

SPECIFICATIONS REGARDING THE CONTEXTUAL ASPECTS OF ROMANIAN AND JAPANESE PROVERBS

Sandra-Lucia ISTRATE¹

Abstract

Japan and Romania seem to have totally different cultures. There are thousands of kilometres between these two countries and the common characteristics and features may not be found very easily. The number of the Romanian people that live in Japan and the number of the Japanese people that live in Romania are pretty fractionally and thus, cultural exchanges between the two nations cannot be developed at an impressive level. Therefore, customs, traditions, rites, rituals or even vocabulary and phrases cannot be borrowed. But as yin and yang are present everywhere, in order to discover where “the balance” is, we could make a research regarding the cultural differences between two nations. I’ve thought that a good starting point might be the differences and similarities between Japanese and Romanian proverbs, since in their wisdom we can certainly find a lot of information about the Japanese man and the Romanian one, therefore, about the cultures and the mentalities of these two nations.

Keywords: folklore, minzoku, proverb, kotowaza, culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of a certain research in any field and of any kind is to try to clarify various dilemmas that can be found either in different works or, why not, in interesting discoveries or even in some unsolved mysteries.

¹ Institutional affiliation: Hyperion University of Bucharest, Romanian-Japanese Studies Center (Romanian-American University) **Sandra-Lucia ISTRATE**, teaches Japanese Literature, Culture and Civilization at Hyperion University in Bucharest and Romanian-Japanese Studies Center; Dean of The Faculty of Social, Humanistic and Natural Studies; member of the Association of Japanese Language Teachers in Romania; she received a Master’s degree in International Relations (Political Science, Bucharest University, 2004) with a dissertation on EU-Japan Trade and Economy and a Ph.D. degree in Philology (Philology, Bucharest University, 2009), with a thesis on Japanese Folklore; in 2010 she studied Methods of Teaching Japanese at Japanese-Language Institute, Urawa, Japan; she is the author of *Romanian Traditions* (Nodashi Zasshi, 2009), *New Year in Japan* (Saitama International, 2009), *Conversation Guide-Book* (Romanian – English – Japanese – Italian), (Perpessicius, 2009), *Wakariyasui Nihongo*, (Universitara Publishing House), 2013, Bucharest, *Japanese Language Communication* (Tracus Arte Publishing House), 2013 Bucharest etc. E-mail: istratesandralucia1976@gmail.com

In our research papers, all of us have to set one goal and make it happen.

Finally, if our message is clearly communicated to interlocutors of any kind, and it can really help in raising the level of understanding of a certain dilemma, we might consider that our objective has been completely met. Certainly, what we might consider "a met objective", from our point of view, somebody else can take as incomplete and therefore, a deeper research or a more detailed one may be done. In particular, taking into account that our paremiology subject is part of the peoples' folklore, we cannot neglect that even its definition might still have an expansive meaning that *could be open to interpretation*.

I believe that when we deal with folkloristic themes and subjects, it's better to discuss it from many points of view. We do not need only simple and cultural knowledge about a certain people, but also psychological, philosophical, literary and, of course, linguistic ones. To analyze even a particularly well-known proverb, often used by common people, a proverb that can be considered even ordinary, being used in common conversation, it would require a round-table consultation in the presence of a psychologist, a profound philosopher, a literary critic, an accomplished linguist, a historian, and, why not, a priest.

In the same vein, when thinking about the famous Romanian proverb "Cine nu are bătrâni să și-i cumpere"/ "he who does not have elders, shall better buy one", we should consider the experience of an elderly man that would also be extremely useful. The Abbot of Saint Pierre sees proverbs as "echoes of the experience". Life experience can sometimes create or explain how specifically a proverb has been born, and this is also what George Cosbuc said: "The experience is the mother of a proverb".

