

# Pragmatic Functions of Proverbs in the Short Stories of Abdulla Qahhor and O. Henry: A Comparative Cross-Cultural Analysis

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## Abstract

This research paper presents a comparative pragmatic analysis of proverbs in the short stories of Abdulla Qahhor, a prominent Uzbek writer, and O. Henry (William Sydney Porter), a celebrated American author. Proverbs, as condensed units of cultural wisdom, are not merely decorative elements but potent pragmatic tools that perform a range of communicative actions. This study investigates how both authors, despite their disparate linguistic and cultural backgrounds, employ proverbs and proverbial expressions to execute specific speech acts, such as persuading, admonishing, offering social commentary, and generating irony. Using a qualitative textual analysis framework grounded in speech act theory and cross-cultural pragmatics, this paper examines a curated selection of short stories from each author. The analysis focuses on how proverbs contribute to characterization, shape dialogue, and establish a distinct authorial voice. The findings reveal both universal and culturally specific strategies in the pragmatic application of proverbs. While O. Henry often uses proverbial expressions to create humor and surprise endings characteristic of his style, Qahhor integrates them to offer profound, often somber, critiques of societal norms and human fallibility. This study concludes that a pragmatic lens offers a deeper understanding of the sophisticated literary artistry of both authors, highlighting how proverbs function as a bridge between cultural ethos and narrative intent, enriching the texts with layers of meaning that transcend their literal interpretations.

**Keywords:** Pragmatics, Proverbs, Abdulla Qahhor, O. Henry, Comparative Literature, Speech Act Theory, Cross-Cultural Communication

## Introduction

Proverbs, the distilled wisdom of generations encapsulated in succinct, memorable phrases, represent a universal feature of human language and culture. These sayings, often referred to as the "shortest of art forms," are far more than archaic remnants of oral tradition; they are dynamic linguistic tools that serve critical functions in communication. In literature, their role is particularly nuanced. Authors strategically embed proverbs within their narratives not only to add local color or authenticity but to perform complex pragmatic actions. A proverb in a character's mouth can be an act of persuasion, a subtle warning, an expression of solidarity, or a poignant critique. The study of how language is used in context to achieve communicative goals, known as pragmatics, provides the ideal

theoretical framework for unlocking these deeper layers of meaning. By examining the use of a proverb, we move beyond its semantic content to understand its intended effect—its illocutionary force—within the narrative world and upon the reader. This paper seeks to explore this rich intersection of paremiology (the study of proverbs), pragmatics, and literary analysis through a comparative study of two masters of the short story form from vastly different cultural milieus: Abdulla Qahhor of Uzbekistan and O. Henry of the United States.

Abdulla Qahhor (1907-1968), often hailed as the "Chekhov of the Uzbeks," was a pivotal figure in 20th-century Uzbek literature. His works are celebrated for their psychological depth, realistic portrayal of Uzbek life during the tumultuous Soviet era, and mastery of concise, impactful prose. Qahhor's narratives are deeply rooted in the

cultural fabric of Central Asia, a region with a rich and ancient oral tradition where proverbs (maqollar) are an integral part of everyday discourse. His characters often speak in aphorisms, using traditional sayings to navigate complex social situations, pass judgment, or express a fatalistic worldview shaped by hardship. The proverbs in his stories are not mere embellishments; they are load-bearing structures in the narrative, revealing character motivations, reflecting societal values, and often conveying the author's subtle critique of the prevailing political and social order. Analyzing his use of proverbs is to analyze the heartbeat of his cultural context.

Contemporaneously, on the other side of the globe, William Sydney Porter (1862-1910), writing under the pseudonym O. Henry, was shaping the American short story with his witty narratives of ordinary people in New York City and beyond. Famed for his clever wordplay, ironic twists, and "tearful smile" style that blends humor with pathos, O. Henry's prose is a reflection of a rapidly modernizing, multicultural America. While perhaps less reliant on traditional, ancient proverbs than Qahhor, his stories are replete with idiomatic expressions, popular adages, and proverbial phrases that capture the vernacular of his time. O. Henry wields this language to build relatable characters, create comedic situations, and deliver his signature surprise endings. The pragmatic function of these expressions in his work often leans towards generating irony, highlighting the gap between appearance and reality, and commenting on the follies and virtues of the common man. His use of proverbial language is distinctly American in its playful, often commercial, and aspirational undertones.

