Language learning is different from all our other learning activities, such as math, music, science or skills for practical purposes, like driving, using a computer, cooking, etc. In any learning activity we perceive and understand the new information, retain it and retrieve it when necessary. Not so with language.

Speaking is a creative activity; when we speak, we do not repeat ready and invariable pieces of stored and recalled chains of phrases and sentences but we create a singular discourse which we may never have heard before and may never repeat again. This is true about the use of our primary language: somewhere in our brain (mostly in Wernicke’s and Broca’s areas) we have a storage of language with its phonological and grammatical systems and vocabulary, and subconsciously we select the necessary discrete units from there to create the unique mosaic of our speech for communication, self-expression, etc. Has it happened with you, when preparing for paper or presentation, you have found the exact words to express your thought, and then they elude you, vanish, and you are unable to remember your perfect sentences? Even the creator of speech is often unable to recreate it; that is how unique and creative the simple speech act is.

This is why linguists differentiate language learning, the conscious, controlled and focused process of learning about a language, its forms, words and rules, or the declarative knowledge about language from language acquisition, the subconscious and uncontrolled process
of acquiring the skills which equip one to communicate in that language, the procedural, practical ability of speaking.

However, each language has fixed phrases, some of them are really old, and repeated over and over again. Perhaps fixed phrases are the easiest things to begin with when learning a foreign or second language. Fixed phrases do not require, at least from the first sight, the creative productivity that native speakers put in their speech so effortlessly. Therefore, it is no surprise that both language students and language teachers begin their language courses with fixed and finite phrases, such as: how are you, thank you, happy birthday, I love you, etc. These are everyday common phrases, the easy ones, opposite from difficult fixed phrases—idioms, sayings, proverbs, maxims, etc.—often generalized as paremia. The latter are not as frequent in common speech as the first but both come together as fixed phrases which are repeated and not created by speakers during a speech act. Are they less of a challenge than the rest of the target language? Are they as easy to acquire as it seems? What problems do language students encounter with fixed phrases of their target languages?

First, let us consider the everyday common phrases. Anecdotal evidence shows that language students having just a few such expressions in their foreign language gear are often able to communicate successfully in limited situations and create opportunities for expanding their language acquisition. However, the underwater currents of common phrases often create serious obstacles for communication. Consider the simple How are you? It is used as a greeting, not a real question requiring information. However, many language students interpret this fixed phrase according to the conventions of their native language and offer a real answer to this greeting which immediately creates communication gaps with native speakers (what's the matter, the native speaker may think, why are you telling me your life story?). Another immediate problem deriving from this expression is the intonation. As a greeting, it is pronounced with rising intonation, but when we mean it, when we want to really ask how the person is doing, our
intonation and pitch go up on the verb (are) and fall down on you. Beginning language learners cannot, as a rule, differentiate intonation hues and they respond out of turn and tune, as, for example a thank you in response to an ironic yeah, right. It often puts the student on a funny spot, raises his/her anxiety, and an emotional barrier shuts down the communication.

The other side of the coin is when an English speaking language student uses the translation of How are you as a greeting in an other than English target language. But it makes no sense. For example, in Armenian one uses how are you as a question or a second, not mandatory component of a conventional greeting which would translate as Hi, Hello, Good morning, etc. How are you in Armenian does not substitute greetings; therefore, is a language learner copies its use from English into Armenian, miscommunication can arise. Often it is rude to proceed to wellbeing (How are you) without a hello.

Thus, the first problem language students encounter is not just what to say but when and how to say it (sociolinguistic competence). The particular way of using thank you in American English is quite different from that of in Armenian, too. But here comes yet another problem: there is no exact equivalency between thank you and Հաղթանակ է մեր սերդու ընտանեկան տարիքին, and Հաղթանակ է մեր սերդու ընտանեկան տարիքին: the two slightly distinct ways of saying thank you in Armenian. The first one is a noun, used both in formal and informal contexts, the second is a verbal first person form with a personal-emotional touch. The English speaker not only has to maneuver between these forms but also tries to attach a you transferring it from thank you which makes the phrases funny or uncouth depending on the setting and purpose of communication, relations with the listener, etc.

