

## Book review

**Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Hrisztalina, T. Litovkina, Anna, Barta, Péter, Vargha, Katalin. (2018). *Anti-proverbs today: a comparative linguistic analysis of five languages* [A közmondásferdítések ma: Öt nyelv antiproverbiumainak nyelvészeti vizsgálata]. Budapest: Tinta Könyvkiadó.**

A good beginning is half the battle. Or is that battle? In the present book, the authors deal not only with traditional, well-known proverbs, but mostly with their modified versions, anti-proverbs. Anti-proverbs permeate all aspects of our lives and appear in a broad range of generic contexts. Although the alterations of proverbs are as old as proverbs themselves, their proliferation resulting from the rapid development of media is now faster than ever.

Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Anna T. Litovkina, Péter Barta and Katalin Vargha have for decades been associated with proverbs, anti-proverbs and humour as a linguistic phenomenon. They have each made important contributions to their overall success, as they all have a firm grounding in linguistics: their core areas of research include humour, phraseology, paremiology, teaching proverbs and anti-proverbs. The authors summarise their common and individual findings from the last decade, mostly carried out within the framework of the International Linguistic Folklore Research Group, of which they all are founding members. In this book, the authors successfully combine their expertise in all these areas to present an impressive and convincing argument in favour of a contrastive linguistic approach to the nature and use of anti-proverbs. It should be noted that the idea of entertainment in learning contributes effectively to the latter's success, and paremiology is one of the most entertaining research areas in linguistics. The present book is the 203th volume of the Linguistic Studies Handbook Series.

Although the language of the book is Hungarian, we somehow feel that the book is part of five different cultures and five different languages. This is not surprising at all, considering that we meet Hungarian, English, German, French and Russian (anti-)proverbs on almost each page. Still, it is perhaps not the great number of very rich and entertaining examples that increases the scientific value of the volume, but rather the linguistic observation, the classification and description of general tendencies, the differences and similarities between the analysed (anti)proverbs of these languages, the presentation of their international distribution and the alteration devices. All this is based on a large and meticulously constructed corpora.

The preface and the introduction, besides giving a general description of the study and its central aims, outline the structure of the book and define its key terms. The book consists of the preface, introduction, two parts, conclusion, references and sources, annexes.

The term *anti-proverb* itself –coined by Wolfgang Mieder,<sup>1</sup> to whom the book is dedicated– also needs to be clarified, given the great number of terms and definitions ascribed

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Mieder specialised in the areas of German and international folklore, the history of the German language, the Middle Ages, and the study of proverbs in particular. Since 1984, he has been the editor of *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*. He is also the editor of the *Supplement Series to*

to the same phenomenon. This work starts with a very clear and logical presentation of the key terms used in the book, highly recommended if one seeks to explore the great variety of terms and definitions used in the research of anti-proverbs. It would be hard work to collect these terms and definitions of such a dynamic field if one has not been working on proverbs and anti-proverbs for decades. Hard work, of course, never hurt anyone... but who wants to be its first victim? The range of English terms used for the same purpose, interchangeably, includes *alterations, anti-proverbs, deliberate proverb innovation, fractured proverbs, mutations, parodies, transformations, variations, wisecracks*.

The authors also present their data and methods, not forgetting about the corpus of their analysis, mostly their individually constructed collection including data from scientific, online and media sources. The authors review not only the background of anti-proverb terminology but also the research carried out in this field, then they address the proverbs most frequently used and parodied, as well as internationally widespread ones. Hungarian, English, German, French and Russian anti-proverbs are presented through the proverbs from which their alteration is created. The alteration itself is always underlined so that the reader's work will be facilitated.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to formal devices of anti-proverbs. In this first part, one will find four different subsections. The authors discuss the four main ways in which English, Hungarian, French, German and Russian proverbs can be altered. Very popular are proverb parodies that pervert the basic meaning of a proverb by simply (1) *adding* a single sound (e.g.: *You cannot put new swine in old bottles [You cannot put new wine in old bottles]*) or punctuation mark, two or three sounds, one or more words and even clauses or sentences. As we see, a proverb can be altered by adding only a single sound. However, it is also possible to modify a proverb by keeping only one or two words of the original one and/or its syntactic structure. As such, the analysis needs to take into consideration the way of the alteration (e.g. by adding a word, by the substitution of two words) as well as its degree (from one word to several clauses or sentences). The fewer added elements in the anti-proverb, the more the result is entertaining. An interesting subtype derivative of adding is the so-called *wellerism* (i.e. a form of expression typical of Sam Weller or his father, two well-known characters in Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*) has been popular in English and German. A *wellerism* is made up of three parts: a speech or statement (often a proverb), identification of the speaker and identification of the situation, which give the expression a parodic or humorous twist: "*Everyone makes mistakes*" – *said the hedgehog after trying to mount the hairbrush*.

