Abstract: Wellerism proverbs have been collected from many languages, but very little has been written on the distribution of these types of sayings geographically. This paper is a first attempt to map the broad distribution of this type of proverb and finds an absence of them in eastern Asia.

Key words: proverb, wellerism, proverb distribution

1. Introduction

Scholars have been consciously aware of wellerism proverbs as a class for over 150 years (A. Taylor 1962: 201, 202 and references there). A wellerism “is normally made up of three parts: 1) a statement (which often consists of a proverb or proverbial phrase); 2) a speaker who makes this remark; and [often] 3) a phrase that places the utterance into an unexpected, contrived situation” (Litovkina & Mieder 2006:20, see also Mieder 2004: 15). For example, “A woman unable to dance said, ‘The drum is defective’” (from Telugu, Bhuvaneswar 2012: 41). Archer Taylor devoted 21 pages of his book *The Proverb* to discussing wellerisms (1962: 200-220), a groundbreaking contribution. Much of this was devoted to a pioneering discussion of their distribution in languages within Europe.

For wellerism proverbs (WP’s), the discussion of their distribution has been very limited, never systematic. As he contemplated his data on the distribution of this type of proverb, Peter Unseth wondered if this kind of proverb is found in the language communities of central and eastern Asia. In an effort to fill this gap in our knowledge, the GIAL Oral Traditions and Literature class in the fall of 2016 specifically looked for evidence of WP’s in languages of central and eastern Asia. For the class project, as students studied proverb collections, they systematically sampled books to examine at least 300 proverbs from each language. What follows is a summary of the data so far on the geographical distribution of the languages that have WP’s.

1. In addition, two other students were part of this project, but prefer not to list their names.
2. Archer Taylor’s book was originally published in 1931; but because it was later published with an added extensive index in 1962, the citations in this article cite this later edition. Taylor deserves credit for his 1931 insights which were far ahead of other scholars.
In the proverbs cited in this paper, the punctuation has been standardized. The names of languages that are listed here are not always spelled the same as in the original sources. Also, some names found in the original sources have been replaced by names that are more standard, such as “Turkish” for “Osmanli.” Most languages are labeled with a three-letter identifying code from the International Standards Organization section 639-3, enclosed in square brackets, e.g. [nch] for Chumburung. In some cases, the original sources have not been specific enough to allow the selection of an ISO code. And some language communities want a separate identity from other communities, even if scholars have included their language with another language sharing the same ISO code. In addition, to the best of our ability we have labeled languages as to the country where they are predominantly spoken.

2. Toward defining wellerism proverbs

Before mapping the distribution of WP’s can begin, we must have clearer criteria for defining what is, and is not, a wellerism proverb. This section explains the origin of the term “wellerism,” going on to explore the boundaries of the term “wellerism.” This leads to a more detailed, and hopefully more insightful, understanding of what a wellerism proverb is and what a wellerism proverb is not.

The wellerism is an ancient proverb form, found as far back as ancient Sumer, e.g. “The fox urinated into the Tigris: ‘I am causing the high tide to rise!’ [he said]” (Alster 1975: 212). Wellerisms are also found across Europe, including English. What Whiting called “the oldest English Wellerism” is from AD 642, about Oswald of Northumbria falling in battle: “‘May God have mercy on their souls,’ said Oswald, falling to the ground” (Whiting 1936: 310, 311).

The term “wellerism” (sometimes capitalized as “Wellerism”), is derived from the character Samuel Weller in the 1836 novel *The Pickwick Papers* by Charles Dickens. Samuel Weller was noted for his habit of attributing a quotation to some generic or non-specific speaker. Many of his sayings are very witty, such as “‘Hope our acquaintance may be a long one,’ as the gentleman said to the five-pound note.” As a result of Dickens’ character Weller saying such constructions, they have come to be known as “wellerisms.”

The label “wellerism” has been adopted and adapted into some other languages. In Wikipedia, examining the English article for “wellerism,” we see that borrowed forms are used for the cognate Wikipedia articles in other languages, i.e. “wellerismo” in Italian, “Wellerismi” in Finnish, “Веллеризм” in Russian, “Wellerismus” in German, “Wellerisme” in Norwegian (Bokmål), “Wellerismus” in Slovak, and وَلِرِسْم ("wlrasm") in Persian. The Walon (Walloon) Wikipedia page uses the term “sapinsté,” also offering “welerisse” as an alternate.

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3 Previously it had been thought that the oldest English wellerism proverb was from Chaucer, “Lat this proverbe a lore unto you be; ‘To late y-war!’ quoth Beaute” (A. Taylor 1962: 203).
4 This wellerism by Oswald was labeled a “prouerbio” in Latin (Whiting 1936: 311), but it is not known how it was used as a proverb by later generations, or in what sense it was a proverb in the current English language understanding of the term.
5 The spelling here has been regularized; the original form conveyed Weller’s non-standard dialect.
However, other languages also have their own original terms for such sayings. The Dutch Wikipedia article uses the title “apologisch sprichwort”; in the Swedish Wikipedia such sayings are called “ordstäv.” In Bamana (Mali), the category “ntale” includes sayings that begin with “the Bamana say ..., the hyena said ..., etc.” (Kone 1997: 62). “This form of proverb is popularly known among the Dagaaba [of Ghana] as donne yelyelli ‘animal sayings’” (Kogri 2014: 53). Some German writers have also used the labels “Beispielssprichwort,” “apologisches Sprichwort,” and “Sagwort” (A. Taylor 1962: 201, fn. 1). Also, “welleryzmy” is now used by Polish proverb scholars (Pomierska 2015).

This paper is concerned with wellerisms that are indeed actual proverbs, so the unambiguous term “wellerism proverb” (WP) is used here. A standard English example of a wellerism is: “‘I see,’ said the blind carpenter as he picked up his hammer and saw.” This saying is in the form of a wellerism; it is very witty indeed, but it is not a proverb. Differences and similarities between wellerisms and proverbs can be seen in Table 1. The upper left quadrant contains the sayings that are the topic of this paper. These contain a quotation and are also considered to be proverbs, not merely jokes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>saying contains a quotation &amp; speaker</th>
<th>saying is a proverb</th>
<th>saying is not a proverb</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Where there are no eagles, the grasshopper says, ‘I am an eagle.’” Malay (Lim 2003:125)</td>
<td>“I see,” said the blind carpenter as he picked up his hammer and saw.”</td>
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| saying does not contain a quotation & speaker | “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” | “Penguins live in the southern hemisphere.” |

Table 1. Four-way classification of wellerisms and proverbs

The matter of whether wellerisms should be considered to be proverbs does not have unanimous agreement. “Wellerisms have been considered a type of proverb and have much in common with other types” (Caro 1997: 839). Taylor acknowledged the complex status of wellerism proverbs, writing that it was possible to say that a wellerism “belonged to a very special class of proverbs” (A. Taylor 1962: 202). Prahlad believes “true proverbs must further be distinguished from other types of proverbial speech, e.g. … Wellerisms” (Prahlad 1996: 33). Table 1 may add some clarity to such classification uncertainty. In this paper, the term “wellerism proverb” is used to unambiguously to refer to only wellerisms that are proverbs.

