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Work Praises the Master: The Concept of Work in Slovenia

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ABSTRACT. Short folklore forms, like proverbs and riddles with integrated metaphors and stereotypes, capture diachronic reflections of the surroundings, including the economic situation and societal values. The economy and economic activity as a dominant part of everyday life is a very important factor in family life. In contemporary ethnology, “everyday” is used to mean the “culture of the many”, the banal, widespread phenomena of culture. More broadly, it represents both the universal and the most one of a kind, the social and the personal spheres of life. Everyday life most faithfully reflects how life and the world are understood. This article focuses on the concept of work in everyday life and its representation in Slovenian short folklore forms, specifically proverbs and riddles, which are analysed across nine thematic groups. This ethnolinguistic study uses the proverb archive at the ZRC SAZU Institute of Slovenian Ethnology.

KEYWORDS: short folklore form, proverb, riddle, work, everyday, Slovenian folklore.

Darbas meistrų giria: darbo samprata trumpuosiuose slovenų folkloro žanruose

SANTRAUKA. Trumpieji folkloro žanrai, kaip antai patarlės ir mįslės su integruotomis metaforomis bei stereotipais, fiksuoja diachroninius aplinkos atspindžius, įskaitant ekonominę padėtį ir visuomenės vertybes. Ekonomika ir darbinė veikla kaip dominuojanti kasdienio gyvenimo dalis yra labai svarbi šeimos gyvenime. Šiuolaikinėje etnologijoje „kasdienybė“ reiškia „daugelio žmonių kultūrą“ – įprastus, plačiai paplitusius kultūros reiškinius. Platesne prasme ji aprėpia ir bendruosius, ir išskirtinius dalykus – visuomeninio ir privataus gyvenimo sritis. Kasdienybėje geriausiai atspindi tai, kaip suprantamas gyvenimas ir pasaulis. Šiame straipsnyje daugiausia dėmesio skiriama darbo sampratai kasdienybėje ir jos raiškai trumpuo-

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siuose slovėnų folkloro žanruose – patarlėse ir mįslėse, kurios analizuojamos pagal devynias temines grupes. Šis etnolingvistinis tyrimas remiasi Slovėnijos mokslų akademijos Slovėnų etnologijos instituto patarlių archyvo medžiaga.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: trumpieji folkloro žanrai, patarlė, mįslė, darbas, kasdienybė, slovėnų folkloras.

WORK IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Everyday life cannot be conceived without a material basis and the effects of human labour, which ensure survival. The everyday – defined as the most banal, widespread phenomena of culture (Bausinger 1987: 38), the universal yet unique social and personal spheres of life (Lefebvre 1991) – is deeply intertwined with work. Furthermore, labour and the economic activities it comprises are key fields for research on culture and everyday life. These activities shape knowledge of the world, social relations, shared cultural traditions and ways of expressing and transmitting knowledge.

The history of culture shows varied and changing attitudes to work and the economy from temporal, spatial and social perspectives. While the material necessities of life are universal, the ways in which societies fulfil these needs vary across cultures. To survive, human beings need air, temperature regulation, water, food, protection from disease and injury, and shelter from external dangers (provided by clothing and housing). Our existence depends on everyday productive activities such as agriculture, handicrafts and housekeeping, and the support of a cooperative community. The social factors that characterise the latter (for example gender, age and economic inequality) play a crucial role in creating and regulating the material conditions on which the wellbeing and social power of the individual and the group depend. Economic knowledge and practices have been and continue to be transmitted or disseminated in various ways, including from older to younger generations. The family economy serves as the primary arena not only for economic activity but also for cultural transmission. It encompasses the management and execution of household, domestic and economic tasks, such as agriculture and handicrafts, to ensure the wellbeing of the community. In this context, short folklore forms serve as a medium for transmitting knowledge and values, expectations and stereotypes related to the economy.

A LINGUISTIC DEFINITION OF THE TERM *DELO* (WORK)

Work is a widely known concept and it seems we all know its meaning. However, upon closer inspection, it appears to be like a “chameleon” – its meaning changing

depending on the time, place and society in which it is used (Komlosy 2021: 11). To gain insight into the concept of work in the Slovenian language, it is important first to describe the etymology of the word, followed by its dictionary and lexicon definitions. The word's historical development reveals earlier understandings of the concept, while contemporary definitions expose the concepts of the chosen linguistic society.

