the People's Republic of China in an Exchange of Toasts at a State Dinner: The Chinese and American people work together and create new opportunities together every single day. Mr. President, today we've shown that our governments can work together as well, for our mutual benefit. And that includes this bit of news, under a new agreement, our National Zoo will continue to dazzle children and visitors with the beloved giant pandas. (Applause.) I'm told that there is a Chinese proverb that says: **"If you want one year of prosperity, then grow grain. If you want 10 years of prosperity, then grow trees. But if you want 100 years of prosperity, then you grow people."**
6. Remarks by The President at the signing of the family smoking prevention and tobacco control act: And today, despite decades of lobbying and advertising by the tobacco industry, we've passed a law to help protect the next generation of Americans from growing up with a deadly habit that so many of our generation have lived with. When Henry Waxman opened that first hearing back in '94 on tobacco with the industry CEOs, he began by quoting an ancient proverb: **"A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step."** Our journey for change is far from over. But with the package of -- passage of the kids tobacco legislation that I'm about to sign, we're taking another big and very important step -- a step that will save lives and dollars.
7. Remarks by President Obama and President Lee of the Republic of Korea in Arrival Ceremony: Good morning, everybody. (Applause.) I hope everybody is enjoying the weather. (Applause.) I am told there is a Korean proverb, which says, **"Words have no wings, but they can fly a thousand miles."** President Lee, First Lady Kim, I hope my words today will be felt in the hearts of all South Koreans when I say to our allies, our partners, our dear friends, please accept our warmest welcome.
8. Remarks by the President at Parallel Business Summit Manezh Exhibition Hall Moscow, Russia: It's our workers, it's our people, it's our ideas, who are the greatest engines of economic resource. It will be with their skills and talent that ultimately will determine the fate of nations in the 21st century, not simply the bountiful natural resources that both America and Russia share. I'm told there's a Russian proverb that says, **"Every seed knows its time."** So today, I hope that we've planted a seed -- a seed of new cooperation and new commerce. And now we must do the work of seeing that that seed grows into a relationship that advances prosperity for our peoples.
9. Remarks by President Obama and President Medvedev of Russia at the U.S.-Russia Business Summit U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Washington, D.C.: It's the imagination and the creativity of our people, our workers, and their dreams for themselves and their children that ultimately drive the modern economy. Last year in Moscow, I learned a Russian proverb, which says, **"Every seed knows its time."** A year ago, we planted a seed of cooperation and commerce. And today, that cooperation is bearing fruit -- with new partnerships and prosperity for both our peoples.
10. Remarks by the President before Signing the Tribal Law and Order Act: As many of you know, I campaigned on this issue. And during our last -- during our tribal conference last year, I pledged my administration's fullest support for this bill. And I told Senator Dorgan last week that I intended to sign it in a ceremony here at the White House with all of you. So today, I am proud to make good on my word. Now,

I'm told there's a Seneca proverb that says "**He who would do great things should not attempt them all alone.**" (Laughter.) And that's particularly true of this legislation, which is the product of tireless efforts by countless individuals across this country. Congressional leaders like Senator Dorgan, Representative Herseth Sandlin, and others who are here today, and tribal leaders like Chairman Marcus Levings, President Theresa Two Bulls, President Diane Enos, Chief Chad Smith, Vice Chairman Jonathan Windy Boy -- we are grateful to all of them for their extraordinary support. And then we've got leaders in our administration like Attorney General Holder and Secretary Salazar, Kimberly Teehee, Jodi Gillette here at the White House who worked tirelessly on this legislation.

11. Remarks by President Barack Obama at Town Hall Meeting with Future Chinese Leaders Museum of Science and Technology, Shanghai, China: China has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty -- an accomplishment unparalleled in human history -- while playing a larger role in global events. And the United States has seen our economy grow along with the standard of living enjoyed by our people, while bringing the Cold War to a successful conclusion. There is a Chinese proverb: "**Consider the past, and you shall know the future.**" Surely, we have known setbacks and challenges over the last 30 years. Our relationship has not been without disagreement and difficulty. But the notion that we must be adversaries is not predestined -- not when we consider the past. Indeed, because of our cooperation, both the United States and China are more prosperous and more secure. We have seen what is possible when we build upon our mutual interests, and engage on the basis of mutual respect.
12. President Obama Addresses Turkish Grand National Assembly April 6, 2009: Our focus will be on what we can do, in partnership with people across the Muslim world, to advance our common hopes and our common dreams. And when people look back on this time, let it be said of America that we extended the hand of friendship to all people. There's an old Turkish proverb: "**You cannot put out fire with flames.**" America knows this. Turkey knows this. There's some who must be met by force, they will not compromise. But force alone cannot solve our problems, and it is no alternative to extremism. The future must belong to those who create, not those who destroy. That is the future we must work for, and we must work for it together.
13. Remarks by the President at AIPAC Policy Conference Washington Convention Center Washington, D.C.: And together, we are working to build a better world -- one where our people can live free from fear; one where peace is founded upon justice; one where our children can know a future that is more hopeful than the present. There is no shortage of speeches on the friendship between the United States and Israel. But I'm also mindful of the proverb, "**A man is judged by his deeds, not his words.**" So if you want to know where my heart lies, look no further than what I have done -- to stand up for Israel; to secure both of our countries; and to see that the rough waters of our time lead to a peaceful and prosperous shore. (Applause.)
14. Remarks by the President at Presentation of the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award: And that may be Magodonga's greatest achievement -- that she has given the women of Zimbabwe each other. That she has given people who long for peace and justice each other. That she has given them a voice they can only have collectively -- and strength that they can only have together. They are a force to be reckoned with.

