

“The best things in life are free.” Some aspects of punning in Anglo-American anti-proverbs

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Abstract

For centuries, proverbs have provided a framework for endless transformation. In recent decades, proverb modification has taken such proportions that sometimes we can even meet more proverb transformations than traditional proverbs. Wolfgang Mieder has invented the term anti-proverb (or in German Antispruchwort) for such deliberate proverb innovations, also known as alterations, parodies, transformations, variations, wisecracks, mutations, or fractured proverbs. The present study focuses on punning, one of the most popular techniques of proverb variation. My discussion is organized in two parts. After a few lines of introduction, in the first part of the study (Section 2) I address the background of anti-proverb (Section 2.1.) and pun (Section 2.2.) research and terminology. The second part of this study (Section 3) is devoted to the discussion of various aspects of punning in Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money. Section 3.1. lists the proverbs containing the word “money” and a numbers of variations. Section 3.2. treats various types of punning in Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money (such as paronyms, homonyms, homophones, repetitive puns, double and triple puns). While Section 3.3. explores the favourite words of punsters in Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money, Section 3.4. considers ambivalence in puns and touches upon ‘good’ and ‘bad’ puns. Finally, in Section 3.5. I list and exemplify some themes emerging in Anglo-American proverb transformations about money, in which punning takes place.

Keywords: Anglo-American, anti-proverb, money, pun, ambiguity.

1. Introduction

The study¹ aims to analyse various aspects of punning in Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money. The Anglo-American anti-proverbs discussed and analysed in the present study were

¹ Some parts of this study (including the texts of anti-proverbs) have appeared or have been published in Litovkina 2005, 2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2015; Mieder & Tóthné Litovkina, 1999; Litovkina & Mieder, 2006; Litovkina et al., 2008, 2021; Litovkina & Vargha, 2013. I would like to express my gratitude to the reviewers of the article for their valuable comments and suggestions. I am grateful as ever to Judy Sollosy for ‘anglicizing’ my study.

taken primarily from American and British written sources². The texts of anti-proverbs were drawn from hundreds of books and articles on puns, one-liners, toasts, wisecracks, quotations, aphorisms, maxims, quips, epigrams, and graffiti, the vast majority of which have been published in two collections of anti-proverbs compiled by Wolfgang Mieder and Anna Litovkina: *Twisted Wisdom: Modern Anti-Proverbs* (Mieder & Tóthné Litovkina, 1999) and *Old Proverbs Never Die, They Just Diversify: A Collection of Anti-Proverbs* (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006). As a rule, anti-proverbs that embrace more than one type of pun will be quoted and discussed only once, except in cases in which only a few anti-proverbs have been identified to illustrate a specific category.

2. Anti-proverbs and puns

In the first part of the study, I treat the background of anti-proverb and pun research and terminology.

2.1. Anti-proverbs

2.1.1. Background of research and terminology

For centuries, proverbs have provided a framework for endless transformation. In recent decades, proverb modification has taken such proportions that sometimes we can even meet more proverb transformations than traditional proverbs. Wolfgang Mieder has invented the term *anti-proverb* (or in German *Antispruchwort*) for such deliberate proverb innovations, also known as alterations, parodies, transformations, variations, wisecracks, mutations, or fractured proverbs. This term has been widely accepted by proverb scholars all over the world as a general label for such innovative alterations and reactions to traditional proverbs: *антипословица* (Russian), *anti-proverb* (English), *anti(-)proverbe* (French) (see the general discussion of the genre of anti-proverbs in Litovkina, 2005; Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, pp. 1–54; Litovkina et al., 2021, pp. 1–51; Hrisztova-Gotthardt et al., 2023).

Although proverb transformations arise in a variety of forms, several types nevertheless stand out. There are a number of mechanisms of proverb variation (which are by no means mutually exclusive), e.g., replacing a single word, substituting two or more words, changing the second part of the proverb, adding new words, repeating words, melding two proverbs, punning, word order reversal, reversal of sounds, and so on.

Anti-proverbs may contain revealing social comments (*American money talks in just about every foreign country* (McKenzie, 1980, p. 343) {*Money talks*}³; *A condom a day keeps the doctor away* (Mieder, 1991, p. 99) {*An apple a day keeps the doctor away*}), but they may also be based on mere wordplay or puns, and they may very often be generated solely for the goal of deriving play forms (*Monkey is the route to all people* (Rees, 1980, p. 91) {*Money is the root of all evil*}).

Typically, an anti-proverb will elicit humour only if the traditional proverb upon which it is based is also known, thus allowing the reader or listener to perceive the incongruity (violation of expectation) between the two expressions. Otherwise, the innovative strategy of

² The vast majority of the examples were found when I was in the USA and Great Britain, being supported by a Fulbright research grant and by a Hungarian State Eötvös Scholarship which enabled me to conduct research at the Department of Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley (1998–1999) and at Oxford University Press (2003).

