CHAPTER IV

Proverbs and Semantics
Semantics is traditionally defined as the science of meaning. Historical linguists make use of this science to trace the change and evolution of the meanings of words. Structural linguists in their analysis of languages keep the meaning scrupulously away to enable themselves to arrive at it later. Bloomfield recognizes two broad kinds of meaning of individual words. One of them is the central meaning which may be described as the literal meaning of the word and the second one is the marginal or metaphorical meaning. These two varieties of meaning are also known as denotation and connotation. When we say that a word means something it is a denotation or the name of that thing. For example the word *cat* is the denotation or a name of a domestic quadruped animal of a particular zoological species. This is also the meaning given by the dictionary. Denotation is another name for Bloomfield's central meaning.

But from our experience in the use of language we know that in no language in the world are words used only in their denotation. Most words have connotative values as well. The word *cow* for example means something very different to a person brought up in western culture but to those brought up in Hindu tradition it evokes complex emotional and religious attitudes which may sometime affect the total understanding of the names and the meanings. But when a word has a connotative value it does not mean
that it is entirely different from its denotation.

On the contrary, as Darbyshire observes, "there will be a common area of agreement about some sort of meaning, including denotation". In structural semantics, the common area of agreement is known as the semantic field. For example, the word foot means a part of the body. This is its denotative meaning. It also means denotatively a measure of length or metrical unit of verse. When the same word is used as verb it means 'to dance', 'to cross', or 'to pay a bill'. But in its metaphorical use we can talk of the foot of a mountain, or the foot of stairs. From the collocation of the word we know the difference between one kind of usage and another. For example, there is a footnote at the foot of the page. The foot in this sentence is used in a different meaning. Similarly the plural of foot is used in different connotation in idioms like to find one's feet or to have a feet of clay.

In structural semantics the linguistic sign is considered a combination of two components signifiant and signifie. Such an analysis provides a convenient framework for the classification of semantic phenomenon. Stephen Ullman observes, "we shall have to distinguish between two kinds of semantics situations: simple ones in which one name is connected with one sense, and complex ones where one name is attached to several senses".¹
In a simple semantic situation words have usually the central meaning or the basic meaning. They only denote certain concepts or certain material things. But in complex semantic situation more than one sense is connected with the same name often resulting in ambiguity. The pure semantic ambiguities have two important types—one of them is called polysemy where a single word has several senses and the other is homonymy where several different words have identical pronunciation. The distinction between polysemy and homonymy is applied to stylistic uses of ambiguity. Polysemy is a multiple meaning while homonymy is a pun on words.

In interpretation of a literary work as a piece of discourse implies correlating the meaning of a linguistic item as an element in the language code with the meaning it takes on in the context in which it occurs. The users of a language give new values to words or proverbs, in the course of their long tradition. Not only poets but all language users and all pieces of writing including proverbs use figurative or metaphorical meanings and extend their applicability to various other situations. In fact the possibility of using a word or a proverb in situations other than their original views is an indication of the growth of resources of the language. It is therefore possible to think of proverbs, as we think of words as existing in sets of small or large
selections of items with allied meanings. For the purpose of this analysis a set may be defined as a number of proverbs which are used to present a wide choice of situations. Darbyshire illustrates how an idea can be expressed in a number of different ways. He takes up an idea contained in a sentence like,

Petrol now costs more because of new taxation.

He says that this can be expressed in a variety of ways as is evident from the following sentences:

1. This new tax means an increase in the price of petrol.
2. Since the budget you have to pay more for your petrol.
3. Expenditure on motoring will go up 5% as a result of latest tax demand.
4. Recent fiscal policy has raised the cost of petrol and so on and on.

The nature of the meaning of a word or a proverb and the extent of its applicability can be described in terms of nucleus and the semantic field. In a case of the sentence given above taxation is the nucleus which has a semantic field that can take other words and collocation of words. Applying this methodology to proverbs, it can be said that each proverb had as its nucleus a situation or a historical event in the past. But it has a semantic field transcending its bounds of time and place. The
semantic field includes similar situations outside the
time and place of origin of the proverb. For example:

The Vicar of Bray will be Vicar of Bray still

This was used at one time to describe a flatterer,
a time-served, sycophant who retains his position of power
by his tricks of sycophancy. It had origin at one place
in one situation. But the proverb can be used in a
similar but not identical situation in some other country,
some other time that means it's semantic nucleus has
its applicability in several other situations. In
the process of such applicability there may be overlappings.
sometimes a number of proverbs are grouped into a sets
because they have the same semantic fields though not
the same semantic origin.

