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PROVERBS WITH THE WORD »BEE« IN ENGLISH, ITALIAN, LITHUANIAN AND SLOVENIAN

Melita LEMUT BAJEC

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education, Kardeljeva ploščad 16, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
e-mail: melita.lemutbajec@pef.uni-lj.si

Judita GIPARAITĖ

Vytautas Magnus University, Faculty of Humanities, V. Putvinskio str. 23, 44243 Kaunas, Lithuania
e-mail: judita.giparaite@vdu.lt

Helena BAŽEC

University of Primorska, Faculty of Humanities, Titov trg 5, 6000 Koper, Slovenia
e-mail: helena.bazec@upr.si

ABSTRACT

The article presents a cross-linguistic contrastive analysis of proverbs featuring the word 'bee' in English, Italian, Lithuanian, and Slovenian, aiming to explore common semantic fields, culture-specific features, the proportion of shared proverbs and their origins. Employing a mixed methods approach, the research integrates qualitative and quantitative data from a corpus of 255 proverbs. Five semantic fields were identified (innate qualities, indispensable bees, collectivity, warnings, and selectivity). The origins of these proverbs trace back to Classical times, Christianity, Medieval Latin, and folk wisdom.

Keywords: bees, proverbs, English, Italian, Lithuanian, Slovenian

PROVERBI CONTENENTI LA PAROLA "APE" IN INGLESE, ITALIANO, LITUANO E SLOVENO

SINTESI

L'articolo presenta un'analisi contrastiva interlinguistica dei proverbi contenenti la parola 'ape' in inglese, italiano, lituano e sloveno, con l'obiettivo di esplorare i campi semantici in comune, le specificità culturali, la percentuale di proverbi condivisi e le loro origini. Utilizzando un approccio metodologico misto, la ricerca integra dati qualitativi e quantitativi provenienti da un corpus di 255 proverbi. Sono stati identificati cinque campi semantici (qualità innate, api indispensabili, collettività, avvertimenti e selettività). Le origini dei proverbi condivisi risalgono all'epoca classica, al cristianesimo, al latino medievale nonché alla saggezza popolare.

Parole chiave: api, proverbi, inglese, italiano, lituano, sloveno

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are recognised as the world's most succinct literary form (Mieder, 2004; Stanonik, 2018; Kochman-Haľadyj, 2020). Defining them is an almost unmanageable task, as is proposing unified terminology (Taylor, 1931; Mieder, 2004; Mrkaić, 2020; Lambertini, 2022) since their complex nature makes it difficult to draw a clear-cut line between proverbs and other related linguistic phenomena such as proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, proverbial interrogatives, twin formulas, wellerisms, apothegms, sententious remarks, literary quotations, maxims, slogans, adages, aphorisms, weather lore, and even graffiti (Mortara Garavelli, 1997; Mieder, 2004; Babić, 2015). Nonetheless, they are usually defined through universally observed markers of proverbiality, among them the relative structural and semantic stability, the metaphorical nature, and the presence of poetic devices (Grigas, 1976; Arora, 1984; Keber, 2011; Muradullayevna, 2022). They are considered to be effective means of studying cultural phenomena (Mrkaić, 2020) as they encompass folk wisdom, morals, and traditional views (Grigas, 1976; Lapucci, 2007; Mieder, 2015), as well as reveal the nation's self-awareness and self-identification (Kržišnik, 2008; 2023). Handed down through generations and shaped by distinct community traditions, proverbs were also used and disseminated by notable historical figures, and now constitute a significant part of various folklore genres and canonical texts (Stanonik, 1999; Kržišnik, 2008; Syzdykov, 2014). Such diverse contextual and individual uses of proverbs trigger varying interpretations (Brown & Wright-Harp, 2011). Nonetheless, their analysis indicates that people across the globe follow relatively similar cognitive principles and patterns (Dobrovol'skij, 1992; Madmarova *et al.*, 2021).

Proverbs are usually explored interdisciplinarily as "paremiology is no discipline in its own right, or with its own method" (Grzybek, 2008, 30). Therefore, proverbial units are studied within the framework of humanities and social sciences such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, ethnology, culturology, heritage studies, and linguistics among others (Ulčnik, 2015). This paper is a very example of such a comprehensive approach as it looks at the proverbs through cultural, etymological, semantic, and heritage lenses. Specifically, it focuses on the proverbs featuring the word bee in English, Italian, Lithuanian, and Slovenian (hereafter bee proverbs). The reason for this particular choice stems from the recognition that research on this topic is limited in some of these languages and non-existent cross-linguistically.

While bee proverbs are comprehensively examined within Slovenian culture (Ovsec, 1984; Stanonik, 2018), bees as part of English proverbial tradition are

largely neglected. The existing literature addresses the iconography of the honey bee in Western art (Wilson, 2019), the potential of bees through design (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016), and bees in literature and folklore (Preston, 2006; Carlson, 2015; Jacobs, 2020). In Lithuanian, research is limited to the study of bee image in singing folklore (Steponavičienė, 2000), while in Italian, the focus is on the symbolic use of bees in art, literature, and heraldry (Purpura, 2010; Calanchi *et al.*, 2011). Yet, systematic cross-linguistic research on bee proverbs in English, Italian, Lithuanian, and Slovenian is lacking.