If we question the proverb "He who steals an egg today, tomorrow will steal an ox," we will have to discover in which type of context, either cultural or historical, it has been created. A historian can tell us when the theft was so striking that people started to write about it in the annals of history, the psychologist can explain what the robbery meant in the past and also how it appeared or what made it to be part of people's life, the philosopher could read behind the words to explain unsuspected meanings, the literary critic can provide information about proverbs that have appeared in different literary works, and the linguist can give us valuable information about the structure of this proverb and how this proverb took the final form known by everyone, the priest can tell us how this crime was punishable at the time when the Bible represented the bedside book of every man, and finally, an old-experienced person can clarify to what extent the theoretical elements or the scriptically explained ones correspond with reality, in which real-life situations this proverb can be "applied".

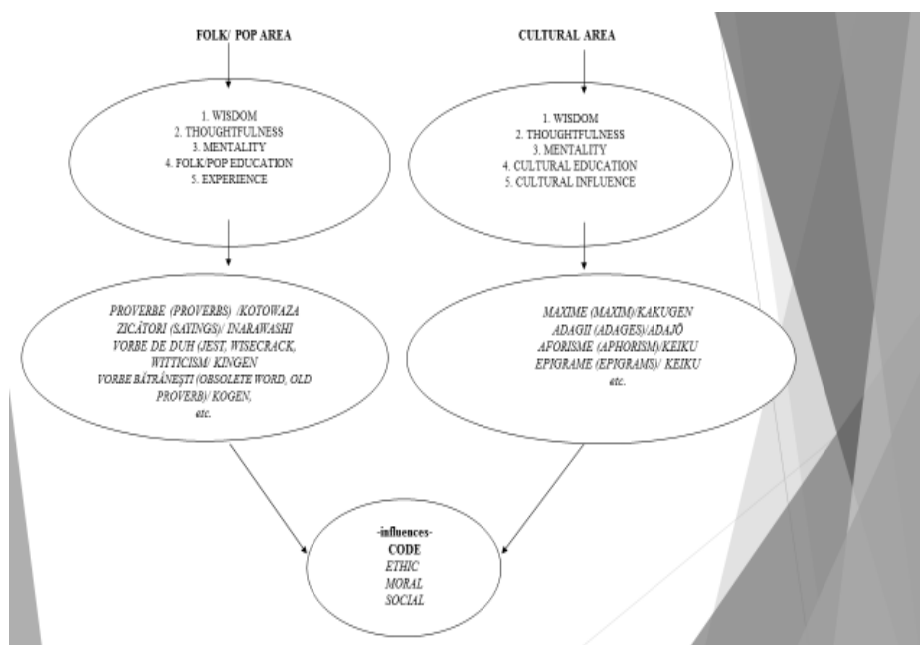
Interestingly, if we try, for example, to find the equivalent of this proverb in a dictionary of Japanese proverbs and sayings, we'll not be able to find it. But we'll be able to find different sayings about "theft". A very interesting one, for instance, is

“Uso wa nusubito no hajimari”/ “A lie is the beginning of a thief”, or “Usotsuki wa dorobō no hajimari”/ “A liar is the beginning of a thief” has an English equivalent, “Show me a liar and I’ll show you a thief”.

Regarding “Minciuna are picioare scurte”, we can find its English equivalent as “A lie has short legs”, but the Japanese one has a different form: “Uso wa ato kara hageru”/ “Lies are afterwards disclosed” (or lit., “Lies afterward fade”) and it means that they are going to lose their gloss pretty soon. We could play a game here and find also another English equivalent like “Lies melt like snow”. It’s interesting to notice that at least one proverb that refers to the fact that sometimes a lie can be resorted to just for the sake of convenience, may be found in many different cultures. As we call it “minciuna de conveniente”/“lie of convenience”, we can find for Japanese “Uso mo hōben”/ A lie, also, is an expedient” and for English, “A necessary lie is harmless”.

Therefore, we can understand again that a research on proverbs of different cultures will be based on culture and psychology of those cultures, and thus, the need for knowledge is quite different.