In the present analysis an attempt is made to
study some select proverbs and their semantic affinity
with other proverbs and their applicability in various
situations. This kind of semantic grouping of proverbs
is like making a thesaurus of proverbs. Only selected
proverbs are taken up for analysis and discussion
lest the present study should grow to unmanageable size.
The diagram number one on the page that follows indicates the radiation of new meanings and their wider range of applicability, starting from the narrow nucleus of the proverb. It is conceived here that every proverb has a central meaning which may be compared to the hub of a wheel, like the spokes that originate in the hub and spread away from it to wider areas; the nucleus gives rise to radiation of meanings and new areas of their applicability.

The diagram number two indicates that the new areas of meaning are mutually interconnected with varying degrees of overlapping among them. These overlappings of the new semantic fields and their original association with the nucleus of the meaning are represented in the diagram. The analysis that follows is primarily based on this concept of nucleus of meaning and its widening semantic fields.

Although proverbs have come into the speech of the community at different times and from different sources there is a thematic affinity among some proverbs. Quite a large number of proverbs deal with similar if not identical themes. The message of these proverbs may not be the same. The situations in which they are used also vary. Still there is something that binds them or unifies them under one central theme. The Penguin Dictionary of Proverbs classifies thousands of
I. Constant dripping wears away the stone.
II. If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.
III. It is dogged that does it.
IV. Little by little, bit by bit.
V. Little strokes fell great oaks.
VI. Slow but sure wins the race.
VII. Where there is a will, there is a way.
VIII. Other possible related proverbs if any.

Diagram showing the process of radiation of marginal or secondary meanings from the core meaning. Shaded area represents the central meaning. Larger circle is the head proverb. Shapes emerging from it are other proverbs radiating new areas of meaning.

Diagram indicating widening area of applicability of the proverb.

Diagram showing the process of radiation of marginal or secondary meanings from the core meaning. Shaded area represents the central meaning. Larger circle is the head proverb. Shapes emerging from it are other proverbs radiating new areas of meaning.
Diagram showing the shared meaning among synonymous proverbs. The shaded area is the core meaning. The large circle is the head proverb. Smaller circles are related proverbs. Shaded parts of the circles mean the result, anticipation, and overlap among the member proverbs.

I. 
II. 5, 6, 7 - Uncertainty of the result.
III. 8, 9, 10 - Uncertainty of the result.
IV. B, E, F - Shared meaning among the member proverbs.

I. 
II. III. IV. V. VI. VII. VIII. IX. X.
proverbs into 180 well defined themes. Some of the
samples of these themes are, beauty, death, devil, fear,
love, war, women, nature religion and so on. Depending
upon the number of proverbs available on each theme and
its various perspectives they can be further classified
into sub themes which are themselves are not totally
unrelated to the main theme. For example on the theme
of love the dictionary lists about 128 proverbs divided
into 24 sub themes proverbs. Then there are proverbs
on the sub themes listed below.

1. **It is blindness**
   Love is blind
   Love sees no faults
   No love is foul, nor prison fair.

2. **It is irrationality**
   Love is lawless
   Lovers are madmen

3. **It is value**
   Love covers many infirmities
   Faults are thick and love is thin
   He that has love in his breast, has spurs in
   his sides

4. **It is power**
   Love conquers all
Love will find a way
Love and cough cannot be hid

5 It's universality:—
He that does not love a woman sucked a sow.
Love and leprosy few escape

6 It's steadfastness:—
Old love will not be forgotten
Sound love is not soon forgotten
True love never grows old.

7 It's ups and downs:—
Love is sweet in the beginning and sour in the ending.

Love is a sweet torment
Never rely on love or the weather

8 It's advantages:—
Love is full of fear
When love puts in, friendship is gone

9 It's dangers:—
Love of the wicked is more dangerous than their hatred.

They love too much that die for love
Love and pease-pottage are two dangerous things
10 It's inadequacy:—
'Sweat-heart' and 'Honey-bird' keep no house
Fear is stranger than love
Of soup and love, the first is the best

11 It's silence:—
Love speaks, even when the lips are closed
Whom we love best to them we can say least
When love is greatest, words are fewest.