Another problem is the literal translation: phrases like Happy Birthday, Happy New Year or Merry Christmas have equivalents expressed with Հաղթանակ է մեր սերդու ընտանեկան տարիքին congratulations plus օրինակ որտեղ որոշ տարիկներ, օրինակ մայիս (birthday, lit: birth or anniversary), Նոր տարի (New Year), Օր Օրինակ (Christmas, lit: holy birth). Additionally, Armenian has another concept connected with these holidays, Նոր տարի which is the day of the New Year, January the first. To add to the student’s
confusion, cultural differences come to interfere: the big holiday in Armenia is the New Year, so in common thinking Ծաղկունի է the equivalent of Christmas.\(^1\) Another issue is that the word order in Armenian is not fixed; the common phrases above are the formal expressions, while in personal communication one may reverse the order, say Ծաղկունի ժողովրդը, and change the intonation to add extra hues and colors to these common, over-repeated phrases. To say nothing about the problem with numerous Armenian dialects, two of which are literary languages, the Western and Eastern Armenian.

How do language students navigate through these problems? One common way is to transfer forms and meanings from the native language into the target language, or mixing two linguistic zones which is called interference, for example, I have heard from my students of Armenian նույն տարեկանություն for Happy birth\(^2\), նույն թա Սունդան (happy holy birthday) for Merry Christmas. Students proficient in Armenian and speaking English as a second language use phrases such as: Merry New Year, Congratulations for your Christmas, etc., missing also intonation and context subtleties.

Another formulaic expression which brings up an interesting use is I love you. It has a literal translation and practically exact equivalency in Armenian. On the pragmatic level, the Armenian phrase is used more selectively and less frequently as very special words. The problem with this phrase (as well as blessings, curses, swear words, etc.) is the lack of emotional load for language students: it just doesn’t sound right, doesn’t caress (or hurt, as with swear words) because of the lack of immediate, internal, emotional connection on a biological level between this sound combination and the speaker’s feelings; it does form eventually from exposure to real life communication. This is true about all linguistic units; words can substitute realia, for example, the word barbeque can make one salivate, and a swearing can make one blush, of

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\(^1\) From Latin: calend (cf. calendar in English). In Armenia the New Year’s holiday precedes Christmas, i.e., Jesus’ birthday according to the Armenian Church is on January the 6th.

\(^2\) նույն is an adjective roughly between happy, merry, cheerful and glad and տարեկանություն, as you remember, this is the common word used in Armenian in birthday phrases but means anniversary.
course when said in one’s native tongue. For language learners target language words and expressions are often just labels, void of emotional connotation.

The meanings of everyday common phrases deeply rest on intonation, and the latter, on the context: the simple *excuse me* may have numerous meanings depending on where it is said, by whom and why. Compare also, the specific intonation of *Yeah, right!*, two positives making a nice negative due to intonation.

So much said about the *easy* fixed phrases, the everyday common expressions which can still be understood in the right context, let us turn our attention to the problems rising from paremia, more complex fixed phrases, less frequently used and us a rule lacking direct equivalents in target languages.

For demonstration, I have selected two proverbs:

1. Ընկող ուժեր, ժամանում են երբեմն: Approximately: *(Someone) took (someone) to the water and brought (him/her) back thirsty.*

2. Տոնորի ոչ կան, տեղական կան, այսուն կան, իրիր կան: Literally: *The money that’s there is hand-grime; today it’s there, tomorrow it is not.* Or: *The money that exists is like dirt on hands, today it exists but not tomorrow.*

