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**‘AS THE SAYING (OR WHATEVER) GOES’: SAYINGS AND PSEUDO-SAYINGS
IN THE AMERICAN PRESS**

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to investigate how the phrase ‘as the (old) saying goes’ is actually used in journalism—especially in the American press—and what types of units it introduces or refers to. We highlight the importance and pervasiveness of this phrase in this type of register as over 10,000 article results have been yielded by the online archives of *The New York Times* containing the target phrase. We claim that this string is applied to an enormous range of words and phrases going from adjectives, collocations and lexical bundles to actual sayings, proverbs and quotations. Our ultimate objective is to find out, observe and examine modern (and also less modern), popular proverbial phrases that seem to crop up in journalistic discourse.

Key-words: introductory phrase, lexicalisation, proverbs, quotations, journalistic discourse.

1. “As the (old) saying goes”

The epistemological reason for this study lies in the hypothetically high possibility of coming across an important number of set phrases, idioms, sayings, proverbs and other types of sentence-like units such as slogans, catchphrases and so forth being used in combination with the introductory phrase ‘as the (old) saying goes’. This phrase can be analysed as a metalinguistic remark or comment on the use of an expression, saying or proverb, or, as it will be shown in what follows, on the use of slang, of a non-standard sense of a word, or to put it in a nutshell, on any deviation from the speaker’s “regular” use of language. It could be stated that this phrase has clearly become a reflex response or action among speakers, and particularly among journalists. The variant ‘as the old saying goes’ is far less used and this is confirmed by a scanty number of 61 occurrences in the online archives of *The New York Times*. However, we have decided to look into it in order to account for potential differences of choice of target sayings or syntactic structures. Obviously other semantically or pragmatically synonymous expressions such as ‘as they say’, ‘as the proverb says’, ‘as my grandmother used to say’, ‘it is true that’, ‘everybody knows that’, etc. are also possible in this context (Mieder, 2004).

This phrase is noticeably interpolated or added to the text in which it can have three different positions. It may occupy the head of the phrase, sentence or text, in which case it serves as an introduction, but it can also be inserted inside the actual saying or expression or even occupy a final position, functioning as a sort of coda.

It is worthwhile trying to differentiate and delimit the terms ‘saying’ and ‘proverb’, a real challenge and an extremely arduous task since the distinction is undoubtedly rather vague and blurred. A starting point could be what Strässler had to say on the subject in 1982:

“Proverbs and sayings are mostly taken as different types, although there is no difference to be noticed in the OED. A proverb is “a short pithy saying in common use”, a saying “something that is said: a dictum, a proverb”. The agreed distinction is the free place in a saying (mostly the subject), which is occupied in a proverb.” (Strässler, 1982: 16)

It is clear that nowadays ‘saying’ is used as an umbrella term in lexicography to lump together all different types of fixed, idiomatic sentence-like units such as catchphrases, maxims, slogans, adages, aphorisms, clichés, dicta, epigrams, idioms, mottos, proverbs, refrains, quotations, allusions or gambits. Our main concern is to examine the inordinate amount of more or less fixed and more or less idiomatic expressions introduced by this phrase as well as to set out a typology according to frequency and usage. We have decided to focus on one single type of discourse, the media discourse, for the following reasons: firstly, because online newspaper archives constitute an amazingly vast database for lexical and phraseological research and secondly, because this phrase has become a sort of padding, a pet phrase or verbal mannerism especially among journalists.

The phrase can be found, with different levels of frequency, in all sorts of written or spoken genres. For the purposes of this study we have limited our research to the American newspaper *The New York Times*. It is, on the one hand, the epitome of American journalism and, on the other hand, its online archives go back to the foundation of the newspaper, exactly to 1851, which allows an interesting diachronic comparison as far as uses are concerned and which has proved extremely revealing. Besides all this, these archives allow exact searches when using a combination of words, which is, for the objectives of this investigation, absolutely essential. The fact of not having access to the whole article, or even to a larger linguistic context, has not prevented the finding and retrieval of the searched-for results since sayings or expressions occur systematically in the near context of the target phrase.