12 It's sources:—
Congruity is the mother of love
Love begets love
Love needs no teaching

13 It's remedies:—
Time, not the mind, puts an end to love
No herb will cure love
In love's wars, he who flies is conqueror.

14 It's rules and conditions:—
All is fair in love and war
Love is a game in which both players always cheat
Love me, love my dog.

15 It's tactics:—
Love delights in praise
The last suitor wins the maid
Scorn at first makes after love the more

16 Courtship:
Sunday's wooing draws into ruin
No woo is a pleasure in a young man, a fault in an old
When petticoats woo, breaks may come speed

17 Lover's quarrels:
Lovers' quarrels are soon mended
The quarrel of lovers is the renewal of love
Love laughs at lovers perjuries

18 Young love:
No love like the first love
Love of lads, fire of charts is soon in and soon out.
Calf love, half love; old love, cold love

19 New love:
One love expels another
As good love comes as goes
Many a heart is caught in the rebound

20 Unrequited love:
Love without return is like a question without an answer
There is more pleasure in loving than in being beloved

21 Parental love:
A mother's love is best of all
A mother's love never ages
No love to a father's

22 Love and faith:
where love is, there is faith
where there is no trust there is no love
Love asks us faith and faith asks firmness

23 Love and jealousy:
love is never without jealousy
Love and lordship like no fellowship
Love being jealous, make a good eye look asquint

24 Love and money:
Love lives in cottages as well as in courts
Love lasts as long as money endures
Love does much, money does everything.

Most of these clusters of proverbs are neither synonymous or antonymous. Each one of them focuses on one chosen aspect of the emotion of love. The
underlined unity of all these is the central theme of love. These aspects of the emotion are related like links in a chain concatenating with each other. They can also be treated as springing from the nucleus.

Many consonant clusters are synonymous rather than antonimous. Proverbs which are antonimous may diagonally opposite statements. For example, the two sayings from Shakespeare

There is divinity that shapes our ends
There is special providence for the fall of a sparrow
Contradict the statement of the following proverb

Men are the masters of their fate

However, such totally opposite proverbs are sparsely available. In terms of semantic fields clusters can be interpreted as synonyms with a network of interrelationships amongst them. For example, the following proverbs may be treated as one semantic cluster around the nucleus of action:

1. Actions speak louder than words
2. Deeds not words
3. Fine words butter no parsnips
4. The greatest talkers are the least doers.
5. He who gives fair words feeds you with an empty spoon
6 A little help is worth a deal of pity
7 Praise without profit puts little in the pot

The nucleus of these proverbs is the superiority of actions over words. The proverb at 2 above is an imperative and stylistic variation of number 1. From words to talkers and from action to doers is an easy step and naturally emerge from the nucleus of the meaning. In number 6 action is represented as help and words are replaced by pity. And the proverb states that help is superior to the verbal expression of pity. In proverb number 7 above, praise stands for words and profit stands for material benefits of action. A mere verbal phrase full of words does not yield any perceptible profits. Thus we see that all these proverbs in spite of their variation in expression are synonymous and can be used in different situations. The extension of the semantic field makes it possible to apply these proverbs in different situations as the context demands.
For the sake of convenience and clarity the clusters of proverbs are numbered serially in the following analysis. A cluster of proverbs with semantic affinity may consist of two or more proverbs. For example,

All good things must come to an end,
And, the best of friends must part;

make a cluster of two proverbs with the change in the best of things as its nucleus. But hundreds of such clusters are available and therefore two-proverb clusters are not taken up here for discussion. Most of the clusters given here have three or more proverbs as their numbers.

When there are several proverbs with a shared meaning, the problem that confronts us is which of the proverbs in the cluster should be taken as the nucleus and which others as its offshoots. Logically we should treat the chronologically first proverb as the central one and all others which came later as its semantic numbers. But the chronology of proverbs is uncertain and as such it would be unauthentic to treat one of the proverbs as historically the first. For the purpose of this analysis the chronology of proverbs is not taken into consideration. What is primary is the shared meaning among the proverbs in
each cluster. Therefore any proverb is as good as any other to establish synonymity or semantic overlappings in a cluster. In each of the clusters below the proverb that is listed first is treated as the nucleus proverb. It should not however mean that it is historically the earliest or has any superiority over others. The central proverb in the cluster is in capital letters.