³ For the reader's convenience all anti-proverbs in this study are followed by their original forms, provided in {} brackets.

communication based on the juxtaposition of the old and “new” proverb is lost. The juxtaposition of the traditional proverb text with an innovative variation forces the reader or listener into a more critical thought process. Whereas the old proverbs acted as preconceived rules, the modern anti-proverbs are intended to make us reconsider the naive acceptance of traditional wisdom. Because it always refers to an original text, the innovative anti-proverb can be understood as the appearance of intertextuality: to use Neal Norrick’s terminology (1989: 117), we can call anti-proverbs “intertextual jokes.” As Norrick points out, “Intertextuality occurs any time one text suggests or requires reference to some other identifiable text or stretch of discourse, spoken or written” (Norrick, 1989, p. 117).

There are highly productive proverbs in Litovkina & Mieder’s corpus of Anglo-American anti-proverbs that have given rise to over 30 anti-proverbs⁴. The 20 Anglo-American proverbs most frequently transformed are listed below (see Litovkina, 2005, p. 24; Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, pp. 12–13). Each proverb is followed by a number in parentheses indicating the number of anti-proverbs that has been located for it):

- Old soldiers never die (, they simply fade away). (79)
- If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again. (65)
- Money talks. (65)
- An apple a day keeps the doctor away. (63)
- A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. (49)
- Never [Don’t] put off till [until] tomorrow what you can do today. (48)
- A fool and his money are soon parted. (47)
- Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise. (46)
- To err is human (, to forgive divine). (45)
- Opportunity knocks but once. (43)
- Two can live as cheap(ly) as one. (41)
- A man is known by the company he keeps. (38)
- The meek shall inherit the earth. (38)
- Money [The love of money] is the root of all evil. (37)
- Behind every great [successful] man there is a woman. (36)
- Here today, (and) gone tomorrow. (36)
- The early bird catches the worm. (35)
- Money can’t [doesn’t] buy happiness. (34)
- Money isn’t everything. (34)
- Where there’s a will, there’s a way. (34)

The proverbs listed above are, of course, among the most popular in Anglo-American tradition. Otherwise, if the reader or listener were unaware of the traditional proverb, the innovative strategy of communication based on the juxtaposition of old and “new” proverb would be lost. Analysis of the proverbs from the list above is beyond the scope of this study, though just a brief glance at it tells us that many of the proverbs are about money.

⁴ The lists of German, French, Russian, and Hungarian proverbs most frequently parodied can be found in Litovkina et al. (2021, pp. 22–28).

2.1.2. Most frequent themes of proverb transformations

All's fair for anti-proverbs – there is hardly a topic that Anglo-American anti-proverbs do not address. Among the most frequent themes discussed in proverb alterations are women (see Litovkina, 2005; 2018; Litovkina & Mieder, 2019, etc.), sexuality (see Litovkina, 2018, pp. 149–170; Litovkina & Mieder, 2019, pp. 65–79, etc.), professions and occupations (see Litovkina, 2005, 2016, etc.), marriage and love (Litovkina, 2018; Litovkina & Mieder, 2019, etc.), children and parents (Litovkina, 2024), and so on.

Without any doubt, money is a frequent theme in Anglo-American anti-proverbs. Indeed, a brief glance at the 20 most popular proverbs for transformation from the list above (see Section 2.1.1.) tells us that many of the most frequently transformed proverbs in Mieder and Litovkina's collections of anti-proverbs are about money. While 5 of them even contain the word "money" (e.g., *Money talks; Money isn't everything*), two of them (*Two can live as cheap(ly) as one* and *Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise*) contain the words *cheap(ly)* and *wealthy* associated with the word *money*.

2.2. Puns

A pun is defined by Christian Hempelmann (2014, p. 612) as "a type of joke in which one sound sequence (e.g., a word) has two meanings, and this similarity in sound creates a relationship for the two meanings from which humor is derived. Puns are one of the most prominent types of humorous text [...]." The unforeseen linking of different words, meanings or ideas creates the comic surprise characteristic of puns. Puns may give us much enjoyment and pleasure, probably as a result of what Sigmund Freud called "an economy of expenditure" (1960, p. 25) when we use one word which has two separate meanings, or when we slightly modify it.

Salvatore Attardo, along with many other humour researchers, distinguishes four subcategories of puns – paronyms, homonyms, homographs, and homophones:

Two words are paronyms when their phonemic representations are similar but not identical. Two words are homonyms when their phonemic or graphemic representation is identical, and two words are homographs when their graphemic representation is identical (i.e., they are spelled the same). Two words are homophones when their phonemic representation is identical (i.e., they are pronounced the same). Homographs and homophones are subclasses of homonyms.