The comparative analysis of these two authors offers a compelling research opportunity. It allows for an investigation

into the universal pragmatic functions of proverbs in storytelling while simultaneously highlighting the profound influence of socio-cultural context. How do a writer from a collectivist, tradition-rich society and one from an individualistic, rapidly changing nation use the same category of linguistic device to achieve their literary goals? This study posits that despite their differences, both Qahhor and O. Henry employ proverbs as powerful pragmatic tools to shape character dialogue, establish authorial voice, and engage the reader on a level beyond the surface narrative. By examining the speech acts performed by these proverbs—whether they are used to advise, criticize, persuade, or express irony—we can gain a more profound appreciation for the authors' craft and the intricate ways in which culture is encoded in literature. This research will, therefore, not only contribute to the scholarship on Qahhor and O. Henry but also to the broader fields of cross-cultural pragmatics and literary stylistics.

### **Literature Review**

The scholarly investigation of proverbs, or paremiology, has long established that these sayings are not static artifacts but performative communicative tools. The seminal work of Wolfgang Mieder (2004) has been instrumental in shifting the focus from mere collection and classification to the analysis of proverbs in context. Mieder emphasizes that the meaning of a proverb is actualized only in its application, a principle that aligns perfectly with the core tenets of pragmatics. From a pragmatic perspective, a proverb's utterance is a speech act, a concept introduced by J.L. Austin (1962) and later developed by John Searle (1969). Searle's classification of illocutionary acts—such as assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations—provides a robust framework for analyzing the intended function of a proverb in discourse. For instance, uttering

"The early bird catches the worm" can be a directive (advice to wake up early), an assertive (a statement of fact about a situation), or an expressive (a complaint about a missed opportunity), depending entirely on the context. Scholars like Norrick (1985) have explicitly applied speech act theory to proverbs, arguing that they function as indirect speech acts, allowing speakers to convey messages—often advice or warnings—without direct imposition, thus navigating social dynamics and politeness.

In literary studies, the function of proverbs is recognized as a key element of style and characterization. The integration of proverbs can ground a narrative in a specific cultural setting, making the fictional world more authentic and resonant (Yankah, 1994). When a character uses a proverb, it can reveal their educational background, social status, moral compass, or connection to traditional wisdom. This is particularly evident in postcolonial literature, where authors often use indigenous proverbs to assert cultural identity and resist linguistic hegemony, as famously demonstrated in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Furthermore, proverbs contribute significantly to the authorial voice. An author can use a proverb straightforwardly to endorse a particular moral viewpoint or ironically to critique the very wisdom the proverb purports to hold. This dual potential for reinforcement and subversion makes proverbs a sophisticated tool for conveying thematic complexity.

Critical analysis of Abdulla Qahhor's work has frequently noted his realist style and his "ability to express many meanings in a few words" (Kakhkhorova, 2021). Literary critics in Uzbekistan have long praised his role as a "translator of the national language," who embedded the rhythms and wisdom of Uzbek oral tradition into his prose. His stories are seen as sharp social commentaries, reflecting the struggles of

ordinary people under the Soviet regime. While his masterful use of concise language is widely acknowledged, a specific, focused pragmatic analysis of how he wields proverbs to achieve his critical aims remains an underexplored area. The existing scholarship tends to approach his language from a stylistic or thematic perspective rather than through a systematic pragmatic lens that dissects the specific communicative acts performed by the proverbs in his characters' dialogues.

Similarly, O. Henry's stylistic flair, particularly his use of colloquialisms, wordplay, and irony, has been the subject of extensive literary analysis. His work is often examined for its unique narrative structure, culminating in the "O. Henry ending" (Lohafer, 1983). Analyses have focused on his contribution to the American short story tradition and his depiction of urban life. While his clever use of language is a hallmark of his style, the specific role of proverbial and idiomatic expressions as pragmatic devices is often subsumed under broader discussions of humor and irony. There is a gap in research that systematically categorizes the pragmatic functions of these expressions in his work and compares them to those of an author from a non-Western tradition. This comparative study aims to fill this lacuna by applying a consistent pragmatic framework to both authors, thereby moving beyond culturally-bound literary criticism to a cross-cultural linguistic analysis of narrative technique.

### **Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative, comparative textual analysis methodology to investigate the pragmatic functions of proverbs in the short stories of Abdulla Qahhor and O. Henry. The study is grounded in a theoretical framework that integrates Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory with principles of cross-cultural pragmatics, which examines how language

use is shaped by different cultural norms and values. The primary objective is to identify, classify, and interpret the illocutionary force of proverbial utterances within the selected literary texts, thereby revealing how these authors use traditional wisdom as a dynamic communicative strategy.