While searching for WP’s, it became apparent that the definition of a “wellerism proverb” has not been worked out at the level of detail needed to definitively analyze and classify proverbs from a variety of languages, leaving us unsure about whether certain proverbs should be classified as being WP’s or not. As stated above, it is standard to describe a wellerism, whether it is a true proverb or not, as being made up of three parts: “1) a statement (which often consists of a proverb or proverbial phrase); 2) a speaker who makes this remark; and [often] 3) a phrase that places the utterance into an unexpected, contrived situation” (Litovkina & Mieder 2006: 20, see also Mieder 2004: 15).
After comparing a large number of proverbs containing quotations, from a variety of languages, some further clarifications for defining wellerisms have emerged. They are stated here as working hypotheses, rather than as dogmatic statements.

Proverbs that include imperatives to say an utterance are not WP’s, e.g. from Korean, “Say ‘Uncle, uncle,’ and give only heavy burdens to carry” (Ha 1970: 160). Similarly, from Biblical Hebrew, with a negative imperative, “Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it’—when you have it with you” (Proverbs 3:28 RSV). Also, in English we find, “Never say ‘Never’” (Doyle, Mieder & Shapiro 2012: 178) and “Cry ‘Havoc!’ and let slip the dogs of war.” None of these are classified here as wellerisms.

Also, 3rd person imperatives (also called “jussives”) may be used in proverbs; but these are not WP’s, e.g. such as from Spanish, “Who has a mouth, let him not say to another, ‘Blow’” (Trench 1862: 111). This is not a WP. Similarly, proverbs with modals (e.g. “would,” “could,” “should,” “must”) are not wellerisms, e.g. the second half of the German proverb “Who says A must also say B” (Mieder 2004: 92). It appears that Wellerisms are always spoken in the indicative voice.

It appears that quotations in conditional clauses are not candidates to be WP’s. Suppose a proverb has the quotation in the protasis of a conditional clause (the “if...” part), e.g. Sierra Leone Creole, “If you hear a child say, ‘Mamma is cooking okra,’ it’s because Papa said it” (Sierra Leone Krio, Sierra-Leone.org/Krio-Proverbs.html); then it is not a WP. If the quotation is in the apodosis (the result part) of a conditional sentence, then it also appears that the proverb is not a WP, e.g. the Burmese proverb, “If one does not win the affections of a lady one says, ‘She is ugly’” (Lat 1939: 42).

If the quotation is identified as something that is not said, then it appears that the proverb is not a WP, e.g. in Ashanti Twi “When you are (really) dying, you do not say, ‘Oh, I am dying! Oh, I am dying!’” (Rattray 1916: 51).

Similarly, when a proverb is formed with “when” and a quotation in a subordinate clause, it is not a WP, such as the following from Burushaski of Pakistan, “When one says ‘sum’, Sumán becomes sulky; when one says ‘gurgán’, Gurgali becomes sulky” (Tiffou 1993: 70). Similarly, from Bamana of Mali, “It is out of respect that one calls one’s father ‘Baba’. When you call him ‘Mother’s Husband’ he should listen to you” (Kone 1997: 71).

When a quotation itself is in the subject of a clause, it is not a WP, such as this example from Korean: “From a house on fire comes the cry ‘Fire!’” (Ha 1970: 61). If a proverb contains compared quotations, then it is not a WP, as in the following proverb from Italian: “It is better they should say, ‘Here he ran away’ rather than ‘Here he died’” (Collison 1980: 82).

Another construction that does not seem to be a true WP is built with a question about what a speaker said in one clause, followed by the quotation; this is not a WP, as in

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6 This example looks very much like the “sour grapes” wellerism, but it is grammatically different; it is not a WP.
7 This proverb, with “Mother’s Husband,” is “controversial,” raising questions of paternity (Kone 1997: 71).
the following Swahili example: “What said the winnowing tray? ‘Give me, and I will give thee’” (W. Taylor 1891: 129).

The similarity between WP’s and dialogue proverbs is obvious, though our research found many languages had only one category without the other. This suggests that the difference between these two categories of proverbs is not trivial. A proverb from an unidentified language in Sudan seems to almost be on the border of these two categories: ‘‘The land belongs to me!’ said the hyena. The hedgehog said nothing” (Knappert 1989: 100). The silence of the hedgehog is used to classify this as a WP in this paper, but it does raise questions about the definition of dialogue proverbs.

If a quotation is in a relative clause, the proverb is not a WP, as in the following Biblical Hebrew example: “He who says to the wicked, ‘You are innocent,’ will be cursed by peoples, abhorred by nations” (Proverbs 24:24, RSV).

It is not so clear how to analyze and classify the following example from Biblical Hebrew: “‘It is bad, it is bad,’ says the buyer; but when he goes away, then he boasts” (Proverbs 20:14, RSV). It does not seem to be a true WP, but some may disagree.

If a proverb says that something is not said, this quotation does not make the proverb a WP, e.g. Nepali “The king doesn’t say ‘small’ and the fire doesn’t say ‘raw’” (Inchley 2010: 47).

One of the challenges faced in the research is understanding the grammar of the various languages viewed through the English translations. For example, it is not always clear from a translation if a quotation is direct or indirect. To be classed as a wellerism proverb, is it determinative that a quotation must be direct? Since some languages do not differentiate these linguistic categories, for some languages an indirect quotation in the English translation is little different from a direct quotation in the English translation. Definitive analysis of whether or not a proverb is truly a WP must be based on examination of proverbs in their original language.

With such unresolved questions, it is not always clear exactly which collected proverbs should be classed as wellerisms, but the data presented here have been analyzed as being WP’s.

3. Distribution of wellerism proverbs

The first general description of the distribution of WP’s seems to be Taylor’s 1950 work, which referred to their presence only in Europe. He wrote, “They are now especially popular in northern Germany and Sweden,” and went on to speak of them in Romance languages also (A. Taylor 1950: 1169).

The first deliberate step in expanding our knowledge of the distribution of WP’s outside of Europe was by Dundes (1964). In that article Dundes summarized the research on the geographic distribution of WP’s by referring to Archer Taylor’s work, summarizing it by writing that that this type of saying “appears to be limited to European tradition, enjoying special popularity in northern Germany and Scandinavia. Certainly, the occurrence of examples in Latin and Greek literature attests to the venerable age of the form, but it does not settle the question of the form’s geographic distribution” (Dundes 1964: 113). Dundes then broadened our knowledge by showing that WP’s are
also found in “West Africa.” But he did not think he had covered their distribution definitively, explaining “In the cases of the Wellerism ... the geographical distribution has not yet been accurately established” (Dundes 1964: 113).

Thirty years later, Grzybek enlarged the list of places (1994: 290), noting that WP’s are found “all over Europe,” “frequently found North in Germanic” languages, also in France, Belgium, Italy, Asia Minor, “Nigeria/Africa,” but “rarely documented in Slavic cultures.” He hinted at the broad gap in knowledge, “it is not easy to say if the w.[ellerism] is a universal form.” In the same year, Mieder & Kingsbury noted that wellerisms had been documented “in the Slavic and Baltic languages and there is an impressive amount of scholarship on African wellerisms,” speculating that they are found “almost everywhere” (Mieder & Kingsbury 1994: xii).

Building on such previous knowledge and speculation, this article presents the evidence from the authors’ research, the broadest research to date into the distribution of WP’s. After noting on a map the regions where WP’s are found, it became clear that there is an area of eastern Asia in which no languages were found to have WP’s.

What follows is a list of 129 languages, each listed with one of its WP’s. The punctuation of the various translations has been regularised from the various punctuation styles that were found in the originals. It was not always clear if proverbs were direct quotations or indirect quotations, so those cited are a bit of a mix.

**Afar** [aar] (Ethiopia): “‘If the tongue were not in me,’ the head says, ‘I would not have been cut off’” (Parker 1971: 283).