Therefore, the primary aim of this paper is to address a research gap by conducting the first cross-linguistic contrastive analysis of bee proverbs in Germanic, Romance, Slavic, and Baltic languages. In particular, common semantic fields, the proportion of shared proverbs, and culture-specific features emerging from them are investigated. Additionally, the origins of bee proverbs identical across the four languages are analysed, seeking to trace historical, cultural, political, sociological, etc. influences that shaped these languages and their corresponding cultures. All in all, this comprehensive approach enhances our understanding of proverbs as reflections of the collective consciousness and their role within and across different cultural contexts. Therefore, the following research questions were posed:

- What semantic fields do bee proverbs belong to?
- What culture-specific features emerge from the four-language bee proverb collections?
- Which of the bee proverbs are shared in the languages under investigation, what is their origin, and when were they first mentioned?

THE SYMBOLIC AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BEES

In the absence of relevant research on bee proverbs, a look into the symbolic and cultural significance of bees in each of the investigated languages is necessary. Namely, the Judaeo-Graeco-Christian West, of which English, Italian, Lithuanian, and Slovenian are part, used bees extensively in its oral and written traditions (Preston, 2006), seeing them as the archetype of diligence, strictness, kindness, organization, selflessness, and intelligence (Giese, 1992; Preston, 2006; Lapucci, 2007; Wilson, 2019; Kõiva, 2023). More precisely, the collective perception influenced by Christianity saw bees as sources of spiritual wisdom, paralleling apostles, saints, and prophets to them. Additionally, many Christian authors revered them as a symbol of purity, based on a belief that they reproduce themselves asexually. However, bees were also controversial due to their sting, serving as a metaphor for people with a dual nature (Colombo *et al.*, 2024). Bees and the beehive

were considered the perfect model of societal order (Lapucci, 2007), which literary artists and scholars critically examined, revealing contradictions between the orderly world of bees and the often chaotic and exploitative nature of human society (Jacobs, 2020). In folklore, bees were treated with special respect, more like family members than livestock, and rituals involving them were observed with care (e.g., telling the bees, tanging a swarm) (Preston, 2006; Stanonik, 2018). Additionally, over centuries bees became an extensive part of weather and agricultural lore (Babič, 2015).

On the British Isles, bees are an important part of folklore and literature. According to a medieval Scottish legend, witches took the form of a bee. For the Celts and Saxons, bees served as winged messengers between worlds. In northern England, bees would sing at midnight on Christmas Eve. Shakespeare frequently referenced them in his political and historical tragedies (e.g., *Titus Andronicus* Henry IV, Henry VI, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*) to express complex ideas of justice, virtue, policy, and vengeance (Preston, 2006). However, bees are not widely used in proverbs, which explains the scarcity of academic interest.

In Italian, profoundly influenced by Latin and the classical period of ancient Rome, bees are generally attributed positive meanings (e.g. precision, clemency, and royalty), in rare cases they can also be associated with negative ones (e.g. danger and exaggeration) (Colombo et al., 2024). Virgil, in his *Georgica* (circa 29 BC), and Lorenzo de Medici (1449–1492) emphasise their perfectly disciplined miniature society; Fedro (1st century AD) in his fables highlights their operosity, Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) in his *Paradiso* (*Divine Comedy*) compares bees to angels for their diligence and work towards a higher purpose. For Trilussa (1871–1950), bees symbolise the beauty of life (Lapucci, 2007).

In Lithuanian, bee songs accompanied seasonal festivals, work, and especially wedding rituals (Steponavičienė, 2000). They were highly revered and attributed positive qualities, such as diligence, friendliness, neatness, honesty, selflessness, bravery, and organizational skills (Steponavičienė, 2000). Bees often symbolise motherhood since they oversee their hive similarly to how mothers care for their family. Beekeeping used to be seen as a sacred activity, and bees were believed to be holy creatures, able to speak and sing, understand human speech, and predict the future. People would avoid arguing and swearing in their presence. Additionally, in pagan tradition, there were two divinities protecting bees: Austėja, the goddess of bees, and Bubilas, the god of bees and honey (Dundulienė, 1990). All in all, the rich tradition associated with bees is reflected in numerous phraseological units, fairy tales, and riddles.

According to Stanonik (2018), for Slovenians, bees symbolise a connection to their Southern Slavic roots, as beekeeping was a skill where they excelled. Therefore, the bee emerged and is still understood as a powerful symbol of resourcefulness, prudence, resilience, adaptability, community, and sacrifice. The recognition of such qualities inspired Slovenian collective consciousness in the 19th century, thus the metaphor “the queen bee” was coined for the Slovenian state, resulting in the names of many expatriate Slovenian cultural institutions, associations, and periodicals. Consequently, bees’ significance emerged in folk tales, songs, and expressions (particularly proverbs) as well as literature. Bees are also represented on beehive panels, lace, decorative pastries, and other traditional arts. This deep integration of bees into Slovenian consciousness culminated in the establishment of World Bee Day, following Slovenia’s proposal in 2018. Since 2023, beekeeping has also been inscribed on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list (Ministry of Culture, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This mixed methods research combines qualitative and quantitative data. Both types of data were analysed holistically using descriptive analysis.

In defining our sample, we resorted to the analysis of various sources of bee proverbs. When making the proverb selection, we selected only sentences exhibiting structural consistency and having fixed meanings. To compile the four language collections, we looked for all the proverbs containing the word ‘bee’ in English and its translations in the other three languages (It. *ape* and *pecchia*; Lith. *bitė*; Slo. *čebela*). Additionally, we expanded our research with derived diminutives (Lith. *bitelė* and *bitutė*; Slo. *čebelica*) and adjectives (It. *pecchiaio*; Slo. *čebelji* and *čebelni*).

