

Women Are as Fickle as April Weather – Are They Really? Cross-Cultural Analysis of Anglo-American and Slovenian Proverbs Featuring the Word *Woman*

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Abstract

This study represents the first cross-linguistic comparison of Anglo-American and Slovenian proverbs featuring the word woman. First, dictionary definitions were analysed to assess portrayals of women and their societal roles in the selected reference works. Next, a bilingual corpus featuring the word woman was compiled, with 211 Anglo-American and 72 Slovenian proverbs to investigate the extent of shared proverbial culture. Lastly, a selection of seven equivalent proverbs in both languages was compiled to explore the cultural elements embedded in these proverbs. The study found that Anglo-American dictionary entries are more inclusive than Slovenian ones, which largely reinforce patriarchal values. The research also revealed a rich shared proverbial tradition. While the analysis of cross-linguistically equivalent proverbs did not uncover many culturally specific elements, it highlighted the universality of human thought and the pervasive influence of patriarchal values, portraying women as subordinate, emotionally unstable, and morally questionable. Nonetheless, the research also identified proverbs that acknowledge women's strength and independence. Lastly, the study emphasises that proverb translation cannot be reduced to a purely lexical process but involves varying degrees of adaptation to convey culturally embedded meanings.

Keywords: *proverbs, woman, Anglo-American, Slovenian, dictionary definitions, shared proverbial tradition, translation studies*

1. Introduction

Proverbs, the world's smallest literary genre (Kochman-Haładyj 2020: 73), reflect the way of life and values of the people of a particular language (Petrova 2014: 256). Being passed down from generation to generation (Kržišnik 2008: 38; Mieder 2015: 297), they encapsulate a collection of folk wisdom, truths, societal norms, and guidelines, and thus steer individuals and communities towards a moral and dignified life (Syzydykov 2014: 319). As part of formal and informal spoken and written language discourse (cf. Nippold et al. 1988; Mieder 1997), proverbs typically convey general rather than absolute truths, which often leads to varying interpretations, particularly when considered in light of different personal and contextual factors (Brown & Wright-Harp 2011: 27). Proficiency in proverb comprehension improves throughout life and correlates with the development of linguistic and analogical skills (Nippold et al. 1988: 20).

Proverbs as dynamic lingua-cultural items are constantly emerging and flourishing but also withering as new ones appear and enter common use (Mieder 2004: xi). According to Mieder (2004, 2015), European proverbs primarily originate from four main sources: Greek and Roman antiquity, the Bible, Medieval Latin and its loan translations, and mass media (songs, films, and advertising slogans). While proverbs may fade in some contexts, anti-proverbs – allusive distortions, parodies, misapplications, or unexpected

contextualisations of recognised proverbs – continue to thrive. Although not a modern invention, anti-proverbs have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary times, reflecting a cultural shift towards playful variations of traditional expressions. Today, anti-proverbs are ubiquitous in digital spaces, particularly in advertising slogans, often eliciting comic, humorous, or satirical effects through the incongruity between the original and the modified forms (Litovkina 2018: 3–24).

Proverbs referring to women are integral to the proverbial discourse and underscore the presence of a culture, profoundly marked by male dominance on the one hand and female subordination on the other (cf. Petrova 2002; Schipper & Schipper 2003). Extensive research has examined such proverbs across a range of cultural contexts (cf. Kochman-Haładyj 2012, 2020, 2022; Schipper & Schipper 2003), as well as within individual traditions, such as Turkish (cf. Kara 2021), Japanese (cf. Storm 1992), Moroccan (cf. Webster 1982), African (cf. Hussein 2005), and American (cf. Kerschen 1998, Litovkina 2018). In addition, studies have explored women in anti-proverbs (cf. Litovkina 2011, 2014) and cross-cultural comparison, e.g. English and Polish (cf. Kochman-Haładyj 2015) and English and Urdu (cf. Rasul 2015). On the other hand, the Slovenian context remains comparatively underexplored, with only limited contributions (cf. Babič 2021, 2020).

To date, there has been no systematic cross-linguistic research comparing Anglo-American and Slovenian proverbs featuring the word *woman* (hereafter referred to as women proverbs). This study aims to address this gap by (1) examining how the word *woman* is defined in Anglo-American and how its Slovenian equivalent *ženska* is defined in Slovenian dictionaries, (2) compiling and analysing a corpus of women proverbs in both languages to assess shared proverbial culture and representation of women, and (3) comparing a selection of equivalent proverbs in both languages to uncover cultural influences on their meaning, transmission, and interpretation. Therefore, the following research questions were posed:

- RQ 1: How is the word *woman* defined in Anglo-American dictionary definitions and how its Slovenian equivalent *ženska* is defined in Slovenian dictionary definitions, and do these definitions reflect the diverse roles women play, or do they reinforce stereotypical expectations?
- RQ 2: To what extent do Anglo-American and Slovenian women proverbs in the compiled corpus reflect a shared proverbial tradition, and how do they represent women?
- RQ 3: What do the historical development and cultural features of a selected sample of cross-linguistically equivalent proverbs reveal about representations of women?

2. Proverbs

Originating from the ancient Greek roots of *paroimia* ('proverb') and *logia* ('science'), paremiology encompasses the study of proverbs and other related linguistic phenomena such as proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, proverbial interrogatives, twin formulas, riddles, wellerisms, parables, apothegms, sententious remarks, literary quotations, maxims, slogans, adages, aphorisms, weather lore, graffiti (Mieder 2004: xii; Babič 2011: 27) but also modified versions of traditional proverbs known as anti-, quasi- and twisted proverbs, oftentimes satirizing the original sayings through hyperbole, irony, humour, and parody,

while still retaining core proverbial features like being concise, memorable, and insightful (cf. Mieder 1993; Mieder & Litovkina 1999; Mandziuk 2016). More specifically, paremiology investigates proverbs' origins, structures, and functions (Toporišič 1974).

While it is difficult to formulate a fully comprehensive definition of a proverb, as already noted by the early proverb scholar Archer Taylor (1985), its essence is often best captured through its communicative function as proverbs operate as conventionalised speech acts that enable speakers to convey culturally shared knowledge, express evaluations, and influence interlocutors in a concise and rhetorically effective manner; they may serve to offer advice, justify arguments or reinforce social norms, often by invoking collective authority rather than individual opinion. In this sense, proverbs constitute pragmatic tools embedded in discourse, whose meaning and function depend on context and communicative intent (Norrick 1985: 11–30; Mieder 2004: 132, 140).

