Book Review


Reviewed by Justyna Mandziuk-Nizińska, Department of Foreign Languages, Medical University of Lublin, Lublin, Poland, E-mail: justynamandziuknizinska@umlub.pl

https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2022-0056

It seems that proverbs have always been in the center of both linguistic and cultural research; they are the essence of language, the crystallization of human thought and ‘carriers’ of the world’s visions which are passed from one generation to another. “Words of wisdom” like An apple a day keeps a doctor away, A bird in hand is worth two in the bush, A bad workman always blames his tools, Absence makes the heart grow fonder, Man proposes, mother-in-law opposes (<Man proposes, God disposes), and thousands of other sayings of this sort could be cited; some of them are “traditional” formations, others, so-called “modified proverbs”, are recent innovations of well-entrenched sayings.

Cross-linguistically, traditional and modified proverbs carry diversified and creative meanings. Therefore, the monograph by acclaimed authors in the field of paremiology Anna T. Litovkina, Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Péter Barta, Katalin Vargha and Wolfgang Mieder is the fascinating study offering an insight into the world of proverbs and their playful modifications across languages. In addition to being renowned scholars within paremiology, the authors of the book in question have made a great contribution by producing numerous articles and volumes on traditional, modified and modern proverbs. Needless to say, Wolfgang Mieder and Anna T. Litovkina co-authored Twisted Wisdom: Modern Anti-proverbs (1999), Old Proverbs Never Die They Just Diversify: A Collection of Anti-Proverbs (2006), Marriage Seen through Proverbs and Anti-Proverbs (2019). Additionally, Wolfgang Mieder in cooperation with Charles C. Doyle and Fred R. Shapiro compiled The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs (2012).

The primary objective of the book is to “analyze the genesis, alteration modes, structure and use of anti-proverbs in five European languages: English, German, French, Russian, and Hungarian” (p. 33). The monograph is divided into two main parts preceded by the theoretical prerequisite to the study of proverbs. Part 1, which consists of Chapters 2–5, provides a theoretical typology of proverb alterations. In particular, it focuses on stylistic practices in anti-proverbs, the most typical being addition, omission, substitution and blending. The Chapter is followed by conclusions and exhaustive reference section. Part 2, which comprises Chapters
6–8, struggles to explore the conceptual aspects of anti-proverbs enterprise. Essentially, it adopts the pragmatic approach, offering a comprehensive analysis of proverbial modifications based on punning. Yet again, it closes with valuable summary and biography. The presented material is ample and highly illustrative. It evokes traditional as well as modified sayings derived from the majority of sources in 5 languages.

The focal issue of Chapter 1 entitled “The Comparative Study of Anti-Proverbs: An Introduction” is to familiarize the readers with basic assumptions and principles in the field of paremiology, discuss the status of traditional proverbs and their plentiful modifications, as well as offers a list of proverbs which are most eagerly transformed by language users. Quite surprising, though, the Chapter questions the truthfulness of proverbs by acknowledging the fact that “when a person perceives that the truth of a proverb does not fit his or her own observations on life, he or she will simply transform the proverb into its opposite” (p. 9) as may well be illustrated by the adage In the underworld, money isn’t the root of all evil, but evil is the root of all money” (Money is the root of all evil).

The first part of the study “Types of Proverb Alterations” commences with Chapter 2 entitled “Additions in Anti-Proverbs.” Basically, it illustrates various types of extensions to the structure of the original well-known paremias. For example, adding a new sound or sounds, or providing extra word or words or even attaching a witty tag or comment. To illustrate the issue, the authors evoke various examples, to mention just a few, You cannot put new wine in old bottles {You cannot put new wine in old bottles}; Absence makes the heart grow fonder, for somebody else {Absence makes the heart grow fonder}.

Next, the concept of omission is the primary concern of Chapter 3 titled “Omission in Anti-Proverbs.” On a similar note, each type of omission is accompanied by some illustrative examples in all five languages. Thus, omission in one sound, two or three sounds e.g. Too many cooks oil the broth (Too many cooks spoil the broth), omission in one, two or more words e.g. Beauty is only skin (Beauty is only skin deep), truncation of the original proverb An apple a day … {An apple a day keeps a doctor away}, omission of the punctuation marks (primarily in Russian proverbs), or even allusions to the original sayings (cf. pp. 81–83).