1. The first proverb in Armenian has only five words, Ընկող ուժեր, ժամանում են երբեմն, with the omitted subject and object implied. For a somewhat meaningful translation I used eleven words in English: *(Someone) took (someone) to the water and brought (him/her) back thirsty.* Students learning Armenian usually can recognize these five quite common words (*water, take, bring back, thirsty*) and try to translate the phrases literally: *For example: Water took, thirsty brought back.* What could it mean? Imagination for language students is a serious tool in their learning endeavors; my students come up with lots of logical interpretations which all unanimously miss the target. The first problem with this proverb is its open structure, a quite
common phenomenon in paremia, which may have missing subjects and objects. They are implied in the real act of communication, the object for this saying, as a rule, would be you or a proper name the speaker sympathizes with, and the subject, he/she or a proper name the speaker criticizes. The established allegorical meaning of the saying is: someone is so cunning and dishonest that for his/her own benefits can take someone to a most desirable place (like a thirsty person to a water source) and bring him/her back from there empty handed (without letting them to quench their thirst). These omitted words are not always added in speech acts: if the previous context has already identified ‘the bad guy’ and ‘the simple guy’, the phase can be used as quoted above. Additionally, it allows verb tense variations between present, past and conditional, e.g.: Կոտոր (Կո) տակ են, ձեռք տա են բեռն, etc. Both verbs, take, bring, can be used in simple present, simple past tenses, and perfect forms, and the first verb can also occur in subjunctive, all depending on the context.

The problem a student encounters with this proverb is first of all in the first word, Կոտոր the water. In the proverb it is in an accusative form and functions as a modifier of place. Its wide semantics (the water) in the proverbs is narrowed down to a source or spring of water. The student has no clue about this specification because the accusative in Armenian, first, formally coincides with the nominative, and second, most commonly functions as a direct object. Students’ first interpretation is the nominative or direct form as a subject, and s/he translates “The water took (washed away) --- (hesitation) the thirst?” Another attempt aims at the next expected function, the direct object: “He took the water – (hesitation) to a thirsty person?” Again, it

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3 This is a common syntactic pattern for Armenian proverbs where the omitted subject and object have clear referents defined in the context. The difference from similar structures in English is in the syntactic completeness of the Armenian phrases due to a conjugated verb. Cf., for example, Զետեր գնալու համ ծիկ ուղու and its the English equivalent: Lead someone by the nose. The English phrase cannot turn into a pragmatic sentence without at least a formal subject and object (s/he, someone, etc.), and a grammatical transformation of the verb lead. Whereas the Armenian phrase, with the same conventional-metaphorical meaning (control someone) and without any formal subject or object can be used as a complete sentence by itself because the conjugated verb turns into a ready predicate and permits the omission of the subject and object.
doesn’t hit the mark, as the concept of *bringing back* is left out. As a hint, I use two illustrations to the proverb of the Armenian cartoonist Georgy Yaralian: a computer making fun of an abacus and a man leading a horse to a lake *having its mouth covered, so that the horse cannot drink* (see attached). And my students cheer up because the proverb suddenly makes sense: “Eureka! We say it in English too, *you can take the horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink*”. This associative interpretation ignores everything that does not correspond to the English saying either in the verbal form of the Armenian proverb or its cartoon illustration. Completely different conventional meanings expressed through similar imagery create ‘false equivalents’, another significant problem connected with understanding and learning paremia in the target language.

Thus, the first proverb contains linguistic and semiotic puzzles for the language learners. Linguistically, it is a classical case of an open structure with omitted words (subject and object), grammatically confusing forms (accusative for the object and the modifier of place, formally coinciding with the nominative). Semiotically, it has a false equivalent with familiar imagery which prompts students to identify it with an English saying and interpret it as the latter. The reign of confusion with the meaning and form of the proverb weakens and eventually disappears through exposure to its meaningful use in appropriate real-life contexts with clearly defined setting and referents.