2. Research method

In order to observe and analyse the actual use of this phrase in journalistic discourse we created a corpus of 500 examples including the string ‘as the saying goes’. A random sample of 500 occurrences containing this phrase was selected from the online archives of *The New York Times* out of a total of over 10,000 results yielded by the search engine of this newspaper. It must be stated that the combinations of our target phrase and a saying or pseudo-saying¹ are practically all nonce uses, which shows their extreme lack of institutionalisation or recurrence. The only exception in our corpus is represented by the

combination of ‘as the saying goes’ and the saying *A picture is worth a thousand words*, with a meagre number of three different tokens.

A second corpus of 61 occurrences was created, following the same procedures as for the main corpus, including the variant form ‘as the old saying goes’. All occurrences were then manually analysed for the purpose of typological classification.

3. Typology

The range of words and phrases introduced or referred to by the target phrase is strikingly varied and heterogeneous. They include adjectives, collocations, fixed non-idiomatic phrases and lexical bundles, idioms, similes and comparisons, conversational formulae, slang words and phrases, substandard lexis, professional jargon, sayings and proverbs, proverb extensions, antiproverbs and quotations. These results prove the high level of lexicalisation of the target phrase, which is used in a wide range of co-occurrences and that, in a great number of cases, should be understood as synonymous with ‘as they say’, as shown in (1):

(1) *That dress for example: it fits perfectly, but **it seems to be wearing her**², as the saying goes.*

3.1. Adjectives

At the lower end of the typological range the target phrase is used to introduce or refer to adjectives. This combination shows the highest level of lexicalisation of the target phrase as it accompanies a single-word unit or a compound adjective as in (3). The inverted commas in examples (3) and (5) function as an emphasising or intensifying device, further marking the unfamiliarity or strangeness of the adjective in question but also the personal linguistic stance on the part of the journalist:

(2) *An international patent is, as the saying goes, **pending**.*

(3) *It is easy to learn to fly in the very stable latest types of machines which, as the saying goes, are “**fool-proof**.”*

(4) *They were not **political**, as the saying goes.*

It is interesting to notice that some of the examples found date back to the 19th century and early 20th century, which accounts for a rather early lexicalisation of this phrase:

(5) *[...] and he came to the conference “**primed**,” as the saying goes. (17/01/1895)*

(6) *Mr. Shaw’s plays, for instance, are not especially **moving**, as the saying goes. (20/11/1910)*

(7) *He will make it, as the saying goes, **snappy**. (04/10/1921)*

3.2. Collocations

Second to adjectives are collocations. These are recurrent word combinations that tend to appear together in texts. The types found in our corpus are *noun + verb*, *verb + noun*, *adverb + adjective*, *verb + adjective* and *verb + adverb* collocations, a selection of which is provided in examples from (8) to (12):

(8) *Complications*, as the saying goes, **ensue**.

(9) They **remained**, as the saying goes, **friends**.

(10) [...] when she discovers that her daughter is, as the saying goes, **sexually active**.

(11) He **“felt lucky,”** as the saying goes, and he knew that he could “get action” without any limit at his favorite game. (19/03/1905)

(12) He **talks easily**, as the saying goes, but his readiness in that line has [...] (03/07/1921)

As with adjectives, an early 20th-century example as the one in (12) seems to corroborate the rather early use of the target phrase in combination with collocations. The unconscious linguistic awareness of the collocational phenomenon is signalled then by the use of the target phrase.