Proverbs tend to exhibit certain consistent features, such as relative stability across lexico-semantic, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic structures of at least two lexemes that typically remain unchanged or allow for minimal variation (Arora 1984; Kerschen 1998; Shtoltsel 2018: 11; Muradullayevna 2022: 892–93). Apart from the relative structural and semantic stability, other universally observed markers of proverbiality include a proverb's metaphorical nature and the presence of poetic devices (Keber 2011; Muradullayevna 2022: 892–93). Further, discerning proverbs from other phraseological units is often intricate and shaped by diverse folkloristic and linguistic traditions (Meterc 2014; Masimova 2018: 13), consequently resulting in a range of different terminologies (cf. Taylor 1931; Mieder 2015; Norrick 2015). Despite diverse traditions, a common emphasis is placed on the inherent meaning of proverbs, which transcends the literal interpretation of individual words. Instead, proverbs encapsulate distinct ideas or evoke imagery (Keber 2011; Espinal & Mateu 2019; Harmon 2021: 127), carrying figurative and/or emotional connotations (Masimova 2018: 12).

Proverbs typically refer to all aspects of human life, with individuals being described as archetypal representatives of humankind (Babič 2021: 80). On the one hand, they illustrate the distinct characteristics and customs of different societies; on the other, they also unveil a shared adherence to fundamental cognitive principles and patterns, thus underscoring their universality (Dobrovol'skij 1992; Madmarova et al. 2021: 444). Proverbs are not created by the folk but rather by an individual (Taylor 1985) as a response to a certain event that translates into a mental image and later into a linguistic item that functions as an interpretation of life, a perception of reality, and a socialisation tool, and further receives a more collective acceptance by the people at large (Mieder 2015; Madmarova et al. 2021: 446). A command of the fundamental paremiological units is a prerequisite for navigating effectively within a given communicative milieu (cf. Meterc 2014: 17). To fully understand a proverb and its emotional impact, it is therefore important to consider the cultural context in which it was created; if the cultural context is lost, proverbs may still be recognised, but their deeper significance can be obscured (Lewandowska & Antos 2015: 163). Proverbs are thereby context-dependent, where their full meaning can be understood and appropriately applied (Brunvand 1996; Mieder 1997).

3. Gender-related proverbs within the proverbial cohort

Proverbs as carriers of cultural beliefs reinforce gender stereotypes by depicting typical gender roles, behaviours, and traits associated with males and females, thereby functioning as agents of societal expectations shaping individuals' roles and identities (Martin & Dinella 2001). They encapsulate gender ideology, which is influenced by religious and societal principles dictating distinct rights, responsibilities, and rewards for each gender (Hussein 2005: 60). Although they vary across cultures, scholars working on gender representations in proverb corpora from different linguistic and cultural contexts (cf. Ronesi 2000; Petrova 2002; Schipper & Schipper 2003; Mieder 2004; Kochman-Haładaj 2020, 2022) have observed that various gender-related traits tend to dominate, shaping societal expectations.

In the English and broader European traditions represented in these studies, there is a recurring theme of inferiority, restricting women to domestic roles, and advocating obedience, even to the extent where physical violence against women is presented as rightly justified; additionally, women are portrayed as weak, fragile, stubborn, mysterious, nosy, talkative, and quarrelsome (Kochman-Haładaj 2020: 77–79). Further adding to the body of negative portrayals, Schipper & Schipper (2003) provide a global comparative collection, where women are also perceived as mischievous, cunning, vain, treacherous, tearful, untrustworthy, ill-natured, witch-like, and obsessively vengeful. Additionally, categories emphasising a woman's ability to give birth, possess beauty, and sexual appeal dominate over other, also positive feminine characteristics, such as being kind, caring, patient, economical, resourceful, and ingenious in overcoming obstacles – all qualities deemed essential for their roles as mothers, wives, and household maintainers (Schipper & Schipper 2003; Kochman-Haładaj 2020). The issue of female beauty is complex, acting simultaneously as an attraction for the opposite sex and a potential source of trouble. Consequently, numerous proverbs emphasise the benefits of a hideous woman. Additionally, beauty is often contrasted with intelligence, a trait typically associated with men (Ronesi 2000; Petrova 2002).

Anglo-American proverbs about women have been found to reflect patterns similar to those identified in cross-cultural and world proverb studies (cf. Schipper & Schipper 2003; Kochman-Haładaj 2020). Regardless of the roles women occupy – whether as daughters, mothers, widows, spinsters, wives, lovers, or mothers-in-law – they are often depicted in highly pejorative ways that perpetuate devaluation, discrimination, and the perception of women as second-class citizens (Litovkina 2011, 2018). Additionally, women appear to be among the most frequent themes in Anglo-American anti-proverbs. On the one hand, these expressions are typically antifeminist and demeaning to women, depicting them as demanding, nagging, complaining, critical, pushy, ill-natured, nosy, quarrelsome, never satisfied, revengeful, greedy, vain, and materialistic, etc. (Litovkina 2018: 5–9). On the other hand, influenced by women's liberation movements, numerous anti-proverbs have been coined, reflecting women's resistance to outdated stereotypes and their efforts to redefine their place in society, thereby creating space for a more equitable and balanced portrayal of both genders (Kochman-Haładaj 2020: 80–81). These proverbs may indicate that men are losing their traditional dominance in various areas of life, while women are increasingly taking on central roles and challenging long-standing gender norms (cf. Litovkina 2018).

Similarly, although research on proverbs related to women in the Slovenian context is limited, the articles by Babič (2020, 2021), based on a qualitative and interpretative folkloristic analysis of selected Slovenian proverbial expressions, sayings, and humorous folklore, identify

recurring stereotypical representations of women as talkative, less intelligent, submissive, and primarily associated with domestic roles, as well as negatively evaluated in relation to age. Babič (2020: 2–4, 2021: 84–88) also notes that, despite societal progress and improvements in women’s status, modern riddles and contemporary humorous expressions, particularly those targeting blondes and mothers-in-law, continue to reproduce and in some cases intensify traditional gender stereotypes. This suggests that modern Slovenian folklore not only preserves these deep-rooted representations but also recontextualises them within modern humorous discourse. This, in turn, supports the view that folklore is not neutral entertainment, but a carrier of social and gender ideology, where such representations are embedded and perpetuated.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data. The research is based on document analysis, which involves the systematic examination of publicly available sources and allows for broad and contextually grounded data coverage (Bowen 2009: 27). The qualitative component of the study was conducted through inductive coding and categorisation, whereby the dataset was first segmented into lower-order semantic units and subsequently organised into higher-order categories (Kordeš & Smrdu 2015; Vogrinc 2008). The quantitative component, consisting of frequency-based analysis of semantic categories, was used to support and complement the qualitative findings. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data enhanced the robustness of the study by enabling complementarity, corroboration, and a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Plano Clark 2017). The study was conducted in four steps (see Figure 1).

