

## PROVERBS

### COMPARING PROVERBS IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

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#### Target audience

- Pre-service teachers
  - Primary teachers
  - Secondary teachers
- In-service teachers
  - Primary teachers
  - Secondary teachers
- Other situations: Social workers and companions of leisure activities

#### Itineraries

- Identity exploration
- Developing knowledge about languages and cultures
- Dealing with intercultural and plurilingual communication
- Exploring attitudes towards languages and cultures

#### Abstract

This activity is subdivided in two parts: a card game and an activity with Brueghel's painting '*proverbs*'. The card game consists of 18 proverbs with their equivalents in 16 different languages. The idea is to try to find links between cultures and languages, discussing what makes them different/similar and why. As for the second part, Brueghel's painting contains more than 100 Flemish proverbs. In this activity we try to look for them, unravel their meaning and discuss possible equivalents in other languages.

Both these activities aim at creating awareness of and reflection on diversity. 'How aware am I of my own language?', 'Of other languages?', 'Did I expect proverbs to be so different/similar in other languages/cultures?', 'Why are they different/similar?' I hope to stimulate reflection of languages and cultures in general and on the long term to develop plurilingual and pluricultural competence in the own teaching of the participants.

#### Rationale

The trainees experience themselves that proverbs can be different in other languages and that there is a clear link between language and culture. This activity can inspire them creating their own activities for future teaching and to be aware of their role as teachers. Through this experience of cultural and

language awareness, it will be easier to pass it on to their students and motivate them to learn (about) other languages and cultures and to have positive attitudes towards them. The activities show the participants the importance of languages and cultures and how to work with them in their own teaching practice.

### **Personal and social dimensions**

- Observing the linguistic and cultural diversity of contexts and individuals.
- Recognising linguistic and cultural diversity as a positive characteristic of groups and societies.
- Being capable of setting up self-training projects that take account of linguistic and cultural diversity.

### **Professional dimensions**

- Being aware of the need for a new linguistic and cultural education capable of promoting plurilingualism and pluriculturalism.
- Knowing and defending the reasons for an education favourable to the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence.
- Being aware of the challenges of language education policies.

## **Activity 1: Card game** (see appendix 1)

- *The cards have to be cut right above the name of the language*
- *The proverbs are translated into English between brackets. If the participants don't have a thorough command of English, it's advisable to translate them into your own language.*



### **Comparing proverbs in different languages and cultures**

Timing: 90'

Material required: cards of the card game

Grouping:  (2 to 4 players)

Description of the activities:

#### Play the cardgame:

- There are 18 proverbs with their equivalents in 16 different languages. Depending on the group, you can select languages or you can take them all. Just make sure you take an even number of cards for each proverb. Shuffle them well and put them upside down on the table. The first player takes two cards. If he thinks the two proverbs mean the same, he can keep them. If not, they have to be put back on the same place. The next player turns a card and combines it with another, trying to remember its place if seen before. (So it's a kind of memory game as well). This way they continue until all cards are taken away. The player with most sets of cards wins.
- After that you put the same proverbs in the different languages together and discuss the meaning of it and the differences and similarities between the languages, trying to group them by families. Try to find similar words and look them up in dictionaries.
- Try also to find links between culture and language, guessing what makes the difference and why. If possible, say the proverb in your own mother tongue and compare it with the other languages and cultures.
- Finally, you can share your experiences with the whole group.

(Alternative: You can leave out the proverbs in the language of the participants and ask them to find them through the others.)

## **Activity 2: Brueghel painting**

### **Worksheet 1**



#### **Comparing proverbs in different languages and cultures**

Timing: 60'

Material required: colour print of the Brueghel painting

Grouping:  (pair work)

Description of the activities:

The Brueghel painting: Pieter Brueghel the Younger is a Belgian, more specifically Flemish (northern part), painter (see annexe). In 1595 he painted “*proverbs*”<sup>1</sup>, a copy of his father’s work; Pieter Brueghel the Elder “*The Flemish Proverbs*” (1559). He included more than 100 proverbs in his painting! Most of them are not anymore used, but some of them are still current.