(Attardo, 1994, pp. 110–111)⁵

Charles Hockett (1972, p. 157) talks about two categories of puns – "perfect" (identical in sound) and "imperfect" (non-identical). Thus, according to his definition, homonyms and homophones could be called perfect puns, and paronyms and homographs imperfect puns.

According to Evan Esar, "the variety of puns must be infinite" (1952, p. 77). He lists some puns according to category (e.g., repetitive, blending, divisive, additive, linking, etc.). In addition, certain puns involve not simply single words but groups of words or even sentences.

L. G. Heller points out that many different patterns of punning are characterized by "a single manifesting mark" which "signals more than one conceptual function" (Heller, 1974, p. 271). To illustrate this, Heller offers the following verse that ends with a pun:

⁵ In this study, contrarily to Attardo's definition, I interpret homonyms more restrictively, that is, being simultaneously homographs and homophones.

The doctor fell into the well
And broke his collar bone.
He should have tended to the sick
And left the well alone.

(Heller, 1974, p. 271)

The pun above occurs is a transformation of the proverb *Leave well enough alone* and plays on the ambiguity of the word “well” – a manifesting mark –which stands simultaneously for two concepts: (1) a place for collecting water and (2) people who are healthy.

Thus, using Heller's terminology, the “manifesting mark” in the following two anti-proverbs is the word “fair”:

All's fair when you've had the roots touched up by the hairdresser. (Berman, 1997, p. 242) {All's fair in love and war}

Gentlemen prefer blondes because blondes are always fair to them. (Esar, 1952, p. 198) {Gentlemen prefer blondes}

In the context established in the first example above, the meaning of the word “fair” (i.e., just) emerging from the proverb *All's fair in love and war* makes no sense. We have to think of another meaning of this word; a reinterpretation signifying “light-coloured hair” renders the humour understandable. In the second anti-proverb, exploiting the ambiguity of the same word for the purpose of punning, this manifesting mark stands simultaneously for two concepts – that is, two meanings of the word “fair” may be equally applicable here: “just” (the meaning expressed in the original text of the proverb) and “light hair colour.” Among various types of puns, Heller differentiates (Heller, 1974, p. 271) the following two – “disambiguational” (in which “although both potential meanings ... are seen, one of them is rejected by virtue of the context”) and “nondisambiguational” (in which “two or more correlations can be perceived”). Thus, the first of the two puns discussed above may be called disambiguational according to Heller's terminology, and the second – nondisambiguational.

In order to understand ambivalent puns one requires an ability to view one situation from two or sometimes more than two different perspectives.

Let us view some ambivalent, or “nondisambiguational” puns from Anglo-American anti-proverbs. In the two proverb modifications below, the word “balls” may refer to two concepts: (1) a spherical object for use in a game or (2) testicles:

Old rugby players never die. They simply have their balls taken away. (Kilroy, 1985, p. 361) {Old soldiers never die, they just fade away}

Old golfers never die, they just lose their balls. (Beck, 2004, p. 36) {Old soldiers never die, they just fade away}

Let us finish this section by quoting three additional examples, all employing homophones (“die” and “dye”, “a tall” and “at all”, “principals” and “principles”), which may also indicate two concepts (only if heard and not read):

The good die young, but the old dye for various reasons. (Esar, 1968, p. 154) {The good die young}

It's better to have loved a short girl than never to have loved a tall. (Esar, 1952, p. 87) {It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all}

Old teachers never die, they just lose their principals. (Prochnow, 1985, p. 104) {Old soldiers never die, they just fade away}

3. Punning in Anglo-American proverb alterations about money

As it has already been discussed elsewhere (Litovkina, 2005; Litovkina et al. 2008, 2021, etc.), one of the most popular techniques of proverb alteration is perverting the basic meaning of a proverb by replacing a single word. Very often the choice of a word is purely phonologically motivated. The second part of the study considers some aspects of punning in the corpus of Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money⁶. I have to point out here that I will put main emphasis on the formal features of the alterations, and I will only briefly mention some themes that emerge in them.

3.1. Anglo-American proverbs and anti-proverbs about money

If we examine the list of 580 Anglo-American proverbs that have provided the template for variation in the corpus of anti-proverbs from Mieder and Litovkina's collections (see Mieder & Tóthné Litovkina, 1999; Litovkina & Mieder, 2006), we will see the following: 13 proverbs in this corpus contain the word "money". The 13 proverbs containing the word "money" and included in Litovkina and Mieder's collections of anti-proverbs (see Mieder & Tóthné Litovkina, 1999; Litovkina & Mieder, 2006) are listed below. The actual proverbs are given in italics. Each proverb is followed by a number in parentheses indicating the number of anti-proverbs that I have been able to locate for it. They are followed by a short statement concerning the meaning of the proverb in < > brackets.

