



ANTI-PROVERBS AND THEIR USAGE

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ABSTRACT: - This article gives a definition of the anti-proverb and terminology, discusses its occurrence, treats proverbs most popular for variation and proverbs with international distribution, addresses different mechanisms of proverb variation and topics emerging in anti-proverbs, and last but not least reviews the background of antiproverb research. The vast majority of the anti-proverbs quoted in this chapter are in English, and were taken primarily from American and British written sources¹⁸⁵. In some additional cases, anti-proverbs from other languages (Russian, French, German, and Hungarian) might also be quoted.

KEYWORDS: Proverbs, ever day, literature, linguistics, terminology.

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs have never been considered sacrosanct; on the contrary, they have frequently been used as satirical, ironic or humorous comments on a given situation. For centuries, they have provided a framework for endless transformation. In the last few decades, they have been perverted and parodied so extensively that their variations have been sometimes heard more often than their original forms. Wolfgang Mieder has coined the term Antispruchwort (anti-proverb) for such deliberate proverb innovations (also known in English as alterations, mutations,

parodies, transformations, variations, wisecracks, deliberate proverb innovations, or fractured proverbs) and has published several collections of anti-proverbs in both German (see Mieder, 1982a, 1985, 1989a, 1998) and English (see T. Litovkina & Mieder, 2006; Mieder, 2003; Mieder & Tóthné Litovkina, 1999). Wolfgang Mieder's term Antispruchwort has been widely accepted by proverb scholars all over the world as a general label for such innovative alterations of and reactions to traditional proverbs: anti-proverb (English), anti(-)proverbe (French), антипословица (Russian), and anti(-

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)proverbium (Hungarian) (see the general discussion of the genre of anti-proverbs in T. Litovkina 2007b; T. Litovkina & Mieder, 2006: 1–54; Mieder, 2004, 2007). Besides the term anti-proverb, many other terms¹⁸⁷ exist in different languages for such phenomena, e.g.: German: verballhornte Parömien, Sprichwortparodien, verdrehte Weisheiten, “entstellte” Sprichwörter, sprichwörtliche Verfremdungen. French: faux proverbe, perverbe, proverbe déformé, proverbe dérivé, proverbe détourné, proverbe modifié, proverbe perverti, proverbe tordu, pseudo-proverbe. Russian: трансформа, пословичная “переделка”, прикол. Hungarian: szokásmondás-közhely, közmondás-paródia, közmondás tréfás ferdítése, (el)ferdített közmondás, közmondás-persziflázs, kvázi-közmondás. Some anti-proverbs question the truth of a proverb through employing antonyms (An exception disproves the rule (< An exception proves the rule), transforming the proverb into its opposite (A friend that isn’t in need is a friend indeed (< A friend in need is a friend indeed); Crime pays – be a lawyer (< Crime doesn’t pay) or posing a naive question (Still waters run deep – but how can they run if they are still? (< Still waters run deep); If love is blind, how can there be love at first sight? (< Love is blind). The vast majority of anti-proverbs, however, put the proverbial wisdom only partially into question, primarily by relating it to a particular context or thought in which the traditional wording does not fit (Money isn’t everything – but it’s way ahead of what’s in second place (< Money isn’t everything). Anti-proverbs may contain revealing social comments (American money talks in just about every foreign country (Money talks); A condom a day keeps AIDS away (< 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 (A fool and his monkey are soon parted

(< A fool and his money are soon parted)). Like traditional gems of wisdom, anti-proverbs appear in a broad range of generic contexts, from personal letters to philosophical journals, from public lectures and sermons to songs, from science fiction to comics and cartoons (Mieder, 1989b, 2007). Anti-proverbs are also found in great abundance on the Internet (Mieder, 2007; for a detailed discussion of the use of Hungarian anti-proverbs on the Internet, see Vargha, 2005; for a discussion of the use of Bulgarian anti-proverbs on the Internet, see Hrisztova-Gotthardt, 2006, 2007), in advertising slogans (Forgács, 1997a; Mieder, 1989b, 2007), in the titles of books and articles, and in magazine and newspaper headlines. They are commonly quoted in collections of puns, one-liners, toasts, wisecracks, quotations, aphorisms, maxims, quips, epigrams and graffiti (see the lists of bibliography in T. Litovkina, 2005: 211–228; T. Litovkina & Mieder, 2006: 349–357; Mieder & Tóthné Litovkina, 1999: 246–254). There is no sphere of life where anti-proverbs are not used. But the anti-proverb is not a new genre born in the era of mass media and the Internet (Mieder, 2007); rather, it can be traced back to the distant past. Proverb alterations are as old as proverbs themselves: they flourished in classical times and in all subsequent eras. Thus, in the eighteenth century the traditional wisdom of many proverbial gems was questioned by a number of philosophers, writers and poets (to name just a few: G. C. Lichtenberg, I. Kant, F. Schiller, Goethe, Voltaire), who created and inspired many proverb transformations. The vast majority of anti-proverbs are the products of the playfulness of a solitary author; they do not catch on, and thus will be found in just one source. There are some texts, however, which appear in many sources, exactly in the same form (for more, see T. Litovkina & Mieder, 2006: XV–XVI). For some anti-proverbs numerous variants have been found. The

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difference may lie in the use of an article, conjunction, or punctuation mark, or in the substitution of one more or less synonymous term for another. Let us view the variants of the proverb To err is human, to forgive divine below: To err is human – to totally muck things up needs a computer; To err is human, but to really foul things up requires a computer; To err is human, but it takes a computer to completely fuck things up; To err is human, but to really screw things up you need a computer (for more, see T. Litovkina & Mieder, 2006: XVI–XVII). Some anti-proverbs have even become proverbial in themselves and have been frequently included in recent proverb collections, for example, A new broom sweeps clean, but the old one knows the corners (< A new broom sweeps clean); Absence makes the heart grow fonder – for somebody else (< Absence makes the heart grow fonder). 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 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 activate us into overcoming the naive acceptance of traditional wisdom. Below the reader will find the list of the ten most frequently transformed AngloAmerican proverbs, followed by the lists of German, French and Hungarian proverbs most frequently parodied. Each proverb is followed by a number in parentheses indicating the number of anti-proverbs that has been located for it. Proverbs other than Anglo-American are followed by their translations into English (given in [] brackets).

The ten most frequently transformed Anglo-American proverbs from T. Litovkina and Mieder's second anti-proverb collection (see T. Litovkina & Mieder, 2006: 12) are found below: 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) (for the list of 54 Anglo-American proverbs that have generated over twenty anti-proverbs in their corpus of Anglo-American anti-proverbs, see T. Litovkina & Mieder, 2006: 12–13) Proverbs most popular for alteration in the German language are from Mieder's antiproverb collection (1998: IX–X) and were translated into English by Melita Aleksa Varga: Morgenstunde hat Gold im Munde. [ww: The morning hour has gold in its mouth.] (76) Lügen haben kurze Beine. [ee: Lies have short legs.] (75) Im Wein ist (liegt) Wahrheit. [ee: The truth is (lies) in wine.] (65) Wer andern eine Grube gräbt, fällt selbst hinein. [ee: Who digs a hole for another, falls into it himself.] (62) Reden ist Silber, Schweigen ist Gold. [ee: Talking is silver, being silent is gold.]

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