1. ALL THINGS ARE DIFFICULT BEFORE THEY ARE EASY

The semantic nucleus is the initial difficulty and final ease in doing a thing. As we go on practising anything can become easy and we succeed in our attempt. The following proverbs share this central meaning, although they are all clothed in different language.

(a) Constant dripping wears away the stone.
(b) It's dogged that does it.
(c) Little by little and bit by bit.
(d) Little strokes fell great oaks.
(e) Rome was not built in a day
(f) Slow but sure wins the race
(g) Learn to walk before you run.
(h) Practice makes perfect
(i) If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.
All the proverbs in the clusters have a common shared meaning. The quantum of shared meaning does not matter. Each proverb has its own emphasis and applicability, different from those of others. And yet it retains its affinity with the central proverb. For example, the proverb at 'i' stresses the importance of repeated attempts or perseverance. It also implies an exhortation not to be discouraged by initial failures. But it shares some semantic area with the central proverb as well as with others. The proverb at 'f' implies a sense of steadiness and slowness and it also exhorts against haste. But ultimately it's related to the notion that things which are initially difficult become easy if steadfast attempts are made. Likewise the other proverbs listed in the cluster have each its own semantic emphasis but at the same time each one emerges from the nucleus of the head proverb.

2. APPEARANCES ARE DECEPTIVE

This warns us against judging people from their outward appearances. Good looks, polished manners and fine clothing do not always go with virtue or the lack of them, with vice. This semantic nucleus is shared by the following members of the cluster
(a) All that glitters is not gold
(b) Never judge by appearances
(c) Things are seldom what they seem
(d) The cowl does not make the monk.

While these proverbs share the semantic field with the head-proverb, it would be relevant to mention the following proverbs as their antonyms. They convey a diagonally opposite meaning and share among themselves a common nucleus.

(a) Fine feathers make fine birds
(b) The tailor makes the man

3. NEVER PUT OFF TILL TOMORROW WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY

The semantic nucleus of this proverb is postponement of action. If a thing has to be done it would be better if it is done immediately. A want of right action at the right moment may lead to unpleasant and even tragic consequences. This meaning is shared by the following members of the cluster:

(a) Procrastination is a thief of time.
(b) Opportunity seldom knocks twice
(c) A stitch in time saves nine
(d) Strike while the iron is hot
(e) Make hay while the sun shines
(f) Gather ye rose buds while ye may
(g) One of these days is none of these days
(h) Take time by the forelock
(i) Tomorrow never comes.
(j) What may be done at any time is done at no time.

4. BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

The dictionary analyses the concept of beauty in terms of shape, proportion, colour, symmetry, form in any object, or human being. But the proverb insists that beauty does not exist by itself. It is in the consciousness of those who see it. If anything delights a person it is beautiful to him. If anything does not delight him it is not beautiful. This meaning is shared by the following proverbs which make a semantic cluster.

(a) Everyone to his taste
(b) Tastes differ
(c) There is no disputing about tastes
(d) One man's meat is another man's poison

The semantic area of most of these proverbs is in the field of tasting of delicacies or food articles. The central notion of delight is shared by these proverbs.
5. BEGGARS MUST NOT BE CHOOSERS

The central meaning is a person who is hungry and is too poor to buy food should not argue with or complain against a benefactor. He should be grateful for anything he gets from the benefactor. Although apparently it is concerned with food and begging it goes beyond these limitations and in its expanded semantic field refers to a person whose circumstances leave him no choice in a matter. He must either take it or leave it. The following proverbs make no reference to food or begging but have synonymous applications.

(a) Never look a gift horse in the mouth.
(b) He who pays the piper calls the tune.

6. BETTER BEND THAN BREAK

This proverb is related to a stiff tree and a pliant tree facing a stormy evening. It suggests that it is better to give way to the wishes of those in authority or those in power than to resist them and get ruined in the process. This is an advice on practical wisdom and is shared by the following proverbs.

(a) Description is the better part of valour
(b) He that fights and runs away may live to fight another day.
(c) One pair of heels is often worth two pairs of hands.
If we interpret the nucleus of the head-proverb in terms of cowardice the following proverbs form a cluster of its antonyms.