Money talks. (66) <Money is the most influential and important thing in the world.> (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, pp. 227–230)

A fool and his money are soon parted. (47) <Foolish people spend their money without consideration and soon find themselves without any money at all.> (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, pp. 61–63)

Money [The love of money] is the root of all evil. (36) <All wrongdoing can be traced to the relentless pursuit of riches.> (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, pp. 223–224)

Money isn't everything. (35) <Wealth alone does not bring contentment.> (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, pp. 224–226)

Money can't [doesn't] buy happiness. (34) <Financial security does not necessarily mean happiness.> (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, pp. 220–222)

Time is money. (15) <Time is as valuable as money.> (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, p. 309)

⁶ Another study of the author provides a detailed analysis of repetitive puns in Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money (see Litovkina 2025c). Some other mechanisms most frequently employed in Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money (such as addition, substitution, repetition of identical or phonetically similar words, literalization, word order reversal, mixing of two proverbs, word class change, and so on) are treated in Litovkina 2025a, 2025b, 2025d, 2025e.

Money doesn't grow on trees. (12) <It is difficult to get money.> (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, pp. 222–223)

Money makes the mare go. (9) <If you have money, you can obtain everything.> (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, p. 227)

Lend your money and lose your friend. (3) (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, p. 197)

Money makes a [the] man. (3) <Money is the most influential and important thing in the world.> (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, p. 226)

Money burns a hole in the pocket. (1) <People with money are likely to spend it.> (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, p. 220)

He who marries for money sells his freedom. (1) <Entering a relationship because of money makes a person dependent.> (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, p. 164)

Money makes money. (1) <Wealth breeds more wealth.> (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, p. 226)

3.2. The most frequent types of punning in Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money

Section 3.2. is devoted to listing and exemplifying the most frequent types of punning in Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money, or related to money. As it was expected, the vast majority of puns in the corpus of Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money are based on sound similarities rather than on sound equivalences; that is, paronyms prevail. Second come homonyms. Homophones are represented in only a few instances. No homographs have been found in our material.⁷ Let me demonstrate these types of puns by a few examples from the corpus of anti-proverbs about money.

Paronomastic puns – i.e., puns involving two similar but not identical strings of sounds and graphemes – constitute by far the largest class of puns analyzed here (such as “matri-money” and “money”, or “partying” and “parted”). Puns of this nature might be called “imperfect” puns (non-identical in sound, i.e., based on paronymy, see Hockett, 1972, p. 157):

⁷ For general discussion of paronomastic, homonymous, and homophonic puns in Anglo-American anti-proverbs, see Litovkina, 2005, pp. 57–75, 2006b, 2009a, 2009b. For general discussion of repetitive puns, double and triple puns, puns playing upon personal names, story puns, and bilingual puns in Anglo-American anti-proverbs, see Litovkina, 2005, pp. 75–79, 2009b. For a detailed discussion of them in Anglo-American, German, French, Russian and Hungarian anti-proverbs, see Litovkina et al., 2008; 2021. The study of punning in Anglo-American, French, German, Russian, Hungarian anti-proverbs that I have conducted with my co-authors (see Litovkina et al. 2008; 2021) shows that the different languages use approximately the same procedures in the field of paronomasia: substituting a word, substituting, adding or omitting one or two sounds, replacing one sound with two, and vice versa. An existing but less common way of creating parody is reversing the order of two sounds within a word. The languages studied do not show significant differences in the use of polysemy/homonymy. Some proverbs and even some words are particularly suitable for this type of wordplay. In the case of homophony, languages with phonetic and non-phonetic writing form two relatively distinct groups (German, Russian, Hungarian ↔ English, French). In the first group, there are only a few German examples, while in the second homophony can be illustrated with many items. No parody could be found where modification is based on homography. It should be noted that parodies based on homonymy/polysemy and homophony are by far less frequent than those using paronomasia for the simple reason that a word often has many paronyms. On the contrary, words with identical pronunciation (and spelling) are much rarer. A common feature of the above” twisting methods” is that they almost always occur with other transformations: substitution, order reversal, combination of substitution and order reversal, addition, and so on.