The inverse of adding, *truncation* (2) is also an interesting feature of anti-proverbs, although it almost never appears on its own but tends to be combined with other ways of alteration. This device makes it possible to omit one or more sounds, word(s) or punctuation mark (e.g. *Beauty is only skin [Beauty is only skin deep]*), but we can also refer to a well-known proverb just by stressing elements arbitrarily. *Substitution* (3) is a device where two sounds or two groups of sounds are replaced (e.g. *It never pains but it roars [It never rains but pours]*). On the other hand, we replace elements (punctuation marks, sounds, words, the first or the second part of the proverb) that were originally not included in the proverb. We mostly tend to replace nouns (e.g.: *Happiness can't buy money [Money can't buy happiness]*). Of course, the adverb proves the rule (e.g. *Better never than late [Better late than never]*). The device called *mixing, blending* or *contamination* (4) is considered to be a subtype of substitution or adding. As contamination has a specific nature, the authors present it separately. Based on the corpus of this study, mixing as a device is surprisingly very rarely used in English compared to the four other languages for reasons as yet unknown. The present

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*Proverbium*. He is an internationally recognised scholar of over one hundred books on proverbs and he is the author of more than three hundred articles on proverbs (see <https://www.uvm.edu/cas/germanrussian/profiles/wolfgang-mieder-professor-german-and-folklore>).

device allows us to mix two or more different proverbs (e.g. *An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – a fair exchange is no robbery*. [*An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; A fair exchange is no robbery*]) as well as to use the form of deductive reasoning called *syllogism* (e.g. *God is love; Love is blind; Ray Charles is God* [*God is love; Love is blind*]).

Chapter 2 focuses on the phenomenon of linguistic humour in anti-proverbs. It is stressed here that an anti-proverb will be perceived as a source of humour if the traditional proverb upon which it is based is also known, thus allowing the reader or listener to remark the violation of expectation between the two expressions.

The first subsection takes the reader to the so-called *puns*, a form of word play that exploits multiple meanings of a term or of similar-sounding words for an intended humorous or rhetorical effect. These ambiguities can arise from the intentional use of paronomasia, polysemy, homonymy and homophony. Anti-proverbs are mostly based on paronomasia by playing upon words which sound alike as the physical, phonemic relation is left unchanged while the semantic, logical and grammatical relations may even disappear. In other words, the pun [the pen] is mightier than the sword!

Phonetical changes take place most frequently in the initial position. As levity [brevity] is the soul of wit, there are of course other possibilities, out of which the most interesting one is maybe *metathesis*, namely the alteration of the order of phonemes within a word: *let sleeping gods [dogs] lie*. Changing a single word can also lead to quite an effective way of creating an anti-proverb: *a fool and his money are soon partying/potted/spotted [parted]*. Repeatedly, anti-proverbs referring to sexuality using the same philosophical thesis: *Coito ergo sum* [*Cogito ergo sum*]. Albeit less frequently than in the case of paronomasia, there are still a great number of anti-proverbs based on polysemy and homonymy. Frequently used proverbs are more likely to be transformed into anti-proverbs, as we can see in the example of the well-known proverb *Where there's a will, there's a way*: *where there's a will, there's a dissatisfied relative, an inheritance tax, a won't*. Homophones, namely words that are pronounced the same but differ in meaning and spelling, are extremely rare in anti-proverbs. In English and in French, there can be a great distance between the pronunciation and the spelling of a word, so the same pronunciation of a word with different a spelling is therefore more likely, compared to the other three languages: *the best advice to a dieter is: no [know] thyself*.

In addition, puns can be based on an endless list of choices, out of which the authors mention plays on words in foreign languages, proper names, changing the word boundary or double entendre. The source language of the anti-proverb varies from one culture to another. Once Latin, nowadays English plays a major role. Therefore, in English some examples derived from German or Italian can be found: *Hitler's word is as good as his Bund* [*An honest man's word is as good as his bond*]. The creation of an anti-proverb can be based on the similarity between a proper name and a common noun. As proverbs tend to generalise and use common nouns instead of proper names, the use of proper names is rare: *Far more foresighted was the father who named both his sons Edward because, as he said, "Two 'Eds are better than one."* [*Two heads are better than one*]. Changing the word boundary is defined as a phenomenon alike to paronomasia, homonymy or homophony. It is extremely frequent in French, but very rare in German. The number of words can be also modified: *no body [nobody] is perfect*. Anti-proverbs of double entendre type combine generally a sexual meaning with a non-sexual one. The comic effect of a great number of proverb parodies is based upon the incongruous use of a vulgar expression. For many of us, puns may be considered a cheap and boring type of humour because of their easy availability. Still, using a word with two or more different meanings can easily lead to misunderstanding, one of the most popular humorous techniques created through puns. After all, a good pun is hard to find.