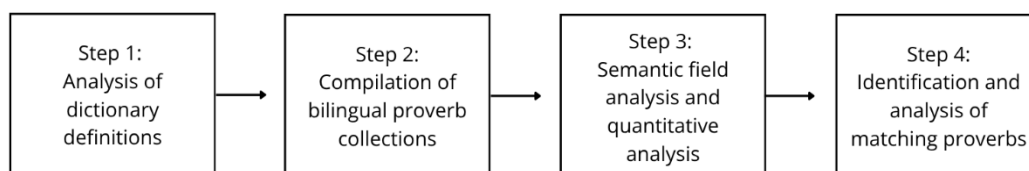


Figure 1: Overview of the research procedure

First, we analysed dictionary definitions of the word *woman* in English and Slovenian, respectively. For English, we consulted two online dictionaries: *Merriam-Webster* (n.d.) and *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries* (n.d.). These were selected because they are widely used and authoritative reference works that reflect different lexicographic traditions associated with American and British English, respectively, allowing for comparison across the two standard varieties of English.

For the Slovenian language, we relied on the *eSSKJ – Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika* (2016–), available on the Fran portal, which represents the central and most comprehensive monolingual explanatory dictionary of contemporary Slovenian. The choice of this source was motivated by its up-to-date, continuously expanding nature and its role as the primary reference work for general lexical meanings in Slovenian.

Second, to compile the bilingual proverb collections, we identified all proverbs containing the word *woman* in English and *ženska*, *žena* in Slovenian, as well as possessive forms *woman's* and *ženski*. However, since the primary meaning of *žena* is relational and denotes a married woman, i.e. *wife*, occurrences reflecting this specific sense were excluded from the analysis. Only instances in which *žena* was used more generally, in the sense of *ženska*, were considered. The analysis, therefore, focused primarily on *ženska* as the general and semantically neutral equivalent of the English *woman*. Also, knowing that proverbs often appear in multiple forms (Taylor 1985), we treated variation of the same proverb as a single entry (e.g. *Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned; Hell knows no wrath like a woman scorned*).

To build a comprehensive list of Anglo-American women proverbs, we consulted four sources: *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (Mieder et al. 1992), *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (Speake 2008), *A Proverb A Day Keeps Boredom Away* (Litovkina & Dobrovol'skij 2000), and *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (Doyle et al. 2012). These works were chosen because they represent authoritative and complementary collections of proverbs, encompassing traditional, contemporary, and contextually documented material from American and British traditions. They also draw on a range of sources, from oral traditions to literary texts and contemporary usage, and provide contextual and chronological references. While Litovkina's 2018 book *Women Through Anti-Proverbs* was also referenced, our focus remained on well-established proverbs. Therefore, we largely excluded newly coined anti-proverbs, though some well-known ones, such as *Women and elephants never forget*, were included when documented in one of the above-listed dictionaries. However, we did not include modern anti-proverbs as this falls outside the scope of this research. Overall, the final compilation now consists of 211 proverbs.

Regarding the Slovenian language, there is currently no single, systematically organised compilation of Slovenian proverbs specifically focused on gender, let alone on the proverbs with the word *woman*. Although both an ongoing online dictionary and a printed dictionary are available (Meterc 2020–, 2023), the number of entries under the headwords *ženska/žena* remains limited. As a result, these sources do not provide a sufficiently extensive and systematically structured corpus for this study. Therefore, we relied on two sources: Šašelj's (1936) article "Kaj pripovedujejo slovenski pregovori o ženskah" ('What Slovenian proverbs say about women') and Babič's (2021) article "Stereotipna podoba ženske v slovenskih folklorih" ('Stereotypical image of women in Slovenian folklore forms') (titles translated by the authors). In total, this resulted in a dataset of 72 proverbs.

It should be noted that the datasets need to be understood as non-exhaustive. Consequently, the analysis is based on representative samples rather than complete corpora. While every effort was made to compile as comprehensive a dataset as possible, this was constrained by the absence of systematic and exhaustive collections, particularly for Slovenian proverbial material. This also explains the reliance on multiple sources in the compilation of the Anglo-American corpus in order to ensure breadth and coverage.

After that, we proceeded with the analysis of semantic fields. We classified categories based on the identifiable semantic affinities they share (cf. Finegan 2008). An inductive taxonomy was developed by grouping proverbs according to their core meaning or underlying conceptual content, whereby items expressing similar ideas were clustered into the same semantic field. In cases where proverbs exhibited semantic overlap and could plausibly be assigned to more than one semantic field, a consistent coding principle was applied. Each

proverb was assigned to a single semantic field based on its dominant and overarching meaning, rather than being counted multiple times. This decision was guided by the primary conceptual message conveyed by the proverb in context. As a point of departure for our corpus-driven analysis, existing classificatory models (cf. Litovkina 2011, 2018) were consulted, providing an initial comparative framework. However, as the two proverb corpora revealed additional semantic nuances and/or culturally specific extensions, existing classificatory models required redefinition and/or expansion. Overall, the final taxonomy ensures comparability with prior research and maintains sensitivity to cross-linguistic variation. Next, based on these semantic categories, we performed a basic quantitative analysis to determine the extent of a shared proverbial tradition.

