Course Description:

“Big Fish Eat Little Fish”
The Nature and Politics of Proverbs

Proverbs offer a concise record of folk wisdom and have appeared in oral tradition, literature, art, popular culture, politics, and elsewhere for centuries. This course will provide an overview of the fascinating world of proverbs, stressing Anglo-American texts but also looking at proverbs from other languages and cultures.

The course will begin with definition and classification problems, dealing with such matters as proverb markers and structure, origin and dissemination, traditional forms related to the proverb, the international type system of proverbs, and various types of proverb collections (general, legal, meteorological, medical, etc.).

A number of proverbs will be looked at in greater detail, illustrating their origin, dissemination, history, occurrence in art, literature, mass media, politics, etc. - among them “Big fish eat little fish”, “First come, first served”, “Good fences make good neighbors”, “A picture is worth a thousand words”, and others. We will also look at the metaphors and messages of proverbs from different languages and cultures, emphasizing authentic American, regional American, Native American, and African American proverbs.

Regarding the scholarship on proverbs (paremiology), we will be concerned with such matters as empiricism and paremiological minima; linguistic and semiotic aspects; performance (speech acts) in social contexts; issues of folklore, culture, and history; politics, stereotypes, and worldview; proverbs and the social sciences; use of proverbs in folk narratives and literature; religion and wisdom literature; pedagogy and language teaching; iconography (proverbs as art); and mass media and popular culture.

All of this will be illustrated by numerous literary and journalistic texts as well as slides from art and the mass media and by discussing such topics as proverbs and Benjamin Franklin; Abraham Lincoln’s proverbial fight against slavery; the use of proverbial language by Charles Dickens; the proverbial war rhetoric by Winston S. Churchill; and Barack Obama’s use of proverbs and proverbial phrases in his books and speeches. We will also cover the use and function of proverbs in poems and popular songs; in caricatures, cartoons, and comics; in advertising; and in headlines of the mass media. Towards the end we will investigate so-called anti-proverbs which parody traditional wisdom and at least in part help to create proverbs of the modern age.
Texts:

(available at bookstore)

(available at bookstore)

various handouts (as we go along)

Syllabus

Tuesday, August 26

Introduction
Course description and academic goals
Course requirements
“Big Fish Eat Little Fish”: A Classical Proverb about Human Nature

Thursday, August 28

Introduction, pp. xi-xvi
Definition attempts, pp. 1-4
Proverb markers and meanings, pp. 4-9
Origin and dissemination of proverbs, pp. 9-13
Traditional forms related to the proverb, pp. 13-16
“Big fish eat little fish”, pp. 34-43

please read: Mieder, *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season:*
Introduction, pp. ix-xviii

Tuesday, September 2

The international type system of proverbs, pp. 16-20
Types of international proverb collections, pp. 20-22
Major Anglo-American proverb collections, pp. 22-25
Various specialized proverb collections, pp. 25-28
Bibliography, pp. 29-31

please read: Mieder, *Proverbs Are Never out of Season:*
chapter 1, pp. 3-17: “‘The Wit of One, and the Wisdom of Many’:
General Thoughts on the Nature of the Proverb’
Thursday, September 4

Proverbs from different cultures and languages, pp. 88-100

please read: Mieder, *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season*:
chapter 2, pp. 18-40: “A Proverb Is a Short Sentence of Wisdom’:
Popular Views of the Proverb”

Tuesday, September 9

Discussion of student **proverb collection project**!

please read: Mieder, *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season*:
chapter 8, pp. 173-192: “Good Proverbs Make Good Vermonters’:
The Flavor of Regional Proverbs”

Thursday, September 11

**No class! It will be made up on Saturday, Sept. 20, from 10:00-11:15**

Prof. Mieder will travel to Paris, France, to present the keynote address at an
international conference on phraseology and paremiology. The title of his lecture is:
“This Are the Times that Try Women’s Souls”
The Proverbial Rhetoric for Women’s Rights by
Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony

Tuesday, September 16

Authentic American proverbs, pp. 100-106
Regional American proverbs, pp. 106-108
Native American proverbs, pp. 108-111
African American proverbs, pp. 112-114
Bibliography, pp. 114-116

Lecture/discussion of:
American Proverbs as an international, national, and global phenomenon

Thursday, September 18

“First Come, first served”: A medieval legal proverb from the millers, pp. 43-52
“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”: A proverb’s way from Germany to
America, pp. 52-60
Saturday, September 20 – make-up class from 10.00-11:15