In English, we resorted to 11 proverb dictionaries (Howell, 1659; Ray, 1678; Gaal, 2023; Cahier, 1856; Kelly, 1859; Bohn, 1875; Christy, 1887; Browning, 1959; Apperson, 2006; Speake, 2008; Doyle et al., 2012) and a database at the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives. In Italian, we consulted four proverb collections (Capponi, 1871; D’Ambra, 1886; Lapucci, 2007; Schwamenthal & Straniero, 2013) and a database at the Accademia della Crusca. In Lithuanian, we utilised the *Electronic Compilation of Lithuanian Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* and a collection compiled by Lipskienė (1999). In Slovenian, we consulted one dictionary (Meterc, 2024b) and seven ethnological sources (Lampe, 1902; Močnik, 1918; Šašelj, 1940; Koledar Mohorjeve družbe, 1968; Cvetko, 2016; Cvetko et al., 2018; Šteh, 2022).

Upon obtaining the four language proverb collections, we proceeded with the analysis of semantic fields. We deemed it best to classify units

cross-linguistically according to an identifiable semantic affinity they share (Finegan, 2008). We created our own taxonomy, as the existing frameworks turned out to be too broad and numerous (Kuusi, 1972; Lauhakangas, 2001) for our purposes. Next, we conducted a basic statistical analysis to get an overview of the similarities and differences across the four language proverb collections. In the following step, we examined proverbs through the underlying messages they convey, focusing on culturally specific ideas. Lastly, we identified matching proverbs in at least three languages and traced their origin and first documented mention, adopting Mieder's (2004) hypothesis of four main sources of European proverbs: Greek and Roman antiquity, Christianity, Medieval Latin, and texts compiled more recently.

FINDINGS

This section is organised in four parts. First, we present the results of the statistical analysis, and then we describe each semantic field separately. Next, we present findings related to individual cultures. The last part focuses on the matching proverbs, their origins, and their first mention.

Statistical analysis

The four collections comprise 255 bee proverbs. A breakdown by language reveals that there are 24 (9%) bee proverbs in English, 37 (15%) proverbs in Italian, 68 (27%) in Lithuanian, and 126 (49%) in Slovenian. The Slovenian collection exceeds the other three by half of the total.

Five semantic fields with differing distributions among languages were identified (Table 1). Most English, Italian, and Lithuanian bee proverbs belong to the semantic field 'innate qualities', the most represented semantic field overall with 112 (44%) units. The second most prolific category is 'indispensable bees' with a total of 88 (35%) units, constituting the most dominant field in Slovenian. The least represented semantic fields are 'collectivity' comprising 22 (9%) units, followed by 'warnings' with 21 (8%) units, and 'selectivity' with 11 (4%) units.

Semantic field analysis

In the following section, each semantic field will be presented to highlight its underlying theme and supported with relevant examples, thus validating its formation. However, drawing clear lines between semantic fields posed challenges as

the same proverb may highlight "slightly different ideas on one level but a common idea on another, more general, level" (Lauhakangas, 2001, 26).

Within the semantic field of 'innate qualities', we included proverbs that depict bees as hard-working (It. *L'ape laboriosa lungo (tutto) il giorno non riposa* "The hard-working bee throughout (all) the day does not rest"), well-organised (Lith. *Būk darbštus kaip skruzdėlė, o tvarkingas kaip bitė* "Be industrious like an ant, and orderly like a bee"), clever and inventive animals (Slo. *Čebela dobi med tudi iz osata* "The bee also gets honey from thistle"). In providing sustenance (*It is the roving bee that gathers honey.*), they can serve as role models to humans (Lith. *Sek paskui bitę – įseksi į medų* "Follow the bee, and you will get to the honey"). Similarly, a diligent person thrives in an abundance of resources (Slo. *Čebele povrnejo čebelarju trikratno za trud, ki ga je vložil v njihovo zdravje in razvoj* "Bees reward the beekeeper three times for the effort he has put into their health and care"). When bees refer to old age (*Old bees yield no honey*), death (It. *Ape morta non fa miele* "A dead bee yields no honey"), and laziness (Slo. *Lene čebele se od ropa rede* "Lazy bees thrive on plunder"), scarcity is implied. However, bees also sting (Lith. *Bitė nuodinga, bet ir daudinga* "A bee is poisonous but also useful"), therefore, one must be brave to get the honey (achieve success) (It. *Chi vuole il dolce del miele deve sopportare l'amaro dell'ape* "Who wants the sweetness of honey must endure the bitterness of the bee"). To emphasise the positive qualities inherent to bees, they are often juxtaposed with other less favourably associated animals such as poisonous spiders or snakes (It. *Dove l'ape sugge il miele, il ragno sugge il veleno* "Where the bee sucks honey, the spider sucks poison"), useless flies (Slo. *Bolja ena čebela ko cel roj muh* "Better one bee than a whole swarm of flies"), or irritating wasps (It. *È meglio un'ape sola, che un esercito di vespe* "One bee is better than an army of wasps").

Most proverbs in the semantic field 'bees' indispensability' focus on bees' ability to accurately forecast weather phenomena (*Bees will not swarm before a near storm*). Furthermore, they are an integral part of nature, enabling overall balance and survival (It. *Quando l'ape si chiude nell'arnia arriva l'inverno* "When the bee hides in the hive, winter arrives"). Through beekeeping, man uses bees for his well-being (Slo. *Čebela zase ne obdrži, z oskrbnikom deli* "The bee does not keep for itself, it shares with the caretaker"). In this context, many proverbs offer advice on proper ways of treating bees (Slo. *Če hočeš čebele zdrave imeti, ne smeš prezgodaj pokladat' začeti* "If you want

¹ All proverb translations were provided by the authors.