3.3. Fixed non-idiomatic phrases and lexical bundles

Fixed-non idiomatic phrases are semantically compositional prepositional or adverbial phrases such as those in (13), (14) and (15) which can also be associated to the target phrase. On the other hand, lexical bundles are extended collocations, i.e. bundles of words with a tendency to occur together as the one found in (16). In either case it is not idiomaticity or non-compositionality that triggers off the use of the target phrase but rather polylexicity:

(13) **In real life**, as the saying goes, *Hank Wangford is Dr. Sam Hutt, 47, a National Health Service physician who [...]*

(14) **Due to popular demand**, as the saying goes, *Mr. Paul had to scrap plans to hold [...]*

(15) *The momentous announcement was received **with mixed emotions**, as the saying goes.*

(16) *“Los Angeles **had nothing to lose**, as the saying goes, so they could make changes like that.*

3.4. Idioms

This is a very important group from a quantitative point of view. Idioms are usually included in different collections and dictionaries of proverbs in the same way as sayings or proverbs are not rare in dictionaries of idioms³:

(19) *As the saying goes, **it was all Greek to me**.*

(20) *I took up chess because of him when I was pre-teen – he was **“all the rage”** at the time, as the saying goes.*

(21) *We preferred to make our own **from “scratch”**, as the saying goes.*

(22) *He knew the Rogues’ Gallery **by heart**, as the saying goes.*

(23) *The prohibition issue will not “**cut much ice,**” as the saying goes, in the present campaign.*

(24) *“Everything is **up in the air** now, as the saying goes,” said the Senator.*

(25) [...] *leaving the task of designing actual sound equipment to practical engineers who, as the saying goes, often **fly by the seat of their pants.***

Idioms represent the largest group of multi-word units which could be considered closest to the general and popular idea of a ‘saying’. It is then not surprising that this type is well represented in our corpus.

3.5. Similes and comparisons

Traditional or modern comparative formulae have also been found in combination with the target phrase. They are much less frequent than the previous type but, on the other hand, they represent a closer stance to the general idea of ‘saying’ or ‘proverb’ among non-specialist native speakers:

(26) *It was created by Marina Polvay, a fine Russian-born cook, and the pie is, as the saying goes, **richer than sin.***

(27) *It was **as easy,** as the saying goes, **as rolling off a log.***

The amount of similes of the type *white as snow* or *fresh as a cucumber* are remarkably numerous in, for instance, Whiting’s *Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings*. We consider that this lexicographical choice responds to the widespread belief that similes are both sayings and proverbial.

3.6. Conversational formulae

Although only two examples have been found in our corpus, informal conversational formulae can be actually and potentially accompanied or introduced by the target phrase:

(28) *Whether you choose a sleek catamaran, teak schooner, teeny trimaran, or a windsurf board or kiteboards, as the saying goes: **Just do it!***

(29) *As the saying goes, **forget it.***

The scant number of hits can be explained by the fact that this type of formula is, for obvious reasons, infrequent in journalistic texts.

3.7. Slang, informal or substandard register

Let us examine the words in bold type in the following examples:

(30) *Maybe we, black and white, just didn’t **want it bad** enough, as the saying goes.*

(31) *That, as the saying goes, is **a hell of** a note.*

(32) *The plot, however, **creaks,** as the saying goes, and the two really capable juvenile leads...*

(33) *As the saying goes, something had **clicked.** Zoe hit the last toss squarely, and the purple ball [...]*

(34) *In the technology world, Mr. Swartz is **kind of a big deal**, as the saying goes.*

(35) *Grove Strangler in his triumphant summer tour, wrapped his two hands around the windpipe of an opponent who was, as the saying goes, **dissing** him.*

(36) *There are wealthy people, usually elderly ones, and estates that have, as the saying goes, **money to burn**. (29/07/1894)*

(37) *“As the saying goes, ‘**Head ‘em up, move ‘em out.**’*

(38) *Well, we will know **more later**, as the saying goes.*

This type clusters together various deviant or sub-standard uses of words as well as slang words and expressions. In (30) the informal use of the adjective *bad* in lieu of the adverb *badly* activates the use of the target phrase. As for (32) and (33) it is the special informal meaning of the verbs *creak* and *click* respectively that makes them ‘special’ and therefore appropriate for the metalinguistic remark. The use of substandard English is conscious and conspicuous in (37) and (38) and the target phrase serves in both examples as a sort of personal excuse on the part of the journalist.