The concept of substitution, is the primary theme in Chapter 4 “Substitution in Anti-Proverbs.” Subsection 1 deals with the exchange of two sounds or group of sounds within a proverb. Next, the concept of word order-reversal is presented. For instance, such jocular adages as Pleasure before business (Business before pleasure). In the following subsections of the Chapter, the Authors delineate such syntactic alterations as substitutions in words or sounds, or even the ultimate change in the second part of the proverb. To illustrate the scheme, the following examples are used: Home is where the mortgage is {Home is where the heart is}, If at first you don’t
succeed, blame it in your wife {If at first you don’t succeed, try try again} and many others.

Last, but not least, Chapter 5, “Blending of Proverbs” offers a witty play on proverbs mixing the well-known paremias into one unique blend. Importantly, such a stylistic device is categorized as a type of substitution or addition, presumably combined with omission. The Authors points out two other terms that can be used interchangeably for blending i.e. mixing, or contamination. Significantly, only the well-known proverbs which belong to the “paremiological minimum of the language” (p. 122) may undergo the process of blending, thus they are easily distinguished by their language users. As an illustration: A penny saved gathers no moss {A penny saved is a penny earned, A rolling stone gathers no moss}, A bird in the hand is the root of all evil {A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, Money is the root of all evil}.

The focal issue of Part 2 is the verbal humor and the linguistic creativity of proverb alterations. This part of the study comprises 3 Chapters. Chapter 6, “Punning in Anti-Proverbs” deals with anti-proverbs whose humor draws on wordplay and their metaphorical nature. Hence, Authors evoke anti-proverbs based on paronomasia A fool and his money are soon parted {A fool and his money are soon parted}, homonymy and polysemy Old fairies never die, they merely blow away {Old soldiers never die, they just fade away} and homophony The good die young, but the old dye for various reasons {The good die young}. Additionally, the Chapter covers various puns and alterations within word boundaries. For instance: Beauty is in the eye of bee holder {Beauty is in the eye of beholder}, No body is perfect {Nobody is perfect}.

Chapter 7 “Further Humor Devices as Used in Anti-Proverbs,” investigates other linguistic and conceptual devices which underlie the humorous effect to be found in proverbial modifications. As an illustration, the Authors evoke repetition, as presented in the proverb Moderation in all things … including moderation? {Moderation in all things}, rhyme 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} as well as literalization Marriage is a lottery! Yes, but you can’t tear up your ticket if you lose! {Marriage is a lottery}.

Finally, Chapter 8 “Summary and Implications for Further Research” offers several accurate observations on the field of anti-proverbs from five languages. As has been noted, “proverbs are not fossilized texts, but are adopted to the language use, mentality and context of each age” (p. 232). The Chapter puts an emphasis on an eclectic approach to the study of proverbs combing syntactic, phonological, pragmatic and conceptual stylistic devices attached to it.

Notably, the second part of the study explains the need to analyze proverbs and their modifications from a new angle and thus substantially contributes to
studies on humor. The Authors point out that the wordplay in proverbs rest on various linguistic and conceptual mechanisms, which are paronomasia, polysemy, homonymy and homophony. It is frequently perceived by scholars that humor is a predominantly linguistic device based on wordplay, yet Authors of the book highlight that each proverb and their modifications employ different linguistic mechanisms in order to achieve humorous effect. The modeling of humor is also dependent on the linguistics means of various languages. For the wordplay to be effective, the underlying linguistic mechanisms need to be fathomed and further investigated by scholars.

The present monograph develops an exhaustive and delightful analysis of proverbs and their amusing modifications in five languages i.e. English, French, German, Russian and Hungarian. The research provides a great deal of informative and diversified examples which undoubtedly contribute to the significance of the study. Being focused on the examination of creative proverbial modifications in various languages, the book becomes a pioneering study in the field of paremiology as well as linguistics. This comprehensive masterwork thoroughly documents and swiftly compares the anti-proverbs across languages as a fundamental expression of contemporary culture, traditions, values, communications and important social events.

The book is a well-structured piece of writing with clear division into Parts and Chapters, including an extensive overview to the study of paremiology which allows even those less experienced readers to fluently delve into the theme.

Owing to the unquestionable virtues of the masterwork, the book will appeal to researchers specializing in the field of paremiology, cognitive, contrastive and cultural linguistics as well as humor researchers. More than that, this monograph is a valuable asset to readers who are intrigued by the creative linguistic modifications of fixed expressions. It is definitely a must-have position in the library of each respectful paremiologist. By no means, it is a fun and fascinating record to dip into, written by the acclaimed authors with extensive knowledge and a neat sense of humor.

References