**Akan** [aka] (Ghana): “The cockroach said, ‘To throw your friend before a hen is no joke’” (http://content.ghanagrio.com/templates/?a=89).

**Alaaba** [alw] (Ethiopia): “‘Cook me with the hump!’ said the intestines” (Schneider-Blum 2009: 57).

**Albanian** [sqi]: “The bear could not reach the pears and said, ‘They are unripe!’” (Friedman 2003: 122).

**Akpam** [akf] (Nigeria): “The lizard said that it had jumped from a high place but it was not appreciated and it should praise itself” (Pachocinski 1996: 123).

**Amharic** [amh] (Ethiopia): “‘In my mouth, who has eaten?’ said the snake-eating bird” (Aberra 2016: 105).

**Antillean Creole French** [gfc] (Martinique): “Rabbit says, ‘Eat everything, drink everything, but don't tell everything’” (Funk 1953: 93).

**Arabic** [ara] (Egypt): “A splinter entered the sound eye of a one-eyed person. ‘I wish you good night,’ said he” (Burkhardt 1875: 13).

**Igbo** (Ariocha) [ibo] (Nigeria): “Porcupine said that until the bushfire is over, it cannot celebrate the *ilo-chi* festival” (Monye 1996: 82).

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8 Dundes is generally cited as the scholar who drew attention to wellerism proverbs in West Africa; but he himself noted that earlier, “J. Berry [1961] claimed that wellerisms were known in West Africa, but were probably rare” (Dundes 1964: 113, fn. 2).

9 It is not clear how large an area of Africa Grzybek meant by the label “Nigeria/Africa.”
Armenian [hye]: “The ass which fell into a granary said, ‘It is better here than in our stable’” (Bayan 1889: 23).

Arsi Oromo [gax] (Ethiopia): “‘I have reserved enough butter, I have also born a son; did I fail to churn; did I fail to reserve; or am I unable to incense myself?’ said a senior wife” (Tullu 2008: 56).

Assamese [asm] (India): “They met the blacksmith on the road and said, ‘Make a knife for us’” (Gurdon 1896: 44).


Badaga [bfq] (SE India): “In the fifth month [of pregnancy] the child will say, ‘Shall I come out or shall I remain inside?’” (Hockings 1988: 114).


Beja [bej] (Sudan): “If you don't gather dung in the rainy season, you can't do it in the summer time,’ said the dung beetle” (Anonymous friend. Personal communication. 2014.).

Berber (unspecified): “‘I won't tie up the mule in a horse's place,’ says the widow” (http://www.special-dictionary.com/proverbs/source/b/berber_proverb/).


Borana Oromo [gax] (Ethiopia & Kenya): “‘As I was crying for horns, they cut my ears,’ said the donkey” (Shongolo & Schlee 2007: 20).

Burji [bji] (Ethiopia & Kenya): “The donkey became rebellious and said, ‘Put your load on whoever is available, not on me’” (Chelo 2016: 17).

Burushaski [bsk] (Pakistan): “The tree said to the axe, ‘If I give you my hand, will you cut it off?’” (Tiffou 1993: 99).

Gurage (Chaha) [sgw] (Ethiopia): “When the water carries him away, the weaver says, ‘I would weave once more’” (Leslau 1949: 220).

Chechen [che] (Russia): “‘My guest asks for water means he is not hungry, my guest does not ask for water means he is fasting,’ said a stingy hostess” (Elena Yurkova. Personal Communication. 2017.).

Chichewa [nya] (Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia): “‘This is lovely,’ said the monkey, and he fell on his back” (Kessel 2015).

Chumburung [ncu] (Ghana): “Chameleon says, ‘Quickly quickly is good and slowly slowly is good’” (Hansford 2003: 79).

Circassian (Kabardian) [kbd] (Russia): “The mosquito on the horn of the harnessed bull said, ‘We are ploughing’” (Jaimoukha 2009: 100).
**Cook Islands** (unspecified Polynesian language): “‘It’s a different day,’ said Tiaure” (Short 1951: 256).

**Dagara** [dag] (Ghana): “The monkey says that dog has a guardian and that is why he fears dog” (Kyiilelang 2017: 174).

**Dagbani** [dag] (Ghana): “The ant says, ‘Helping to lift is strength.’ This proverb actually means ‘unity is strength’” (Kogri 2014: 53).

**Dargin** [dar] (Dhagestan, Russia Federation): “She couldn’t do milking, because, she said, ‘The cow’s horn is crooked’” (Gasanova, Magomedova & Gasanova 2016: 11874).


**Dutch** [nld] (Holland, Belgium): “‘That is a good riddance,’ said little Griet, and her husband died” (Ley 1998: 81).

**Ebira** [igb] (Nigeria): “A millipede says that many feet help destroy more plants than a few feet” (Pachocinski 1996: 219).

**Eggon** [ego] (Nigeria): “A squirrel says it cries for only one day” (Pachocinski 1996: 105).

**Ekajuk** [eka] (Kajuk) (Nigeria): “The pig says, “Luck only comes when you move from place to place” (Ganyi, Owan & Ellah 2015: 59).

**Enga** [enq] (Papua New Guinea): “The kaiwe bird which does not have bright plumage is saying, ‘I am good, I am good’” (Gibbs 2000: 188).

**English** [eng]: “‘Every little helps,’ quoth the wren when she pissed in the sea” (Mieder & Kingsbury 1994: xvi).

**Ewe** [ewe] (Ghana): “The wasp says several regular trips to a mud pit make it possible for it to build a house” (Dzobo 1973).

**Farsi** [pes]: “The old woman spilt the broth, so she said, ‘I was wishing for bread only anyway’” (Zekaria 2015: 295).

**Finnish** [fin]: “Hunger says, ‘I’ll kill you, if you don't work’” (Lauhakangas 2012).

**Ganda** (Luganda) [lug] (Uganda): “‘I’ll die for a big thing,’ says the biting ant on the big toe” (Finnegan 1970: 401).

**Georgian** [kat]: “A person has found a horseshoe and says: ‘Oh, now I just need a horse and three horseshoes!’” (Elena Yurkova. Personal Communication. 2017.).

**German** [deu]: “‘Non semper oleum,’ said (St.) Michael and pooped into the lamp” (Prédota 2010: 297). (The proverb is in German, but the quotation is in Latin, meaning “Not always oil.”)

**Ga’az** [gez] (Classical Ethiopic): “The fool says in his heart, “There is no God” (Taräqäny 2008: 76, 77).

**Greek** [ell]: “The fly sat on the axle-tree of the chariot wheel and said, ‘What a dust I raise!’” (Stavropoulos 2003: 116).
Guji Oromo [gax] (Ethiopia): “‘What is our sin?’ said a dog after giving birth to nine blind puppies”10 (Jirata 2009: 80 and Jaleta 2004: 85).


Hebrew (Biblical) [hbo]: “The sluggard says, ‘There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!’” (Proverbs 26:13).

Hindi [hin] (India): “The sluggard fell in the draw-well, and he said to himself, ‘I feel fine here’” (Todorova-Marinova 2015).

Hindustani [non-specific] (India): “A sick man met a sick man and said, ‘Drink nīm water’” (Fallon 1886: 196).


Icelandic [isl]: “‘Poor you, how black you are,’ said the iron pot to the clay pot” (Paczolay 1997: 319).


Igala [igl] (Nigeria): “The chameleon says that he will not alter his dignified manner of walking just because the forest is on fire” (Egbunu 2014: 262).