3.8. Professional jargon

The awareness of a certain type of jargon phraseology or parlance is also a triggering factor for the use of the target phrase. Examples are numerous and varied and the expressions involved tend to be powerful and vivid. Although we have found examples related to different professional fields and technical domains, most of them are proper either to business or to sports:

(39) *Executives of the American Motors Corporation are not trying, as the saying goes, **to lose money on each sale, but make it up in volume**.*

(40) *There is a widespread perception that, as the saying goes, **in good times you should advertise, but in bad times you must**.*

(41) ***Inflation**, as the saying goes, **is caused by too much money chasing too few goods**.*

(42) *I never thought I’d be wishing for inflation, but as the saying goes, **“inflation maims, deflation kills.”***

(43) *Still, nervous investors may prefer to stick with investments that can be valued, as the saying goes, by **letting the market decide**.*

(44) *As the saying goes, **real estate is all about location, location, location**.*

(45) *For now, both players were **on serve**, as the saying goes.*

(46) *As the saying goes in baseball, both games were **hotly contested**...*

(47) ***Letting the ball do a lot of running**, as the saying goes in soccer, and playing with more heart, the Irish proved more effective for the greater part...*

(48) *A point guard often has the ball **when the shot clock is short**, as the saying goes in the league.*

(49) *He won the next diamond and **“went into the tank,”** as the saying goes.*

The expressions in bold type in examples from (39) to (44) are characteristic of the business, finance, marketing and real estate milieus. Examples from (45) to (49) show expressions used in different sports. The phrase ‘go into the tank’ is used in poker and means ‘to think very hard about your next play’. A ‘shot-clock’ is a timer designed to increase the pace, and consequently the score, in games such as basketball. The expression ‘when the short-clock is short’ thus speaks for itself.

3.9. Sayings and proverbs

This is the most important type both quantitatively and qualitatively. Apart from traditional proverbs and sayings—which, in general, do not abound—, there seems to be an inexhaustible amount of more or less modern proverbs which illustrate the vitality and strength of multi-word units in American journalistic discourse:

(52) *As the saying goes, “**Hurt me twice, shame on me.**”*

(53) *“**Much honor, many enemies,**” as the saying goes.*

(54) *As the saying goes: **Nobody ever beats the river.***

(55) *As the saying goes, **if you can remember the 1960s you probably weren’t there.***

(56) *As the saying goes, **after sex all animals are sad.***

(57) *As the saying goes, **it takes a lot of beer to make a little wine,** meaning that more than a few [...]*

(58) ***Knowledge is power,** as the saying goes.*

(59) *As the saying goes, **life is like a revolving door.***

(60) *As the saying goes “**Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.**”*

(61) *As the saying goes, **nothing focuses the mind like one’s own hanging.***

(62) *When it comes to Sarah Bernhardt, as the saying goes: **you can dip a frog in honey but it doesn’t mean I’ll eat it.***

(63) ***Sex sells,** as the saying goes, and, according to most studies, the number [...]*

(64) *“**War,** as the saying goes, **is too important to be left to the generals.**”*

(65) *But as the saying goes, **the more things change, the more they stay the same.***

(66) *As the saying goes, “**If Mohammed won’t come to the mountain [...]**”*

(67) *If **patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels,** as the saying goes, then [...]*

(68) ***Culture leads politics,** as the saying goes.*

(69) *If, as the saying goes, **there are no atheists in foxholes,** there [...]*

(70) *As the saying goes, **money goes to money.***

(71) *As the saying goes: “**Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.**”*

(72) *As the saying goes, “**quality is a journey, not a destination.**”*

(73) *“As the saying goes, **from the bitter comes sometimes the sweet,**” Rabbi Spielman said.*

(74) *Or as the saying goes, “**God looks after fools, drunkards and the United States.**”*

(75) *“**Talk,** as the saying goes, **is cheap.**”*

(76) *No guts, no galaxy*, as the saying goes around Battletech Center.

(77) “As the saying goes, *There is no sinner without a future and no saint without a past*,” Mr. Dodd said.