Matri-money is the root of all evil. (Anonymous, 1908, p. 26) {Money is the root of all evil}

A fool and his money are soon parting. (Esar, 1968, p. 580) {A fool and his money are soon parted}

Numerous proverbs in the corpus have provided good models for exploiting ambiguity through the use of a single word that is polysemous (i.e., having two meanings) or two words that are homonymous (i.e., having identical graphemic and phonemic representation) such as “time” or “root”, thus creating comic surprise with unforeseen links between words or ideas. Puns of this nature are referred to in our study as homonymous⁸, or “perfect” (Hockett, 1972, p. 157) puns, e.g.:

“Time is money,” as the man said ven he stole the patent lever watch. (Mieder & Kingsbury 1994, p. 138) {Time is money}

Money is the root of all evil – but it doesn’t make it any easier to dig it up. (Safian, 1967, p. 54) {Money is the root of all evil}

Puns employing homophones (words pronounced the same but spelled differently such as “mayor” and “mare”) are relatively rare in our material, e.g.: *Money makes the mayor go.* – *Proverbs of Politics* (Wurdz, 1904) {Money makes the mare go}.

Some other types of puns employed in our corpus of anti-proverbs about money are puns based on personal names, bilingual puns, double and triple puns, story puns, repetitive puns. Let me illustrate below only double, triple, and repetitive pun.

According to Heller, “In theory one may have any number of puns embedded in the same utterance” (Heller, 1974, p. 280). In just a few anti-proverbs in our corpus, in which a double or triple pun appears, these are most frequently paronomastic. In the anti-proverb below “a foal and his mummy” replaces “A fool and his money”:

A horse farm made it a habit to bottle-feed its colts when they were only a few days old. Hence: a foal and his mummy⁹ are soon parted. (Jennings, 1980, p. 47) {A fool and his money are soon parted}

In the triple pun below all the nouns from the original proverb text are substituted based on their phonological similarity. Thus, “Runny” replaces “Money”, “snoot” substitutes “root”, and finally, “weevils” is used instead of “evil”:

Runny is the snoot of all weevils (Farman, 1989) {Money is the root of all evil}.

In the repetitive pun, punning words, as one would expect, are repeated:

Remember – Money is the root of all evil. If money is the root of all evil, why does everyone root for it? (Mieder 1989, p. 274) {Money is the root of all evil}

3.3. Choice of a word for punning

Certain words have become real favourites of punsters in the corpus of Anglo-American anti-proverbs. In Litovkina’s view, the most frequent homonymous or polysemous words are

⁸ In our discussion, I make no distinction between polysemous and homonymous words.

⁹ In American English, it would be “mommy.”

“rod,” “will,” “come,” “time,” “fair,” “ring,” “lie,” “fall,” “swallow,” “miss,” “ruler,” “inch,” “yard,” “figures,” “present,” “iron,” “root,” “mind,” and “sweet.”

Pairs of paronyms most frequently played on in the corpus of Anglo-American anti-proverbs are:

“fuel” and “fool,” “monkey” and “money,” “yearn(ing)” and “learn(ing),” “contempt” and “consent,” “seen” and “obscene,” “work” and “word,” “wise” and “wife,” “fee” and “free.”

The most commonly employed homophones in the corpus of anti-proverbs are:

“know” and “no,” “route” and “root,” “rain” and “reign,” “weight” and “wait,” “die” and “dye,” “here” and “hear,” “scene” and “seen,” “waste” and “waist,” “heals” and “heels,” “aural” and “oral” (for more, see Litovkina, 2005, 2006).

The popularity of these words is proven not only by the large number of proverb transformations but also by the number of various proverb parodies in which the ambiguity of a certain word is exploited. For instance, five different anti-proverbs, in all of which the word “time” refers to either a watch or clock, play on its polysemy. Let me demonstrate below the popularity of the word “time” in Anglo-American anti-proverbs from Mieder and Litovkina’s collections. All of them are in the form of wellerisms¹⁰:

“Time presses,” as the monkey said when the clock fell on his head. (Mieder & Kingsbury, 1994, p. 139) {Time presses}

“How time flies,” as the monkey said when it threw the clock at the missionary. (Mieder & Kingsbury, 1994, p. 139) {Time flies}

“Time will tell,” as the monkey said when he hid the limburger in Grandpa’s clock. (Mieder & Kingsbury, 1994, p. 139) {Time will tell}

In many cases in the corpus of analysed Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money, the choice of a word for punning is also obvious or largely predictable, as may be demonstrated in two ways:

First, through the large number of proverb transformations using the word in question such as:

- paronyms “evil” and “idol,” “money” and “matrimony” in case of the proverb *Money is the root of all evil*, paronyms “mare” and “nightmare” in case of the proverb *Money*