Igbo [ibo] (Nigeria): “The vulture asked what it has to do with a barber” (Opata 1990: 223).11

Ilaje [yor] (Yoruba dialect of Nigeria): “The owl says, ‘I see with all the parts of my body’” (Ojoade 1980: 67).


Jabo (dialect of Grebo) [grj] (Liberia): “North wind says: ‘If you rise, they will know you are there’” (Finnegan 1970: 420).

Kafa [kbr] (Ethiopia): “‘Fearful has many sticks,’ said the dog” (Wodajo 2012: 112).

Kabyle [kab] (Algeria): “As the ass said, ‘I will not accompany you to heaven if there are children in it’” (Belkhir 2014: 175).

Kambaata [ktb] (Ethiopia): “‘The sky is wide,’ said the sorghum plant” (Treis 2008: 15).


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10 This wellerism is a reformulation of the classical proverb, “The bitch in her haste has given birth to the blind.” The significance of this proverb being found in Ethiopia is discussed by Unseth (2017).

11 Some might say that the indirect speech (at least in the English translation) disqualifies this from being a wellerism structure, but Opata clearly labeled examples like this as “wellerisms” (1990).
Kashmir [kas] (India): “The hen asks, ‘What is my fault I have just hatched duck’s eggs?’” (Koul 2006: 32).

Kashubian [csb] (Poland): “‘It is not so easy to do thinking,’ said gbur [rich Kashubian farmer] to the priest, ‘I see an example in my oxen’” (Sychta 1976 vol. 1: 314).

Kikuyu [kik] (Kenya): “Hyena says, ‘Men are wise because they know how to hold a firebrand’” (Barra 1939: 153).

Kirundi (also known as Burundi and Rundi) [run] (Burundi): “The time has come to celebrate the feast of the first fruits,” as the old woman said after a rat had left his droppings in her mouth while she was sleeping” (Rodegen 1974: 533).

Koonzime [ozm] (Cameroon): “Chimpanzee said to his wife, ‘It’s never bad to have a drop of rain fall on you’” (http://www.silcam.org/folder020601/page.php).


Kurdish [unspecified] (Mid East): “‘Hurry up, the herd is going away,’ said the Wolf, as they were reading the Gospel to him” (Permyakov 1979: 205).

Kurdish [kmr] (Northern): “The fox couldn’t reach the grapes, (so) he said, ‘They’re sour’” (Bailey, in preparation).

Kyerepong [cpn] (Ghana): “The bat says, ‘All that God (Onyame) will do is good’” (Damman 1972: 38).

Latin [lat]: “‘You are black!’ as the cauldron said to the pot” (Paczolay 1997: 321).


Luyia [luy] (Kenya): “The hyena said to the stone that even if the stone chose to remain silent, the hyena had excreted on it” (Wambunya 2005: 25).

Maasai [mas] (Kenya): “They hyena said, ‘I am not lucky, but I am always on the move’” (Mulatya 2013: 51).

Macedonian [mkd]: “The grapes are beautiful but still immature,’ said the fox when she could not reach them” (Friedman 2003: 122).

Malay [mly]: “Where there are no eagles, the grasshopper says, ‘I am an eagle’” (Lim 2003: 125).

Malagasy [unclear which variety]: “A fortuneteller says, ‘If it’s not a boy, it will be a girl!’” (http://www.rodneyohebsion.com/madagascar.htm).

Marathi [mar] (India): “The shawl took him twelve years to weave, and he said, ‘It is for the king’s shroud’” (Manwaring 1899: 68).

Moroccan Arabic [ary] (Morocco): “The high-bred horse says, ‘Feed me as your brother, ride on me as your enemy’” (Westermarck 2015: 162).

Nepali [nep]: “The Brahmin who has a full stomach says, “Molasses are bitter’” (Inchley 2010: 393).
Nawuri [naw] (Ghana): “The cat says, ‘Fall down and I fall down is a good game’” (Hansford 2003: 79).


Nuer [nus] (Sudan & Ethiopia): “Gazelle said, ‘The village could not be left because of the lack of water to drink’” (Kawich 2012: 49).

Nupe [nup] (Nigeria): “A vulture says that normally it is in the morning that excrement is sweet, in the afternoon it turns sour.” (Pachocinski 1996: 267).


Oromo (om): “‘The ground is nice, too,’ said the old woman, falling off her horse” (Cotter 1992: 475).

Panjabi [pan] (India): “The farmer standing on his corn heap said to the king’s elephant driver, ‘Will you sell that little donkey?’” (Usborne 1905: 61).

Pashto [pbt] (Afghanistan, Pakistan): “The fish said, ‘I would have spoken if I had not had a mouth full of water’” (Bartlotti & Khattak 2006: 328).

Pashai [unclear which variety] (Afghanistan): “When a thirsty cat sees water in a bottle, it says, ‘The water is not fresh’” (Yun & Pashai Language Committee 2010: 31).


Rendille [rel] (Kenya & Ethiopia): “‘Nobody told me not to,’ said the dog when he ate the faeces” (Schlee & Sahado 2002: 108).

Rotuman [rtm] (Fiji): “Hi’i said, ‘It is my habit to eat flies and if I stop no one else will do it’” (Inia 1998: 31).


Scottish Gaelic [gla]: “‘It’s the bigger of that,’ as the wren said when he added a drop to the sea” (Williams 2010: 32).

Senoufo [unclear which variety] (Côte d’Ivoire): “When the termites are smarter than the digger, he says, ‘They disappeared’” (Pierre Soro. Personal Communication. 2017.).

Setswanna [tsn] (South Africa and Botswana): “One tortoise said, ‘I wish it would rain so that we may feed on green herbs’” (Plaatje 1916: 48).
Sidaama [sid] (Ethiopia): “While the cat was sleeping a rat moved it slowly, saying, ‘Let me see what happens to her’” (Anbessa Teferra. Personal Communication. 2017.).

Sinhalese [sin] (Sri Lanka): “‘It is not that I cannot dance, but the floor is not level,’ said the dancer” (Senaveratna 2005: 32).


Sorbian [hsb] (Slavic in Germany): “The fox says, ‘Not every berry is a raspberry’” (Hose 2004: 56).

Sotho (South Africa): “‘I and my rhinoceros,’ said the tick bird” (Finnegan 1970: 396).


Sudan (language unspecified): “‘The land belongs to me!’ said the hyena. The hedgehog said nothing” (Knappert 1989: 100).


Swedish [swe]: “‘How black you are,’ said the pot to the kettle” (Paczolay 1997: 321).

Tajik [tgk] (Tajikistan): “The pen declared, ‘I am shah of the world, I bring the writer to his goal’” (Bell 2009: 238).

Tamil [tam] (India and Sri Lanka) “He says ‘To cook, there is a woman; for outdoor work, a man’” (Percival 1874: 140).


Tigré [tig] (Ethiopia, Eritrea): “And does not the disease of animals attack the donkey?‘ said the Ad Takles” (Littmann 1910: 54).

Tigrinya [tir] (Eritrea): “When I speak, the donkey lets loose,’ said the poor man” (Täklä et al. 1985: 197).

Tiv [tiv] (Nigeria): “The bat says that there is no difference between standing down[12] and upright” (Pachocinski 1996: 305).

Tonga [toi] (Zimbabwe & Zambia): “[Saying,] ‘This is sweet and that is also sweet!’ a monkey missed a branch and fell upside down” (Mphande 2001: 63).