Table 1: Statistical analysis of proverbs per language and semantic field.

	English	Italian	Lithuanian	Slovenian	Total
Innate qualities	13 (54%)	18 (49%)	38 (56%)	44 (35%)	113 (44%)
Indispensable bees	5 (21%)	10 (27%)	11 (16.2%)	62 (49.2%)	88 (35%)
Warnings	3 (13%)	3 (8%)	7 (10.2%)	8 (6.3%)	21 (8%)
Community	2 (8%)	2 (5%)	9 (13.2%)	9 (7.1%)	22 (9%)
Selectivity	1 (4%)	4 (11%)	3 (4.4%)	3 (2.4%)	11 (4%)
Total	24 (9%)	37 (15%)	68 (27%)	126 (49%)	255 (100%)

to have healthy bees, you mustn't start collecting the honey too early"). A frequent motif refers to a mutual exchange of privileges, emphasizing the dependence of man and bees (Slo. *Čebela taka je kot njiva: če hočeš, da kaj da ti, ji moraš tudi dati in ne samo jemati* "A bee is like a field: if you want to get, you have to give, not just take"). A set of proverbs draws comparisons between bees and livestock such as sheep, oxen, donkeys, pigs, and cows (*Bitè negi karvè: kada nori neprieisi!* "A bee is not a cow, you cannot approach it whenever you want").

A series of bee proverbs function as warnings, emphasizing dual nature. Besides giving honey, they also sting (Lith. *Bitè maža, bet skaudžiai gelia* "A bee is small, but stings painfully"), especially when they are under threat (Lith. *Ir bitè skriaudžiam gelia* "Even the bee being harmed stings"). While these proverbs caution about the inherent dangers associated with bees (It. *Il favo è dolce, ma la pecchia punge* "The honeycomb is sweet, but the bee stings"), they also metaphorically imply that humans have a negative side to their actions (*Don't let the same bee sting you twice*), harming one another with words (Slo. *Kar so pri čebelah piki, to so pri ljudeh jeziki* "What stings are to bees, tongues are to humans"). Some proverbs serve as cautionary advice to beekeepers (e.g. *Nesijuok iš nebylių – bitės išskris iš avilių* "Do not laugh at the deaf, bees will fly out of the beehives"), refraining them from stealing bees (Lith. *Vogtos bitės nesiveda* "Stolen bees do not multiply") or acting stingily (Lith. *Medaus ryžėjai – tavo bitės ir išnyko* "You were stingy with honey, so your bees disappeared").

The semantic field 'community' encompasses proverbs highlighting bees' behaviour and associating them with a clearly-established hierarchy where

each bee has a specifically defined role. The whole community is under the strict supervision of the bee queen (Lith. *Be bitino nė bitės negyvens* "Bees will not live without the queen bee") whose role is quintessential (It. *Api senza regina, alveari in rovina* "Queenless bees, ruined hives"). Additionally, the bee queen embodies maternal (Slo. *Brez matere so otroci, brez matice čebele izgubljene* "Children without mother are like bees without the bee queen") and leadership features (*He is like the master bee that leads forth the swarm*). A beehive functions as a well-knit community, therefore exposing a singular member to danger provokes a collective response (Slo. *Čebela iz roja huje piči* "Bee from a swarm stings more painfully").

Bees are also associated with being selective (Lith. *Ant visų žolynų bitelės leidžias, bet ne nuo visų medų ima* "Bees land on all plants but take honey not from all of them") just like people who choose what they deem most suitable and most pleasant (*Every honey is sweet*). Despite this, bees cherish diversity and take advantage of it (Slo. *Čebela zbira s cvetov celega travnika, da bi od tega naredila samo med* "A bee collects flowers of an entire meadow to make only honey").

Culture-specific proverbs

This section discusses the proverb collection through a cultural lens, highlighting cultural references in individual collections, excluding Italian as it seemingly exhibits no such features.

There are two proverbs reflecting the English mindset. The first one, *Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee* is a quote attributed to Mohammed Ali that has gained proverbial lore, implying the need to be graceful, yet merciless when outperforming

the opponent. The second proverb *No bees, no honey; no work, no money* (Smithsonian Libraries and Archives, 2024) reflects an American straight-forward, pragmatic worldview that values hard work and diligence in pursuit of success.

One of the noticeable features of Lithuanian bee proverbs is a reference to God, which can be found in the proverbs expressing a threat to renounce God if bees are lost (*Ai, Dievuli, tavęs nelaikysiu, jei man bites išvaikysi* “Oh, God, I won’t hold on to you if you chase away my bees”). Further, one who loves bees enjoys God’s mercy (*Kas myli bites, tą ir dievas myli* “Who loves bees, God loves him”). Also, some proverbs highlight the inconsistency of human behaviour (*Kai valgo medų, tai sako: „Dievo bitelės, Dievo bitelės“, o kai bitė įgelia, tada sako: „Velnio bitės, velnio bitės“* “When eating honey, they say “God’s bees, God’s bees”, but when a bee stings, they say “Devil’s bees, devil’s bees”) and the misuse of good for evil purposes (*Dievas davė bites, velnias bitininką* “God gave bees, devil the beekeeper”). Another feature of Lithuanian bee proverbs is the negative connotation attributed to bees. Some bee proverbs describe them as poisonous, stinging, angry (*Ir bitės piktos, bet saldų medų neša* “Even bees are angry but bring sweet honey”) or conflicting in their nature (*Bitutės, saldų medų nešdamos, ir tai supyksta* “Even bees that bring sweet honey get angry with each other”). In other proverbs, bees are associated with indecisiveness (*Kad nuo stogo taukai lašės, kad iš vaško tiltus dirbs ir bitės vilnas kirps, tada aš apsiženysiu* “When fat will drop from the roof, when bridges will be built of wax and bees will shear wool, I will marry”), inaction (*Vargstam kaip bitės į aulį/aulyje* “We are tormenting ourselves like bees in a hive”) or a lack of productivity (*Devyni vilkai vieną bitę pjauna* “Nine wolves are killing one bee”). One more unique aspect of Lithuanian bee proverbs is their focus on patriotism, depicting bees as homeland defenders (*Ir bitelė savo namelius gina* “Even a bee defends its little home”). Finally, the link between bees and friendship is reflected in the origin of the Lithuanian term *bičiulystė* ‘close friendship’ (Smoczyński, 1982; Eckert, 1989) and represented in the proverb *Mirė bitės – nėra nė bičiulystės* (“Bees have died, there is no friendship”).