“The only good Indian is a dead Indian”: A slanderous proverbial stereotype, pp. 60-69

Lecture/discussion of such other proverbial stereotypes as:
“No tickee, no washee” (directed against Chinese Americans)
“Call a spade a spade” (directed against African Americans)

Tuesday, September 23

“Good fences make good neighbors”: An ambiguous proverb of relationships, pp. 69-78

Lecture/discussion of:
“The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”: An American proverb of discontent

Thursday, September 25

**First test** (23.3%) – completions and essay questions

Tuesday, September 30

Proverb journals, essay volumes, and bibliographies, pp. 118-121
Proverb collections and future paremiography, pp. 121-125
Comprehensive overviews of paremiology, pp. 125-127
Empiricism and paremiological minima, pp. 127-131
Linguistic and semiotic considerations, pp. 131-133
Performance (speech acts) in social contexts, pp. 133-134
Bibliography, pp. 153-159

please read: Mieder, *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season*:
chapter 3: “‘Proverbs Everyone Ought to Know’: Paremiological Minimum and Cultural Literacy”

Thursday, October 2

Issues of culture, folklore, and history, pp. 135-137
(continued on next page!)
Politics, stereotypes, and worldview, pp. 137-139
Sociology, psychology, and psychiatry, pp. 139-142
Use in folk narratives and literature, pp. 142-144
Religion and wisdom literature, pp. 144-146
Pedagogy and language teaching, pp. 146-148
Mass media and popular culture, pp. 150-153
Bibliography, pp. 153-159 (once again)

Tuesday, October 7

  Iconography, proverbs as art, pp. 148-150

Lecture/discussion of:
  “Proverb pictures are worth more than a thousand words”: From Pieter Bruegel’s *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559) to Tom E. Breitenbach’s *Proverbidioms* (1975)

Thursday, October 9

  “A man [woman] of fashion never has recourse to proverbs”: Lord Chesterfield’s tilting at proverbial windmills, pp. 162-171
  Benjamin Franklin’s “The Way to Wealth”, pp. 216-224

please read: Mieder, *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season:*

Tuesday, October 14

  “Conventional phrases are a sort of fireworks”: Charles Dickens’s proverbial language, pp. 189-198

Lecture/discussion of:
  “Hitch your wagon to a star”: Ralph Waldo Emerson’s theory and praxis of proverbs

Thursday, October 16

“Behind the cloud the sun is shining”: Abraham Lincoln’s proverbial fight against slavery, pp. 180-189

Lecture/discussion of:
“Government of the people, by the people, for the people”: The making and meaning of an American proverb about democracy
“A house divided against itself cannot stand”: From Biblical proverb to Abraham Lincoln and beyond
“Don’t swap horses in the middle of the stream”: An intercultural and historical study of Abraham Lincoln’s apocryphal proverb

**Tuesday, October 21**

No reading assignment, but do continue the work on your proverb project!

Lecture/discussion of:
“If there is no struggle, there is no progress”: Frederick Douglass’ proverbial fight for civil rights
“Paddle your own canoe”: Frederick Douglass’ proverbial message in his “Self-Made Men” speech
“A woman’s work is never done”: Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s and Susan B. Anthony’s proverbial rhetoric in the service of women’s rights

**Thursday, October 23**

“Make hell while the sun shines”: Proverbial war rhetoric of Winston S. Churchill, pp. 198-207

Lecture/discussion of:
“We are all in the same boat now”: Proverbial discourse in the Churchill-Roosevelt correspondence
“It sure is hell to be president”: Harry S. Truman’s proverbial plain English

**Tuesday, October 28**

please read: Mieder, *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season*:
chapter 10, pp. 225-225: “‘Proverbs in Nazi Germany’: The Promulgation of Anti-Semitism and Stereotypes through Folklore”

Lecture/discussion of:
“As if I were the master of the situation”: Proverbial manipulation in Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*
“Arbeit macht frei”: The horrible misuse of a German proverb during the Holocaust
Thursday, October 30

**Second test** (23.3%) – completions and essay questions
including parts of the first third of the semester

**Saturday, November 1 – make-up class from 10.00-11:15**
Prof. Mieder will have to miss classes on Tuesday, Nov. 4 and Thursday, Nov. 6 due to two lectures off campus. The one class we make up on this Saturday, and the other one is cancelled – please work on your collections, and thank you for your understanding

please read: Mieder: *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season:*
chapter 4, pp. 58-97: “‘Old Wisdom in New Clothing’: The Proverb in the Modern Age”