The Slovenian word *delo* (work) is derived from the pie. root **dheh1*, which means to lay or to place and to make or to work, and later from the proto-Slavic **děti delati* and *postaviti* (partly preserved in the Slovenian *děti*, *dejāti*).¹ We can infer that the concept is based on a finished or manufactured item that can be placed somewhere, as well as on the process of its creation. In this way, work is also linked with the concept of change: through work, an initial state is altered, ultimately becoming a new state (when the work is done).

In the Standard Slovenian Dictionary (SSKJ), *delo* (work) is defined as the

conscious use of physical or mental energy to acquire goods//effort, toil; [...] which is realised by doing; which is realised by doing, especially in the artistic field; object, thing made by someone; employment, job.

The Slovenian ethnological lexicon provides a similar yet more descriptive definition:

[I]ndividual and social activity, the conscious use of human abilities for the purposefully planned acquisition and creation of material and spiritual goods, or the prerequisites, conditions and circumstances necessary for these processes (Baš 2004: 82).

Further lexicon headwords linked with the term work include undeclared or illegal work, work from home, holiday work, work in the house, work customs, work time, work tool, workplace and workroom. All the descriptions are linked with earning money and acquiring goods, with the exception of household tasks. This is even emphasised by the headword “work in the house”, which refers only to handicrafts that were done in the house, such as shoemaking or weaving (see also Komlosy 2021).

Definitions from both sources emphasise the acquisition of goods, using an activity in such a way that the result enables a better life. This includes everything from meeting basic needs to acquiring what is desired or sought after.

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1 Komlosy (2021: 55–57) discusses the dual nature of work both as labour and as creative, imaginative craftsmanship. While this distinction can be traced in German and Romance language groups, Slavic languages did not develop in the same way. Slavic expressions for work refer only to toil, such as *trud* and *rabota* in Russian and *praca* in Polish, rather than denoting creative or imaginative crafts.

SHORT FOLKLORE FORMS AS DATA FOR ETHNOLINGUISTIC RESEARCH

Language articulates our relationship with the surrounding world while also influencing how we express ourselves. Language takes on different relatively fixed forms, with longer expressions allowing for more flexibility, while shorter forms preserve a relatively fixed shape. When these forms become socially accepted as part of the language, a ‘mental dictionary’ that is part of culture and narrating that culture, they are considered folklore. Through folklore, individuals and groups express themselves, their values and their views on society and the world. Regarding the social foundations of folklore and folklore as performance, folklore genres are “a recreated intention to respond to any given situation” (Noyes 2012: 27).

The folklore we are dealing with is strongly intertwined with language, which is a powerful tool that allows us to make sense of the world by enabling categories of thought.

As Mikhail Bakhtin discusses in his work (for example 1999: 288), especially where it concerns the dialogical structure of concepts and language, words have socially charged lives. They are not a neutral medium for communication, but are practices and activities intertwined with social contexts. We could also invert Bakhtin’s statement: social relations live a life filled with language, meaning that every social interaction, whether spoken, written or non-verbal, occurs through language. Language is therefore social by nature.

Folklore is also communicated through language. Due to its rooted place and function within a community, and its longevity, folklore has incorporated social context filled with experiences, norms and expectations. From this perspective, we can claim that it is a narrative (Grigas 1996) – a narrative about society. This article focuses on short folklore forms, which are comprised of a diverse group of texts. In these forms, words are combined into shorter or longer phrases that can be transformed into linguistic forms that are semantically predetermined and often metaphorical. These forms have relatively fixed structures, content and functions. They capture “an idea or notion that has become traditional and may be regularly repeated in the same or approximately the same version in various contexts” (Bošković-Stulli, Zečević 1978: 22). They generally feature content that is based on experiences, impressions, insights, as well as a stereotyped social perspective. Furthermore, their metaphoricity generalises all of the above at the level of social norm and/or value, which is emphasised each time they are used in context. These units therefore reflect social understandings of the world and social concepts. At the same time, short folklore forms serve as carriers of cultural values, conveying what is deemed acceptable or not within a given society. However, they do not represent

a logical philosophical system (Mieder 2008: 9). They are tied to specific everyday situations, functioning as effective formulaic expressions and acting as signs for interpreting human behaviour and social context (see also Kuusi 1957; Grzybek 1994). In this way, they transcend their status of socially decontextualised folk wisdom and become sources for understanding social practices, space and time.