You can ask the participants to first find proverbs on the painting by themselves. Or you can give them directly the following list of 19 Flemish proverbs (with literal translation into English between brackets) and ask them to locate them on the painting and try to find out what they mean. Finally, they discuss how they would say these proverbs in their own language.

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<sup>1</sup> Museum: KBC Bank NV, Rockoxhuis, Antwerp, Belgium, [www.rockoxhuis.be](http://www.rockoxhuis.be)





- a) Try to find the following Flemish proverbs on the painting
- b) What do you think they mean?
- c) Discuss how you would say them in your own language  
(Write down your answers)

**1. Met het hoofd tegen de muur lopen**

- *(To run with your head against the wall)*

**2. De kat de bel aanbinden**

- *(To tie the bell to the cat)*

**3. Bij de duivel te biecht gaan**

- *(To confess at the devil's)*

**4. Als het kalf verdronken is, delft men de put**

- *(When the calf has drown, one quarries the pit)*

**5. Een spaak in het wiel steken**

- *(To put a stick in the wheel)*

**6. Hij is door de mand gevallen**

- *(He fell through the basket)*

**7. Op hete kolen zitten**

- *(To sit on hot coals)*

**8. De omgekeerde wereld**

- *(The world upside down)*

**9. Op de wereld schijten**

- *(To shit on the world)*

**10. Iemand bij de neus nemen**

- *(To take somebody by the nose)*

**11. Iets door de vingers zien**

- *(To see something through the fingers)*

**12. Achter het net vissen**

- *(To fish behind the net)*

**13. Zijn pijlen verschieten**

- *(To shoot away one's arrows)*

**14. Tegen de stroom inzwemmen**

- *(To swim against the flow)*

**15. Van andermans leer is het goed riemen snijden**

- *(It's easy to cut belts from someone else's leather)*

**16. Zijn geld in het water werpen**

- *(To throw one's money into the water)*

**17. Twee vliegen in één klap vangen**

- *(To catch two flies with one slap)*

**18. Waar rook is, is vuur**

- *(Where there's smoke, there's fire)*

**19. Een oogje in het zeil houden**

- *(To keep an eye in the sail)*

## Worksheet 2



### Comparing proverbs in different languages and cultures

Timing: 30'