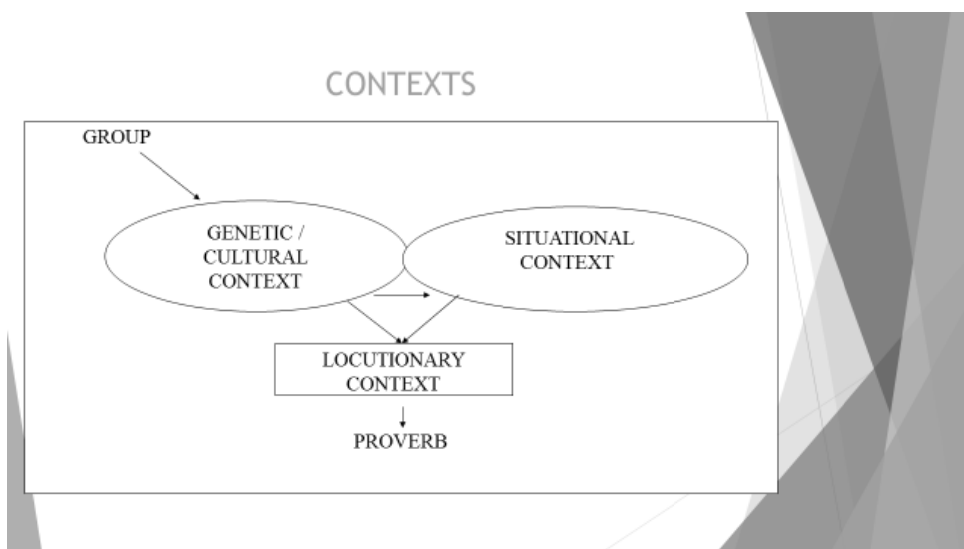
Starting from an analysis of the folklore that means “[oral], [artistic], group and contextual communication ” (Nicolae Constantinescu), I would consider that the proverb goes the same and, as a part of the folklore (and as a part of a people’s culture), it should be studied in terms of contextuality. Any type of communication takes place in a particular context, and therefore the contextuality is defining.



Proverbs are conditioned by the existence of contexts, whether the locutionary or the situational ones. Thus, the situational context (i.e. a certain situation that is created in a certain moment) initiates the locutionary one (the very moment of sayings a proverb).

The genetic context is particularly important if we consider that a proverb is born in a particular cultural context that finally defines it and the situations (another sub-contexts which it can be used in). Thus, the folk text becomes the interpreter of the cultural context and it includes aspects of that group culture that has created the context.

We could question here the double dependency between the genetic context which is created in a particular cultural context and the situational context that is created in a group. They, together, give birth to the locutionary context.



We can see in the chart above that any group has a certain genetic background that creates its possible cultural context(s) which therefore gives rise to the situational context, hence the proverb. Thence, the result of this process is the interdependency between these existing elements, always required when researching a background of a proverb, because the proverb itself is the intertripping of that contextual process.

Paul Ruxăndoiu defines the genetic context as an "initial determination of a meaning that can be preserved in the collective consciousness"².

Therefore, we can make a very fine remark about the literary context, stressing that the social unrest, the tension between effusion moments or impulses of life itself, the type of mentality that influences the individual can create a context, in

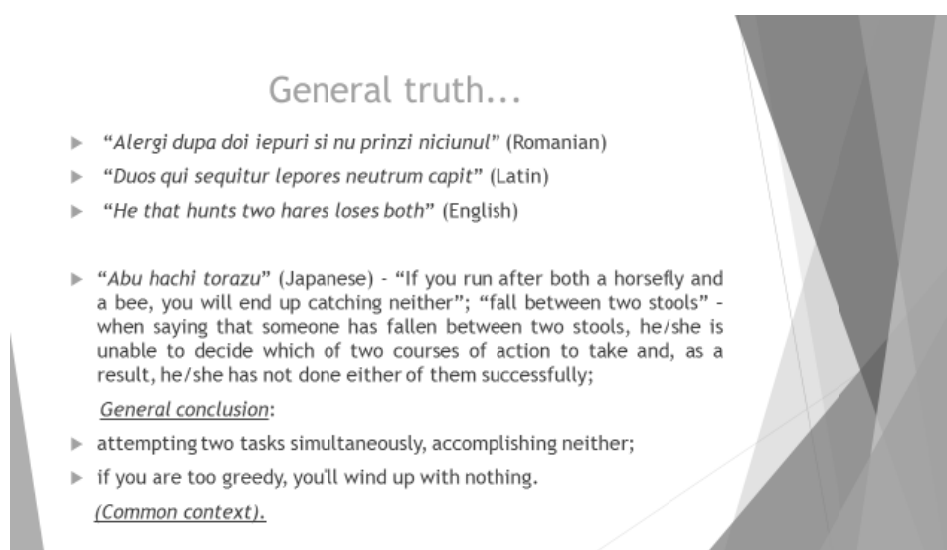
² P. Ruxăndoiu, *Proverb și context*, Editura Universității din București, 2003.

