

Review: Anna T. Litovkina, Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Péter Barta, Katalin Vargha & Wolfgang Mieder. *Anti-Proverbs in Five Languages*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 264 pages.

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The pen is mightier than the... pencil?

In modern society, the *keyboard* might be mightier than the pen as well, if we choose to distort the proverb *The pen is mightier than the sword* even further. As explained in the introduction of this book, the collection and study of proverbs are disciplines themselves: paremiography and paremiology. The volume does fit into this area, though it does not collect or study the proverbs we all know well—instead, it is an explorative monography of their alterations in five different languages (English, French, Russian, German and Hungarian) with explanations on how and why such alterations happen, ultimately creating the so-called “anti-proverbs.” In modern times proverbs keep changing, and their intentional alteration (or distortion) is often done within a humorous context. The fact that the volume does not focus on a single language – as many publications are wont to do – means that it could be considered a significant step forward in the study of proverbs, aiding future scholars and researchers in their studies. Such a comparative monography of proverbs has never been done before; the different language families also mean different sentence structures, with several phenomena still to explore, of which the basis is presented.

The book consists of a preface, acknowledgements, eight numbered chapters, and an index of words and terms used.

Chapter 1, *The Comparative Study of Anti-Proverbs: An Introduction*, briefly explains paremiography, paremiology and the concept of “anti-proverb.” The field is not as recent as we might be inclined to believe, as the very first collection of these distortions (German-language ones: *Antisprichwörter*) was published in 1982/83 by Wolfgang Mieder, who later also contributed to the first English collection, *Twisted Wisdom: Modern Anti-Proverbs*, in 1999. Both Mieder and Anna Tóthné Litovkina, editor of the latter volume, are among the authors of the present one.

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Before moving on, it has to be noted that for an anti-proverb to work well, either humorously or otherwise, the original *has* to be a well-known one. In English, the proverb subject to most alterations (79) is *Old soldiers never die, they just fade away*. While 79 might seem a lot, the Hungarian proverb with most alterations counts no less than 178 variants! This phenomenon alone indicates how such a comparative monography has to be intriguing.

The rest of the book is divided into two sections. The first one, *Types of Proverb Alterations*, details in four chapters the ways proverbs might be altered.

First, there is Chapter 2, with the most obvious method to alter a proverb: *Addition in Anti-Proverbs*. Addition is also the most varied and widespread type of alteration. While at first we might believe only words or sentences may qualify as addition, adding single sounds or strings of sounds could very well change the meaning of a proverb too. Two English examples are *Strike while the irony is hot* or *Let sleeping dogmas lie*. There is then, of course, the addition of a word or words shorter than a clause, usually attached to the end of the proverb, such as in *Fine feathers make fine birds extinct* or even in the middle as in *Ignorance is a voluntary condition of bliss*. Addition of a clause or several clauses is more a comment than an alteration, which could appear again usually at the end of the proverb (*Hard work never hurt anyone, but who wants to be its first victim?*), or even frame the original one on both sides (*Every father knows that money talks mostly in the mother tongue*). Interesting sub-types are Wellerisms, where the proverb stays the same, but the situation makes it absurd, and Tom Swifties, where the words of a proverb may be mixed up and a pun introduced. Typically, these are mainly used in jokes or narrative.

Chapter 3 explains the opposite of addition, *Omission in Anti-Proverbs*. As in addition, sounds, words or clauses could all be omitted. Still, the phenomenon is most apparent in truncation, where only part of the original proverb is kept, but the meaning is clear nonetheless, alluding to the original (*An apple a day... ~~keeps the doctor away~~*).

Chapter 4 introduces a much heavier type of alteration, *Substitution in Anti-Proverbs*, where the categories of sound, sounds, words or clauses are not added or omitted, but replaced by other ones (*The bigger they are, the harder they ~~fall~~ hit*), or the word order is reversed as a source of humor (*Pleasure before business*). In other cases, the whole first or second part of the proverb may be substituted with another clause (*People who live in glass homes ~~shouldn't throw stones~~ make interesting neighbors*).

One of most intriguing and humorous types of alteration in proverbs is the one discussed in Chapter 5, *Blending of Proverbs*. Blending, resulting in a compound proverb, is almost as varied as addition, and humorous also when both components are well-known and often used.

Commonly the ending of one proverb is attached to the beginning of another, as in *A penny saved gathers no moss*, composed of *A penny saved is a penny earned* and *A rolling stone gathers no moss*. If two proverbs contain the same component, they are quite likely to be blended, as in *Better late than sorry*, from *Better late than never* and *Better safe than sorry*. As I have mentioned, blending has several more methods, like attaching two complete proverbs together, replacing part of one with a common idiom, or mixing proverbs with opposite meanings (syllogism). The book contains several examples, in all five languages.

As stated before, one of the main goals of creating anti-proverbs is humor; the second section of the volume, from Chapter 6 to Chapter 8, deals with verbal humor.

The section's foreword defines proverbs as *semantically and pragmatically multilayered, adaptable units*, meaning that, together with their diversity, they provide an excellent basis for language play and puns.

Chapter 6, *Punning in Anti-Proverbs*, presents the four main types of puns. *Paronomastic* puns are puns in the strict sense, where words are substituted with similarly-sounding ones. *Polysemic* or *homonymic* puns are based on words with multiple meanings or ones spelled and pronounced the same way. The third category, puns deriving from *homophonic* (same-sounding) words, as expected, is especially popular in French and English, as in both many words are spelled differently, but pronounced the same way. The rest of puns is just referred to as "other types of puns," and comprises modification of word boundaries, play upon proper nouns, bilingual puns, and multiple puns (where a single sentence contains several words played upon, i.e., *Figures don't lie – except on the beach*).

As anti-proverbs do not only contain puns, Chapter 7 explains *Further Humor Devices as Used in Anti-Proverbs*. These include metaphors interpreted literally, repetition of words, rhyme, or meaningless words.

Chapter 8, *Summary and Implications for Further Research*, summarizes the results of the research conducted by the authors. They mainly sought to answer three questions:

- When the anti-proverb is created, what changes compared to the original proverb?
- How many items will change from these?
- Where are the changed items?

Despite the differences between the five languages analyzed, some general tendencies could be observed: for example, addition is far more common than omission; the first part of the proverb tends to remain unchanged; the original proverb is recognizable even if only its

base structure and a few words remain; anti-proverbs are humorous only if the original can be recognized.

As for further research, there is the option of exploring the culture behind certain proverbs and anti-proverbs, cultural-historical analysis of single ones, and, of course, assembling corpora in languages other than the five used in the book.

In my opinion, this volume is extremely useful and a must-read for translators, as anti-proverbs, when used in literature, might not be immediately recognizable, resulting in inaccurate translation. As culture is reflected in proverbs, as evidenced by Hidasi in her 2004 book (Hidasi, 2004, 23), their alteration is also deeply rooted in a language's cultural background. Research may not be conducted only from a linguistic, but from a translational point of view as well.

Finally, there are countless possibilities for future studies – as we know, *all is well... if it never ends!*

References

Hidasi, J. (2004). *Interkulturális kommunikáció*. Budapest: Scolar.