Tsakhur [tkr] (Azerbaijan): “When the cat cannot reach the meat, she says that it is already spoiled” (Shamkhalov 2012: 14).


Turkish [tur]: “The bride got on the horse (to go to the groom’s village) and said, ‘Whatever God wills will be’” (Gökhan 1992: 157).

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[12] “Standing down” likely means “being upside down.”
Turkmen of Iraq [tuk]: “The hedgehog says, ‘No one is smoother than my baby’” (Mustafa & Moosa 2008: 144).

Twi variety of Akan [aka] (Ghana): “The tortoise says, ‘Quickness is advantageous, slowness is also advantageous’” (Akrofi 1958: 104).

Urhobo [urh] (Nigeria): “The monkey says that he should be shaved the way his mates are shaved” (Maledo 2015: 84).

Vai [vai] (Liberia): “The frog says, ‘I have nothing, but I have my hop’” (Ellis 1914: 150).

Welsh [cym] (United Kingdom): “‘Black bottomed,’ the crow said to the seagull and she herself being black bottomed” (Paczolay 1997: 321).

West Cameroon Pidgin [unclear which variety] (Cameroon): “When the jam is all finished, the monkey eats pepper, saying, ‘It is a garden egg.’” (This reflects an interpretation of an incompletely glossed proverb form cited from another scholar’s collection, Todd 1971: 85-100.)

Wolaytta [wal] (Ethiopia): “‘Everything that is in the book is my name,’ said the blind person” (Tällacchäw & Ammänu 1987: 165).


4. Findings of this paper

The goal of this research project was to map the distribution of WP’s. That has been accomplished, documenting patterns of distribution of this type of proverbs. Figure 1 shows the number of languages that have WP’s in various regions of the world. Clearly the maps are very general, based more on geography than cultural and linguistic factors.

Europe – 24
Africa – 73
Mideast – 10
South Asia – 17
Sinosphere – 1 (Korea)
Figure 1. Map showing the distribution of wellerisms proverbs

Summarizing the results of the mapping of WP’s, it is clear that WP’s are found in many parts of Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus region, the Persian region, Europe, and South Asia, but they are not found in large areas of eastern Asia. The area of eastern Asia without WP’s can be very roughly described as the areas within the Sinosphere, an area heavily influenced by Chinese culture. But Korean WP’s are a fascinating exception.

Alert readers will note that there the map does not include North or South America. This is due to the “striking lack of proverbs among Native Americans” (Mieder 2008: 147, also Mieder 1989). The one example listed from the Western Hemisphere is from Antillean Creole French, spoken in Martinique, in the West Indies. This is not a true exception when we remember that the language is a creole, composed largely of elements of African languages and French. Therefore, finding WP’s in Antillean Creole French is not an exception to the generalization that WP’s are not found in the indigenous languages of the Americas.

There is not enough data from languages of the Malay area, though a WP has been found in Malay. More data from the Malay sphere of influence is needed.

Data from Pacific islands is too scanty to make any generalizations about WP’s. At this point, it can only be said that examples have been found in Enga of Papua New Guinea (Gibbs 2000), Rotuman of Fiji (Inia 1998), and an unspecified Polynesian

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13 Because Antillean Creole French has large influences from both French and African languages, it is not reflected on the map as belonging to any area.
language from the Cook Islands (Short 1951: 256). No examples of WP’s were found in Maori (Colenso 1878) or Samoan (Shultz 1980).

Very tentative evidence suggests that the southern part of Africa does not have as many WP’s as languages to the north. This conclusion is based on finding none in examining a collection of 249 proverbs from six Zambian languages (Sumbwa 1993), 270 proverbs from Nsenga of Zambia (Pluger 2014), and 129 from Zulu of South Africa (Mayr 1912). However, WP’s have been found in Sotho (Finnegan 1970) and Setswanna (Plaatje 1916) of South Africa.

4.1 Languages without WP’s (based on our initial, incomplete research)

For a number of languages, a systematic sample of about 300 proverbs was scanned. This raises a question about whether it is adequate and significant to categorize a language as not having WP’s or dialogue proverbs based on a sample of 300 proverbs. For other languages, the available sample was only 100 proverbs, with some collections falling in between

Burmese: \( n > 300 \) (Thamen 2000)
Chinese: firm conclusion by two native speakers with significant knowledge of proverbs
Dehong Tai (Thailand): \( n = 108 \) (Swangpanyangkoon & Edwards 1994)
Dzongkha (Bhutan): \( n = 165 \) (Sørensen & Nidup 1999)
Japanese: \( n = 100 \) (Ganef 2000)
Kannada (India): \( n = c. 480 \) (Rao 1982)
Khakas and Shor (Russia, southern Siberia): \( n > 230 \) (Roos, Nugteren & Waibel 2006)
Khmay (Khmer) (Cambodia): approx. 290 proverbs (Fressanges 2010)
Maori: (Colenso 1878) \( n = 235 \)
http://rsnz.natlib.govt.nz/volume/rsnz_12/rsnz_12_00_001250.html
Mongolian: \( n > 350 \) proverbs (Raymond 2010)
Nsenga (Zambia): \( n = 270 \) (Pluger 2014) \( n = 270 \)
Philippines: \( n > 600 \) proverbs, a collection from a wide variety of Philippine languages (Eugenio 1992)
Songye (Democratic Republic of Congo): \( n = 100 \) (Kazadi & Bibasuya 2011)
Thai: \( n = c. 300 \) (Gerini 1904)
Tibetan: \( n = c. 1,600 \) (Pemba 1996) \(^{14}\)
Tonga (Pacific): \( n = 633 \) (Collocott & Havea 1922) Searched electronically for “said” and “say.”
Yiddish: \( n = 1,001 \) (Kogos 1970)
Zambia (six languages): \( n = 249 \) proverbs from six languages of Zambia (Sumbwa 1993)

\(^{14}\) The collection was searched electronically for “said” and “say.”
Zhuang (China): \( n = 2,160 \) (Zhou 2017)
Zulu (South Africa): \( n = 129 \) (Mayr 1912)

### 4.2 Percentage of WP’s in proverb collections for languages that have them

Well into the research for this paper, it became apparent that among languages that have WP’s there is great variation in the percentage of their proverbs that are WP’s. Much of our early research had simply examined collections to see if there were any WP’s, but it became clear that it would have been useful to note the number of WP’s.

In some languages, less than 1% of the proverb collection are WP’s, but for other languages WP’s are a higher percentage. For Chaha (Ethiopia), of the 25 proverbs in the Chaha collection (Leslau 1949), one was a WP, 4% of a tiny sample. For Kambaata (Ethiopia), of the 75 proverbs in a Kambaata collection (Treis 2008), four were WP’s, over 5%. For Dagara (Ghana), of 207 proverbs (Kyilelang 2017), 14 were wellerism proverbs, 7% of the sample. For Alaaba (Ethiopia), of over 400 proverbs in an Alaaba collection (Schneider-Blum 2009), about 10% of the proverbs were WP’s. For Nuer (South Sudan and Ethiopia), of over 358 proverbs in a collection (Carlassare 2015), 35 were wellerism proverbs, about 10%. For Burji (Ethiopia and Kenya), of 100 proverbs in a collection (Chelo 2016), five were wellerisms proverbs for 20%.

It would be very interesting to know if the percentage of WP’s lessened near the edge of the Sinosphere, the Chinese sphere of influence.