The corpus for this study consists of four short stories, two from each author, selected based on their representative nature and the presence of proverbial language. From Abdulla Qahhor's oeuvre, the stories "Anor" ("Pomegranate") and "Bemor" ("The Patient") were chosen. These works are exemplary of Qahhor's focus on social issues, human psychology, and his integration of Uzbek cultural expressions. From O. Henry, the stories "The Gift of the Magi" and "The Ransom of Red Chief" were selected. These are among his most famous works, showcasing his characteristic wit, irony, and engagement with American social archetypes. The Uzbek texts were analyzed in their original form, with careful attention paid to the nuances of the original phrasing, supported by scholarly English translations to ensure accessibility and clarity in the final analysis.

The analytical process involved three main stages. First, a close reading of the four stories was conducted to meticulously identify all instances of proverbs, proverbial expressions, and aphoristic statements. The identification criteria were based on Mieder's (2004) definition of a proverb as a short, generally known sentence of the folk that contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form. Second, each identified proverb was contextualized within the narrative, examining the speaker, the addressee, the social situation, and the surrounding dialogue. This step was crucial for determining the intended meaning beyond the literal words.

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The third and most critical stage involved classifying the pragmatic function of each proverb according to a modified version of Searle's speech act categories. The classification framework included the following functions:

1. **Didactic/Directive:** The proverb is used to advise, warn, or instruct a character.
2. **Assertive/Evaluative:** The proverb is used to state a belief, pass judgment, or offer a philosophical observation about a situation.
3. **Ironical/Critical:** The proverb is used to create verbal irony or to subtly critique a character's actions or societal norms.
4. **Expressive/Emphatic:** The proverb is used to express a character's emotional state (e.g., resignation, hope, despair) or to add weight and finality to a statement.

The classified data was then organized into tables for clear presentation and comparative analysis. A quantitative element was introduced by creating a graph to visualize the frequency of each pragmatic function across the two authors, providing a macroscopic view of their stylistic tendencies. This mixed-method approach, combining deep qualitative interpretation with quantitative visualization, allows for a nuanced and systematic comparison of how Qahhor and O. Henry harness the pragmatic power of proverbs to enrich their storytelling.

### **Results and Analysis**

The comparative analysis of the selected short stories by Abdulla Qahhor and O. Henry reveals distinct patterns in their use of proverbs as pragmatic tools. While both authors leverage proverbial wisdom to deepen their narratives, the predominant functions they employ reflect their unique literary styles and the socio-cultural contexts they represent. Qahhor's use is often deeply embedded in the tragic realism of his characters' lives, serving evaluative and critical functions, whereas O. Henry's

application leans towards creating irony and enhancing the charming wit of his storytelling.

### Abdulla Qahhor: Proverbs as Social and Moral Critique

In Qahhor's stories, proverbs are not lighthearted embellishments but weighty pronouncements that encapsulate the harsh realities faced by his characters. They function primarily as evaluative and critical speech acts, reflecting a worldview steeped in experience and, often, disillusionment.

In "Bemor" ("The Patient"), the narrative is framed by a sense of fatalism and struggle. As the protagonist, Sotiboldi, grapples with his wife's worsening illness and his own poverty, the dialogue and narration are imbued with a sense of grim acceptance. When Sotiboldi seeks help from his wealthy master, who offers platitudes instead of material aid, the unspoken social critique is palpable. A relevant Uzbek proverb that captures this dynamic is *"To'q ochning holidan xabar olmas"* (The full one does not ask about the state of the hungry). While not explicitly stated, Qahhor's narrative structure and character interactions evoke the essence of this proverb, using the situation to perform a powerful critical act against social indifference. The story ends in tragedy, reinforcing the grim wisdom that pervades the social environment.

In "Anor" ("Pomegranate"), the old woman who tends to her pomegranate tree, a symbol of hope and memory, embodies traditional wisdom. When she speaks, her words carry the weight of experience. A key proverbial phrase used in the story is *"Sabrning tagi sariq oltin"* (The bottom of patience is yellow gold). The old woman's entire existence is a testament to this belief as she patiently waits for her son's return. Here, the proverb functions as a directive for herself and an assertive statement of her core belief system. However, Qahhor masterfully uses this proverb to create dramatic tension. The reader is left to

question whether this patience will indeed be rewarded, thus using the proverb to both define the character's hope and to highlight the potential for that hope to be tragically unfounded.