Finally, we investigated the bilingual corpus and selected seven cross-linguistically equivalent proverbs, which we identified as near/direct equivalents. Near equivalent proverbs were defined as those that express similar underlying semantic content or pragmatic function but differ in their lexical realisation, imagery, or metaphorical structure. Direct equivalents refer to proverbs that correspond in meaning and lexical-semantic structure, often approximating a near-literal translation between the two languages. This distinction was adopted to align with translation studies approaches to equivalence, which understand meaning as multi-layered and focus on communicative purpose and context-sensitive translation decisions (cf. Baker 2018; Nord 2018). The culturally embedded nature of proverb translation further resonates with perspectives that view translation as a form of cultural rewriting and ideological mediation (cf. Tymoczko 2007; Bassnett 2014; Venuti 2018). In addition, this perspective can be related to Chesterman's (2016) concept of translation as the cross-cultural dissemination of ideas, whereby stable units of meaning may circulate across linguistic systems while undergoing formal and metaphorical adaptation. Lastly, the analysis is grounded in the understanding that the transfer and diffusion of proverbs are facilitated by sustained cultural contact between linguistic communities (Taylor 1985).

5. Findings

The findings are organised into three sections. The first section (5.1) examines how the term *woman* is defined in Anglo-American dictionaries and how the word *ženska* is defined in Slovenian dictionaries, exploring whether these definitions profoundly differ in reflecting the diverse roles women occupy. The second section (5.2) investigates the extent of shared proverbial culture and assesses how closely the two proverb collections align in reinforcing traditional societal norms. The third section (5.3) analyses a selected sample of cross-linguistically equivalent proverbs and examines their historical and cultural features to explore how these shape their meaning and representation of women.

5.1. *The differences in the dictionary definitions between English and Slovenian*

Based on Merriam-Webster (n.d.) and Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (n.d.), the noun *woman* primarily denotes "an adult female person" (e.g. *a 54-year-old woman; an interesting young woman*). This core biological sense is extended to refer to women as members of specific social or occupational categories, typically in compounds such as *businesswoman*, *councilwoman*, or *Englishwoman* (Merriam-Webster n.d.; Oxford Learner's Dictionaries n.d.). Both dictionaries also include references to women in relation to labour or work roles,

particularly in domestic or manual contexts (e.g. *We used to have a woman do the cleaning*) (Merriam-Webster n.d.; Oxford Learner's Dictionaries n.d.). A further set of meanings describes relational identities, including wife, girlfriend, or female partner (e.g. *He's got a new woman in his life*) (Merriam-Webster n.d.; Oxford Learner's Dictionaries n.d.). In addition, both dictionaries record marked usages. These include archaic or offensive forms of address (e.g. *Be quiet, woman!*) (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries n.d.) as well as informal or evaluative uses referring to emotional or personal devotion (e.g. *a chocolate woman through and through*) (Merriam-Webster n.d.). Finally, idiomatic expressions illustrate culturally embedded uses of the term, such as *be your own man/woman*, *a woman of leisure*, or *hell hath no fury like a woman scorned* (Merriam-Webster n.d.; Oxford Learner's Dictionaries n.d.). Overall, these senses form a structured lexical-semantic network ranging from biological reference to socially, relationally, and pragmatically extended meanings.

The Slovenian dictionary definitions of the word *ženska* ('woman') in the eSSKJ (2016–) also stress biological distinctions, but tend to be more strongly associated with stereotypical representations, primarily expressed through physical descriptors (e.g. *majhna* 'small', *mlada* 'young', *modrooka* 'blue-eyed', *vitka* 'slim', *mirna* 'calm', *prijazna* 'kind', *noseča* 'pregnant', *poročena* 'married', *ženska srednjih let* 'middle-aged'). Further, the entry presents a woman in terms of physical development from girlhood to womanhood (e.g. *kar v nekaj mesecih se je iz dekleta razvila v žensko* 'in just a few months she developed from a girl into a woman') and associates womanhood with socially and behaviourally framed expectations based on gendered assumptions (e.g. *ga bo že preprosila, saj je ženska* 'she will persuade him, as she is a woman'; *v njej je premalo ženske, da bi to razumela* 'there is not enough of a woman in her to understand this'). Importantly, while the core definition itself remains largely neutral, stereotypical and evaluative representations emerge primarily in the usage examples and phraseological units rather than at the definitional level. Further, women are portrayed in phraseological examples as emotionally volatile (e.g. *ženska je kakor aprilsko vreme* 'a woman is like April weather') and cunning (e.g. *kjer vrag ne zmore, ženska pripomore* 'where the devil fails, a woman prevails'). These elements can be interpreted as reflecting evaluative and stereotypical views of women within the broader lexicographic treatment of the entry.

To conclude, the comparison of dictionary definitions of the word *woman* in English and Slovenian suggests differences in the types of semantic features emphasised in each entry. While definitions in both languages begin with neutral biological reference to an adult female human, the English dictionaries extend the meaning primarily through references to social roles, relational identities, and idiomatic usage, reflecting a broad functional and contextual range of meanings. On the other hand, the Slovenian dictionary entry includes a greater proportion of evaluative and descriptive attributes related to physical appearance, personality traits, and stereotypical characterisations. In summary, it can be concluded that the observed differences indicate variation in lexical framing and semantic emphasis across the two lexicographic traditions.

5.2. *The extent of shared proverbial tradition*

The two collections contain 283 proverbs, comprising 211 (75%) Anglo-American proverbs and 72 (25%) Slovenian ones. They were classified into four categories (see Table 2): *Subservient* with 63 proverbs (22%), *Expectations* with 60 proverbs (21%), *Character* with 151 proverbs (53%), and *Opposites* with 9 proverbs (3%). This distribution shows a clear

predominance of the *Character* category, which alone accounts for more than half of the dataset, indicating that women proverbs most frequently describe inherent personal traits.

These four categories were subsequently subdivided into 12 uniform semantic fields (see Table 2). A closer look reveals that the *Character* category (53%) is dominated by strongly evaluative and predominantly negative traits, such as *Troublesome* (17%), *Manipulative* (8.8%), and *Gossipy* (7.4%), although it also includes more ambivalent attributes like *Powerful* (11.3%) and *Mysterious* (8.5%). In contrast, the *Expectations* category (21.5%) is primarily associated with external and socially constructed attributes, particularly *Looks* (9.5%), *Age* (6%), and *Moral qualities* (5.7%), reflecting societal norms imposed on women rather than inherent characteristics. Similarly, the *Subservient* category (22.5%) is largely defined by explicitly hierarchical and negative semantic fields, especially *Domestic* and *Inferior* (both 9.9%), alongside *Misogyny* (2.5%), which directly encodes unequal gender relations. The *Opposites* category (3.2%), although marginal in size, indicates the presence of contradictory or paradoxical representations, which may point to inconsistencies in how women are conceptualised across proverbs.