this case the genetic one, that is born in a moment characterized by certain set of features that belong to an epoch and it can “describe” it highly.

The genetic context represents actually the proverb source, whether the reference is made to physical life, everyday people’s experiences in a certain period, or major events in history. Hence, they become part of the folklore and they have always been preserved, even subconsciously, while being passed to next generations, initially orally, then in writing.

The genetic background (context) is in a “close contact” with the generic one that is also created by certain circumstances or events. In accordance with an analysis made by I. Zanne, “universal proverbs express a general truth recognized anywhere and at any time”, and therefore they become “universal”, “and the “particular” ones rests on a constant truth obtained by experience, but a special experience and a local one, that belong to certain and different peoples³”, hence their particularity.

Proverbs that have become universal (as general truths), are closely tightened to their generic context since they have gained, in time, common significance and large general audience.



General truth...

- ▶ “Alergi dupa doi iepuri si nu prinzi niciunul” (Romanian)
- ▶ “Duos qui sequitur lepores neutrum capit” (Latin)
- ▶ “He that hunts two hares loses both” (English)

- ▶ “Abu hachi torazu” (Japanese) - “If you run after both a horsefly and a bee, you will end up catching neither”; “fall between two stools” - when saying that someone has fallen between two stools, he/she is unable to decide which of two courses of action to take and, as a result, he/she has not done either of them successfully;

General conclusion:

- ▶ attempting two tasks simultaneously, accomplishing neither;
- ▶ if you are too greedy, you’ll wind up with nothing.

(Common context).

For example, when we are saying “*Alergi dupa doi iepuri si nu prinzi niciunul*”, we mention it like a general truth since it can be considered already a universal proverb. It’s interesting to find it back in the Latin culture, “*Duos qui sequitur lepores neutrum capit*”, or in the British one, “*He that hunts two hares loses both*”. The Japanese equivalent of this proverb is “*Abu hachi torazu*” – that means “If you run after *both a horsefly and a bee*, you will end up *catching* neither”. It may be also

³ Edițiune populară, *Proverbele românilor*, extrase din colecțiunea D-lui I. Zanne și cu autorizarea D-sale, București, Editura Librăriei Socec, 1907.

interpreted as “fall between two stools” – and when saying that someone has fallen between two stools, he/she is unable to decide which of two courses of action to take and as a result, he/she has not done either of them successfully; attempting two tasks simultaneously, accomplishing neither; if you are too greedy, you'll wind up with nothing.

In any of the cases above, we might conclude that, in fact, the general context of this proverb was a common one, a context that was born once in each of the culture mentioned before.

The situational context is created after the genetic and the generic ones and it represents the intertripping of the locutionary context that is, in fact, the very act of clear communication. The proverb plays its role only when it starts being related to the concrete contexts in which it is used and, thus, it gains a certain function.

It is meant to advise people when they take certain actions, usually improper ones, or to act as a guide of life issues, to generalize or not the experiences of a group etc. Proverb functions are noticed also from the point of view of the functional context and they are innumerable, but they purposely can make the connection between “the transmitter” and “the receiver”, and their message is actually the “cause” that creates the locutionary context intertripping.

Even if a group only consists of a transmitter and a receiver, the proverb reach the stage of the locutionary context only after it passes, in turn, through the genetic context, then the situational one, and, finally, the functional one. Depending on the time and situation, a proper proverb that has a right (in accordance with the time and situation, as I've mentioned above) message is to be chosen.