Lecture/discussion of:
“Think Outside the Box”: Origin, Nature, and Meaning of Modern Anglo-American Proverbs

**Tuesday, November 4**

**No class! It will have been made up on Saturday, November 1**

Prof. Mieder will travel to Tavira, Portugal, to deliver a lecture at an international conference on paremiology. The title of his talk is:
“Different Ways to Make Life’s Gold”
Three Valedictory Messages of a University Course on Proverbs

Please read: Mieder, *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season:*
Chapter 7, pp. 152-172: “‘An Apple a Day Keeps the Doctor Away’: Traditional and Modern Aspects of Medical Proverbs

Please work on your proverb collection. The International Proverb Archives in 425 Waterman will be open for you all week, as always.

**Thursday, November 6**

**No class! This is the one class of the semester that is cancelled**

Prof. Mieder will travel from Tavira, Portugal, to Santa Fe, New Mexico (over twenty hours!) to deliver a lecture at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society. He will take a second and different look at the proverbial language of America’s two famous feminists of the 19th century. The title is:
“What’s Sauce for the Goose is Sauce of the Gander”
The Proverbial Fight for Women’s Rights by
Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony

Please work hard on your proverb collection. The International Proverb Archives in 425 Waterman will be open for you all week, as always.

Tuesday, November 11

Proverb poems and popular songs, pp. 224-236

Thursday, November 13

Proverbs in caricatures, cartoons, and comics, pp. 236-243

Lecture/discussion of:
“Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil”: The three proverbial monkeys

Tuesday, November 18

Proverbs and the world of advertising, pp. 244-249

please read: Mieder, *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season:*

Thursday, November 20

Proverbs as headlines and slogans, pp. 250-254

please read: Mieder, *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season:*
chapter 9, pp. 193-224: “‘(Don’t) Throw the Baby Out with the Bath Water’: The Americanization of a German Proverb(ial Expression)”

Lecture discussion of:
“‘Yes we can”: President Barack Obama’s proverbial rhetoric

Tuesday, November 25 and Thursday, November 27: Thanksgiving Recess

No reading assignment, but please work on winding up your collections, if you have not already done so.
Safe travels and best regards to your families. Be sure to thank them for supporting your studies at the University of Vermont.
Tuesday, December 2

Lecture/discussion of:
“Many roads lead to globalization”: The spread of Anglo-American proverbs throughout the world
“Different strokes for different folks”: The quintessential American proverb of personal freedom

Summary and thank you all for taking part in this lecture course! I hope that you will continue your interest in proverbs, remembering that the anti-proverb “Proverbs are the best policy” has a lot of truth in it as you find your way in the modern world.

Wednesday, December 9: 10:30 – 1:15

Third test (23.3%) completions and essay questions
including parts of the first two thirds of the semester

Course requirements and evaluation: see next page!
**Course requirements and evaluation:**

----- please do all the reading, participate when possible, and do come to all classes punctually

----- take good notes as you read the various assignments (reading alone is not enough)

----- always take notes in class; coming to class (going to all of your classes you take) is the best you can do as a serious student

----- please no eating during our early class; drinks are perfectly fine

----- 20 minute required meeting with Prof. Mieder (definitely before the first test) so we can meet personally and discuss the proverb collection project

You may, of course, come as often during the semester as you wish

Tuesdays and Thursdays are completely set aside for all of you

I will always be glad to help and support you

\[23.3\%\] First test (completions and essay questions)

\[23.3\%\] Second test (completions and essay questions, including parts of first test)

\[23.3\%\] Third test (completions and essay questions, including parts of both previous test)

\[30.0\%\] proverb collection project (cartoons, advertisements, newspaper headlines, literary texts, songs, etc., with precise bibliographical information and at least for 10 of them citations from a standard proverb collection on the back [do not write on the front!])

no references from the internet except for song lyrics!

20 plus references (C range), 30 plus references (B range), 40 plus references (A range) – plus interpretive matters

materials required (available at UVM bookstore):

3-ring binder (1.5 inches)

clear sheet protectors, economy weight, 10 sheets: $1.39

due date: **Wednesday, December 3**

(it would be great if some of you could hand the collections in earlier than this – perhaps even before Thanksgiving – thank you!)

Thank you! All the best, and remember the proverb “All’s well that ends well!”

Prof. Wolfgang Mieder