Culture is “learned” through language: “language is a cultural resource” and a “social act” (Duranti 1997: 2). Short folklore forms, such as proverbs and greetings, are learned as relatively fixed units, allowing the transmission of the inherent concepts.

The analysis in this article focuses on the linguistic representation of ‘work’ in proverbs and riddles. Both genres have been extensively studied and have numerous structural, semantic and functional definitions. For the purposes of this article, we will use Mieder’s definition of proverbs:

A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation (1985: 119; also 1993: 24).

The riddle is a very similar genre to the proverb in terms of metaphoricity, yet it differs in function and structure:

A riddle consists of two parts: a metaphorical description or question and a non-metaphorical answer. It is a word-play built on the double-meaning of the description or question, typically involving two individuals or groups engaged in a competitive exchange (Kaivola Bregenhøj 2001: 47–53; Babič 2021: 12–18).

Containing metaphors, which are strongly culturally marked, these chosen genres can be analysed with an ethnolinguistic method to gain insight into the worldview they preserve as a stereotyped idea or concept (Bartmiński 2005: 12–15; Bartmiński 2009: 22–38). The analysis of the concept of work in proverbs and riddles from the archive at the ZRC SAZU Slovenian Institute of Ethnology, Collection of Slovenian paremiological units *Pregovori 1.1* (Babič et al. 2023), and Slovenian riddles (Babič 2018) must therefore focus on the historical perspective. These sources mainly contain material collected from the 19th and early 20th centuries, therefore analysis gives more or less the historical, diachronic the world view. The ethnolinguistic approach places special emphasis on language, not only in terms of folklore but also as a broader element of intangible culture. It considers language, thought and culture as deeply intertwined (Bartmiński 2009: 8–12; Толстая 2015: 14–17). Paremiological units and riddles are used to analyse the concepts of work,

although these units are rarely used today. However, they do contain information about worldviews from different historical periods. Moreover, we must consider the lasting influence of these worldviews, which continue to resonate today. Although many of these proverbs and riddles are considered transnational, the way they function within a society and how they are verbalised (especially in translation) provides valuable insights. As such, they offer rich material for analysis (Babič 2015: 50, 51).

THE CONCEPT OF WORK IN PROVERBS AND RIDDLES: AN ANALYSIS

For the research the databases of Slovenian proverbs (Babič et al. 2023) and Slovenian riddles were used (Babič et al. 2025). These collections were mainly created in the 19th and first half of the 20th century, resulting in a diachronic view of the concepts. It is important to emphasise that most collectors were men and lots of the material was collected from newspaper archives or from other collections of published material. The material was examined using the keywords *delati* (to work), *delo* (work) and *garati* (to toil), which semantically signal the process of (hard) work. In the proverbs, work is conceptually linked with food, payment, speed, knowledge, outlook, gender and children, as well as the work process itself and with sloth as the opposite. The material is organised into nine sub-groups based on these connections, each highlighting a key focus of the analysis: payment, quality, society and its components (outlook, status, gender, children), the process of work and the concept of work as something unappealing.

1. Work and payment. Work is associated with payment, which, according to the proverbs, is usually material, most often in the form of food, serving as a means to satisfy one's primary needs, is present in Slovenian proverbs: "*Kjer je delo, tam je jelo*" (Where there's work, there's food), "*Kjer je delo, tam je kruh*" (Where there's work, there's bread), "*Ni jela brez dela*" (No food without work) and "*Popred je delo ko jelo*" (First comes work, then food). The concept is further highlighted through its opposition to sloth: "*Ko lenoba v postelji leži, pridnost na polju delo stori, delo da pa jelo*" (When sloth lies in bed, diligence in the field does the work, and the work gives the food/meal). Proverbs also warn that avoiding work can lead to starvation: "*Kdor se dela brani, hitro strada*" (He who avoids work quickly goes hungry), "*Kdor se enkrat na beraško palico upre, ta se po delu več ne ozre*" (He who takes up the beggar's stick will never look for work again), "*Lenoba človeka hitreje konča kot delo*" (Laziness finishes off a man faster than work). Criticism of lazy individuals who nevertheless demand payment or food for work is expressed in the following paremiological units:

