

Anna T. Litovkina, Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Péter Barta, Katalin Vargha & Wolfgang Mieder: *Anti-Proverbs in Five Languages. Structural Features and Verbal Humor Devices*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2021. 253 pp. eBook ISBN 978-3-030-89062-9.

Creative play with proverbs and arising transformations of these fixed formulations is an intrinsic linguistic activity that can be traced back to ancient times. No matter how cliché it may sound, the fact still holds true having become especially noticeable in our digital age. Coinage of anti-proverbs is one of ingenious mechanisms of recycling popular “wisdom” involving a truly amazing complex of cognitive, pragmatic, and discursive processes that have intrigued scholars from the international paremiological arena for quite a while now. Another fascinating circumstance is that dozens of relatively young anti-proverbs have already found their way into the common use as bona fide proverbs thus encapsulating significant changes in socio-political life. As the authors of the much welcome and timely monograph “Anti-Proverbs in Five Languages. Structural Features and Verbal Humor Devices” rightfully claim, “the Century of the Anti-Proverb is now in progress”! (p. v).

The volume under review is a comparative study of English, German, French, Russian, and Hungarian anti-proverbs based on well-known traditional texts by a group of internationally acclaimed proverb experts. The book is aimed at the analysis of such crucial aspects of paremiological studies as the origin, alteration modes, structure, and use of anti-proverbs in the selected languages.

The monograph has a coherent structure and consists of a detailed introduction into the comparative study of anti-proverbs and two comprehensive parts dealing with the types of proverb alterations (Part I) and exploring the phenomenon of verbal humor in the anti-proverbial genre (Part II).

The introductory part offers useful insights into the intriguing paremiological problems of contradictory proverbs (Section 1.1) and truthfulness of proverbs (Section 1.2). The authors go on to overview the background of the research into proverbs in general and anti-proverbs in particular, and discuss the paremiological metalanguage. It is rightfully stressed that the symbiosis of traditional proverbs and anti-proverbs as their counter-parts is an important element of effective communication (p. 17). Quite expectedly, the authors discuss the aptness of the term “anti-proverb” coined by the outstanding paremiologist Prof. Wolfgang Mieder. Despite its certain limitations, the term has been adopted and successfully deployed by proverb scholars around the world due to its lingua-cognitive compactness and universality allowing it to be intuitively understood by linguists and non-linguists alike. Further on, the authors note the discursive variety and ubiquity of anti-proverbs (Section 1.4), examine their sources and

variants (Section 1.5). When discussing the proverbs most popular for variation in the five languages under consideration in Section 1.6, they make a significant remark about the cognitive nature of the processes of creation and interpretation of anti-proverbs in communication. Another worthwhile aspect in the study of paremiological (and phraseological) layers of a language touched upon in the book is the analysis of fundamental structures, or lexical-grammatical patterns, that serve as frames or schemes for proverbial cognition and verbalization of human experience. In its entirety, the introduction prepares the reader for the following two elaborate chapters.

Part I is wholly devoted to the most common types of proverb transformations. Different kinds of *addition* covered here range from the slightest alterations of a single sound to more complex cases of clause- or sentence-length additions. Readers will also learn about the nuances of such amusing anti-proverbial genres as Wellerisms, Tom Swifties, and “sandwich-species”. Another frequent type of proverb modifications yielding anti-proverbs explored in the volume is *omission* in its various forms. Two mechanisms of *substitution* are discussed in great detail as well. These include 1) cases arising from syntactical inversion (when the existing elements of a traditional paremia change places), and 2) cases arising from the replacement of different elements of the original text. When dwelling on substitution, the authors provide practical advice on how to employ the exercise of completing half-stated proverbs as an educational and entertainment tool in a foreign language classroom. Another type of alterations is *blending* (or *contamination*), which, according to the study, is not as common in English as in the other languages under analysis. The authors determine the prerequisites for the application of this intricate technique of building novel texts out of the ready-made elements available in a language (p. 122). With recent (anti-)proverbial gems appearing on social media and political rhetoric, like, for instance, Hillary R. Clinton’s “When there are no ceilings, the sky’s the limit”,¹ the phenomenon most definitely deserves further exploration both in English and other languages!

Part II of the book scrutinizes the concept of verbal humor from the “anti-proverbial” perspective and covers its stylistic, linguistic, and rhetorical aspects. The chapter familiarizes the reader with the exciting phenomenon of *punning* (*wordplay*) existing in a plethora of forms and contains valuable comments on the state of affairs in the five languages under analysis. The coverage of verbal humor

¹ Hillary R. Clinton used this anti-proverb, which is as a blending of the popular idiom “glass ceiling” and the modern proverb “The sky’s the limit”, at the Philadelphia Rally Speech in November 2016 referring to her being the first ever female presidential nominee from a major political party.

is supplemented by the discussion of the cases of *literalization* of metaphorical proverbs, *word repetition*, and *gibberish*.

Overall, the reviewed monograph is a significant contribution to paremiological scholarship. It is a pioneering comparative study of anti-proverbs from major European languages that draws on impressive empirical material. The authors supply generous lists of references and notes for each section, which in themselves are a treasure trove for budding linguists and students. Not only does the book provide important theoretical insights into multifarious linguistic problems, it also adds to our understanding of the proverb, its cognitive nature and discursive functions. The study foregrounds the fact that being traditional formulations of bits of experience that possess certain relevancy in a given lingua-culture proverbs are due to be critically reconsidered as societies evolve and times change. Dozens of examples prove that anti-proverbs are not merely an entertainment vehicle but rather specific metalanguage providing valuable and, at times, biting commentary on modern realia and significant socio-political changes. In this respect, the comprehensive lists of the anti-proverbs in the selected five languages (from the collections that serve as the source of the empirical material dated no later than 2005) can now be supplemented by a slew of anti-proverbial texts that have been born in the recent propitious socio-political contexts. The monograph most definitely paves the way for paremiologists to look at the genre in other languages by providing efficient tools and solid theoretical background; to investigate anti-proverbs in their actual use in discourse; to conduct exciting etymological studies of individual units; and to explore their role in the emerging multi-modal texts.

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