(78) “*Successful people are too busy*, as the saying goes, *to take care of the chickens*.”

The phrase in (60) is “[a]ttributed to Thomas Alva Edison, U.S. inventor and businessman (1847-1931) [and q]uoted in the Washington Post 10 May 1915.” (Yale Book of Quotations 2006: 226). The origin of the phrase in (64) is to be found in a quotation also attested in the Yale Book of Quotations:

War is too important to be left to the generals. Attributed to the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929). *La guerre! C’est une chose trop grave pour la confier à des militaires*.
“*War is too serious a matter to entrust to military men*” (YBQ 2006: 158)

3.10. Extended proverbs

A traditional proverb is reinterpreted by extending its meaning by means of a comment or a remark:

(79) As the saying goes: *To err is human, but it takes a computer to really foul things up*.

(80) As the saying goes, “*when it comes to schools, there’s no place like home⁴!*”

(81) *Comparisons*, as the saying goes, *are odious, but sometimes unavoidable*.

(82) As the saying goes, *the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, and that is especially true for cyclists*.

(83) As the saying goes, *every dark cloud has a silver lining, and so it is with bad contracts*.

(84) *Life is short and so am I*, as the saying goes.

These extended proverbs can have, as in (82), a restrictive effect. In (84) it is rather a matter of syllepse and humoristic effect.

3.11. Antiproverbs

Antiproverbs—the manipulation of a traditional proverb by means of lexical substitution—represents an important means of achieving stylistic effect in journalistic discourse. This phenomenon is related to the unfreezing or destabilization of fixed expressions and idioms (Moon 1998: 40):

(85) *It was*, as the saying goes, *lust at first sight*, a lust that turned to love. (< love at first sight).

(86) “Yes, he has been accused of being a terrorist, although, as the saying goes, *one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter*.” (< One man’s meat is another man’s poison).

(87) *But good news is good news*, as the saying goes, and especially may it be said... (< No news is good news).

(88) *Nothing succeeds like failure*, as the saying goes. (< Nothing succeeds like success).

(89) *As the saying goes, the President proposes and Congress disposes.* (< Man proposes and God disposes).

3.12. Quotations and catchphrases

An important number of examples in our corpus correspond to quotations and catchphrases. No distinction is made in the speakers' mind concerning these two different varieties as shown in examples from (90) to (94):

(90) *As the saying goes, "when it comes to schools, there's no place like home!"*

(91) *"Plaintiff has been, as the saying goes, 'hoist by his own petard,' and this attempt [...]"*

(92) *"As the saying goes, it was all Greek to me."*

(93) *"This is a positive sign, but as the saying goes, we will wait and see."*

(94) *It's true, as the saying goes, that she married Paul Gibson, the New York Yankees pitcher, for better or for worse, but not necessarily for lunch.*

The quotations in (91) and (92) are attributed to William Shakespeare, according to the Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins (1990: 113; 105), whereas that in (93) is attributed to Daniel Defoe as registered in the Oxford Dictionary of Catchphrases (2003: 300).

The following quotation from the Oxford Dictionary of Catchphrases explains the origin of the phrase "I married him for better or worse but not for lunch":

"A play on one of the traditional Christian wedding vows, that has become a catchphrase among women's groups and organizations in the USA and the UK, used with reference to adjusting to married life after a husband's retirement, or the onset of memory loss or senility. The exact origins of the phrase are uncertain, but it was popular in both countries by the early 1960s. It has been ascribed to both the Duchess of Windsor, who used it when noting her husband would lunch on his own while she went about her business, as well as to Hazel Weiss, who uttered the line in 1960, after her husband, George Weiss, retired as manager of the New York Yankees." (Oxford Dictionary of Catchphrases, 2003, p. 155)

4. "As the old saying goes"

Only 61 occurrences corresponding to this phrase have been found in our corpus. Interestingly enough, this variant phrase tends to occupy the initial position as illustrated in the following examples:

(95) *As the old saying goes, a rising tide lifts all boats.*

(96) *As the old saying goes, two minds are better than one.*

(97) *As the old saying goes, in vino veritas.*

(98) *As the old saying goes, he who seeks revenge had best dig two graves, one for his victim and one for himself.*

(99) *As the old saying goes, providence moves slowly but the devil always hurries.*

(100) *As the old saying goes*, “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

These results demonstrate that this variant phrase has not gone through the same process of lexicalisation as the target phrase ‘as the saying goes’ and thus keeps its original meaning, as in (97), even though some of the sayings may be not as old as thought as illustrated in (95) and (98).