The first distinctive feature of the Slovenian proverb collection is the paradoxical nature of the bees. On the one hand, they are associated with prosperity and abundance (e.g. *Čebele z zlatom plačajo* “Bees pay with gold”), on the other hand, with scarcity and hunger (*Čebela ne dá kruha* “Bee yields no bread”). Another aspect refers to anthropomorphisation as seen in the proverb *Čebela ne pogine, ampak umira, ker za cerkveno svečo vosek nabira* (“A bee does not die, it perishes because it collects wax for a church

candle”) where bees’ death is expressed with the use of the verb reserved for humans. Additionally, the proverb *Dim prežene čebele, greh pa angele* (“Smoke drives out the bees as sin drives out the angels”) suggests that sinful and immoral behaviour distances individuals from goodness and divinity. The proverb echoes the times when Christianity permeated all spheres of human activities. Moreover, the proverb *Zmeraj sedi doma kakor trotje pri čebelah* (“He is always sitting at home as drones with the bees”) is an allusion to a phenomenon known as *zapečkarstvo*, which is used to describe a state of a person who is unwilling to adapt to new ideas, is narrow-minded, and insists on staying at home (SSKJ, 2024). Next, the proverb *Gredo otroci iz hiše, kakor čebele iz panjev* (“Children go out of the house as bees go out of the hive”) is associated with once large Slovenian families (SURS, n. d.). A peculiarity of the Slovenian collection is the parallel drawn between bees’ activities and the blossoming of different types of trees (e.g. chestnut, linden, apple, cherry) (*Pazi na čebelo, da bo sadno drevje bogato letino imelo* “Be mindful of the bees, if you want fruit trees to yield a bountiful harvest”). Another distinctive feature is the problem of alcohol addiction as referenced in the proverb *Tudi čebela pije, pa ni pijanka* (“A bee drinks too, but it’s not a drunkard”). Lastly, an abundance of weather lore stemmed from the Christian calendar *Na sv. Gregorja in sv. Jožefa pridejo čebele iz panjev* (“Bees come out of their hives on St Gregory’s and St Joseph’s Day”).

Cross-cultural features

This section deals with the matching proverbs in at least three languages and their origins. While there are slight variations in metaphors and wording, the way phrases are used across many different languages follows common patterns, conveying the same underlying idea (Vrbinc & Vrbinc 2012; Lenassi et al., 2024). For this very reason, no direct translations are included further on. Instead, we listed the matching proverbs side by side in the findings. Overall, only a few proverbs were recognised as matching proverbs; two in all four languages, three in English, Italian, and Slovenian, and one in Italian, Lithuanian, and Slovenian.

Honey is sweet, but the bee stings/Ne daleč od žela ima med čebela/L’ape ha il miele in bocca e il pungiglione nella coda/Užtat bitės duoda medaus, kad skaudžiai kanda

The idea of bee’s duality is first documented in Sappho’s verse (before the 7th B.C.E) “Neither the honey nor the bee for me”, alluding to the complexities of love and erotic desire, where a woman’s

sweetness is a risk man must take despite potential dangers (Carlson, 2015). Later, Greek grammarian Diogenianus (2nd century A. D.) referred to her work, excluding sexual connotations and equating the bee's ambivalent nature with human character (Lelli, 2021). Another interpretation of the proverb origins leads us to the Roman scholar Marco Terenzio Varrone (116–127 B.C.), mentioned as its author in *Fiore di virtù*, a prose treatise on morality published circa 1313–1323 in the Bologna dialect where it was recorded as *L'ape porta il mèle in bocca e 'l vespajo sotto la coda* "The bee has honey in its mouth and a wasp's nest under its tail" (Rosenwald & Fersen, 1953). The same source and its subsequent editions were translated in the 15th and 16th centuries into many European languages. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* (Smith, 1935) referred to the year 1440 as the first mention of this proverb. However, we were unable to decipher and trace this source. Further research led us to John Ray's collection (1678) where we eventually found the English proverb as we know it today. In the Slovenian language, the idea of bee's duality was first used by a priest Rogelij Ljubljanski (1667–1728) in one of his sermons where he said *Ta čebela zbira, inu ima sladak med na sebi [...]* *Ali zraven tega ima tudi ona tu želu, s katerim ona upič, inu ubsode, kadar ima potreba* "This bee gathers and has sweet honey on itself [...] But it also has a sting, with which it stings and judges when necessary" (Stanonik, 1995, 17–18), where the bee's attributes were used to describe the personality of St. Bernard. Finally, this very idea is reflected in the version of the Slovenian proverb first documented in *Slovenski čebelar*² (Volc, 1934). The Lithuanian proverb was first recorded by Ivinskis who made proverbs part of his calendars in 1856 (Grigas & Kudirkienė, 2000, 28).