2. Now we will turn our attention to the next proverb which is void of the reefs characterizing the first one. This proverb is set apart with a grammatically complete structure and no immediate or easily confusable equivalents. Դուրս են զավթի, ժամկող զավթուն է, այնուհետ զավթ, զավթուն է: Literally: *Money: that’s hand grime, today it’s there, tomorrow it’s not.* Having translated this much for my students, I ask if it makes any sense. Yes, of course—but then comes the hesitation—that money has no value? I have heard many interesting interpretations of this proverb from my students some of which go into a sophisticated discussion of inflation and
devaluation of the dram (the monetary unit of Armenia). These are logical interpretations, but they fall short of the target—its conventional meaning, endorsed by social subconsciousness. The problem with this type of proverbs for students arises from its cultural load and the vague connection between its allegoric meaning and literal meaning, vague up to the point of arbitrariness as the connection between the sound form and the meaning of a word.

I have heard this proverb growing up and through all my life with several specific intonations: funny, ironic, sarcastic, contemptuous, philosophic, etc. I would hardly remember all of them out of context, since the intonation and context play a particularly crucial role in the interpretation of fixed phrases. Basically, the proverb means that money has no value, and it’s filthy and not lasting. Why? How do I explain this to my students? The first problem is in the concept itself: why money has no value when we work hard to earn a living; and money can change so much. Another Armenian proverb says: Դուրս ումիտ տերբեր ինչ տերածաղի: Money lights up dark places (refers to bribes). So, it must have some value and power in and by itself. Ironic shades of intonation do not necessarily go with the latter proverb.

Returning to original proverb, Money is hand-dirt, today it’s there, tomorrow it isn’t, I see its roots in the communist philosophy which has been the dominating doctrine during my formative years. The proposition derives from the Soviet system of values and beliefs: money is dirty because it is an instrument of capitalist exploitation; people should work not for money but for the prosperity and progress of their country and the communist system. The purpose of earning narrows down to professional growth and perfection, but excludes possession of money as power and other material, not basic, goods. In the ideal future communist society, which in communist theories somewhat resembles the heaven, there will be no money; money is not an eternal value. Remember, however, the common intonations going with this proverb; it was always said either ironically, sarcastically, or contemptuously, always with a bit of hilarity and fun, because common people knew just too well the value and power money rendered. Contempt
emphasized the word *dirty-filthy-grime*: to get rich in the Soviet society one had to use illegal means and dirty their hands, i.e., steal, deceive, take bribes, etc. The dirtiness of money had both direct and allegoric meanings: money circulates through thousands of hands; it is really dirty, contaminated with microbes, viruses, etc. This side of the reality was emphasized with a concerned intonation and abbreviated versions of the proverb, such as: Զինվուր ումիտ զգում է or Զինվուր զգացում է. *Money is dirty.* The insecurity of wealthy people during the Soviet regimen was expressed in a philosophical intonation and another brief version: Զինվուր ամուր էսթ, զգաշ էսթ, *money’s here today; not tomorrow,* meaning that the power money can generate is gone when it’s gone and it is gone soon; getting rich meant getting closer to a jail, being caught in illegal acts, etc. The resentment to those who got rich with illegal means was emphasized with contemptuous, even hostile intonations. An open-ended intonation with the full or abbreviated versions could mean that money by itself had no lasting value in comparison with real values, such as family and friendship, love and knowledge. The ironic or sarcastic intonation would blame one for their inability to make money, or condemn those who are jealous of others’ wealth, etc.

How can a language teacher create all these real life situations to explain the spectrum of the meanings one fixed phrase can express? The problem I encountered was to reproduce the correct intonation in class, without a real context. My attempts served however another important purpose; I realized that this proverb must be much older than the Soviet system established in Armenia in 1920.

What was the original meaning of this proverb? And the veil fell off my eyes when I visualized the simple man, the hard worker on daily insecure wages, who spends his daily earnings for basic life necessities by the time he gets home, who brings to his family not money but daily bread only, and washing his hands after the day’s work has the feeling that he washed away also the money he earned: *it was there for today, but not for tomorrow.* If there was irony in
that intonation, it must have been bitter. This interpretation comes with the sensory-motor experience of washing hands and the connotation of washing down one’s daily income.

