

Speaking Card Decks 1 & 2

90 Traditional English-Language Proverbs

Proverbs—bits of “folk wisdom” passed down from generation to generation—are a part of every culture.

There are several hundred traditional proverbs that English speakers throughout the world are familiar with. You can find ninety of the most common of these sayings listed at the end of this booklet.

The same proverbs appear in *Speaking Card Decks 1 & 2 —90 Traditional English-Language Proverbs*. If you have not purchased the two 90-card decks, you can produce your own materials for the “Games of Wisdom” by copying the first half of each proverb on one card (followed by dots ...) and the second half (beginning with dots ...) on another card of a different color. Number only the first card of each sentence. Be sure to divide each saying at a logical point. Here are examples:

Half a loaf...

1

Variety ...

2

Too many
cooks ...

3

... is better than
none.

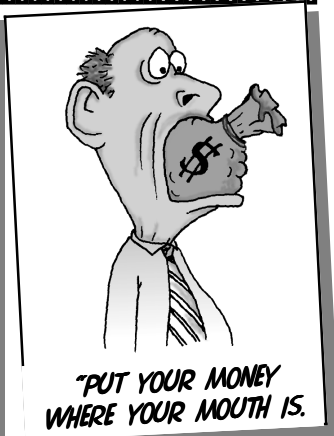
... is the spice of
life.

... spoil the
broth.

Speaking

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The “Wisdom” of Proverbs

This reading selection is the text of “Sample Speech 3A” from Part Three of *Speaking: Oral Language Skills for Real-Life Communication*. It is a sample “oral essay.”

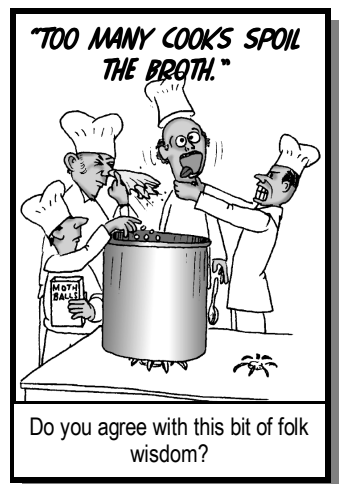
We can read or hear proverbs, sayings, and quotations everywhere—on posters and in pamphlets, magazines, and books, in people’s speeches, and in everyday talk. There’s even a quotation on U.S. money. Each bill or coin has the phrase “In God We Trust.”

Every culture has its share of “folk wisdom” from the past, and some of these ideas appear to be universal. For example, here are some Mexican proverbs that seem to correspond to sayings in the United States:

- “He who is a parrot is green wherever he is.” (Doesn’t that mean the same as “A leopard can’t change its spots?”)
- “In the matter of pigs, everything is money, and in the matter of money, everyone is a pig.” (That sounds like “Money is the root of all evil.”)
- “To win a dispute is to gain a chicken and lose a cow.” (Or, as we say in the U.S., “Win the battle but lose the war.”)
- “An ant that is moving does more than an ox that is taking a nap.” (Is that like our proverb “Slow and steady wins the race?”)

Proverbs are cultural treasures, handed down from one generation to another. They *seem* to contain tremendous wisdom about human nature. But are these “truisms” always true? Sometimes...maybe.

For example, it’s true (isn’t it?) that “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” I mean—if someone you love goes away, you miss him...don’t you? Although...on the other hand, if you really weren’t suited for each other in the first place, his absence might be...a welcome relief? You never know...I guess it depends...



On the other hand, how about the folk wisdom that “Familiarity breeds contempt?” This well-known proverb is *supposed* to mean that detailed knowledge of a thing—or a person—makes us hate it (or him or her). But then...psychologists have done studies that show the *opposite* is true. After seeing photos of strangers several times, participants in these experiments began saying they thought they would *like* those people. And how about the items in our homes—the paintings or photos or objects that we see again and again—day after day? We grow to “love” those things, don’t we—and to miss them if they break or if we move to another place? Familiarity breeds contempt? Oh, well.

Some well-known proverbs seem to mean exactly the opposite as *other* proverbs. For instance, how can it be true that “Birds of a feather flock together” (that is, people make friends most easily with people of similar personalities) while—on the other hand—“Opposites attract?” Hmm... And then there’s the saying “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks” versus the belief that “You’re never too old to learn.” How can both “truisms” be true at the same time?

I guess people are most interested in sayings that they can quote in their own speech—especially if they’re funny. How else can we explain the popularity of books like *The Wit and Wisdom of Forrest Gump*, by Winston Gunn, *Life’s Little Instruction Book* (or *Life’s Little Destruction Book*, a parody by Charles Dane), *Live and Learn and Pass It On*, by H. Jackson Brown, Jr. and many others?

Here are some well-known bits of wisdom from the popular movie *Forrest Gump*:

- “If you don’t know where you are going, you will probably not wind up there.”
- “Do not make excuses—unless you have to.”
- “If you’ve got to cry, do it by yourself—and be quick about it.”
- “Most people don’t look dumb until they start talking.”
- “Life is like a box of chocolates—you never know what you’re going to get.”
- “Always say ‘thank you,’ even if you don’t mean it.”

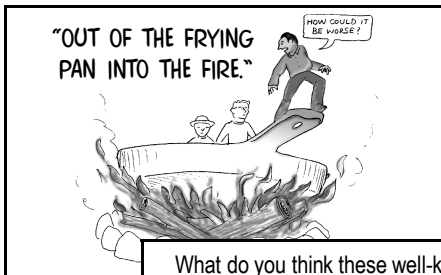
Well...we can all agree with *these* modern proverbs. *Can’t* we?

Children seem to know intuitively that some old proverbs are really nonsense—at least in their worlds in modern times. When some eleven-year-olds in Baltimore, Maryland, were asked to finish some very famous proverbs, here’s what they came up with:

- “Don’t put all your eggs...in your pocket” (instead of “in one basket”).
- “Don’t bite the hand...that has your allowance in it.” (The proverb used to end with the words “that feeds you.”)
- “All is fair in love and...fighting with your brother.” (I guess that’s better than the old ending “war,” isn’t it?)
- “If at first you don’t succeed,...blame it on the teacher.” (Well, that’s easier than “try, try again,” I suppose.)
- “A bird in the hand is...dead.” (Of course! How can a dead bird be “worth two in the bush,” anyway?)

Proverbs and other quotes are all around us—even on our car bumpers and coffee mugs—and T-shirts. Every day, we can read again and again that “The best man for the job is usually... a woman,” “Whoever says money can’t buy happiness...doesn’t know where to shop,” “Experience is what you get when you didn’t get what you wanted,” and “It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s how you place the blame.” O.K. so these pieces of wisdom are a little different from the time-honored originals, but after all:

- “Here today, gone tomorrow.”
- “Tomorrow never comes.”
- “All’s well that ends well.”
- “Last but not least...”



What do you think these well-known proverbs mean?