¹⁰ Wellerisms, named for Charles Dickens’ character Samuel Weller, are particularly common in the USA, Great Britain and Ireland (see Mieder & Kingsbury, 1994; Mieder, 1989, pp. 223–238). This form of folklore is normally made up of three parts: 1) a statement (which often consists of a proverb or proverbial phrase), 2) a speaker who makes this remark, and 3) a phrase that places the utterance into an unexpected, contrived situation. The meaning of the proverb is usually distorted by being placed into striking juxtaposition with the third part of the wellerism. As Mieder points out, “In this way a wellerism often parodies the traditional wisdom of proverbs by showing the disparity between the wisdom of the proverb and actual reality” (Mieder, 1989, p. 225). According to Mieder, they are particular popular in Northern Europe, in Germanic languages (Mieder, 2014, p. 793). In Mieder’s view (1989, pp. 226–227), “many wellerisms are reactions against proverbial clichés. Proverbs have a tendency to oversimplify life and its problems, and the wellerism is a splendid way to parody them through a proverbial structure.... On the one hand wellerisms might effectively parody existing proverbs since they appear at times not to fit the modern world any longer, but on the other hand wellerisms also continue to be used because they give us the opportunity to react satirically or humorously against complex problems by using a triadic proverbial structure which has served that purpose for centuries.”

makes the mare go, paronyms “mummy” and “money” in case of the proverb *A fool and his money are soon parted*.

To illuminate it, let me quote here two transformations of the last proverb both of which are double puns playing on the phonological resemblance of the word “mummy” in parodies and the word “money” in the original proverb text (another example of such pun has been demonstrated above, in Section 3.2.):

A mule and its mummy are soon parted. (Farman, 1989)

A Kentucky horse breeder named Schubert invariably has his young colts bottle-fed after they're three days old. He knows that a foal and his mummy are soon parted. (Cerf, 1968, p. 19)

- homophones “route” and “root” in case of the proverb *Money is the root of all evil* and homophones “mayor” and “mare” in case of the proverb *Money makes the mare go*
- homonyms playing on different meaning of the word “root” in case of the proverb *Money is the root of all evil*

Second, through the number of different proverbs that are distorted through the use of the same punning word in different anti-proverbs (such as the word “time” that has been shown and exemplified in Section 2.2.3. above). Let us demonstrate it by restricting ourselves to the following transformations playing on the paronyms “monkey” and “money”. Indeed, all the three anti-proverbs below, based on different proverbs, play on the phonetical resemblance of these words:

A fool and his monkey are soon parted. (Margo, 1982) {A fool and his money are soon parted}

Money doesn't grow on trees. And it's a good thing it doesn't. It would make monkeys out of lots of people. (Safian, 1967, p. 57) {Money doesn't grow on trees}

The following mutation contains two puns but each of different kind: *Monkey is the route to all people* (Rees, 1980, p. 91) {*Money is the root of all evil*}. While the first one is a paronomastic pun (playing on resemblance of the words “money” and “monkey”), the second one relies on the play on two homophones (“root” and “route” - when “route” follows the American pronunciation -, see also Section 3.4. below for the discussion of these words).

The following transformation of the proverb *Money doesn't grow on trees* is in the form of a syllogism (a frequent feature of which is magnification of the contradictory qualities of proverbs by pushing their received wisdom to illogical extremes):

The Long-Sought-After Proof that Money Grows on Trees

1. Money is what people get when they sell.
2. Sell sounds the same as cell.
3. A cell is a tiny room.
4. One kind of person who lives in a tiny room is a monk.
5. Monk is a short form of monkey.
6. Monkeys eat bananas.
7. Bananas grow on trees.

Therefore, money grows on trees. (Louis Phillips, in Rosen, 1995, p. 51)

Just observe with what ease the proverb *Money doesn't grow on trees* is changed into its opposite (*Money grows on trees*) and is used twice in this form in the syllogism above, at the very beginning and at the very end of it. Furthermore, the word *monkey* discussed above as one of the favourite words of punsters in our corpus is also used here (not even once but twice), illustrating once again the predictability of its usage in the process of proverb transformation. Moreover, the word *monk*, a paronym of the words *money* and *monkey* occurs twice in this text.

3.4. Good' and 'bad' puns

According to Victor Raskin:

For many speakers, the mere exposure to a homonymous or polysemous word or phrase constitutes an irresistible temptation to make a joke. ... It is the easy availability of puns which makes them a cheap and somewhat despicable type of humor for many individuals and social groups. However, the same factor prevents them from disappearing, and every new generation goes through many cycles of discovering the puns, getting tired of them, rejecting them and eventually rediscovering them again.

(Raskin, 1985, p. 116)

Raskin also points out, "If the trigger is there but the scripts and the oppositeness relation are not, the pun remains an artificial low-quality product" (Raskin, 1985, p. 116). Jesse Bier stresses, "The very lowest form of sound-effect punning is that in which only one of two terms has any truth at all" (Bier, 1968, p. 18). Numerous scholars including Arthur Asa Berger, Albert Rapp, Salvatore Attardo have pointed out that ambivalence is the basis of good puns (Berger, 1995, p. 76). Rapp emphasizes, "The essential feature of the pun lies precisely in the existence of two separate meanings; since they provide the opportunity for tricking or double-crossing your listener" (Rapp, 1951, p. 87). Just in the same vein, according to Attardo, "the best puns are those in which either the two senses coexist in a difficult balance, or in which the connotating sense brings a meaningful contribution to the global senses of the text" (Attardo, 1994, p. 138).