“Zadnji pri delu, prvi pri koritu” (Last at work, the first at the trough), *“Len pri delu, prvi pri jelu”* (Lazy at work, the first to eat). The cynical tone in which this proverb is usually uttered reflects the belief that the person does not deserve to receive (much) food or payment because he or she did not work hard or actively enough.

2. Work as motivation. Work requires energy, so it is no surprise that the concepts of appetite and work are connected: *“Delo je najboljši kuhar”* (Work is the best cook), *“Gospod, lakota in delo sta kralja vseh kuharjev”* (Sir, hunger and work are the kings of all the chefs). Today, the proverb *“Lakota je najboljši kuhar”* (Hunger is the best cook) is frequently quoted and referred to as an “African proverb”, which yet again raises the question of the ‘nationality’ of proverbs. However, older, expanded versions of the proverb show that the value of food was once defined by its mere availability, not just its taste. Proverbs present food not only as a form of payment but also as a motivation for work.

3. The quality of work. Work is evaluated by payment: if it is done well, then the pay should be generous: *“Po delu plačilo”* (The work determines the pay), *“Kakršno delo, tako plačilo”* (The work determines the pay), *“(Dobro) delo zasluži plačilo”* ((Good) work deserves to be paid). The following riddle is connected with the same idea: *“Kdaj dobe delavci pogače? – Kadar je pečena”* (When do workers get the bread/cake? – When it is baked). However, the answer is surprising: workers do not get the food as a reward for work (well) done, but when the food is prepared, which is the normal and logical order. This riddle is therefore classified as a joke question. Although fast workers were valued, speed was not always appreciated. Proverbs warn that work done too quickly can also be work done badly: *“Hitro opravljeno delo joče nad delavcem”* (A job done quickly cries over the worker), *“Hitro delo, dvojno delo”* (Fast work, double the work). A good and fast worker was one who concentrated on the work and was not distracted: *“Kdor pri delu govori, malo naredi”* (He who talks while working does little). However, workers were more focused if the deadline was short: *“Čim krajši je rok, bolj gre delo od rok”* (The shorter the deadline, the better the work is done). Focus is also mentioned in the context of relationships with co-workers, in the sense of ‘mind your own business’: *“Kdor tuje delo gleda, svoje pozabi”* (Whoever looks at another’s work, forgets about their own). This is further amplified in a proverb that highlights the importance of work done within the framework of social expectation, without transgressing social norms:² *“Daleč od dela, blizu hudiča”* (Far from work, close to the devil).

2 One of the infractions is definitely sloth, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Here are some examples: *“Leni hlapec se boji dela”* (The lazy servant fears work), *“Ko gredo kure na gredo, lenuh se svojega dela loti”* (When the hens go to sleep, the lazy worker gets to work), *“Lenuhi imajo naveč*

The topic of work that has no value is metaphorically included in the riddle “*Kateri brivec dela vse zastonj? – Vetr, ki brije ušesa*” (Which barber does everything for free? – The wind that shaves your ears). The riddle is talking about large amounts of energy invested in an activity to no avail. It also contains a humorous play on words, as the Slovenian verb ‘to shave’ can also refer to a cold wind blowing strongly.

4. Work and body shape. The shape of the body is also linked to work: the working person is not supposed to be overweight, but fit and in good shape. Proverbs imply that only lazy people can become overweight: “*Od dela ni debel, od leže ni sit*” (One does not grow fat from work, just as one cannot have one’s fill lying down), “*Samo valj je debel od dela*” (Only the roller is fat from work), “*Od dela se samo mačka redi*” (Only a cat gets fatter by working), “*Od dela je debel samo krompir*” (Only a potato is fat from work).³ Even beauty was supposed to be the opposite of work: “*Če je lep, je pa pri delu slep*” (He might be handsome, but he’s blind to work). Some proverbs clearly link work with physical activity in the field: “*Kjer je zemlja, je tudi delo*” (Where there’s land, there’s work), “*Delo je pri tleh*” (Work is at ground level).