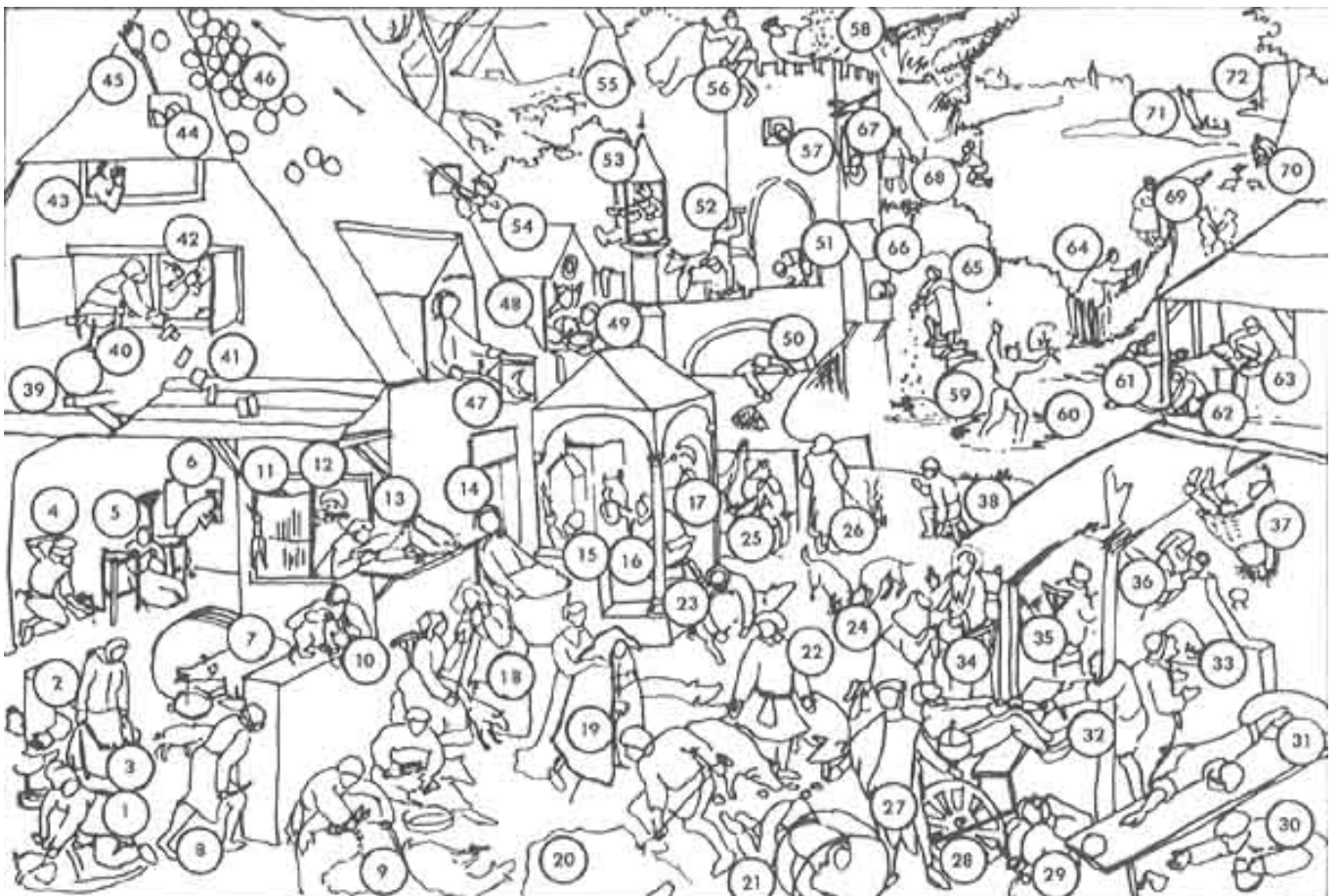
Material required: /

Grouping:  (pair work)

Description of the activities:

Here you find the solutions, the literal translation of the proverb into English, the meaning of it and the English equivalent.

Finally, you can discuss in the whole group if you couldn't find some proverbs or if you're not sure about their meanings.



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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.taalkabaal.nl/spreekwoorden/index.php>

1. **Met het hoofd tegen de muur lopen (N°8)**
  - *(To run with the head against the wall)*
  - = To be faced with unwillingness
  - To run one's head against a wall
2. **De kat de bel aanbinden (N°10)**
  - *(To tie the bell to the cat)*
  - = To be the first to start something difficult
  - To bell the cat
3. **Bij de duivel te biecht gaan (N°16)**
  - *(To confess at the devil's)*
  - = To confess your secrets to someone you can't trust
  - To consort with the devil
4. **Als het kalf verdronken is, delft men de put (N°20)**
  - *(If the calf has drown, one quarries the pit)*
  - = To make up for your mistake when it's too late
  - It's too late to lock the stable door after the horse has bolted
5. **Een spaak in het wiel steken (N°28)**
  - *(To put a stick in the wheel)*
  - = To hinder progress
  - To throw a spanner in the works
6. **Hij is door de mand gevallen (N°37)**
  - *(He fell through the basket)*
  - = To have to admit a mistake
  - To have to come clean
7. **Op hete kolen zitten (N°38)**
  - *(To sit on hot coals)*
  - = To be impatient
  - To be on tenterhooks
8. **De omgekeerde wereld (N°39)**
  - *(The world upside down)*
  - = Everything is turned upside down
  - It's a mad world
9. **Op de wereld schijten (N°40)**
  - *(To shit on the world)*
  - = Not care about anything
  - Not give a shit
10. **Iemand bij de neus nemen (N°42)**
  - *(To take somebody by the nose)*
  - = To fool somebody
  - To pull someone's leg