Socio-economic changes in the society can change the perception of everything, including money. The old proverb received a new allegoric interpretation in Soviet times: money is something low and dirty, and does not matter. Thus, the key for the semiotic interpretation of a proverb is defined by the cultural background of its users.

There is yet another important layer to this proverb which derives from older cultural values. Armenians are known to have a strong sense of community. With this collectivistic mentality, many come to help if one is in trouble. And Armenians are known to be doers, they help by doing for one in trouble what that one needs, not just telling him ‘go and try this and that’. This kind of aid often means spending real money. An image reveals itself as a background for our proverb: one who has even a small amount of money will immediately give it to a friend or relative in misfortune. Contemplation comes later: money is like hand dirt, it would disappear soon anyway. What does one choose—to save a life or to buy a pair of much needed shoes. This attitude explains one of the puzzles of Armenian’s survival: throughout history, with continuous wars and plundering of the country by enemies, the people came to rescue the weakest of their friends and family, so that who had suffered and lost the most would not perish, but thrive once again and go to the rescue of those who appear in need. These cultural experiences, which I would generalize also as typical for the best of mankind, are solidified is the proverb in question. The proverb itself has gone and still goes through modifications of its interpretation depending on historic circumstances on one hand, and on the other, real life contexts of its use.

Thus, the analysis of one proverb can take us into a journey of cultural depths and historic layers. A language learner will have difficulty grasping its philosophical implications, even if they understand its literal and allegoric meanings.
Conclusion: My observation show that language learners encounter three main types of problems in regard to the interpretation and use of fixed phrases, particularly, proverbs: linguistic, semiotic, and cultural.

a) Linguistic: intonation, pitch, lexical gaps, special meanings of a common word, non-standard (dialect, slang, etc.) grammatical forms and words, frozen forms, literary, polysemous, loaned, and other rare words, omissions, pragmatic subtleties in use, and etc., in addition to the acquisition of the standard grammar, lexicon, and phonology for communication.

b) Semiotic: mastering the arbitrary and liquid interlacing between the literal and the social-conventional meanings of fixed phrases, allegories, confusing variations in the interpretation of symbolic images, homonymy between idioms and free expressions, specific metaphors and semiotic imaging with body parts, animals, plants, family, etc., play of words, humor and irony, pragmatic scenarios, proper names with special meanings, etc.

c) Cultural: climate, resources, and history, beliefs, values, morals, and ethnic self-evaluations, literary sources, patterned characters and images, parameters characterizing prosperity, family, health, and other values, and stereotypical and traditional credence, etc.
Appendix: A Few Allegoric Proverbs with Student Interpretations
(Not included in the publication)

It is easy to misinterpret proverbs because of the ambiguity of semiotic and linguistic meanings in general. The examples below show that the reasoning and logic in student interpretations is implicitly based on the American worldview and values. The interpretations rarely coincide with the meaning conventionalized in the Armenian reality. But some do.

**Attitudes toward Work**

רַּפָּאָה בְּרָאָה, רַּפָּאָה בְּרָאָה:  
(When) the bread (meal) has been put (served), the work is cursed.

**Fixed meaning:** Bread is sacred and sharing meal family a rare and precious moment in long working days.
**Student interpretation:** people on welfare, why do they have to work if they get what they want without working?

עָמַד נֶפֶשׁ בְּרָאָה נְפֶשׁ נְפֶשׁ:  
The egg-laying hen will cluck.

**Fixed meaning:** a hard worker knows his/her worth and talks proudly of it.
**Student interpretation:** 1. About talkative people. 2. About the boastful.

רַּפָּאָה בְּרָאָה בְּרָאָה בְּרָאָה:  
The hen dreams of seeds.

**Fixed meaning:** weak ivory-towered people see their wishes fulfilled in dreams only.
**Student interpretation:** greedy people are not satisfied.