In summary, the overall representation of women in the combined corpus is mixed, although leaning toward the negative, with relatively limited emphasis on positive or empowering characteristics. It should also be noted that the inclusion of such proverbs in established collections (e.g. dictionaries, proverb collections, etc.) does not itself constitute endorsement; instead, it reflects the linguistic and social realities in which these expressions have circulated but may, in turn, contribute to the continued visibility and potential legitimisation.

Table 2: Overview of the four main semantic fields and the 12 sub-semantic fields

| Character | | | Expectations | | | Subservient | | | Opposites | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|-------------|-----------------|-----------|-------------|------------------|----------|------------|
| Semantic field | No. | % | Semantic field | No. | % | Semantic field | No. | % | Semantic field | No. | % |
| Troublesome | 49 | 17 | Looks | 27 | 9.5 | Domestic | 28 | 9.9 | Opposites | 9 | 3.2 |
| Powerful | 32 | 11.3 | Age | 17 | 6 | Inferior | 28 | 9.9 | | | |
| Manipulative | 25 | 8.8 | Moral | 16 | 5.7 | Misogyny | 7 | 2.5 | | | |
| Mysterious | 24 | 8.5 | | | | | | | | | |
| Gossipy | 21 | 7.4 | | | | | | | | | |
| Total | 151 | 53 | Total | 60 | 21.5 | Total | 63 | 22.5 | Total | 9 | 3.2 |
| Total | 283 proverbs, 100% | | | | | | | | | | |

A closer comparison between the English and Slovenian datasets (see Table 3) reveals several important differences. The Slovenian dataset exhibits a stronger tendency toward negative evaluations, particularly in the case of *Troublesome*, which is considerably more frequent than in the English dataset (22.2% vs. 15.6%), and *Inferior* (13.8% vs. 8.5%). In contrast, the semantic field *Powerful* is almost three times more frequent in English proverbs

(13.3%) than in Slovenian ones (5.6%), suggesting that English proverbs may be more inclined to attribute agency or authority, whereas Slovenian ones tend to downplay it. Similarly, the semantic field *Domestic* appears much more frequently in the Slovenian dataset (15.4%) than in English ones (8%), pointing to a stronger association with traditional or role-based expectations. For categories such as *Manipulative* (8.8% vs. 9.7%) and *Mysterious* (9% vs. 6.9%) the differences are less pronounced.

Certain semantic fields are also notably absent or marginal in the Slovenian dataset. For instance, *Age* appears in the English dataset at 8 % but is entirely absent in the Slovenian dataset (0%). Conversely, *Misogyny* is slightly more present in the Slovenian dataset (4.2%) than in the English ones (2%), although it remains a relatively minor semantic field in both datasets.

Overall, it can be deduced that English proverbs are more evenly distributed across the semantic fields, thus reflecting a more nuanced and diversified perception, whereas the Slovenian dataset is more concentrated around a few semantic fields, particularly *Troublesome*, *Domestic*, and *Inferior*, indicating a more rigid, stereotype-driven, and role-oriented framing.

Table 3: Distribution of proverbs by semantic fields and language

| | English | | | Slovenian | | |
|---------------------|--------------|-----|------|--------------|----|------|
| | | No | % | | No | % |
| Troublesome | Troublesome | 33 | 15,6 | Troublesome | 16 | 22.2 |
| Powerful | Powerful | 28 | 13,3 | Domestic | 11 | 15.4 |
| Inferior | Looks | 20 | 9,5 | Inferior | 10 | 13.8 |
| Domestic | Mysterious | 19 | 9 | Manipulative | 7 | 9.7 |
| Looks | Manipulative | 18 | 8.8 | Looks | 7 | 9.7 |
| Manipulative | Inferior | 18 | 8,5 | Gossipy | 6 | 8.3 |
| Mysterious | Domestic | 17 | 8 | Mysterious | 5 | 6.9 |
| Gossipy | Age | 17 | 8 | Powerful | 4 | 5.6 |
| Age | Gossipy | 15 | 7,1 | Misogyny | 3 | 4.2 |
| Moral | Moral | 14 | 6.5 | Moral | 2 | 2.8 |
| Opposites | Opposites | 8 | 3.7 | Opposites | 1 | 1.4 |
| Misogyny | Misogyny | 4 | 2 | Age | 0 | 0 |
| Total | Total | 211 | 100% | | 72 | 100% |

Overall, despite some proportional differences, the presence of most shared semantic fields across both corpora suggests a considerable degree of overlap in proverbial themes. This indicates that, while emphases may differ, there is a meaningful shared proverbial foundation between the two traditions.

In the following analysis, we demonstrate this by presenting the four categories and the 12 semantic fields within them, supported by proverbs from each language. However, it needs to be emphasised that drawing clear lines between semantic fields can be challenging as many proverbs reflect different nuances on one level, yet share common ideas on another, more general level (Lauhakangas 2001: 24).

The first category, *Subservient*, constitutes three semantic fields:

- The semantic field *Inferior* presents women as subordinate, with little autonomy (*Žena nikomur ne sme dajati daril, ne da bi mož znal za to* ‘A wife must not give gifts to anyone without her husband’s knowledge’), or decision-making power (*What a woman has to say above her whisper isn’t worth listening to*). Women are likened to

prey (*Man is a hunter, woman is his game*), and their value is reduced to domesticity and reproduction (*A woman should be kept barefoot and pregnant and in the kitchen*)¹. These portrayals reinforce the idea of women as possessions rather than individuals, expected to be obedient, silent, and controlled by men.

- The semantic field *Misogyny* promotes mistreatment of women as a form of education (*A dog, a woman and a walnut tree: the more they are beat, the better they are*) and reinforces submission and fear as a woman's rightful place (*Psa drži na verigi, konja na povodcu, žensko v strahu* 'A dog on a chain, a horse on a lead, a woman in fear').
- The proverbs grouped under the semantic field *Domestic* emphasise women's roles and duties within the household. A woman is restricted to her home (*Woman's place is in her home/the house*) where her presence is indispensable, upholding warmth, stability, and functionality (*Hiša ne stoji na zemlji, ampak na ženi* 'The house does not stand on the land, but on the wife'). Women are the backbone of the household (*Pridna žena tri vogle hiše podpira, pa še četrtega pomaga možu nositi* 'A hard-working wife supports three corners of the house and helps her husband carry the fourth').