Thence, I consider that there is an interdependence between the functional context and the locutionary one, an interdependence that represents the instrument that shall “deliver” the correct message – either moral, juridical, religious or educative etc.).

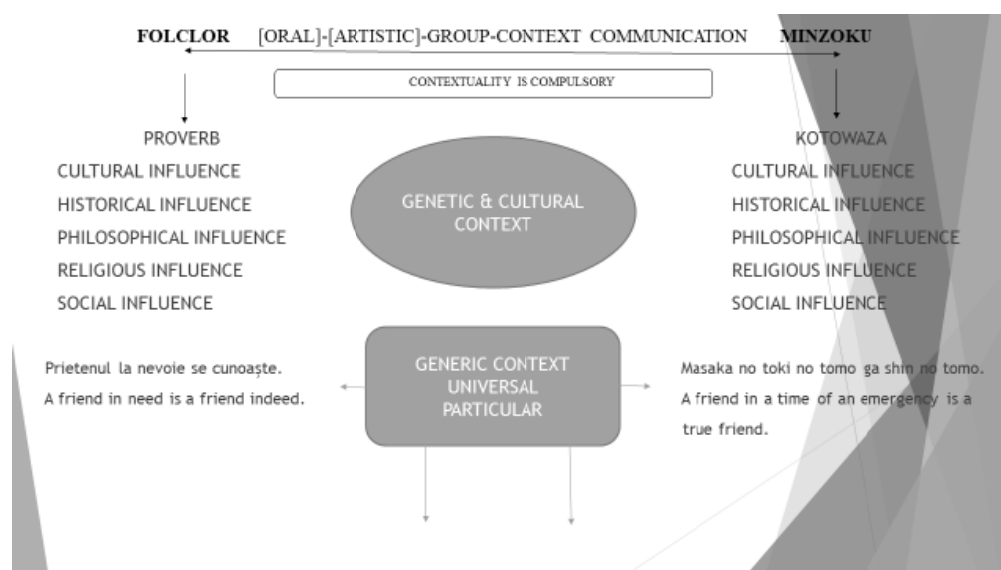
A parallel research on European and Asian folklores involves, first of all, a separate deep and profound research of each of the two ones, from all the points of view that I mentioned before in my paper (cultural, psychological, philosophical, literary, linguistic etc.). Starting from this point we may be able to discover common elements and principals or, on the contrary, antithetical ones.

We should also keep in mind that the education of a people is based on a certain type of culture, of course, stemmed from genetic contexts that are all so different. Education is built gradually, depending on the culture, religion etc, specific to each nation.

How proverbs are determined primarily by genetic contexts, we can expect that the difference between Romanian and Japanese proverbs is particularly a pregnant one. But, putting into question the generic context, we will certainly find many common proverbs in both cultures because, over time, they have become universal proverbs and have lost their contextual nature that is strictly genetic.

We can find in the two researched cultures either proverbs with the same background, but different forms, or proverbs that have both identical “substance” and form. In the first category of proverbs, we can notice that even if they have a similar background, their forms are completely different but, in spite of that we can easily understand their similarity if we pay attention to the functional context and to their practical message.

A proverb having, more or less, an identical form and a common background is “Prietenul la nevoie se cunoaste”/ “A friend in need is a friend indeed”. Its Japanese equivalent – “Masaka no toki no tomo ga shin no tomo”/ “A friend in a time of an emergency is a true friend” shows that also the literal translation is pretty similar. Thus, it can be considered indeed a universal proverb since its equivalents can be find in the cultures of many nations.