***Where the bee sucks honey, the spider sucks
poison/Kjer čebela med dobi, srka pajek strup/
Dove l'ape sugge il miele, il ragno sugge il veleno/
Iš tų pačių žiedų bitės renka medų, o vorai –
nuodus***

The first mention of the proverb in English is found in Draxe's compilation of ancient adages, and sententious proverbs selected out of the English, Greek, Latin, French, Italian, and Spanish languages. Under the entry *Pellucet tanquam lucerna* ("It shines like a lamp"), attributed to Plaut (circa 250 BC), we find 4 proverbs that correspond in meaning, one of them being *Where the bee sucketh hony the spider sucketh poison* (Draxe, 1616,

124). Bees were often used for the dissemination of the Church ideology with priests incorporating them into their sermons. For example, Isaac Barrow (1630–1677) in his homily *Against Distraction* preached: "Good nature, like a bee, collects honey from every herb. Ill nature, like a spider, sucks poison from the flowers" (Barrow, 1678). The Slovenian version was introduced by Capuchin Janez Svetokriški (1691) in one of his sermons where he used the bees as an example of how a person judges others by themselves, saying *Pajek, kar liže v strup se preobrne, kar pa čebela liže v med se preobrne* "What the spider licks turns into poison, but what the bee licks turns into honey". This line eventually became the proverb as we know it today ("Where the bee gets honey, the spider sucks poison"), first documented by Volc in *Slovenski čebelar* in 1934. The first mention in Italian is found surprisingly late, documented in Strafforello's compilation of proverbs in 1868. In Lithuanian, the proverb was first recorded in *Electronic Compilation of Lithuanian Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* (Patarlių ir priežodžių elektroninis sąvadas, 2024).

***A swarm of bees in May is worth a load of hay, a
swarm of bees in June is worth a silver spoon, but a
swarm in July is not worth a fly/Roj v maju je vreden
voz sena, roj v juniju dober kos mesa, roj v juliju
kurjega peresa ne velja/Il primo sciame è d'oro, il
secondo d'argento e il terzo di piombo***

This proverb expresses Aristotle's idea of progressive diminution that was transmitted to the modern age through Roman culture and later Christian florilegium, with variations and additions, also through sermons (Lelli, 2021). The English proverb was first mentioned in Thomas Tusser's *Five hundred pointes of good husbandrie* as "A Swarm in May is worth a Load of Hay" in 1557 and later in its full version in Ray's *Collection of English Proverbs* in 1678. The Slovenian version by Lampe appeared in *Slovenski čebelar* in 1902 and the Italian one was first documented in Schwamenthal & Straniero (2013).

***A dead bee will make no honey/Mrtva čebela ne
prinese medu/Ape morta non dà miele***

This proverb is used to emphasise the futility of focusing on something that is no longer productive or beneficial. The first English version "A dead bee maketh no home" is found in Sandford's appendix to *Houres of Recreation* (1572) which included a collection of Italian proverbs with their corresponding English translations. This proverb is a translation

² *Slovenski čebelar*, a specialised periodical dedicated to apiculture, has been in publication since 1898. In addition to its primary focus on beekeeping, the magazine holds significance for its occasional inclusions of bee-related proverbs, sayings, and weather lore.

of the Italian *Aue morai non fa mele*. The proverb in its current form appeared in Florio's textbook for Italian speakers of the English language titled *Firste Fruites* in 1578. Despite the evidence of the Italian proverb preceding English, Accademia della Crusca leads us to Serdonati's manuscript compiled as late as the second half of the 16th century. The Slovenian version was first recorded by Volc in *Slovenski čebelar* in 1934.

Where bees are, there is honey/Kjer so čebele je tudi med/Dove va l'ape va il miele

The proverb equates bees with capabilities or possessions and honey with profit or advantage. In English, the proverb was first mentioned in Draxe's compilation of proverbs under the Latin entry *Vbi apes, ibi mel* and translated as *Where bees are, there is honie* (Draxe, 1616, 77) and becomes a part of Ray's *Collection of English proverbs* in 1678. In the *Preface*, the author explains how he proceeded when compiling the collection. Among other sources, he mentions Erasmus Rotterdam's (1466–1536) *Adagia*, a collection of Greek and Latin proverbs. In Slovenian, it was recorded by Volc as 'Where there are bees, there is also honey' in *Slovenski čebelar* in 1934. Regarding Italian, no earlier mention is to be found than in Lapucci's 2007 proverb dictionary.

Quando la pecchia punge, muore/Ko čebela piči, samo sebe uniči/Ir bitutė skriaudžiama netylės, bet skaudžiai gels, nors žino, kad įgėlus mirti turės
[When a bee stings, it kills itself]

The first Italian mention appears in Serdonati's online collection with its sources dating back to 1557 (Accademia della Crusca, 2024). In Slovenian, it was first recorded by Lampe in *Slovenski čebelar* in 1902. The Lithuanian proverb was first published by Krėvė-Mickevičius in 1938.