The second category, *Expectations*, constitutes three semantic fields:

- The semantic field entitled *looks* underscores the emphasis on women's physical appearance, often framing beauty as crucial to success (*A man without ambition is like a woman without looks/beauty*). At the same time, this creates unrealistic expectations to which women are expected to conform (*Inside every fat woman, there is a thin woman trying to get out*), even to the point of prioritising appearance over intellect (*Women are wacky, women are vain: they'd rather be pretty than have a good brain*). On the other hand, certain physical traits are framed negatively. Being tall is seen as a burden in the household (*Bel konj in velika ženska sta dve nesreči pri hiši* 'A white horse and a large woman are two misfortunes at the house'), while being too thin is associated with impracticality (*A skinny woman is like a racehorse: fast and fun but no good for work*). At the same time, a lack of beauty may be seen as protective (*Plain women are as safe as churches*), and ultimately a woman's beauty is enhanced by her husband (*Pava lepša perje, ženo mož* 'A peacock is adorned by its feathers, a woman by her husband').
- The semantic field entitled *Age* reflects societal pressures surrounding the aging process, especially for women. While aging is respected in men, it is presented as a more delicate topic with women (*Age is venerable in a man and would be in a woman if she ever became old*), best avoided in conversation (*A diplomat is a man who always remembers a woman's birthday but never her age*). It should be noted that no corresponding Slovenian proverbs were identified in this semantic field, which may indicate a cultural asymmetry in the proverbial encoding of age-related norms.
- The semantic field entitled *Moral* emphasises a woman's virtue. Her moral character is the most valuable asset in a home (*The best furniture in the house is a virtuous woman*),

¹ Although this proverb could also be associated with the *Domestic* category, it was ultimately classified under *Inferior* due to its dominant semantic focus on power asymmetry, subordination, and lack of female agency. In line with the coding principle adopted in this study, each proverb was assigned to the category reflecting its overarching conceptual meaning rather than secondary thematic associations.

and her actions can either honour or disgrace her husband (*A virtuous woman is a source of honour to her husband, a vicious one causes him a disgrace*). Virtuous women are rare and therefore highly sought after (*Dobre kose ni lahko dobiti, kakor ne dobre žene* 'A good scythe is hard to find, just as a good woman').

The third category, *Character*, constitutes five semantic fields:

- The semantic field *Powerful* portrays women as influential figures in society (*Denar in žene — vladarji zemlje* 'Money and women – the rulers of the earth') and within the household (*Mož pleše, kakor mu žena žvižga* 'The husband dances as his woman whistles'). Their influence is undeniable (*Never underestimate the power of a woman*) as their power shapes the success of those around them (*Behind every great man, there's a great woman*). In more contemporary expressions, women are depicted as independent and self-sufficient, no longer defined by their relationships with men (*A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle*).
- Within the semantic field *Troublesome*, we included proverbs that highlight women as instigators of conflict (*Skoraj ni prepira, ki od žene ne izvira* 'There is hardly a quarrel that doesn't originate from a woman'), a constant source of trouble (*Never quarrel with a woman*). A few even compare their nature to that of animals (*Women and dogs cause too much strife*) or malevolent forces (*A woman knows a bit more than Satan*). A woman's anger and her vengeance are extreme (*There is no fury like a woman's fury*). When a woman takes on an authoritative role within the home, it is often framed as an inversion of natural order (*Kjer žena hlače nosi, si mož kruha prosi* 'Where the woman wears the pants, the man begs for bread'). Proverbs also emphasise the troubles when women need to cooperate (*Dve ženski v kuhinji je huje ko sodni dan* 'Two women in the kitchen is worse than Judgement Day').
- *Manipulative* is another semantic field that permeates negativity as it portrays women as guileful (*To je pribita resnica, ženske so bolj zvite ko lisica* 'It's a truth, women are more cunning than a fox'). Their actions are calculated and self-serving (*Women are saints in the church, angels in the street, devils in the kitchen, and apes in bed*), adapting their behaviour to gain control or influence (*A woman is in pain, a woman's in a woe, a woman's ill when she likes to be so*).
- The semantic field entitled *Mysterious* portrays women as enigmatic and paradoxical (*A woman is the greatest contradiction of all*), elusive in their communication (*You can never pin a woman down to an answer*), fickle (*Vsaka ženska ima svojo čud* 'Every woman has her own character') and exasperating (*Women: you can't live with them and you can't live without them*).
- The proverbs in the semantic field *Gossipy* portray women as overly chatty (*Dve ženski – trg, tri – semenj* 'Two women – market, three – fair'), quick to spread information (*There are three types of communication: telephone, telegraph and tell a woman*), sometimes to the point of indiscretion (*Če se moškemu kaj pove, gre pri enem ušesu notri, pri drugem pa ven; če ženski, gre pri obeh ušesih noter, pri ustih pa ven* 'If a man is told something, it goes in at one ear and out at the other; if a woman, it goes in at both ears and out at the mouth').

The fourth category, *Opposites*, constitutes one semantic field, highlighting the idea that men and women are fundamentally different, each in their own distinct nature and behaviours (*Men are from Mars, women are from Venus*), implying that these differences are difficult to reconcile.

5.3. Cross-linguistically equivalent proverbs and their specifics

This part of the analysis focuses on seven cross-linguistically equivalent proverbs that appear in both languages and convey the same underlying message, even if they differ in metaphors or phrasing. It should be noted that the selection of the seven proverbs presented below is not exhaustive but the result of a deliberate sampling choice. As establishing such cross-linguistic equivalence proved challenging, only the most transparent and analytically robust cases are included. Other potential correspondences were excluded for (1) reasons of scope and (2) where equivalence was less direct, context-dependent, or open to interpretation.

Further, in order to explore the cultural elements embedded in these proverbs, we decided to examine them through a historical lens. Specifically, tracing their earliest recorded attestations was used as a means of situating the proverbs within broader patterns of transmission and potential origin. This diachronic perspective then served as a basis for considering whether culturally specific elements were preserved, adapted, or reinterpreted in the respective linguistic contexts. It should be noted, however, that a deeper investigation of Slovenian proverbs in this section did not yield a comparable range of historically traceable or well-documented examples as in the Anglo-American case, which inevitably affects the depth of diachronic and source-based comparison. All Slovenian proverbs in this section are attested in Šašelj's (1936) collection, except for proverb 5, which is documented in Babič (2021). Apart from their attestation in these two sources, no further information regarding their earlier origins or transmission history seems to be available, and their dating is limited to the time of their inclusion in the respective compilations. This limitation is therefore addressed here in order to avoid repetition across the analysis of the seven examples.