Work is considered beneficial, especially for our physical health, with physical work being the presumed meaning: “*Delo kreпча naše telo*” (Work strengthens our bodies), “*Delo krepi človeka*”⁴ (Work makes a person stronger). These proverbs refer to work as toil or hard work, even physical suffering (see also Komlosy 2021: 51–78), although on the other hand this work was believed to keep the body slim and fit.

5. Work and social status. Proverbs also link work with social status, clearly expressing the view that less privileged people should do the hard work: “*Dela naj*

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dela, ko pride nedelja” (Lazy workers have most work on Sundays). All of these focus on work that has been put aside and completed later when it should already have been finished. The time “when the hens go to sleep”, i.e. early evening, or “Sunday” are supposed to be times for rest and not work. Similarly, the proverb “*Z nedeljskim delom ne obogatiš*” (One does not become rich doing work on Sundays) expresses the opinion that Sundays should be reserved for rest, while work is expected on all other days. Comparative phrasemes from our database that express the avoidance of work include “*Mu diši delo, ko mački česen*” (He takes to work like a cat to garlic) or “*Se sili z delom, ko bolnik z jedjo*” (He forces himself to work like the sick man forces himself to eat). Both proverbs express a strong aversion to work.

3 The last two examples are from contemporary material, dating after the year 2000. While it is not known how long these units were in use before this, it is surprising that even in modern times with all our knowledge of physical facts, this concept is still popular.

4 The proverb “*Delo krepi človeka*” (Work makes a person stronger) now has a contemporary anti-proverb: “*Delo krepa človeka*” (Work destroys a person), which is used quite often, usually in humorous contexts.

bik, ki mu kravata ne paše” (Let the bull without a tie do the work). The bull was considered a strong working animal that was not very intelligent. Another proverb is “*Delo je revnega last, bogatemu v čast*” (Work is the poor man’s property and the rich man’s honour), while the proverb “*Z delom ne boš obogatel*” (One does not get rich from work) implies that working is not the way to climb the social ladder.

There are also proverbs that seem to serve as an endorsement for less valued jobs: “*Vsako delo je častno*” (All work is honourable), “*Delo ni sramota*” (Work is not shame).

Work also seems to express our belonging to society, as well as our alignment with its values: “*Kdor ima rad delo, ima rad tudi ljudi*” (Whoever loves work also loves people), “*Delo in red drži ta svet*” (Work and order hold the world together), “*Človek je rojen za delo, kakor ptič za letanje*” (Man is born to work, like a bird to fly). Work also defines the person’s worth: “*Delo kaže človeka*” (Work reflects the person), it demands full involvement “*Vsako delo terja celega človeka*” (Every job demands the whole person), and no true worker has time to fool around “*Tisti, ki za dva gara, se pri ženskah ne sladka*” (A man who toils for two does not delight in women).

6. Work and gender. If this last proverb portrays women as a sweet temptation, the following examples present just the opposite, emphasising that a woman’s value lies in her ability to work, or that beauty is not as important as a woman’s skills and qualifications: “*Pri dobri gospodinji se vsako delo o pravem času začne in o pravem času konča*” (A good housekeeper starts and finishes every job at the right time), “*Kmetiška ženska je skoraj vsaka za delo, gosposka skoraj nobena*” (Almost every farming woman is a good worker, but this is true of hardly any noblewoman). A woman’s character is also defined by her attitude towards work: “*Jeznorite babe so dobre za delo pa vendar malo ktero delo dobro opravijo*” (Angry women are good workers, but few do a good job). In this context anger is seen as a negative trait if one wants a job done well. The stereotypical worldview suggests that privileged and beautiful women are unaccustomed to work and therefore useless, while good housekeepers are seen as self-sacrificing for the good of their husbands and families.