DISCUSSION

The research demonstrated that classifying proverbs within coherent semantic fields poses a persistent challenge as certain proverbs can be classified within more semantic fields simultaneously. For instance, some proverbs classified under the field of 'innate qualities', and describing negative traits could also be assigned to the field of 'warnings' (e.g. *Honey is sweet, but the bee stings*. Lith. *Ir bitės piktos, bet saldų medų neša* "Even bees are angry but give sweet honey"). This observation aligns with the findings of Cruse (2011) and Brown & Wright-Harp (2011) who highlighted that the true meaning of a proverb is shaped by the situation and social context in which it is used, and is influenced by

varying cultural traditions, mindsets, and perspectives. Furthermore, it is consistent with Lauhakangas (2001) and Dobrovol'skij (1992), who pointed to the overlapping of different categories that represent universal archetypes of human thought.

Subsequently, it was observed that the same idea can be interpreted in diverse ways across languages. For example, the proverb *Dead bee yields no honey*, which generally signifies a lack of productivity in English, carries a more specific connotation in Italian, where the bee is synonymous with the father. If he dies, the whole family suffers a tremendous loss, lacking resources and overall welfare. This observation aligns with Lauhakangas (2001) who suggests that seemingly identical proverbs can embody opposing values in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, different norms in the target culture might impact the translation of the paremiological unit to better align with the society and its people (Reynolds, 2004; Trupej, 2024). This proves how culture as the reflection of a nation's identity, values, and mindset finds its way into languages, thus shaping our interactions with others and forming our sense of belonging (UNESCO, 2009). This is why proverbs cannot be applied mechanically but need to be culturally understood and interpreted (Lapucci, 2007).

Drawing from the results, it can be inferred that proverbs provide concise commentary on social matters, which is in line with Mieder (2004). Within the Slovenian collection, there is a proverb alluding to the idea of *zapečkarstvo*, a typical Slovenian phenomenon referencing a state of a person's mind described as a sticking-in-the-mud homebody (Puhar, 1992). Within the English collection, the proverb *No bees, no honey, no work, no money* alludes to the idea of a self-made man and an American goal-driven mindset (Dundes, 1969). Additionally, findings indicate the connection between proverbs and social issues existent in the nation. This was seen with the Slovenian proverb referencing the problem of alcoholism, a still relevant issue among many Slovenians (Koprivnikar et al., 2015). However, caution is needed when examining proverbs expressing certain national characteristics so that no stereotypical conclusions are drawn (Mieder, 2004).

Based on the results, it is evident that bees were once indispensable to societal well-being. This statement, particularly pertinent to the Slovenian context, can be confirmed through the abundance of weather lore, which provided practical guidelines related to the timing of agricultural activities where bees and their behaviours served as predictors of various weather phenomena, activities, and events (Babič, 2015). This perception is further corroborated by Stanonik (2018) who noted that bees

have always been deeply integrated into people's daily lives and have also found a significant place in literature and folklore.

Also, considering the results, anthropomorphism as a prominent feature of the Slovenian proverb collection comes to the fore, where human traits are attributed to non-human entities, resulting in admiration and respect towards them (Reberc, 2018). For instance, bees are not only equated with humans in terms of death but are also described as singing, crying, and going on nuptial and wedding flights; they take on roles such as workers, cleaners, nurses, builders, feeders, and janitors and are depicted as experiencing emotions like happiness, sadness, and fierceness, which aligns with Bokal (2009) who drew the parallel between such naming conventions and the deep connection of Slovenian people to bees' activities.

Additionally, while it can be safely assumed that the majority of bee proverbs were in use before the 20th century, we also noticed the emergence of a recently coined proverb in the English language, while none were found in the other three languages. Mohammed Ali's quote *Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee* has attained proverbial status, being classified alongside other famous American quotes such as Theodore Roosevelt's *Speak softly and carry a big stick* (Mieder, 2004). This finding aligns with Mieder (2010) who asserts that proverbs continually emerge and fade away as they adapt to cultural dynamics. While exact statistical calculations regarding present and past trends are difficult to perform, it can be safely claimed that today's era is rich with new paremiological units due to mass media impact. To illustrate, Meterc documented the emergence of 120 new entries in Slovenian only in 2024, among them *Lačen si ful drugačen* (You're not you when you are hungry) (Meterc, 2024a). From this perspective, it can be hypothesised that the contemporary climate change crisis and the emerging sustainable development policies (UN, 2015) might trigger a renewed interest in bees. Consequently, paremiologists might find it relevant to observe how the language responds; whether new bee proverbs will be coined or old ones revived.

In light of the results, we can confirm Mieder's (2004) hypothesis regarding the origins of the proverbs. The findings indicate that corresponding proverbs originate from Medieval Latin, which built upon the legacy of the Greeks, Romans, and Christianity, at the time promoted by great thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and Erasmus of Rotterdam (Smith, 1935). However, the origins of some proverbs remain unidentifiable, suggesting that they may be classified as folk wisdom that could emerge independently in various cultures. This is

based on the idea that people, despite cultural differences, think and experience the world similarly (Dobrovol'skij, 1992; Madmarova et al., 2021). Another plausible interpretation could be that the migration and adaptation of proverbs across different cultures and languages over centuries could have obscured their sources to the extent that they are no longer recognizable. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive historical records and scholarly attention to certain regions or periods has contributed to the difficulty in tracing down the origins of these proverbs (Mieder, 2004; Ivanov & Petrushevskaia, 2015). While it is almost impossible to provide the exact date of the proverb origins, we can always point to its first mention, which may be centuries after its emergence (Smith, 1935).