The seven cross-linguistically equivalent proverbs are:

(1) *A good woman is hard to find/Dobre kose ni lahko dobiti, kakor ne dobre žene*

This anti-proverb reworks an established proverb *A good man is hard to find*, popularised by Flannery O'Connor's 1953 widely anthologised short story of the same name, which itself drew on a 1917 song by Eddie Green (Doyle 2007). The Slovenian variant introduces a rural metaphor, comparing a good woman to a good scythe, referencing Slovenia's agrarian past, as noted by literary figure Fran Levstik in his travelogue *A Journey from Litija to Čatež* (Levstik 2012). It is also a fine example of how culture, as the carrier of identity, values, thoughts, concepts, and beliefs, is manifested through language (Kutukdjian & Corbett 2009; Furlong & Bernaus 2017: 37).

(2) *A man without a woman is like a ship without a sail/Človek brez žene kakor soba brez stene*

The proverb draws on the phrase *a ship without a sail* written in 1859 in an article "What is a bachelor" by Launcelot Gossensberry in *Hutchings' Illustrated California Magazine*, which included various analogies for bachelorhood. Later, the proverb as we know it was used in 1909 in *Wilson's Photographic Magazine*, where W. F. Oliver refers to it as the opening line

of an old song titled “A Man without a Woman”. This proverb was later adjusted to suit a feminist movement of the 1970s as an anti-proverb *A man without a woman is like a fish without a bicycle* (Doyle et al. 2012: 159). The Slovenian variant introduces the comparison *like a room without walls* and echoes the nation’s deep cultural attachment to homeownership as the ultimate goal for Slovenian families, symbolising stability, security, and personal identity within one’s living environment (Sendi 2017: 136, 141).

(3) *Women are the devil’s net/Žena je vražja mreža*

The proverb draws on one of the greatest and most influential Spanish works, the play *La Celestina*, written by Fernando de Rojas in 1499. The phrase was first used in English around 1520 (Mieder et al. 1992), most likely referring to Celestina, who represents a subversive element in society, meddling with sexual desire and magical powers, being manipulative, cunning, and morally ambiguous (Newton 1974; Brocato 1996). The Slovenian variant is a direct equivalent of the English version.

(4) *Women are as fickle as April weather/Ženska je kakor aprilsko vreme*

The proverb can be traced back to King Francis I of France, a famous seducer who, after being deceived by one of his many mistresses, is said to have engraved the words “A woman often changes, but he who trusts her is a fool” on the windowpane of his room at the Château de Chambord. This phrase was later popularised by Victor Hugo in his 1832 play *Le Roi s’amuse*, emphasizing the theme of female inconsistency. Lastly, it was Giuseppe Verdi who adopted Hugo’s play into the opera *Rigoletto* in 1851, featuring the aria “La donna è mobile” sung by the Duke of Mantua, which echoes the same sentiment (Classic FM n.d). The Slovenian version compares women to April weather but excludes the word fickle.

(5) *There was never a conflict without a woman/Skoraj ni prepira, ki od žene ne izvira.*

The Anglo-American proverb was, according to Mieder et al. (1992), first recorded in Clarke’s *Paremiologia Anglo-Latina* in 1639, a notable early collection of proverbs. The Slovenian variant is a direct equivalent of the English version.

(6) *No house was ever big enough for two women/Dve ženski v kuhinji je huje ko sodni dan.*

The proverb reflects a long-standing cultural notion of inevitable conflict between equals sharing the same domestic space. According to Mieder et al. (1992), the Anglo-American proverb can be traced back to around 1450 and was later recorded in a compilation of ancient manuscripts entitled *Reliquiae* and edited by Wright and Halliwell in 1845. However, Taylor (1957) argues for an even earlier origin, identifying a related idea in a medieval Latin source quoted by Richard de Bury in *Philobiblon* (1344). At the same time, Archer Taylor emphasises that although this is a relatively old proverb, it has been cited only infrequently and seems to be characteristically English in circulation. More broadly, he situates it within a larger family of traditional expressions, found across Europe, and even in Far East traditions, that convey the idea that two of a kind in close proximity are prone to rivalry or disagreement, often expressed through metaphor rather than literal meaning. Slovenian variant compares the presence of two women in the kitchen to being worse than the doom’s day.

(7) *Two things govern the world—women and gold/Denar in žene — vladarji zemlje*

The proverb highlights the perception of women and wealth as powerful forces that influence or control the world. The Anglo-American version is relatively recent, first recorded in *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (Mieder et al. 1992), which attributes its distribution to the district of Oregon, based on fieldwork across North America between the 1940s and 1970s. Slovenian variant is a direct equivalent of the English version.

The analysis suggests that, out of seven proverbs identified as close equivalents, only the Slovenian proverbs 1 and 2 contain references to culturally specific elements, namely Slovenia's agrarian past and its strong cultural attachment to homeownership, respectively. No explicit cultural references tied to the Anglo-American context could be identified in the Anglo-American proverbs, nor in the Slovenian proverbs 3, 4, 5, and 6. Rather, they all can be interpreted as reflecting more universal patterns of gender representations, particularly those associated with historically dominant patriarchal ideologies, except for proverb 7 that departs from predominantly negative evaluative patterns by presenting women as influential and attributing agency and power to them.

Although the dataset is limited, the analysis suggests that both the Anglo-American and Slovenian proverbs demonstrate how language and folklore can perpetuate stereotypes across time and language.

6. Discussion

The analysis of dictionary definitions of the term *woman* in English and *ženska* in Slovenian reveals that both Anglo-American and Slovenian dictionary definitions begin with a neutral, biological description, but diverge in their broader semantic framing. Anglo-American dictionary entries tend to offer a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of womanhood, acknowledging both traditional and modern identities. Some outdated or stereotypical expressions persist; however, they are typically marked as old-fashioned, humorous, or offensive, signalling an awareness of their problematic nature. In contrast, Slovenian entries, when they extend beyond the biological definition, embed numerous characterisations that associate women with specific physical attributes, emotional instability, and stereotypical behavioural traits, which largely reinforce stereotypes that appear to normalise such representations rather than distance from them. This very issue has also been addressed in a linguistic debate in Slovenia on the language consulting platform *Jezikovna svetovalnica* (Jezikovna svetovalnica n.d.), where the question was raised whether the term *woman* could be defined more equitably in relation to a man. The question titled *Je ženska – človek ali oseba* ('Is a woman a human being or a person?') ("Je ženska – človek ali oseba" n.d.) advocates for more gender-neutral and inclusive language in the representation of both sexes. The dilemma lies in the fact that the word *man* is defined as a person, a somebody, while *woman* is described merely as a human being. Such seemingly small lexical choices, when implemented in reference works, may have far-reaching effects as they help perpetuate traditional views of gender and influence everyday perceptions.