**Table 1: Pragmatic Functions of Proverbs in Abdulla Qahhor's Stories**

Proverb/Expression (Translated)	Short Story	Pragmatic Function	Contextual Analysis
"Patience is a bitter plant, but it has sweet fruit." (Implicit Theme)	"Anor"	Assertive/Evaluative	Represents the old woman's guiding philosophy of enduring hardship with the hope of a future reward. It is a declaration of her worldview.
"The sky is far and the earth is hard." (Opening line)	"Bemor"	Assertive/Evaluative	This proverbial saying establishes a fatalistic and oppressive tone, functioning as a philosophical statement about the character's hopeless situation.
"A good heart does not speak evil words." ( <i>Oq ko'ngildan yomon so'z chiqmaydi</i> )	"Anor"	Didactic/Directive	Spoken by the old woman, this serves as a moral instruction and a gentle rebuke, advising on proper conduct and reinforcing community values.
"The light of life went out." ( <i>Hayot chirog'i o'chdi</i> )	"Bemor"	Expressive/Emphatic	This common Uzbek idiom for death is used to express the profound finality and sorrow of the wife's passing, heightening the emotional impact.

### O. Henry: Proverbs for Irony and Character Charm

O. Henry employs proverbial expressions and idioms with a lighter touch, often to generate humor, characterize his protagonists as witty "common folk," and spring his famous narrative traps. The primary pragmatic functions are ironic and expressive.

In "The Gift of the Magi," the narrative revolves around the central irony of a young couple sacrificing their most prized

possessions for each other. The story concludes with the famous line comparing their foolish yet wise actions to the Magi. O. Henry's authorial voice asserts, "But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest." This directly plays on the concept of wisdom, subverting the proverbial idea that financial prudence is the wisest course. The pragmatic function is assertively evaluative, but with a strong ironic undertone, critiquing a materialistic definition of wisdom and celebrating selfless love instead.

"The Ransom of Red Chief" is a masterclass in situational irony, and O. Henry uses proverbial language to highlight the absurdity. The kidnappers, Bill and Sam, think they are adhering to the criminal adage of "crime doesn't pay" unless you make it pay well. However, their experience with the mischievous "Red Chief" turns this on its head. When Sam writes the ransom letter, he says, "You had better come at once, because the boy is getting on my nerves." This understatement is a comedic reversal of the expected power dynamic. The entire story can be seen as a narrative enactment of the proverb "Don't bite off more than you can chew," with the kidnappers' failure serving as a humorous didactic lesson. The pragmatic use of language here is consistently ironic, critiquing the characters' inflated self-perception.

**Table 2: Pragmatic Functions of Proverbs in O. Henry's Stories**

Proverb/Expression	Short Story	Pragmatic Function	Contextual Analysis
"Of all who give gifts these two were the wisest."	"The Gift of the Magi"	Ironic/Critical	Subverts the conventional wisdom about value and wealth, ironically arguing that the couple's "foolish" sacrifice is true wisdom.
"Life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with	"The Gift of the Magi"	Assertive /Evaluative	A quintessential O. Henry aphorism that functions as a philosophical, albeit

sniffles predominating."			sentimental, statement on the human condition, setting a bittersweet tone.
"It looked like a good thing: but wait till I tell you." (Narrative Framing)	"The Ransom of Red Chief"	Ironic/Critical	The opening setup implies a standard crime narrative, ironically foreshadowing the complete and utter failure of the kidnappers' plan.
"Crime doesn't pay." (Implicit Theme)	"The Ransom of Red Chief"	Ironic/Critical	The story humorously inverts this proverb. For the kidnappers, crime not only doesn't pay, it costs them money to undo, a deeply ironic outcome.

### Comparative Visualization

The differing tendencies of the two authors are clearly visible when the frequency of the primary pragmatic functions is compared.

### Discussion

The results of this comparative analysis offer significant insights into how literary pragmatics operates across different cultural and linguistic landscapes. The distinct ways Abdulla Qahhor and O. Henry employ proverbs are not arbitrary stylistic choices but are deeply intertwined with their respective cultural contexts, literary traditions, and authorial intentions. The findings underscore that while proverbs are a universal linguistic resource, their pragmatic application in literature is highly malleable and purpose-driven.