Another interesting fact that emerges from the analysis is the very small number of matching proverbs. The explanation for this could lie in the fact that each of the four languages included belongs to a particular branch of the Indo-European language family (Baltic, German, Romance, and Slavic), which led to unique cultures that shaped the development of the languages. In addition, because each of the four groups has lived in a distinct geographical environment, they developed unique ways to explain natural phenomena and everyday practises (Pučnik, 1980; Reynolds, 2004).

Last but not least, the evidence supports the idea that bees were closely associated with spirituality, particularly Christianity. This is confirmed by the observation that numerous bee proverbs are linked to significant dates and saints in the Christian calendar. Specifically, the collective perception shaped by Christian beliefs regarded bees as sources of spiritual wisdom, as evidenced in the homilies of St. Basil the Great (Schaff & Wace, 1884), St. John Chrysostom (Schaff, 1889), and Svetokriški (1691), who drew parallels between bees and apostles, saints, and prophets (Colombo et al., 2024). Additionally, bees' diligence and organization were frequently employed (Stanonik, 1995) to provide counsel for simple people through the application of vivid similes taken from everyday life (Landmann & Ganz, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of bee proverbs in terms of semantic fields, culture-specific features, the proportion of shared proverbs, and their origins proves to be effective for the cross-linguistic contrastive study of proverbs. The findings highlight the complexities involved in classifying proverbs within coherent semantic fields across multiple languages, underscoring the persistent challenge of overlapping

categories and cultural nuances. The distribution across semantic fields shows that in English, Italian, and Lithuanian cultures bees are valued for their intrinsic traits, while in Slovenian culture, their practical importance takes precedence. Additionally, the research confirms Mieder's (2004) hypothesis regarding the origins of proverbs, tracing them back to Classical times, Christianity, and Medieval Latin. The origins of some proverbs, though, remain uncertain, possibly reflecting folk wisdom based on universal human experiences. Furthermore, the research also demonstrates the significant role of proverbs in providing social commentary, reflecting cultural mentalities, and addressing societal issues of individual nations such as alcoholism in Slovenian culture. Lastly, the diminishing use of bee proverbs in contemporary discourse along with

their deep-rooted connection to spirituality and daily life exemplifies the dynamic nature of proverbs that serve as time capsules reflecting bygone eras and their values.

A notable limitation is the accessibility of medieval sources, many of which are still in manuscript form and are not fully digitalised. Additionally, limited academic attention given to certain geographical regions or periods hindered our efforts to trace the origins of the matching proverbs. Irrespective of this, it is reasonable to assume that a revived interest in ecology and sustainability, arising from the pressing climatic crisis, will make this study a valuable bridge between the fertile past, when bee proverbs were commonplace, and a future where their creation and use might once again become relevant *posteris*.

PREGOVORI Z BESEDO »ČEBELA« V ANGLEŠČINI, ITALIJANŠČINI, LITOVŠČINI IN SLOVENŠČINI

Melita LEMUT BAJEC

Univerza v Ljubljani, Pedagoška fakulteta, Kardeljeva ploščad 16, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija
e-mail: melita.lemutbajec@pef.uni-lj.si

Judita GIPARAITĖ

Univerza Vytautas Magnus, Fakulteta za humanistične študije, V. Putvinskio ul. 23, 44243 Kaunas, Litva
e-mail: judita.giparaite@vdu.lt

Helena BAŽEC

Univerza na Primorskem, Fakulteta za humanistične študije, Titov trg 5, 6000 Koper, Slovenija
e-mail: helena.bazec@upr.si

POVZETEK

Članek predstavlja medjezikovno kontrastivno analizo pregovorov, ki vključujejo besedo »čebela« v angleščini, italijanščini, litovščini in slovenščini. Namen pričujoče raziskave je preučitev skupnih semantičnih polj, kulturno-specifičnih posebnosti, ki se kažejo skozi posamezne pregovore; ugotoviti delež skupnih pregovorov in njihov izvor. Raziskava združuje kvalitativne in kvantitativne podatke, pridobljene iz korpusa pregovorov, oblikovanega na podlagi več zbirk virov. Skupaj smo identificirali 255 pregovorov, pri čemer slovenski delež presega več kot polovico vseh enot. Analiza je razkrila, da si štirje jeziki delijo pet semantičnih polj, ki smo jih poimenovali: prirojene lastnosti, nepogrešljive čebele, kolektivnost, opozorila in selektivnost. Zaradi semantične kompleksnosti in prekrivanja se je potrebno pri kategorizaciji pregovorov nasloniti na vsakokratne kontekstualne posebnosti, ki so mnogokrat tudi kulturno pogojene. Raziskava ugotavlja, da preučevani pregovori izvirajo iz klasične dobe grške in rimske civilizacije, krščanstva in srednjeveške latinščine. Za pregovore, katerih izvor ostaja neznan, se domneva, da izhajajo iz ljudske modrosti in odražajo univerzalne človeške izkušnje. Raziskava poudarja vlogo pregovorov pri odražanju mentalitete nekega naroda in zanj aktualnih družbenih vprašanj (npr. pri Slovencih problem alkoholizma). Vse manjša uporaba teh pregovorov ali njihovo preoblikovanje v sodobnem diskurzu ponazarjata dinamično naravo pregovorov in njihov pomen pri odražanju preteklih obdobj in vrednot. V tem smislu raziskava predstavlja dragocen opis trenutnega stanja, ki služi kot most med preteklostjo, ko so bili čebelarski pregovori del vsakdana, in prihodnostjo, ki bo morda ponovno vzbudila njihovo rabo.

Ključne besede: pregovori, čebele, angleščina, italijanščina, litovščina, slovenščina

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