

Hello. I'm Daniel Brint. Welcome to the Upper Street TODAY language talk, a weekly podcast about English language, expressions, idioms and any other topics of interest inspired by TODAY's subject.

February 11th is 'no point crying over spilt milk day.' This proverb is a way of saying that when something bad has happened, or an opportunity missed, we have to push ahead, focus on the future and avoid dwelling on the past.

The organizers of this day stress that 'we can all use a reminder to pause and reflect on how well we are adjusting and adapting to life's little interruptions and make sure we are not carrying any regrets as baggage along our way.'

Proverbs are a kind of concentrated wisdom, usually the result of observing behaviour, processes in nature, and basically the way things tend to happen. They are memorable, useful pieces of advice and a kind of folk wisdom. Despite typically rural origins, they can be detached from their literal context and remain relevant. They often refer to life in the countryside and especially processes connected to farming. Milk in past times was such a valuable commodity that spilling it probably produced a profound sense of regret. Today it barely matters. There's usually more in the fridge or you can always nip to the corner shop. Don't count your chickens before they are hatched (meaning make plans based on something you cannot be sure of) takes on a special urgency when there are hungry mouths to feed. A bird in hand is worth two in the bush stresses the importance of prioritizing what you have rather than something that might be and, and although we now buy our meat from shops, and by and large don't keep chickens, the meaning is clear and often wise.

Still, not everyone sees things the same way. So, we also get contradictory advice. Many hands make light work – work in a team – but too many cooks spoil the broth – um, better work on your own than with others. The more the merrier urges us to be social and form large groups but two's company, three's a crowd, highlights the value of intimacy. In fact, proverbs can become – almost accidentally given their purpose of instructing and teaching – a source of comedy, and even satire, as in some famous narratives where they are used to create scenes, reflection and even character. Don Quixote is a well-known example and proverbs are used so skillfully by Cervantes that they become intricately connected to the text's evolution, what Salvador de Madariaga calls 'the quixotification of Sancho and the Sanchofication of Quixote.'

And those for whom proverbs are a role-defining characteristic are a great source of interests for certain writers. After Cervantes, we can turn to Louis Carroll, as I have on several previous occasions in these podcasts.

When Alice meets the Duchess, Carroll uses proverbs – and the tendency towards moralizing they can exacerbate – to create some unforgettable scenes, such as this one when the Duchess approaches Alice unexpectedly:

"You're thinking about something, my dear, and that makes you forget to talk. I can't tell you just now what the moral of that is, but I shall remember it in a bit."

“Perhaps it hasn’t one,” Alice ventured to remark.

“Tut, tut, child!” said the Duchess. “Everything’s got a moral, if only you can find it.” And she squeezed herself up closer to Alice’s side as she spoke.

“The game’s going on rather better now,” Alice said, by way of keeping up the conversation a little.

“’Tis so,” said the Duchess: “and the moral of that is—‘Oh, ’tis love, ’tis love, that makes the world go round!’”

“Somebody said,” Alice whispered, “that it’s done by everybody minding their own business!”

“Ah, well! It means much the same thing,” said the Duchess, “and the moral of that is—‘Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves.’”

The Duchess is mangling existing proverbs to comment on the situation. Firstly, by irrelevance – love makes the world go round bears no relation to a sport. Secondly, by simply getting the proverb wrong. The proverb she uses is a version of ‘take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves’ which urges economy and thrift. It has no relevance here.

Alice then reflects:

“How fond she is of finding morals in things!”

When the Duchess suggests doing an experiment on a flamingo, Alice cautions:

“He might bite,”

To which the Duchess replies:

“Very true,” “flamingoes and mustard both bite. And the moral of that is—‘Birds of a feather flock together.’”

“Only mustard isn’t a bird,” Alice remarked.

“Right, as usual,” said the Duchess: “what a clear way you have of putting things!”

“It’s a mineral, I think,” said Alice.

“Of course it is,” said the Duchess, who seemed ready to agree to everything that Alice said; “there’s a large mustard-mine near here. And the moral of that is—‘The more there is of mine, the less there is of yours.’”

“Oh, I know!” exclaimed Alice, who had not attended to this last remark, “it’s a vegetable. It doesn’t look like one, but it is.”

“I quite agree with you,” said the Duchess; “and the moral of that is—‘Be what you would seem to be’—or if you’d like it put more simply—‘Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.’”

“I think I should understand that better,” Alice said very politely, “if I had it written down: but I can’t quite follow it as you say it.”

As usual, Carroll is making serious points here among the comedy. Firstly, that the Duchess doesn’t really hold any coherent opinions at all, she just produces and repeats phrases. Secondly, and more importantly, that unless your ideas are a result of thought and reflection, a series of questions explored with relation to the topic in hand and with an openness to other ideas and opinions, then it doesn’t matter how supposedly TRUE a proverb might be, it is, in the end, just another kind of nonsense. And if this is how we communicate with others in the broadest sense – repeating cliches and lazy formulas – well, that is something worth crying over.

I hope you have enjoyed this TODAY talk. Thank you for listening.