Because history tells us, truth has a life of its own once it's told. Love can transform a nation once it's taught. Courage can be contagious; righteousness can spread; and there is much wisdom in the old proverb: **“That God could not be everywhere, so he created mothers”**. In the end, history has a clear direction -- and it is not the way of those who arrest women and babies for singing in the streets. It's not the way of those who starve and silence their own people, and cling to power by threat of force. (Magodonga Mahlangu is a women's rights campaigner from Zimbabwe)

Examples of Erdoğan’s proverb use in his political discourse

1. At the opening ceremony of a gene bank in Ankara He used a Native American proverb: **“Only after the last tree has been cut down, only after the last river has been poisoned, only after the last fish has been caught, only then you will find that money cannot be eaten”**. He said that 'business as usual', will mean food shortage, a poor world with filthy air and sea , land covered by more roads, airports, bigger industrial farms and cities and more wars in the future. He challenged to fight against ignoring problems of global world and motivated them to make a difference, help to create a fairer sustainable world rather than consuming much and carrying on buying, wasting without any care towards the obvious risks in the future . He gave the message that we have to if our beautiful planet is to survive with all its wonderful life and variety.
2. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday attended a conference focusing on investment opportunities in Turkey which was held in Madrid with the participation of Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and prominent businesspeople: Erdogan greeted the audience by saying, **"Quien tiene amigo tiene un tesoro"** (**The one who has friend has a treasure**) and defining Spain as a close friend in every field. Speaking at the meeting, Erdogan underlined the importance of cooperation between Turkey and Spain at a time when regional issues become serious, problems are encountered in Syria and Palestine and global economic crisis is underway. Stating that Turkey would like to increase its trade volume with Spain from 8 billion Euros to 10 billion Euros in a short period of time, Erdogan called on Spain to work in cooperation towards this end.
3. Analysing the conflict between Israel and Palestine, the Prime Minsiter gave an interview to a French journal. After being asked for his strict attitude towards the problems there, he reminded that Israel didn’t facilitate the peaceful atmosphere there and it wasn’t time to close eyes to the persecution although both countries have military and economical cooperation but it was time to accept the conflict made by Israel; meant to be partners but that was the reality: **“Dost acı söyler”**; (**The real friend tells the bitter truth.**)
4. Prime Minister Erdoğan said that the world of today allocates 1 trillion dollars only to defense industry per year and Prime Minister’s speech continued as follows: ‘If the half of the money were spent for the undeveloped countries, the world would go to less conflict and to the civilizations alliance as we did with Spain. We believe one of the oldest cultures of the world, Africa, will definitely be developed with the help of

all countries because there is a proverb **“Moving water does not rotate the mill”; ‘Taşıma su ile değirmen dönmez.’**

5. Prime Minister in an official visit to Greece after the economic crisis there, in order to illustrate the importance of the trade volume between the two countries which should be increased to \$ 5 billion, he used the proverb **“Komşu komşunun külüne muhtaçtır; Neighbour needs a neighbour's ashes”**. (Even in the smallest of matters one neighbor can help another)
6. The Turkish proverb **“Su akar, Türk bakar”–“Water flows, Turkish looks”** was criticized by Prime Minister Erdoğan in order to attach importance to global warming and climate change problems which has increased and It is not time to watch the river flowing but time to make bans or investments in water technology as a country rich in water because water is becoming as important as oil reserves. Uttered the new version ‘The water flows, Turkish makes’ ‘Su akar, Türk yapar.(The origion of the proverb **“Su akar, Türk bakar”-“Water flows, Turkish looks”** is critics to the disinterest and carelessness of Turkish people to the things happening around.)
7. Erdoğan said during his Justice and Development Party's (AK Party) parliamentary group meeting and renewed his call for Syrian President Bashar Assad to end his ongoing crackdown on anti-government protestors, warning the Syrian leader: “I would like to appeal to Mr. Assad once again in his own language [Arabic]. Ya Bashar! **“Man dakika dukka” “What goes around comes around” (Turkish: Eden bulur)**. The path you are following is not good. This path has a dead end. I would like to recommend him once again to leave this path before shedding more blood”.
8. Erdoğan said in his speech at the Somalia conference in Istanbul yesterday. The tragedy in Somalia does not belong only to the locals, but to all humanity, Erdoğan said, adding that problems in the country will be solved thanks to the unity of the Somali people. The prime minister said, referring to a Somali proverb. “There is a problem in Somalia, but arguing over ‘you’ or ‘I’ instead of solving the problem will only prolong the problem. **“When a snake is in the house, one need not discuss the matter at length.”**
9. Prime Minister Erdoğan commented on the events that transpired during the opening ceremony for the brand new TT Arena, when protests in the stands prompted his as well as other prominent state and sports figures departure, stating; “Galatasaray hasn’t spent a cent on this stadium. The entire facility was done by TOKI. Galatasaray is one of our nation's football clubs that have received international recognition. We thought that such a place would be fitting. We held an official opening ceremony. All of the negativity that transpired there belongs to those responsible. I absolve the Galatasaray community of responsibility for what happened. I believe that they are also indisposed by what transpired. We just think that this shouldn't have been the response for this investment that we made. But what do we say? **“Do well and throw it into the sea; if the fish don't know it, the Creator will.’ “İyilik yap denize at balık bilmezse halik bilir.”**
10. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan delivers a speech at Gabon’s parliament during a visit to this African country on Monday and said those who exploited Africa's