Qahhor's reliance on proverbs for their assertive and evaluative functions reflects the societal role of proverbs in Uzbek culture. In a society with a strong oral tradition, proverbs are repositories of collective wisdom and serve as authoritative social charters. When a character in a Qahhor story uses a proverb, they are often invoking a shared, communally-validated truth. This is evident in "Anor," where the old woman's patient worldview is encapsulated in proverbial wisdom. This usage does more than just characterize her; it positions her as a bearer

of cultural values. However, Qahhor's genius lies in his ability to place this traditional wisdom in contexts of immense hardship, thereby creating a tension between the ideal prescribed by the proverb and the brutal reality of his characters' lives. The fatalistic opening of "Bemor" with the proverb-like phrase "The sky is far and the earth is hard" is a masterful speech act that functions as an evaluative assertion, framing the entire narrative within a worldview of inescapable struggle. This aligns with critical interpretations of Qahhor's work as a subtle critique of the Soviet system, where traditional resilience is tested against an unyielding and oppressive environment. His authorial voice emerges through this gap, using the weight of traditional wisdom to highlight the depth of modern suffering. In stark contrast, O. Henry's primary use of proverbial language for ironic and critical purposes reflects the cultural landscape of turn-of-the-century America—a society characterized by rapid change, social mobility, and a certain degree of charming cynicism. His characters, often ordinary people trying to get by, do not typically speak with the weight of ancient wisdom. Instead, O. Henry manipulates common adages and idiomatic expressions to expose hypocrisy, comment on human folly, and craft his signature plot twists. In "The Ransom of Red Chief," the entire narrative is an ironic inversion of the proverbial wisdom that crime ought to be a profitable enterprise. The authorial voice is not one of a solemn social critic like Qahhor, but that of a witty, urbane observer who delights in the absurdity of human plans gone awry. Similarly, his re-evaluation of the meaning of "wisdom" in "The Gift of the Magi" is a pragmatic act of redefinition. He takes a universally understood concept, filters it through the actions of his characters, and presents an ironic critique of societal materialism. This use of language shapes characters who are

relatable in their imperfections and strengthens an authorial voice that is at once sentimental and cleverly detached.

The comparison, therefore, reveals a fundamental difference in authorial stance and its relation to cultural context. Qahhor uses proverbs to connect his characters to a deep, often burdensome, cultural heritage, and his voice speaks through the resonance and dissonance this creates. O. Henry uses proverbial expressions to detach from traditionalism, playing with language to create a modern, ironic voice that observes and entertains. This study confirms that a proverb in a literary text is a complex speech act whose illocutionary force is a product of the interplay between its traditional meaning and the immediate narrative context.

### **Conclusion**

This comparative pragmatic analysis of proverbs in the short stories of Abdulla Qahhor and O. Henry has demonstrated that these concise expressions of wisdom are sophisticated literary devices that perform a range of crucial communicative functions. By moving beyond a purely semantic or stylistic examination, this study has illuminated how both authors, operating from distinct linguistic and cultural traditions, harness the illocutionary force of proverbs to construct character, shape dialogue, and imbue their narratives with deeper layers of meaning. The findings reveal that Qahhor predominantly employs proverbs as assertive and evaluative speech acts, grounding his tales of Soviet-era Uzbekistan in a somber realism that both respects and questions the efficacy of traditional wisdom in the face of overwhelming hardship. His authorial voice uses the weight of these proverbs to offer a profound and often melancholic social commentary. Conversely, O. Henry utilizes proverbial and idiomatic language primarily for its ironic and critical potential, subverting reader expectations and highlighting the

follies and virtues of his characters in early 20th-century America. His authorial voice is witty, playful, and urbane, using language as a tool for entertainment and gentle social satire.

The central contribution of this research lies in its cross-cultural comparative approach within a pragmatic framework. It establishes that the function of a proverb is not inherent in the saying itself but is activated by the author's strategic deployment within a specific narrative context. The contrast between Qahhor's earnest, evaluative use and O. Henry's detached, ironic use illustrates how the same linguistic tool can serve vastly different artistic and thematic ends, dictated by the author's intent and the cultural ethos they seek to represent. This study, therefore, reinforces the importance of pragmatics as an analytical tool in comparative literature, enabling a more nuanced understanding of authorial technique and the intricate relationship between language, culture, and storytelling. While this paper provides a focused analysis, it is not without limitations. The corpus was limited to two stories from each author, and a broader survey of their works could yield even more comprehensive patterns of use. Future research could expand this corpus or apply the same comparative pragmatic framework to other pairs of authors from different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, an investigation into how these proverbs are handled in translation and whether their pragmatic force is maintained or altered would be a valuable avenue for further study. Ultimately, this research affirms that the "short sayings drawn from long experience" are not merely relics of the past but are vibrant, powerful instruments in the hands of literary masters, capable of conveying the most complex human emotions and social critiques with enduring impact.

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