Further, the research revealed the presence of shared semantic fields across both corpora, indicating a rich shared proverbial tradition. The presence of all four overarching categories and a substantial overlap in the 12 identified semantic fields points to a broadly shared conceptualisation of womanhood across the two traditions. Highly frequent fields

(i.e. *Troublesome*, *Inferior*, *Manipulative*, *Domestic*, and *Gossipy*) appear in both corpora, suggesting that negative and stereotypical representations of women may not be culturally specific but form part of a wider, transnational proverbial repertoire. This observation aligns with authors who pointed out that human cognition is not only socially, culturally, linguistically, and contextually dependent, but primarily tends to be universal and symbolic (cf. Dobrovol'skij 1992; Lauhakangas 2001; Brown & Wright-Harp 2011; Cruse 2011). At the same time, it is important to recognise that the meaning of a proverb is shaped by the prevailing values of its time and may change accordingly; proverbs are therefore subject to shifting interpretations based on evolving values, tastes, and attitudes (Taylor 1985). Importantly, Babič (2021: 88) argues that despite certain societal shifts in perceptions of gender roles, core gender stereotypes remain remarkably stable across discourse genres or are even reinforced. Such examples highlight the persistence of gendered stereotypes in society and the role of folkloristic forms as carriers of these representations, concluding that proverbs, in particular, function as enduring vehicles of cultural transmission, preserving and reproducing patterns of thought that may originate in earlier stages of social development but continue to shape contemporary discourse.

Next, the analysis focused on seven cross-linguistically equivalent proverbs, indicating the same underlying message despite formal or metaphorical differences. Of these, only two Slovenian proverbs contain clearly identifiable culturally specific elements. The rest show no culturally specific adaptations and rather reflect broadly shared themes, particularly the portrayal of women as troublesome, manipulative, or socially disruptive. This underscores the enduring influence of patriarchal thought. A brief look at history reveals persistent misogyny, as pointed out by Ramšak (2004): The Greeks were openly hostile to women, while the Romans, though more permissive, remained ambivalent; the Middle Ages were especially harsh, portraying women as sinful and in need of punishment. Medieval literature often depicted them as passionate, gossipy, hypocritical, and incapable of keeping secrets. The enduring trope of the talkative, untrustworthy woman, often punished to be controlled, appeared across religious, literary, and oral traditions, typically voiced by men but sometimes passed on by women themselves (Ramšak 2004: 122). This sentiment, which eventually found its way into proverbs, was widely endorsed by those who authored the moral and ideological narratives of their age (Račić 2023: 113–14). One such figure was the influential and leading theologian Thomas Aquinas of the 13th century, who argued that women were inherently inferior due to their passive souls and weaker intellect, describing them as accidents of nature whose primary purpose was childbearing and supporting men (McCluskey 2007: 2; Petri 2016: 277; Early 2024: 5). This also aligns with Litovkina (2018), who noted that proverbs have preserved discriminatory attitudes toward women for centuries, reinforcing cultural norms that devalue and marginalise them, helping to perpetuate traditional gender roles with deeply ingrained patriarchal structures. Further, this is also in line with Mieder (2004: 146–48) and Burger et al. (2012: 224–72), who contend that proverbs serve to uphold established systems and norms, often presented as teachings of moral values and social skills, and are firmly embedded in child-rearing practices within families and educational settings.

7. Conclusion

The research represents the first cross-linguistic comparison of Anglo-American and Slovenian proverbs featuring the word *woman*; it integrates semantic field analysis with cultural and historical contextualisation. It demonstrates that cultural values, societal experiences, and underlying ideologies are not only embedded in proverbs but can be found even in dictionary definitions, as seen in the Slovenian word entry for *ženska*, which perpetuates traditional and stereotypical representations to a much greater extent than the more inclusive and multifaceted portrayals found in Anglo-American dictionary entries. Additionally, the research uncovered a number of shared semantic fields across both corpora, pointing to a rich shared proverbial tradition. While the analysis of cross-linguistically equivalent proverbs did not uncover many culturally specific elements, it did highlight the universality of human thought and the pervasive influence of patriarchal values, portraying women as subordinate, emotionally unstable, or morally questionable. However, the research also identified proverbs that acknowledge women's strength and independence; particularly more recent Anglo-American creations, shaped by feminist thought and the women's liberation movement, signal a shift toward more equitable gender representations.

A limitation inherent in this study, which requires caution when generalising beyond the current sample, is that the two corpora, despite very thorough research, may not be exhaustive – an insurmountable challenge in proverb studies. Additionally, when providing translations of the Slovenian proverbs, it must be acknowledged that certain semantic and cultural nuances may be partially lost or modified. In this sense, the findings highlight that proverb translation cannot be reduced to a purely lexical process but involves varying degrees of adaptation to convey culturally embedded meanings. This is particularly evident in cases where equivalent proverbs differ in imagery or metaphorical structure across the two languages. As argued in translation studies, translation entails processes of selection and recontextualization rather than neutral transfer. In this respect, the translation of proverbs may contribute to the maintenance or modification of culturally embedded representations, particularly those related to gender and social relations.

In the future, given the notable lack of research on Slovenian proverbs that reference women, more extensive and systematic studies are needed. In particular, attention should be given to women's anti-proverbs in Slovenian context, an area where research is currently non-existent. Exploring this would provide valuable insights into whether traditional gender roles are being challenged or subverted in contemporary language use. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to conduct a semantic field analysis of proverbs featuring the word *man/moški/mož* to examine how men are positioned relative to categories established in this study. Such an analysis could offer a deeper understanding of the societal values and gender dynamics encoded in language and whether similar mechanisms of stereotyping, idealisation, and critique apply to male figures.

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