natural riches and even its population in the form of slavery will sooner or later be held accountable for what they did. “There is a very meaningful proverb here in Africa that **“when the flood comes, fish eat the ants and when the flood recedes, ants eat the fish.”** No one should rely on their current might and superiority because who eats whom depends on the flow of water,” he said. “This ancient land, Africa, where the humanity was born but was then massacred by the greedy, will sooner or later rise again and lead humanity.”

11. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited his mother, Tenzile, 82 and gave her flowers on the occasion of Mothers’ Day. Erdoğan, who adores his mother, never skipped visiting her with a bouquet of flowers on Mothers’ Day, despite his busy programs. “I celebrate the Mothers’ Day of all mothers. I offer my love and regards to all of them. There is no other love in the world that could ever surpass a mother's love. You know the proverb **“Ana gibi yar olmaz ; A mother's love is unlike any other”**
12. Erdogan had words to dole out to the Republican People's Party (CHP) and its chair Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who is currently in China. "Another example of hollow bullying was displayed by the main opposition CHP, when a deputy paid a visit to the family of a known terrorist in order to offer their condolences as if they were a flower child. Even their own party chairman lacks the courage to say anything, instead he is trying to score points through us. CHP Chairman Kılıçdaroğlu's mentality is no different from that of this deputy who hails from the same town. That is because he has a secret agenda. From the moment he took on the position he has been promoting Turkey as 'a nation that throws journalists in prison. “That is because the journalists the CHP Chair refers to were playing their advocate and conducting their propaganda. No offense, but **“birds of a feather flock together”** stated Erdoğan. (**Tencere yuvarlanmış kapağını bulmuş**)
13. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visits the quake-stricken area to assess the situation following a powerful 7.2-magnitude quake in Turkey's southeastern province of Van, Oct. 23, 2011. Spoke to the people telling that “Turkey has not learned enough from past earthquakes that toppled poorly constructed buildings. Shoddy construction had contributed to the high death toll in Sunday's earthquake. Despite all previous disasters, we see that the appeals were not heeded. We have to learn as the proverb says **“One misfortune is better than a thousand pieces of advice; experience is the best teacher; bir musibet, bin nasihatten iyidir.”**
14. Mardin, Turkey Proverb **“No roasting from the head of a bird”**; **“Kuş kafasından kavurma olmaz”** was also a reply to oppositions for the percentage of the votes they got in the former elections and also criticizing them for not analyzing the reasons of the investments and not producing solutions, changing the proverb ‘They can’t be the leading party’, for they have no vision and enough votes’.
15. Prime Minister Erdogan responded with a Çorum, Turkish proverb to the Opposition party: **“The croaking of the frog doesn’t make the river muddy”**; **“kurbanın vakvağası ırmağı bulandırmaz”** meant that they would go on doing investments and service for the citizens although having been opposed by the opposition who is really small in number.

16. Criticizing the Civil Unions for not obeying the rules of demonstration and accusing themselves for their demands to decide where to celebrate the day in the most international main square of İstanbul , He used the proverb: “**If the feet become the head, it is the end of the world**”; ‘Ayakların baş olduğu yerde kıyamet kopar.’”

CONCLUSION:

As is shown above, Barack Obama as president of the United States and Erdoğan as the prime minister of Turkey are communicating with the world and they are both in touch with the other world leaders and the people of countries throughout the world. Obama and Erdoğan are influenced to a considerable degree by proverbs and proverbial expressions in particular when they address native speakers at home, but they also draw on this folk wisdom when speaking to audiences abroad. They are both gifted in adding a folkloric touch to their political rhetoric so that it appeals to people everywhere. In order to be understood by the people, they both avoid from highly metaphorical language so they choose metaphor which is easy to interpret. Both are avoiding from creating linguistic problems for their audience and the translators as well. The use of proverbial language enables them to communicate effectively with people of different ethnic and social backgrounds. Such language serves them extremely well in bringing across their political, social, and ethical points. They are aware of the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their audiences and proverbs that they use are a part of their political discourse. Because they understand the context of the proverb and use it in an appropriate way, the proverb has the desired effect on their recipients.

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