(a) A bold heart is half the battle.

(b) Put a stout heart to a steybrae

(steybrae means steep slope)

c) A brave man may fall, but he cannot yield.

d) Better to break than to bend

e) Valour would fight, but discretion would run away.
The following are some more proverb clusters with shared semantic fields, isolated for the purpose of this study. Each member of the cluster has its own nucleus of meaning and at the same time shares the meaning of the other members. The proverb clusters are given without any further explanations.

(8) Birds of a feather flock together

Like will to like
Men are known by the company they keep
He should have a long spoon that sups with the devil
He that toucheth pitch shall be defiled
The rotten apple injures its neighbours
Who keeps company with the wolf will learn to howl.

(9) Catch your bear before you sell its skin

Never spend your money before you have it
Don't count your chickens before they are hatched
Do not halloo till you are out of the wood
First catch your hare
There's many a slip twixt the cup and the lip.

(10) Don't count your chickens before they are hatched

Catch your bear before you sell its skin
Do not halloo till you are out of the wood
First catch your hare
Never spend your money before you have it.
There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip.

(11) Don't cross a bridge till you come to it

Don't cry before you are hurt
Don't meet trouble half-way
Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you
Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

(12) Don't cry before you are hurt

Don't cross a bridge till you come to it
Don't meet trouble half-way
Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you
Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

(13) Don't take your harp to the party

Harp not for ever on the same string
It is useless to flog a dead horse
Not good is it to harp on the frayed string.

(14) A door must be either shut or open

No man can serve two masters
You cannot burn the candle at both ends
You cannot have it both ways
You cannot have your cake and eat it
You cannot run with the hare and hunt with the hounds
You cannot sell the cow and drink the milk
You cannot serve god and mammon.

(15) Eavesdroppers never hear any good of themselves
    The fish will soon be caught that nibbles at every bait
    He who peeps through a hole may see what will vex him.
    Too much curiosity lost paradise.

(16) Faint heart ne'er won fair lady
    None but the brave deserves the fair
    Fortune favours the bold
    He who hesitates is lost
    Nothing venture, nothing have

(17) Familiarity breeds contempt
    Distance lends enchantment to the view
    No man is a hero to his valet
    A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house
    Respect is greater from a distance.

(18) A hedge between keeps friendship green
    Good fences make good neighbours
    Love your neighbour, yet pull not down your fence
    An Englishman's house is his castle.
(19) If two men ride on a horse, one must ride behind

Don't speak to the man at the wheel
He that cannot obey cannot command
It needs more skill than I can tell to play the second fiddle well
Through obedience learn to command.

(20) Neither a borrower nor a lender be

Lend your money and lose your friend
When I lent I had a friend; when I asked he was unkind.

(21) Opportunity seldom knocks twice

Fortune knocks at least once at every man's gate
Gather ye rosebuds while ye may
He that will not when he may, when he will he shall have nay
He who hesitates is lost
Hoist your sail when the wind is fair
Life is short and time is swift
Make hay while the sun shines
Strike while the iron is hot
There is a tide in the affairs of men
Time and tide wait for no man.
(22) Safety lies in the middle course

    Enough is as good as a feast

    Moderation in all things

    More than enough is too much.

(23) Hedlock is padlock

    He travels the fastest who travels alone

    Marry in haste, and repent at leisure.

(24) What must be must be

    Do not kick against the pricks

    What can't be cured must be endured

    You must grin and bear it.

(25) While there is life there is hope

    Every cloud has a silver lining

    Hope springs eternal in the human breast

    Never say die

    Nothing so bad but might have been worse.

(26) Who keeps company with the wolf will learn to howl

    He should have a long spoon that sups with the devil

    He that toucheth pitch shall be defiled

    The rotten apple injures its neighbours.
(27) who repairs not his gutters repairs his whole house

It is not use spoiling the ship for a Ha'p'orth of tar

A stitch in time saves nine.

Many more members can be added to each of the clusters discussed or listed above. And many more proverb classes can be identified. But what is attempted in this chapter, would hopefully, serve as a sample. Of course, there are several other ways of analysing the semantics of proverbs. But the one attempted is a less-trodden path.
REFERENCES


2. A.E. Darbyshire A Description of English. Arnold Heinemann India, New Delhi, 1967 (P. 154)