5. Frequency of use

A search carried out on the 20 September 2001 on <<http://www.google.com>> yielded interesting results as far as frequency of use is concerned. Table 1 shows a selection of proverbs, sayings and quotations found in our corpus ranging from extremely high frequency to nonce-forms:

Table 1. A selection of proverb, sayings and quotations and number of results in the World Wide Web

Proverbs, sayings and quotations	Google hits
<i>Knowledge is power.</i>	7,680,000
<i>Sex sells.</i>	2,340,000
<i>Life is like a revolving door.</i>	65,400
<i>War is too important to be left to the generals.</i>	28,600
<i>After sex all animals are sad.</i>	9,020
<i>Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.</i>	8,330
<i>If you can remember the 1960s you probably weren't there.</i>	584
<i>Nobody ever beats the river.</i>	59
<i>Much honor, many enemies.</i>	1
<i>Nothing focuses the mind like one's own hanging.</i>	1

6. Conclusions

The results of our research show that the phrase ‘as the saying goes’ has undergone a process of lexicalisation and is used, in numerous cases, as synonymous with ‘as they say’. It occupies several positions in the sentence and actually introduces or refers to an extremely wide range of words, word combinations and phrases. On the contrary, the variant ‘as the old saying goes’ tends to be used as an introducer⁵ and refers, in a high proportion, to regular or traditional sayings and proverbs. Examples of the non-standard or lexicalised use of the phrase ‘as the saying goes’ have been found as early as the mid-1800s in American journalism, especially in the business and sports sections. This phrase is triggered by the linguistic awareness of speakers and represents an example of a metalinguistic comment or

remark. It should be noted the high correlation between the choice of the initial position and the use of traditional or modern proverbs. However, there is no substantial evidence concerning institutionalised links between the target phrase and certain proverbs or sayings. The use of introductory formulae remains a research strategy to pinpoint and retrieve modern proverbs or even nonce proverbs as well as more or less famous quotations that will (or will not) eventually become proverbial.

Notes

1. As a working definition, the term ‘pseudo-saying’ corresponds here to any word, word combination or phrase taken by the speaker or writer as a saying or proverb but not actually being one. These include quotations, slogans, catchphrases, slang words or expressions, etc.
2. We have highlighted in bold the items (either single words or phrases) introduced or referred to by the target phrase.
3. Let us mention that the proverb *Fools rush in where angels fear to tread* is listed together with *fool’s gold* or *live in a fool’s paradise* in the Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms. *Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned* makes part of the nomenclature of the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms and is included under the headword *hell*.
4. This phrase is originally a “[l]ine from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, starring Judy Garland as Dorothy, a young girl who finds herself lost in Oz and longing for home.” (Oxford Dictionary of Catchphrases, p. 291)
5. For other introducers see František Čermák’s “Text Introducers of Proverbs and Other Idioms” (see references).

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Curriculum vitae

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² We have highlighted in bold the items (either single words or phrases) introduced or referred to by the target phrase.

³ Let us mention that the proverb *Fools rush in where angels fear to tread* is listed together with *fool’s gold* or *live in a fool’s paradise* in the Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms. *Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned* makes part of the nomenclature of the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms and is included under the headword *hell*.

⁴ This phrase is originally a “[l]ine from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, starring Judy Garland as Dorothy, a young girl who finds herself lost in Oz and longing for home.” (Oxford Dictionary of Catchphrases, p. 291)

⁵ For other introducers see František Čermák’s “Text Introducers of Proverbs and Other Idioms” (see references).