New Horizons in English Studies 9/2024

REVIEW

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Challenging the Wisdom of Proverbs in *Anti-Proverbs in Five Languages*

Anna T. Litovkina, Hrisztalina Hriszotva-Gotthardt, Péter Barta, Katalin Vargha and Wolfgang Mieder 2021. *Anti-Proverbs in Five Languages: Structural Features and Verbal Humor Devices*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 252. ISBN 9 78-3-030-89061-2, ISBN 9 78-3-030-89062-9 (eBook). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89062-9

Introduction

In order to be able to make sense of the surrounding world, human beings constantly need, require, and use linguistic, and various other crutches for survival. Wittgenstein's reformulation of the classical, somewhat simplistic view of the elementary necessity for categorization gives ground to the possibility of investigating this basic phenomenon on

DOI: 10.17951/nh.2024.9.313-324

a more refined level (Wittgenstein, 1978). Proverbs, as more than linguistic devices, are testaments to this essential requisite. Using a simple, seemingly insightful, catchy saying taken to be based on some truthfulness shared with a certain community gives the sensation of coping with a particular situation and lends comfort and safety to the individual trying not to get lost in the world. However, questioning the classical view, Wittgenstein advanced the idea that the boundaries of the categories are by no means clear-cut and straightforward. Instead, the conceptual divisions that human beings apply have fuzzy boundaries. This blurriness not only enables, but also encourages the individual to play with the boundaries to his or her liking and challenge the categories commonly perceived as fixed, thus creating novel meanings and meaning-making processes that describe his or her experiences better. Such tendencies have crucial relevance in both cognitive linguistic and less technical terms. From both perspectives, anti-proverbs, as twisted versions of otherwise entrenched proverbs, provide expressive examples of how people exploit the fuzzy boundaries of conceptual categories. Thus, a cognitive-minded approach to linguistics, and anti-proverbs in particular, carries the potential of revealing much about the basic motivations that govern the collective and individual thinking of human beings.

Anti-Proverbs in Five Languages: Structural Features and Verbal Humor Devices authored by Anna T. Litovkina and her colleagues, is the latest contribution to the academic discourse on the intriguing topic of anti-proverbs. Taking an interlinguistic, comparative approach, this work promises a more comprehensive perspective on how people make use of such unconventional means of communication, as English, German, French, Russian, and Hungarian examples comprise the rich subject of investigation. In addition to providing a plethora of vivid examples, such a work is also expected to offer an explanation for the communicative purpose of anti-proverbial constructions. When do people use anti-proverbs? How do people use anti-proverbs? And most importantly, why do people use anti-proverbs? This review assesses whether and to what extent the book provides answers to these questions. The structure of the review does not chronologically follow the structure of the book; instead, it endeavors to reflect on the content of the work according to the major topics it immerses in.

Terminology and Definition

Prior to any in-depth analysis of the linguistic—and beyond—material, it is elementary to contextualize the topic by setting forth the terminology and the proper definitions, according to which the phenomenon under scrutiny is being understood. Regarding the definition, Litovkina and her colleagues explore various approaches and take them all into consideration *en route* before ultimately adopting Mieder's definition as the foundation for identifying proverbs, as presented on page 13 of their book:

> "*A proverb is a concise statement of an apparent truth which has, had, or will have currency among the folks*." (Mieder 2004, 4)

Indeed, this brief yet substantial definition comments on the most crucial features of proverbs. As for formal appearance, the definition expects a short statement articulated in a simple *A* is *B* format. Regarding the content, a proverb is supposed to refer to some kind of truthful element. The definition suggests that for a proverb to be considered true, the community using it must collectively agree and believe in its truthfulness. However, proverbs are arguably not uttered for their own sake. Instead, people often use a proverb's general truth to guide their actions in situations that they believe are similar to the wisdom expressed in the proverb. Thus, the pragmatic use of proverbs is context-dependent, whereas the definition above fails to take note of this essential feature.

Perhaps more important is to provide a comprehensive definition of an anti-proverb itself, as it is anti-proverbs, not proverbs, that serve as the subject of investigation. While the introductory section of Litovkina et al.'s work endeavors to outline several defining characteristics of anti-proverbs, it is notable that the authors do not provide a comprehensive, fully articulated definition. This absence gives rise to theoretical and pragmatic ambiguities, which will be further elucidated in subsequent sections of this review.

Litovkina and her colleagues identify several key aspects of anti-proverbs in their book. These aspects involve understanding the boundaries of traditional proverbs, questioning universal principles of behavior, pointing out conflicting proverbs, and, overall, questioning the accuracy of the messages conveyed by proverbs. However, the lack of a clear-cut, explicit definition leaves a number of questions open. Is there a general structure for anti-proverbs? What is the exact relationship between the anti-proverb and its original proverbial counterpart? What is the purpose of creating and using anti-proverbs? Is humor a necessary and/or sufficient criterion for anti-proverbs? Does the currency-among-the-folks element of the definition of proverbs also hold true for anti-proverbs, or shall we regard one-off distortions of a particular proverb as an anti-proverb as well? Some of these questions are answered right through the book, whereas others remain yet to be resolved.