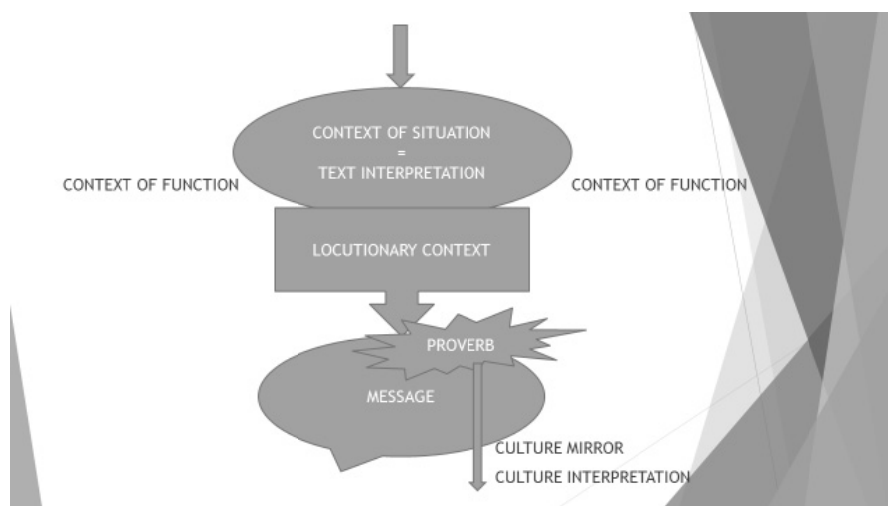


“Doi ochi vad mai bine ca unul” / “Two eyes can see better than only one” (English equivalent – “Two heads are better than one”) finds its equivalent in Japanese Language – “San nin yoreba Monju no chie ” - and being equivalents, they might have a common background.

But their forms are obviously different, since the Japanese literary translation is “Three persons would gather, the wisdom of Manjusri” (for Japanese people, Monju is a Buddhist god of wisdom). From here we see very clearly the influence of some other Asian cultures upon the Japanese one, as Manjusri represents the Bodhisattva of wisdom and intellect, met in Tibetan culture as Jampelyang, in Chinese culture as Wenshu or Wenshushili, and it is often recalled in the famous Lotus Sutra of the Indian culture.

Thus, we might conclude that, regarding the above proverb, existed different genetic backgrounds, but eventually they were born having different forms, with common substance. Therefore, their functional context may also be a common one, since the message transmitted to the people is the same: humans should consider that more eyes, more minds and more heads can come to a much better result.

► <u>Religious influences.</u> De la mine puțin, de la Dumnezeu, mult. Less from me, more from God.	<u>Religious influences.</u> Hotoke no kao mo san do. (The third time for the Buddha's face; i.e.: even a person with the patience of the Buddha won't tolerate that much)
► <u>Historical influences.</u> Din gură în gura are să ajungă până la urechile Lui Voda. From mouth to mouth, to Voda's ears.	<u>Historical influences.</u> <i>Naseba naru.</i> (If you take action, it will become) This proverb comes from a poem by Uesugi Harunori (Yōzan), a member of an important clan from back in the Edo period.
► <u>Old customs/traditions/practices</u> S-a dus omu' la colac si a capatat un ciomag. He went for a twist bread and got a cosh.	<u>Old customs/traditions/practices</u> <i>Okite hanjou, nete ichijou.</i> (Half a tatami mat when awake, one tatami mat when asleep.)
► <u>Life and death mentality</u> Moartea unora este viața altora. Someone's life is someone else's death.	<u>Life and death mentality</u> <i>Inochi atte no monodane.</i> (Life is the root of all things.)
► <u>Name of places and spots</u> S-a făcut Dunăre de mânie. "Turning Danube" with anger.	<u>Name of places and spots</u> Fujisan ni noboru mono wa kenjin desu. (A person climbing Mount Fuji is a wise man.)
► <u>Famous characters</u> Pica para malaiața în gura lui Natafleata. A soft pear in the stupid's mouth.	<u>Famous characters</u> Ningen banji Saiou ga uma. (All human affairs are like ' Saiou's horse)
► <u>Tradiții culinare</u> Când te hrănești cu pui, când cu fasole. Sometimes chicken, sometimes beans.	<u>Tradiții culinare</u> <i>Kamo ga negi o shotte kuru.</i> (A duck comes along carrying a leek on its back)



CONCLUSIONS

I hope that the present work might actually have as a result a close intercommunion between the civilizations and cultures of Romania and Japan, that, at the first sight, seem diametrically opposed, but finally, we don't have to forget that they have the same existential core that characterizes the mankind.

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