The following three transformations of the proverb *The best things in life are free* play on the word "fee" – antonymous to "free", thus negating the meaning of the original text:

The best things in life are fee. (Safian, 1967, p. 44)

The best things in life are for fee. (Kandel, 1976)

The lawyer agrees with the doctor that the best things in life are fees. (McKenzie, 1980, p. 396)

With respect to the analysed money anti-proverbs, I would like to discuss three transformations of the proverb *Money makes the mare go*:

Money makes the mayor go. – Proverbs of Politics. (Wurdz, 1904)

Money makes the nightmare go. (New Yorker, June 28, 1956)

Money makes the mare go – but not the nightmare. (Mieder, 1993, p. 185)

Although in the first anti-proverb there may not appear to be much relationship between the homophones “mayor”¹¹ and “mare”, there is nevertheless some sense in suggesting that a mayor would do anything for money.¹²

In the following alteration of the proverb *Money doesn't grow on trees* we can discover something that the “trees” of the original text and the “banks” of the pun have in common – “branches” (a word with numerous meanings one of which has been demonstrated in Section 3.3. above): *If money doesn't grow on trees, how come the banks have so many branches?* (Metcalf, 1993, p. 19).

Anti-proverb coiners succeed in finding a word phonologically paralleling a word from the original proverb (*Money is the root of all evil*), tying together two different strings of thoughts and thus bridge domains which at first glance seem unrelated, as in “route” and “root” below, where “route” used the American pronunciation:

Philanthropy proves that though money is the root of all evil, it is also the route of much good. (Esar, 1968, p. 595)

Money is the root of all evil – but has anyone ever discovered a better route? (Safian, 1967, p. 54)

The meaning of the original proverb *Money doesn't grow on trees*, according to Litovkina and Mieder, is: “It is difficult to get money” (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, p. 222). In the anti-proverb below, however, by introducing the word “trays” phonologically similar to the word “tree” and using positive form instead of the negative “doesn't grow” (i.e. “grows”), a new meaning emerges. This meaning is contrary to the one of the original proverb. Indeed, according to the waitress from the alteration below, money might not grow “on trees”, as is indicated in the original proverb text, but for her it definitely does grow “on trays” (for instance, the tips): *Waitress: A girl who thinks money grows on trays* (Prochnow & Prochnow, 1964, p. 274).

3.5. Themes emerging in the proverb alterations about money

There is scarcely any aspect of life to which humour of the analysed money anti-proverbs employing punning is not related. Among the themes (other than money) emerging in the money proverb alterations in which punning takes place are marriage, animals, relatives (e.g., mother), professions and occupations, idleness, time, entertainment, and so on. In what follows I will list just a few examples under the following headings, but without further discussion:

marriage

Matrimony is the root of all evil. (Edmund & Workman Williams, 1921, p. 275) {Money is the root of all evil}

Money isn't the root of all evil – matrimony is. (Esar, 1968, p. 504) {Money is the root of all evil}

Money is the root of all evil – and also of a good many family trees. (Safian, 1967, p. 54) {Money is the root of all evil}

¹¹ The English and Americans pronounce the word “mayor” differently, so this distortion only works in British English as a pun.

¹² Observe the following anti-proverbs: *Give a politician a free hand and he will put it in your pocket.* (McKenzie, 1980, p. 401) {Give a man enough rope and he will hang himself}; *Every politician has his price, especially those who are worthless.* (Esar, 1968, p. 614) {Every man has his price} (for an analysis of Anglo-American anti-proverbs about politicians, see Litovkina, 2005, pp. 107–113; 2016).

animals (e.g., monkey)

Monkey is the route to all people. (Rees, 1980, p. 91) {Money is the root of all evil}

A fool and his monkey are soon parted. (Margo, 1982) {A fool and his money are soon parted}

Money doesn't grow on trees. And it's a good thing it doesn't. It would make monkeys out of lots of people. (Safian, 1967, p. 57) {Money doesn't grow on trees}

relatives (e.g., mother)

A mule and its mummy are soon parted. (Farman, 1989) {A fool and his money are soon parted}

A horse farm made it a habit to bottle-feed its colts when they were only a few days old. Hence: a foal and his mummy are soon parted. (Jennings, 1980, p. 47) {A fool and his money are soon parted}

A Kentucky horse breeder named Schubert invariably has his young colts bottle-fed after they're three days old. He knows that a foal and his mummy are soon parted. (Cerf 1968, p. 19) {A fool and his money are soon parted}

professions and occupations

Money makes the mayor go. – Proverbs of Politics. (Wurdz, 1904) {Money makes the mare go}