### 4.3 Widespread WP’s

Some WP’s have been found in multiple languages. This is noteworthy since, as Grambo summarized the work of Iris Jarvo-Nieminen regarding Finnish wellerisms, “language boundaries form a major obstruction to the spread of wellerisms” (Grambo 1972: 101). There are a number of wellerisms that can be shown to have spread across language boundaries. This can be seen with the world’s oldest recorded WP’s, still found in use today.

**Urinating into the ocean**

Sumerian: ka.a-a a.aba-se gis-a-ni u-bi-in-sur a.ab.ba TUN-bi kas-mu-um-e.se “The fox urinated into the sea: ‘The sea-(all) its surface(?) is my urine!’ (he said).”

Sumerian: ka5.a idigna-se kas i-sur-sur-ra a.estub.ku6 ba-zi-ge-en-e.se “The fox urinated into the Tigris, ‘I am causing the high tide to rise!’ (he said)” (Alster 1975: 212).

Welsh: “‘Every little bit is a help,’ as the little wren said while pissing in the sea” (Williams 2010: 41).

Mieder & Kingsbury cite a parallel wellerism proverb in English from 1605, “‘Every little helps,’ quoth the wren when she pissed in the sea” (1994: xvi). The same basic saying was collected orally in Idaho in 1966, “‘Every little bit helps,’ said the ant as he peed in the ocean” (Mieder & Kingsbury 1994: vxi).

Compare these with examples from Ireland:
“‘Every little helps,’ as the monkey said when he piddled in the ocean” (Williams 2002: 124).
“‘Every little helps,’ as the jinny-wren said when he pissed in the ocean” (Williams 2002: 124).

“‘Every wee drop counts,’ said the old woman when she piddled in the sea” (Williams 2002: 125).

“‘Everything counts,’ as the woman said when she pissed in the ocean” (Williams 2002: 125).

**Unable to dance well**


Sinhalese (Sri Lanka): “It is not that I cannot dance, but the floor is not level,’ said the dancer” (Senaveratna 2005: 32).

Tamil (India & Sri Lanka): “The temple girl who could not dance said, ‘The hall was not large enough’” (Percival 1874: 62).

Telugu (India): “A woman unable to dance said, ‘The drum is defective’” (Bhuvaneswar 2012: 41).

Hindi (India): “Since she doesn’t know the dance, but is unwilling to admit that, she claims, ‘The yard’s uneven’” (Todorova-Marinova 2015).

Gikuyu/Kikuyu (Kenya): “He who cannot dance says that the yard is stony” (Barra 1939: 527).

Makonde (Kenya): “The one who fails to dance says, ‘The ground is stony’” (Ireri 2017).

**Pot calling kettle black**

Latin: “‘You are black!’ as the cauldron said to the pot” (Paczolay 1997: 318).


Icelandic: “‘Poor you, how black you are,’ said the iron pot to the clay pot” (Paczolay 1997: 319).


Swedish: “‘How black you are, said the pot to the kettle” (Paczolay 1997: 321).

Turkish: “One pot tells the other, ‘Your face is black’” (Paczolay 1997: 321).

**Sour grapes**

Kurdish (Northern): “The fox couldn’t reach the grapes, (so) he said, ‘They’re sour’” (Bailey, in preparation).

Macedonian: “‘The grapes are beautiful but still immature,’ said the fox when she could

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15 Todorova-Marinova reports six variants of this proverb in Hindi, two of which are clearly wellerisms (2015).
Farsi (Iran): “He could not reach the grape, so he said, ‘It is still not ripe [it is sour]’” (Zekaria 2015: 295).

Language communities to the north share an innovation, keeping the fox in the wellerism proverb, but having the fox referring to a familiar northern berry rather than to less-familiar grapes.

Sorbian (Slavic in Germany): “The fox says, ‘Not every berry is a raspberry’” (Hose 2004: 56).

Danish: “‘They are sour,’ said the fox about the rowan berries; he couldn't reach them” (Brøndegaard 1970).

Finnish: “‘Sour,’ said the fox about rowan berries” (Lauhakangas 2012).

Norwegian: “‘They are sour,’ said the fox [when] he jumped after the berries of the rowan tree, but did not reach them” (Grambo 1972: 102).

Swedish: “‘Sour,’ said the fox about the rowanberries” (Lauhakangas 2012).

In Albanian, a bear speaks about unripe pears instead of grapes or berries:

Albanian: “The bear could not reach the pears and said, ‘They are unripe!’” (Friedman 2003: 122)

In the Caucasus and Afghanistan, we find a cat instead of a fox, though the desired object varies:

Peshai (Afghanistan): “When a thirsty cat sees water in a bottle, it says, ‘The water is not fresh’” (Yun & Pashai Language Committee 2010: 31).

Tsakhur (Azerbaijan): “When the cat cannot reach the meat, she says that it is already spoiled” (Shamkhalov 2012: 14).

In Farsi, a person speaks instead of an animal, and the food item is different; but the general idea is still very similar:

Farsi: “The old woman spilt the broth, so she said, ‘I was wishing for bread only anyway’” (Zekaria 2015: 295).

**Soft hedgehog**

In some parts of western parts of Asia, a prickly mammal speaks of her baby as being soft.

Assyrian (Mid East): “The hedgehog says, ‘No one is softer than my baby’” (Dinkha & Bitshamoon 2004: 220).

Turkmen16 (Iraq): “The hedgehog says, ‘No one is smoother than my baby’” (Mustafa & Moosa 2008: 144).

Dari (Afghanistan): “A porcupine speaking to its baby says, ‘O, my child of velvet’”

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16 It is not clear how similar this is to the language spoken in Turkmenistan.
Uyghur (China): “The crow says, ‘My baby is white’; the hedgehog says, ‘My baby is soft’” (Fiddler 2017).

There is a slightly different wellerism proverb about porcupine mothers in Wolaytta of Ethiopia: “‘A mother knows how to cuddle a baby,’ said the mother porcupine” (Tällacchäw & Ammänu 1987: 159).

Ant talks about lifting

Dagbani (Ghana): “The ant says, ‘Helping to lift is strength’” (Kogri 2014: 53).

Dagara (Ghana): “The ant says that helping to lift something together is strength” (Kyiilelang 2017: 174).

4.4 WP’s and similar non-WP’s

One of the patterns discovered about WP’s is that sometimes the same underlying proverb is used both as a wellerism proverb and also in a non-wellerism form in the same language. Lauhakangas (2012) cited such a pair from Finnish:

Wellerism: “‘Go around me, don't swear,’ said the stone to the ploughman.”

Non-wellerism: “Pass round the stone, don't curse it” (Lauhakangas 2012).

Similarly, in Persian, one basic proverb is found as a wellerism proverb and also in a non-wellerism form:

Wellerism: “The Turk was kept out of the village but he kept on saying, ‘Take my bow and arrow to the house of the village headman!’” (Shurgaia 2014: 134).

Non-wellerism: “Some so-and-so was not allowed to enter the village but he still asked where the village headman’s house was” (Shurgaia 2014: 134).

Comparing across languages, a number of WP’s from some languages are found as non-wellerisms in other languages.

Dog bearing blind pups

Wellerism:

Guji Oromo (Ethiopia): “‘What is our sin?’ said a dog after giving birth to nine blind puppies” (Jirata 2009: 80 and Jaleta 2004: 85).

Non-wellerism:

Alaaba (Ethiopia): “The she-dog [bitch], because she is in extreme hurry gives birth to blind (ones)” (Schneider-Blum 2009: 95).