7. Work and children.⁵ For the needs of this paper, we selected two proverbs that link children and work. One emphasises that a child is simply another family member who needs to eat, therefore they must start earning money as soon as possible: “*Vsak otrok prinese s seboj roke za delo, žlico za jelo*” (Every child comes with a pair of hands to work with and a spoon to eat with). The second shows how

5 For a detailed ethnolinguistic analysis of proverbs on the value of children and their role in work, see Huzjan 2024.

children can soon help with all manner of tasks if they are taught how to do them, so adults will have less to worry about: “*Če se otrok dela nauči, bo odrasel imel manj skrbi*” (If a child learns how to work, the adult will have less to worry about).

Work done in youth is appreciated and encouraged by the proverb “*Pridna mladost dela častito starost*” (Diligence in youth makes for an honourable old age).

Historically, children were considered part of the workforce on farms and in industrial settings such as mines (Huzjan 2024). It is therefore unsurprising that proverbs reflect the belief that children should begin work early, with the adage that those who wish to eat must earn their food.

8. The work process. Proverbs emphasise that work speaks for itself: “*Delo se samo kaže*” (Work shows itself), and how it cannot be put aside “*Delo ne more čakati*” (Work cannot wait).

The process of work must be set in motion: “*Kdor hoče delo končati, ga mora začeti*” (Whoever wants to finish a task must begin it), “*Dober začetek je pol dela*” (A good start is half the work done). Once started it should not be interrupted: “*Kdor ne odlaš, najbolje dela*” (He who does not delay, works best), “*Odloženo delo je v drek položeno*” (Work that is put off is put to waste).

Even though the proverb “*Vsako delo rodi sadove*” (All work bares fruit) implies that all work should be appreciated, unfinished work is considered worse than work that was never started: “*Na pol opravljeno delo je slabše od neopravljenega*” (Half-done work is worse than work not done). Work requires good tools, as expressed in the proverb: “*Dobro orodje, lahko delo / delo olajša*” (Good tools make light work). This can also be interpreted as advice to take good care of tools, as well as an excuse to acquire better tools. According to the following riddle, working without tools seems almost impossible: “*Striček most dela brez sekire in brez noža? – Led*” (This man builds a bridge with neither axe nor knife? – Ice).

Nevertheless, even with determination and good tools, one can really master only one trade rather than many: “*Kdor je vseh del mojster, je vseh rev gospodar*” (The master of all trades is the poorest of them all), “*Bolje je znati eno delo prav, kakor pa veliko na pol*” (It’s better to master one trade than to be half-skilled in many). The quality of the work reflects how well workers master their trade: “*Kakršen mojster, tako je delo*” (The work reflects the master). Specialisation seems to be one of the most important qualities of a master, especially in skilled trades. The topic is illustrated by the cynical paremiological unit: “*Šuštar se je pa še zmeraj na kovačevo delo spoznal*” (The shoemaker always knew all about the blacksmith’s work).

As part of the work process, proverbs also address the importance of rest: a good rest is a guarantee for a job well done: “*Dober počitek je pol dela*” (A good rest is half the work), while rest is also considered a reward after work “*Po delu je sladak*

počitek” (After work, sweet rest). Rest is even encouraged in a paremiological unit that is inspired by the tale about the thankful bear (ATU 156; Kropiej 2015: 286) and which appears in the form of an image rather than a description: “*Medved spleza s hruške, pa postoji, da bi si odpočil, kako si človek ne bi od dela*” (Even a bear climbs down from the pear tree to have a rest, why should a person not take a break from work). Meanwhile, too much resting is described as being more tiring than work: “*Nesmiseln počitek človeka bolj zbije kot delo*” (Unneeded rest wears a person out more than work).

9. Work as something unappealing. Work is generally regarded as a valued element of everyday life, although it can be exhausting and time-consuming. It is therefore not surprising that some units in the database also highlight the opposite, portraying work as unappealing because it is tiring: “*Bolje lačen v senci, kot sit pri delu*” (Better hungry in the shade than well-fed at work). Work is also seen as something that wears you out: “*Bolje trebuh od hrane kot grba od dela*” (Better get a belly from food than a hunched back from work). Some proverbs suggest that work is not worth the wealth it brings: “*Bolje s kolesom v kurbarijo kot z mercedesom na delo*” (Better cycle to the brothel than drive to work in a Mercedes). Finally, work is viewed as a thief of time: “*Delo je rabelj časa*” (Work is the executioner of time). Most of these units are contemporary, dating from the end of the 20th century, as evident from the words used (for example “Mercedes”, “a belly from food”). The following unit can also be categorised in this section: “*Baba gobe žanje, dedec sterže korenje, sin polže strela, hči punce dela*” (The old woman’s reaping mushrooms, the old man’s peeling carrots, the son’s shooting snails, the daughter’s making footprints). This paremiological unit is a comment on hard but senseless work. The following riddle could also be connected with the above proverb: “*Kaj dela kmet, kadar po njivi hodi? – Stopinje*” (What does a farmer do in a field? – Leaves footprints). The image of the farmer in the field is tied to his work and knowledge, while the answer is humorous, emphasising walking as his basic activity in the field.