The second subsection deals with other humorous devices used in the construction of anti-proverbs. Above all, word-repetition and phonemic repetition are a very common device not only in proverbs but in anti-proverbs as well. Repetition is a powerful marker of humour, as the multiple use of the same word reinforces the semantic import conveyed in this saying. The following example represents such word repetition: *to err is human, to cover it up is even more human [to err is human, to forgive divine]*. Another widely used device, present not only in traditional but also in modified proverbs, is rhyme. Rhyme introduces fluency to the utterance while making it more pleasing. Consider such proverbial parodies as: *Early to bed and early to rise – and you'll never see red in the whites of your eyes. [Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise]*. In a great number of anti-proverbs, the meaning of a metaphorical proverb is narrowed by putting it in a context in which it is meant to be interpreted literally: *where there's smoke, there's pollution [where there's smoke there's fire]*. Intentional grammatical mistakes, aggramaticality, gibberish, hapax legomenon (a term of which only one instance of use is recorded), onomatopoeic words and conversion (new word class) are presented in the last subsection with their related examples.

Based on their corpora, the authors claim that the main results of the book are as follows:

- There are significantly fewer cases of truncation than of adding because truncated proverbs are harder to identify.
- As opposed to the frequent change of the second part of proverbs, the change of their first part is relatively rare.
- The most common alteration device within the framework of adding is the addition of one or more clause(s) to the original proverb.
- Substitution usually takes place in case of nouns if this is about the change in the position of two words, in case of consonants instead of vowels, in case of initial sounds instead of final sounds.
- Contamination usually occurs when it is possible to mix two proverbs and the first part of the first proverb is contaminated in general with the second part of the second proverb.
- Paranomasic alterations of the same word of the original proverbs were identified in each of the analysed languages. Moreover, they present the same paranomasic tendencies and subjects such as sexuality.
- The five languages do not seem to present significant differences concerning the use of homonymy and polysemy. On the other hand, languages that follow historical spelling like English and French present a great number of homophones, while German, Russian and Hungarian offer only a few examples.
- As for puns, it can be observed that English replaces Latin as the most frequently used foreign language in most of the cases when the alteration of a proverb occurs with the use of a foreign language. The altered part of the proverb in this case can be related to the original proverb on a phonetic or logical level.
- It is very common to use a proper name instead of a common word in anti-proverbs, whereas the contrary, that is, the use of a common word instead of a proper name, is rare.
- Changing the word boundary is a typical characteristic of French but remains rare in German.

As Mieder (1993: 90) points out, whereas the old proverbs acted as preconceived rules, the modern anti-proverbs are intended to activate us into overcoming the naive acceptance of traditional wisdom. Anti-proverbs very often move beyond the realm of fun and wordplay

into commenting on important aspects of society. Anti-proverbs only have a humorous effect if one understands the proverb behind them. So, if at first you do not succeed, give up. As for the implications for further research, a rich understanding of anti-proverbs requires diverse approaches on the part of lexicographers, linguists, sociologists, folklorists and comparativists. Another equally exciting goal for future research entails conducting cultural-historical analyses of individual proverbs, collecting and publishing anti-proverbs in any culture where they flourish, comparing and contrasting the most common types of proverb transformation in languages, identifying anti-proverbs identical in different languages, analysing the processes of creativity involved in coining and performing anti-proverbs, observing the functions of anti-proverbs and evaluating the humorousness of anti-proverbs.

As for the reference section, the authors have looked into more than 160 scientific books or articles (including their own very rich number of publications), more than 80 printed dictionaries, sources and collections and more than 120 online sources. The first appendix presents the visual representation (images, posters, etc.) of the most often altered proverbs in the five observed languages, the second one the anti-proverbs existing in all five languages, the third one the wellerisms existing in all five languages. The book ends with these extremely funny visual representations of proverbs and anti-proverbs.

This study is significant within the area of humour research and would be interesting for humour scholars for several reasons. The authors claim this book to be the first to observe and describe language devices creating a humorous effect in anti-proverbs as well as to distinguish the role of linguistic humour in the exploration and criticism of the current political, economic, cultural and societal problems. The authors summarise their outstanding individual and commonly reached findings from the last decade based on their professionally constructed corpora. They also present a great number of entertaining examples as well as the linguistic observation, classification and description of general tendencies alongside the differences and similarities between the analysed (anti-)proverbs of these languages.

All's well that ends [well].

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## Reference

Mieder, W. (1993). *Proverbs are Never out of Season: Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age*. New York: Oxford University Press.