Tongue and head

17 This is actually more than a wellerism proverb, but a dialogue proverb. However, it illustrates the hedgehog’s speech about the baby.

18 This proverb is discussed in another article in this issue of GIALens (Unseth 2017).
Wellerism:
Afar (Ethiopia): “If the tongue were not in me,” the head says, “I would not have been cut off” (Parker 1971: 283).

Non-wellerisms:
Chitonga (Zambia): “The mouth put the head in trouble” (Sumbwa 1993: 15).
Turkmen (Turkmenistan): “Trouble to the head comes from the tongue” (Tyson & Clark 1993: 64).

Did-dik antelope and footprints
Wellerism:
Orma (Kenya): “The dik dik said, whoever has seen my footprints will not desire my meat”” (Katabarwa & Chelo 2012: 6).

Non-wellerism:
Borana (Kenya): “Somebody who has seen my footprints will not long for my meat.” (This saying is attributed to the dik-dik.) (Shongolo & Schlee 2007: 95).

Lid for every pot
Wellerism:
Ireland: “As the cook said, ‘There’s a lid for every pot’”’ (Williams 2002: 199).

Non-wellerism:
America: “There’s a lid for every pot” (Mieder, Kingsbury & Harder 1992: 371).

Unable to dance and creates excuse
Wellerisms:
Sinhalese (Sri Lanka): “It is not that I cannot dance, but the floor is not level,” said the dancer” (Senaveratna 2005: 32).
Tamil (India & Sri Lanka): “The temple girl who could not dance said, ‘The hall was not large enough’” (Percival 1874: 62).
Telugu (India): “A woman unable to dance said, ‘The drum is defective’” (Bhuvaneswar 2012: 41).
Dari (Afghanistan): “The dancer was unable to dance and says, ‘The dance floor is crowded’” (Anonymous friend. Personal communication. 2014.).

Non-wellerisms:
Malay: “The man who cannot dance blames the softness of the ground” (Lim 2003 132).
Turkish: “The bride who doesn’t know how to dance complains of the lack of space” (Gökhan 1992: 154).
Bengali (Bangladesh): “If you don’t know how to dance, you blame the floor for not being level” (Sinha-Ray 2009).

Yiddish: “If the bride can’t dance, she finds fault with the musicians” (Kogos 1970: 40).

Different wellerism for making an excuse:

Dargin (Dhagestan, Russia Federation): “She couldn’t do milking, because, she said, ‘The cow’s horn is crooked’” (Gasanova, Magomedova & Gasanova 2016: 11874).

**Pot calling kettle block**

Wellerisms:

Latin: “‘You are black!’ as the cauldron said to the pot” (Paczolay 1997: 318).


Icelandic: “‘Poor you, how black you are,’ said the iron pot to the clay pot” (Paczolay 1997: 319).


Swedish: “‘How black you are, said the pot to the kettle” (Paczolay 1997: 321).

Turkish: “One pot tells the other, ‘Your face is black’” (Paczolay 1997: 321).

Non-wellerism:

Russian: “One pot should not laugh at another as both are black” (Paczolay 1997: 318).

**Rejected guest wants to store item**

Wellerism:

Armenian: “Ashugh was not permitted to come into the house but he was still asking, ‘Where can I put my saz lute?’” (Shurgaia 2014: 134).

Non-wellerism:

Georgian: “Khevsuri was kept out of his house and he asked to hang his shield and sword on the upper shelf” (Shurgaia 2014: 134).

**Donkey wanting horns**

Wellerism:

Borana (Kenya & Ethiopia): “‘As I was crying for horns, they cut my ears,” said the donkey” (Shongolo & Schlee 2007: 20).

Non-wellerism:

Pashai (Afghanistan): “A donkey that coveted a horn left home and lost his ears” (Yun & Pashai Language Committee 2010: 93).

**Fox and sour fruit**

Wellerism:
Kurdish (Northern): “The fox couldn’t reach the grapes, (so) he said, ‘They’re sour’” (Bailey, in preparation).

Non-wellerism:

Burushaski (Pakistan): “When it cannot reach them, the pomegranates seem sour to the fox” (Tiffou 1993: 43).

**Camel on hills**

Wellerism:


Non-wellerism:

Pashto (Pakistan and Afghanistan): “Someone asked a camel, ‘Is ascending better than descending?’ He replied, ‘May both be cursed’” (Bartlotti & Khattak 2006). Instead of being a wellerism, this proverb is a dialogue proverb, sort of a double wellerism.

**Soft baby hedgehog**

Wellerisms:

Assyrian (Mid East): “The hedgehog says, ‘No one is softer than my baby’” (Dinkha & Bitshamoon 2004: 220).

Turkmen (Iraq): “The hedgehog says, ‘No one is smoother than my baby’” (Mustafa & Moosa 2008: 144).


Uyghur (China): “The crow says, ‘My baby is white’; the hedgehog says, ‘My baby is soft’” (Fiddler 2017).

Non-wellerism:

Korean: “The hedgehog thinks his young are soft and sleek” (Ha 1970: 77).

**4.5 Different characters speaking same quotation in different languages**

The comparative research for this paper also discovered WP’s in different languages with very similar forms, but with different speakers in different languages, or sometimes even in the same language.

**Fall down and get up game**

Nupe (Nigeria): “The dog says, ‘If you fall down and I fall down, the play will be enjoyable’” (Pachocinski 1996: 182).

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19 This is actually more than a wellerism proverb, but a dialogue proverb. However, it illustrates the hedgehog’s speech about the baby.
Chumburung (Ghana): “The dog says, ‘Fall down and I fall down is a good game’” (Hansford 2003: 79).

Nawuri (Ghana): “The cat says, ‘Fall down and I fall down is a good game’” (Hansford 2003: 79).

“Non semper oleum”

Dutch: “‘Non semper oleum,’” said the Devil and he pooped into the lamp” (Prędota 2010: 297). (The quotation is in Latin, meaning ‘Not always oil’.)

German: “‘Non semper oleum,’ said Michael and pooped into the lamp” (Prędota 2010: 297).

Urinating into ocean


English: From Ireland, five wellerisms about claiming a great effect after urinating into the river/sea/ocean, with one about a monkey, one about a jinny-wren, and three about a woman (Williams 2002: 124, 125). From England, one with a robin (Williams 2010:11). From Scotland, with a wren (Williams 2010: 15).

Death in a pumpkin

In an Amharic proverb collection, the same wellerism quotation is spoken by two different animals: “Let death enter the pumpkin” is said by a porcupine in one form of the proverb and by a gray donkey in another version (Aberra 2016: 109).

Haste and slowness both good

Chumburung (Ghana): “Chameleon says, ‘Quickly quickly is good and slowly slowly is good’” (Hansford 2003: 79).

Ashanti Twi (Ghana): “The tortoise says, ‘Haste is a good thing and deliberation is also a good thing’” (Rattray 1916: 70).

4.6 Wellerism proverbs in languages of Horn of Africa

In studying languages of the Horn of Africa, all 21 languages for which we had access to proverb collections have at least one wellerism proverb. This is intriguing, since shared verbal folklore patterns have been shown to coincide with linguistic features of the Ethiopian Language Area (Meyer 2005).

Afar: “‘If the tongue were not in me,’ the head says, ‘I would not have been cut off’” (Parker 1971: 283).

Alaaba: “‘Cook me with the hump!’ said the intestines” (Schneider-Blum 2009: 57).

Amharic: “‘Its name is guinea fowl,’ they say, when eating a vulture” (Ingida 1999: 197).