Waitress: A girl who thinks money grows on trays. (Prochnow & Prochnow, 1964, p. 274) {Money doesn't grow on trees}

idleness

Money is the root of all evil – but it's still number one as the root of all idyls. (Safian, 1967, p. 54) {Money is the root of all evil}

Money is the root of all idyls. (Safian, 1967, p. 45) {Money is the root of all evil}

entertainment

A fool and his money are soon partying. (Esar, 1968, p. 580) {A fool and his money are soon parted}

Many more types of punning and examples of anti-proverbs demonstrating them, as well as themes other than money emerging in the proverb transformations about money could be addressed in Section 3. but I must come to suggestions for further research and a conclusion now.

4. Conclusion

The present study, while continuing my previous research on punning in anti-proverbs (deliberate proverb innovations, alterations, parodies, transformations, variations, wisecracks, fractured proverbs) (see Litovkina, 2005; 2006; 2009a; 2009b; 2015; Litovkina & Vargha, 2013; Litovkina et al., 2008; 2021), has focused on punning in transformations of 13 Anglo-American proverbs about money.

In the first part of the study, at first I have addressed the background of anti-proverb research and terminology, I have also demonstrated 20 Anglo-American proverbs most popular for variation. Afterwards I have discussed the background of pun research and terminology, addressing ambiguity and ambivalence in puns.

The second part of the article has considered some aspects of punning in Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money. At first I have focused on proverbs about money transformed in Mieder and Litovkina's collections (Mieder & Tóthné Litovkina, 1999; Litovkina & Mieder, 2006), and I have listed 13 Anglo-American anti-proverbs containing the word "money" and numbers of their transformations. Then the most frequent types of punning (such as paronyms, homonyms and homophones), as well as three other types of punning (double, triple and repetitive puns) in Anglo-American anti-proverbs about money have been demonstrated and exemplified. Furthermore, I have explored the favorite words of punsters (such as paronyms "evil" and "idol", "money" and "matrimony", "mummy" and "money", "money" and "monkey", homophones "route" and "root", "mayor" and "mare", and homonyms "root" and "root") and their predictability in the anti-proverbs about money. As has been demonstrated in the study, in some cases a single proverb (such as *Money is the root of all evil* or *Money makes the mare go*, etc.) gives rise to two or more puns. Finally, the study has also treated ambivalence in puns, and, it has touched upon 'good' and 'bad' puns in the analysed anti-proverbs about money.

The literary basis of humour comes from the irony of the situation in which unfulfilled expectations give birth to unexpected results. Since proverbs are considered by many of us sacrosanct, their reinterpretation in innovative ways can create humor. We laugh at some anti-proverbs because they skew our expectations about traditional values, order, and rules. We are, however, sometimes struck by the absurdity of some situations portrayed in proverb parodies, especially when they rely purely upon linguistic tricks employed for the sole purpose of making punning possible.

The similarity between the original words and their substitutes makes some distortions funny, even if they are based on pure accidental resemblances in sounds and not in meanings. Some of the puns in my corpus are, however, of a poor quality. Indeed, punsters more often than not play in unsophisticated ways with the sounds of words but not with their meanings. Proverbs very frequently lend themselves to manipulation exclusively for the sake of manipulation. The vast majority of puns in Anglo-American anti-proverbs are based on purely phonetic and not semantic relationships between words. My previous research (see Litovkina, 2005, pp. 79–86; 2006) has shown that in the vast majority of the puns in the corpus of Anglo-American anti-proverbs, only one correlation may be identified (although another potential meaning, the one indicated by the original text of a proverb, is always implicit): that is, the vast majority of the puns used in anti-proverbs are, according to Heller's terminology, disambiguational. Similarly, in the analysed anti-proverbs about money, almost all the puns are also disambiguational.

5. Suggestions for further research

In my analysis I have mainly emphasized the formal features of alterations of money anti-proverbs containing puns, and I have only briefly mentioned the themes that appear in them. It would be interesting to engage in a detailed examination of the themes (other than money) that emerge in the proverb alterations in which punning takes place. Furthermore, it is important to point out that puns are extremely rarely used just on their own, i.e. punning is frequently combined with other mechanisms of proverb variation in a variety of ways (such as repetition of words, replacement of words, word addition, literalization, metathesis, and so on). Therefore,

another important goal for future research would be to analyse such combinations of techniques. Last but not least, another equally exciting task for further research could be the exploration of the functions of anti-proverbs being a source of humour in literature and the arts, similar to Tosina Fernández' research (2023) on analysis of Michael Scott's usage of anti-proverbs in *The Office*.

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