**Women**

עָמַד נֶפֶשׁ, נֶפֶשׁ נֶפֶשׁ:  
Long hair, short mind.

**Fixed meaning:** stereotype regarding women in general.
**Student interpretation:** Are these hippies?

עָמַד נֶפֶשׁ בְּרָאָה בְּרָאָה בְּרָאָה:  
Many throw rocks at a pretty apple.

**Fixed meaning:** Many try to get a pretty woman, never mind that they hurt her.
**Student interpretation:** Jealousy: they want to knock you down to their level.

**Misfortune**

אָפִּיַּיָּּד בְּרָאָה, אָפִּיַּיָּּד בְּרָאָה:  
If you pull out a thread, a thousand patches will fall down.

**Fixed meaning:** 1. extreme poverty. 2. revealing one problem brings up many other hidden problems of the poor.
**Student interpretation:** A small event can cause many big events, bring about disaster.

בְּרָאָה בְּרָאָה בְּרָאָה בְּרָאָה:  
The dog has put on a shirt, and the cat, pants.

**Fixed meaning:** Disaster, calamity, everything is going wrong.
**Student interpretation:** 1. Masquerade? 2. It’s cold; they are dressing their pets. 3. Comparing apples and oranges.
Improvidence

Απίστηται οποιαδήποτε, εφηύ η γεύτη, που η τακτική σπάει.

If the gypsy has a lot of clarified butter, he rubs half of it to his butt.

Fixed meaning: Wasteful, improvident, shallow people spoil their own goods. Based on an ethnic stereotype.
Student interpretation: they are ignorant, indulging, and use it as skin lotion.

Obstinacy

Καμία είκοσι μέρα δεν αλλάζει: 
The red cow doesn’t change its skin.

Fixed meaning: stubborn people do not change their bad habits. Cf. The leopard doesn’t change its spots.
Student interpretation: Because red cows are rare?

Κέρατη αλλάζουσαν, κτύπαταν το ήλιο: 
What good is soap for the black and advice, to insane.

Fixed meaning: It’s useless to advice a stubborn person and show him ways to improve. Bad character or habits are forever. The proverb makes racial references.
Student interpretation: Oh, no, oh, my God, no—(assuming racial connotations).

Stupidity

Καινός ο ισαμάς, παλαιός η πέτρα.
The clod sits and mourns for the rock that it may rain, and the rock may melt.

Cf. version:

Όχι ο ισαμάς, οίκισες; 
He doesn’t take care of his own problems, troubles but weeps for others.

Fixed meaning: the fool doesn’t understand his own situation, and worries about someone more fortunate.
Student interpretation: Heavenly wise, and earthly not good.

Οί κεφαλή θάλασσα, οί άρθουρ: 
Has neither brains, nor sins.

Fixed meaning: 1. Foolish and unreliable or: 2. Phony and pretending not to understand avoid responsibility or assistance.
Student interpretation: That’s true; the insane are not responsible in court.

Orphans

Αρημένος ο ορεστής, η γέννηση: 
An orphan’s cradle is broken.

Fixed meaning: an orphan is born ill fated.
Student interpretation: because no one takes care of the orphans, so their cradle stays broken if it breaks down.

Ingratitude and Orphans

Fixed meaning for all the three proverbs below: Ungrateful.

Σε το λαιμό, και το βασιλικό σου φιλό: 
I sit in your lap, and I pluck your beard.

Student interpretation: About play, playful children.
Greed

If he gets a snake into his hands, he’ll shave it.

Fixed meaning: Greedy and cunning: getting fur from a snake, grabbing anything and everything.

Student interpretation: 1. Is he greedy? 2. He’ll try to do the impossible.

Cowardice

Dread is stronger than death.

Fixed meaning: Fear is more powerful than death. Cf. post-traumatic disorders.

Student interpretation: That’s true; fear of death is worse than dying itself.