The categories above emphasise key aspects of work, revealing clear connections to food, social contribution and the individual’s roles in society. However, a diachronic view reveals deeper layers of significance. The final category illustrates changes in how work is perceived: it appears to be taken less seriously now than it was in the past. Additionally, many anti-proverbs – often with different wording but semantically related to work – reflect this change.

CONCLUSION

In ethnolinguistic terms, language embodies cultural meanings: in the semantics of words and even paremiological units, we can discern images of the world and humanity, societal worldviews and fragments of cultural history. Building on this foundation, we explored short folklore forms to examine how the concept of work is preserved within them. While this insight is partial – culture cannot be fully understood through a single, narrow lens such as folklore – the analysis offers valuable perspectives on the diachronic social views of work. It contributes a piece to the broader mosaic of understanding everyday life and its cultural foundations.

Etymologically and within short folklore forms in Slovenian, “work” inherently involves the concept of change: one state is transformed into another, resulting in a finished product that can be ‘laid on the table’. There is a distinct difference between Slovenian proverbs and riddles: riddles mainly use work to mean a change of state, focusing on the process itself, while proverbs use work more broadly, linking it to survival, social hierarchy, daily routine, and its quality and value, etc. Work is a process, and its value lies in its completion; in the context of proverbs, unfinished work is seen as unsatisfying and of little worth. Many proverbs link work to payment, often using food or bread as metonyms. They emphasise that all work deserves compensation and that payment is inseparable from labour. Without payment, one faces hunger, which is a metaphor for poverty in short folklore forms. Consequently, proverbs suggest that life without work is a privilege reserved for those with sufficient resources to sustain themselves: a good home, ample food, and other necessities or even luxuries.

Physical work in Slovenian material is often associated with the underprivileged and is not seen as a path to wealth in proverbs, rather it is a means to secure basic needs. Proverbs suggest that work alone cannot make one rich, it merely provides the essentials. This perception is reflected in the stereotype that individuals from higher social strata, particularly women, were considered unskilled in work. Farmers, on the other hand, were idealised as hardworking, while housework was often excluded from the definition of ‘real’ labour. Proverbs also reflect the traditional belief that children should begin working early, embodied in the adage that those who wish to eat must earn their food. However, it must be emphasised that this view is no longer valid: children are expected to focus on education and prepare for adulthood, and only then should they earn money through work.

Today, work has become an activity that many seek to avoid. This is expressed humorously or in anti-proverbs, which are noticeable in Slovenian. The main message in these units is that it is better to live a carefree life, even if it means having a bit less money. Ethnographic fieldwork also reveals a significant generational difference in how work is conceptualised, which is not yet reflected in folklore

material. Older generations equate work solely with physical labour, viewing mental work as leisure or an activity that does not cause fatigue. In contrast, younger generations, when facing mental exhaustion, increasingly turn to physical hobbies, such as gardening or handicrafts as a form of rest. The general conceptualisation of work today remains focused on paid labour, while activities such as caregiving, housework or hobbies are not seen as tiring or burdensome.

The material analysed in this article, which is primarily drawn from the 19th and early 20th centuries, offers a diachronic, historical perspective on the concept of work. The material might potentially be biased as most collectors during the period of collecting this material were men; therefore there are many fewer units linked with, for example, the household. While the wording of these proverbs reflects their time, the underlying concept of work has endured: a good member of society is expected to work, whether for honour or through financial necessity. Work remains closely tied to the idea of earning a living and improving one's circumstances, even if reality often falls short of this ideal.

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