Arsi Oromo: “‘We could not get the heart of the Amhara men and the Oromo women,’ said the Italians” (Tullu 2008: 100).
Beja: “‘We hear what we like and we hear what we don't like,’ said the hyena” (Anonymous friend. Personal communication. 2014.).

Borana Oromo (Kenya & Ethiopia): “‘As I was crying for horns, they cut my ears,” said the donkey” (Shongolo & Schlee 2007: 20).

Burji: “The old man said, ‘Do the possible and bring me the impossible’” (Chelo 2016: 21).

Chaha Gurage: “When the water carries him away, the weaver says, ‘I would weave once more’” (Leslau 1949: 220).


Guji Oromo: “‘I can see everything now,’ said an old woman after burning her house” (Jirata 2009: 137 and Jaleta 2004: 80).


Kafa: “‘Fearful has many sticks,’ said the dog” (Wodajo 2012: 112).

Kambaata: “‘The sky is wide,’ said the sorghum plant” (Treis 2008: 15).

Oromo: “‘I am now as I was,’ said the clay griddle while burning along with the house” (Cotter 1992: 475).

Nuer: “Gazelle said, ‘The village could not be left because of the lack of water to drink’” (Kawich 2012: 49).

Rendille: “‘Nobody told me not to,’ said the dog when he ate the faeces” (Schlee & Sahado 2002: 108).

Sidaama: “One with cleft lip said, ‘You told me to blow on the fire while you know [my problem]’” (Anbessa Teferra. Personal Communication. 2017.).


Tigré: “‘Do not make a mistake, let each one stand in its place,’ said Mount Gädäm” (Littmann 1910: 97).

Tigrinya: “‘By which leg, by which way of crossing,’ said the sickly one” (Täklä et al. 1985: 119).

Wolaytta: “One who goes to steal at night says, ‘I am frightened at day time’” (Alemayehu 2012: 68).

It is not surprising to find shared WP’s within the Horn of Africa. It is noteworthy to find one shared by Tigrinya at the northern end of the Horn in Eritrea, Amharic in the middle, and Burji at the southern end of the Horn region, straddling the Ethiopia-Kenya border: “‘O sheep, if I don’t eat you, you will eat me,’ said the hyena” (Täklä et al. 1985: 119 for Tigrinya; Aberra 2016: 110, Chelo 2016: 9 for Burji).

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20 This wellerism proverb is from the Bible, Psalm 14:1. It is the only clear example of a wellerism proverb in this collection of Ga’az proverbs. It raises the question of whether Ga’az formed and used its own wellerism proverbs, or if this Biblical example is a singleton example.
4.7 Speakers in WP’s

In an early study of wellerisms, Archer Taylor speculated, “Wellerisms in which an animal is the speaker... are probably a special variety of wellerism” (A. Taylor 1950: 1169). In the data presented here, an approximate count shows about 40 speakers who are human, about 80 that are animals/bugs. It is not precisely clear what Taylor meant by saying that WP’s with animals speaking are “a special variety of wellerism,” but it is clear that WP’s with animal speakers are not a rare variety of WP in a comparative scope.

Additionally, this comparative study of the distribution of WP’s, shows that inanimate speakers are also found in WP’s, comprising about 20 of the examples in this paper. The following examples show a variety of inanimate speakers.

Alaaba: “‘Cook me with the hump!’ said the intestines” (Schneider-Blum 2009: 57).

Alaaba: “‘Scratch me hard!’ said the scabies” (Schneider-Blum 2009: 83).

Alaaba: “‘To see, I was lightning for you, to hear, I was thundering for you,’ said the rain” (Schneider-Blum 2009: 65).

Ariocha: “‘So it will end like that,’ said the cow dung to the dog” (Monye 1996: 82).

Jabo: “‘North wind says, ‘If you rise, they will know you are there’” (Finnegan 1970: 420).

Kambaata: “‘The sky is wide,’ said the sorghum plant” (Treis 2008: 15).

Latin: “‘You are black!’ as the cauldron said to the pot” (Paczolay 1997: 318).

Malay: “The egg says that the cucumber does not know how to sit properly” (Kim 2003: 137).

Oromo: “‘I am now as I was,’ said the clay griddle while burning along with the house” (Cotter 1992: 475).

4.8 WP’s used to portray small creatures aligning with the powerful

WP’s seem to be a good way to show a small creature identifying with those larger and more powerful, claiming a great accomplishment, by the use of “we.”

Circassian: “The mosquito on the horn of the harnessed bull said, ‘We are ploughing’” (Jaimoukha 2009: 100).


Irish English: “‘What a dust we kick up!’ as the fly said to the cartwheel” (Williams 2002: 85).

Spanish: “The fly atop the ox declares, ‘We are plowing the field’” (Seller 1994: 19).

Latvian/Lettish: “‘Now we have rowed well,’ said the flea, when the fisher drew the boat on land” (A. Taylor 1962: 213).

Scots English: “‘We hounds killed the hare,’ quoth the bleary-ey’d messen (messen defined here as a “dim-eyed small pet dog”) (Williams 2010: 20, citing source from 1785; see also Mieder & Kingsbury 1994: 64).

English: “‘We apples are swimming,’ said the horse-chestnut and swam downstream with the apples” (A. Taylor 1962: 209).

4.9 WP’s used to portray people making excuses

WP’s seem to be a good way to portray people making excuses, such as seen in the proverbs about poor dancers making excuses. The study identified two examples of people eating meat that is considered religiously unclean, but rationalizing it with a WP: Amharic: “‘Its name is guinea fowl,’ they say, when eating a vulture” (Ingida 1999: 197). Kurdish: “‘Its ears resemble those of a rabbit,’ said the man who was compelled to eat donkey meat” (Bauman 1992: 31).

5. Conclusions

This paper has shown the need to define “wellerism proverb” more precisely. Some guidelines have been presented here, but these are incomplete.

More significantly, this paper has documented geographic patterns about the distribution of WP’s in languages around the world, by far the broadest mapping effort to date. The evidence shows wellerisms found in languages from Europe through the Middle East into India, but not in China and many of its neighbors. Also, WP’s are common across Africa, though they appear to be less common in southern Africa.

This paper approached the matter of documenting whether languages had WP’s as binary: either a language had examples of the structure or it did not. Now it is clear that this was too simplistic an approach. For example, in Korean, in a collection of 1,106 proverbs, three examples of WP’s were found, only .27% of the collection. In Burushaski of Pakistan, in a collection of about 640 proverbs, only 3 were WP’s, about .4% of the collection. But in some other languages, WP’s are a much higher percentage. For example, in Alaaba of Ethiopia, in a collection of over 400 proverbs, about 10% of the proverbs were WP’s (Schneider-Blum 2009); and in Burji of Ethiopia and Kenya, in a collection of 100 proverbs, 20% were WP’s (Chelo 2016).

Previously, there has been little comparative work about the distribution of proverb structures across the map. This gap in the distribution of WP’s highlights how such comparative studies as this are needed. Such studies may discover additional new patterns and gaps.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the help of those who have contributed examples, explained points, and answered questions about spellings, etc. The list of helpful people includes Leonard Bartlotti, Gayané Hagopian, Shin Ja Hwang, Outi Lauhakangas, Georgi Kapchits, Pat Krayer, Justyna Pomierska, Rick Taylor, Anbessa Teferra, Shin Ja Whang, Elena Yurkova, Mohsen Zekaria, and undoubtedly others we have forgotten. Our thanks to all of them!
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