**11. Iets door de vingers zien (N°43)**

- *(To see something through the fingers)*
- = To accept something, to close your eyes and pretend you didn't see
- To turn a blind eye to something

**12. Achter het net vissen (N°50)**

- *(To fish behind the net)*
- = To come too late and see your chance slip away
- To miss the boat

**13. Zijn pijlen verschieten (N°54)**

- *(To shoot away one's arrows)*
- = To spill one's strength
- To fire one's last shot

**14. Tegen de stroom inzwemmen (N°61)**

- *(To swim against the flow)*
- = To persevere in spite of resistance
- To go against the current

**15. Van andermans leer is het goed riemen snijden (N°63)**

- *(It's easy to cut belts from someone else's leather)*
- = It's easy to use something if it belongs to someone else
- Men cut long thongs of other men's leather

**16. Zijn geld in het water werpen (N°65)**

- *(To throw one's money into the water)*
- = To waste money
- To throw one's money away

**17. Twee vliegen in één klap vangen (N°67)**

- *(To catch two flies with one slap)*
- = To obtain two goals at the same time
- To kill two birds with one stone

**18. Waar rook is, is vuur (N°68)**

- *(Where there's smoke, there's fire)*
- = Nothing is without cause, every gossip contains some truth
- There's no smoke without fire

**19. Een oogje in het zeil houden (N°71)**

- *(To keep an eye in the sail)*
- = To look on attentively that nothing goes wrong
- To keep an eye on things

## Assessment

The aim of these activities is to create awareness of diversity and reflection about diversity. I also aim at an examination of one's own identity: 'How aware am I of other languages? Did I expect proverbs to be so different in other languages/cultures?' I hope to stimulate reflection of languages and cultures in general and on the long term to develop plurilingual and pluricultural competence in the own teaching of the participants.

The activities can be assessed in an evaluation-discussion with the students afterwards. You can ask them the following questions:

- Did you enjoy the activities?
- What was most striking to you?
- Did you expect proverbs to be so similar/different in other languages?
- Did you find links between language en cultures?
- How can you use this activity in your own teaching?
- ...

## Bibliography

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## **Annexe: Who is Brueghel? (Also: Breugel, Bruegel, Breughel)**

Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525-1569) was the first of a family of Flemish (northern part of Belgium) painters that would reach the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He had two sons: Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564-1638) and Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625). Jan Brueghel the Elder for his part had two sons called Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601-1678) and Ambrosius Brueghel (1617-1675). All of them are famous Flemish painters.

Pieter Brueghel the Elder is the most famous. After his education he goes to Italy. The 50 paintings we know of him, all date from the period after he got back to Antwerp (city in the North of Belgium) in 1553. He is especially known for his landscapes and peasant scenes. But he also made graphics. His style was often narrative. He lived ten years in Antwerp and moved to Brussels after his marriage in 1563 to the daughter of his master, Mayken Van Aelst.

Pieter Brueghel the Younger was only 6 when his father died. He made his career in Antwerp. In 1585 he started painting landscapes, religious subjects and fantasy paintings. He often copied the works his father created, often leading to confusion which of the two actually painted the painting. His son, Pieter Brueghel III (1589-1640) was also a painter.

In 1559 Pieter Brueghel the Elder painted 'The Flemish proverbs'. The painting depicts various proverbs popular in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Over one hundred proverbs have been identified, although the exact number is uncertain as different critics have ascribed more than one proverb to some of the characters and details. Many of the proverbs shown are no longer popular.

The painting is to be admired in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, Germany. In 1595, Pieter Brueghel the Younger copied this painting. There are only a few small differences with the original one. His painting is shown in the KBC Bank NV, Rockoxhuis, Antwerp (Belgium).

The Belgians still haven't forgotten about this famous family. Apart from the popularity of their paintings, we still honour them with Brueghel-beer, Brueghel-bread and Brueghel-meat and some restaurants and pubs still bear their names.

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