The insufficient definition of anti-proverbs compels the reviewer to draw its consequences within the realm of terminology as well. Litovkina et al.'s work deserves credit for mentioning a number of alternative approaches that endeavor to give a name to the phenomenon in question. Francesca Cocco's *paraproverbio,* Aderami Raji-Oyelade's idea of *post-proverbials,* and Damien Villers's on page 19, take emphasizing the parody feature are all notable contributions leading to the delineation of what an anti-proverb means. Litovkina and her co-authors assert that there is no widely agreed-upon designation for this concept. They endorse the term *anti-proverb* because it appears to be the preferred choice among most scholars who study proverbs. Academic popularity is in fact relevant; however, from the perspective of coherence, it would arguably be a more well-founded decision to take Cocco's para-proverb as the default denomination. The example recited below from the book demonstrates the potential confusion that the acceptance of the term *anti-proverb* causes:

Eng. *Everyone to her own taste, as the old lady said when she kissed the pig*.

According to the database of thefreedictionary.com, the *"Every man to his taste"* saying connotes that each person has their own unique preferences, and all are acceptable. Even if the example above is in fact considered an anti-proverb, it does not seem to go against the wisdom of the proverb it originates from; in fact, the sentence regarded as the anti-proverb only confirms and exemplifies the original saying, which is the function of a proverb and not an anti-proverb. Thus, in this particular case, Cocco's para-proverb is more applicable and accurate than the designation anti-proverb. As Litovkina and the co-authors confirm themselves (Doyle et al. 2012), the anti- prefix carries opposition, going against meaning, whereas the para- prefix (besides), as a more moderate and broad version, alludes to the co-existence of the original and the distorted proverbial parts. Even though the authors comment on the potential misinterpretation the anti-prefix infers (p. 233), this confusion may have been avoided by supporting Cocco's terminology or by suggesting one of the authors' own. However, while Litovkina and her co-author's contribution to the discussion on anti-proverb terminology and definition is valued, occasional minor inconsistencies can sometimes impede the smooth application of theory to the examples presented in their book. This observation prompts us to move on to the next section of this review, which evaluates the examples used in the book.

Structure and Examples – Part I.

The book employs a clear, logical, and easy-to-follow structure. Following the compulsory elements of the preface and the acknowledgement, the introductory part contextualizes the topic of investigation by immediately presenting a number of examples of contradictory proverbs. Then, the question of truthfulness as a key element responsible for the emergence of anti-proverbs is exposed. The endeavor to set the terminology and definitions mentioned above is documented by the next structural unit. The introductory section of the book also makes sure to take note of the possible occurrences, sources, variants, and most popular structures of anti-proverbs. Finally, prior to pinning down the aim and organization of the work, the book also briefly touches upon the interlinguistic dynamics of anti-proverbial activity.

The body of the book is divided into Parts I and II. Part I intends to collect the main mechanical maneuvers people generally resort to when using anti-proverbial linguistic material. In other words, Part I lists the most frequent techniques used for physically putting together anti-proverbs. The basic techniques identified are addition, omission, and substitution. These types of anti-proverbs are confirmed by the provision of a number of relevant examples. In this plethora of examples, two special genres—Tom Swifties and Wellerisms—are being highlighted. Furthermore, a separate sub-section is dedicated to the discussion of another special type of anti-proverbial material, namely, the blending together of two or more proverbs.

Part II draws more on the applied, functional, and conceptual aspects of anti-proverbial mechanisms. In addition to underscoring humor and pun—a specific type of humor—as the key forces behind the inclination toward using anti-proverbs, the book also ventures into mentioning the metaphorical aspects potentially identified beyond the surface-level workings of the anti-proverbial phenomenon. As a closing remark, the book summarizes its main findings and assesses its future potential and contribution regarding the academic interest in investigating the topic.

In addition to the straightforward and, easily digestible classification the book provides, the international scope of the remarkable number of examples used aids the reader greatly in processing the vast linguistic material presented. Thus, apart from the topic selected, the two main strengths of Litovkina and the co-authors' contribution are the wide range of examples and the international perspective. As for the first point, based on the number of references, the book incorporates ca. 1400 examples. As for the second point, the work delivers a comparative study of examples collected from five languages with a clear focus on English[1]. The authors rely on certain extra features in order to catch and keep the readers' attention. The display of the *"Don't do today what you can put off tomorrow"* anti-proverb and its counterparts in the four other languages analyzed immediately makes the inquirer involved in the topic.

Moreover, it is appreciated that, following each anti-proverb presented in the book, the original proverb, from which the anti-proverbial formation stems, is given in parentheses. This helps the reader compare the original and the transformed version with each other and see what the anti-proverb is actually created from. However, in such an interlinguistic context encompassing examples from five relatively distant languages, it is wishful thinking to expect the majority of the readers to have proficiency in all of the languages incorporated. Although the individual genuinely interested in the topic can always delve into more research on his or her own, the comprehensiveness of the work could be enhanced even more with the provision of an English translation for the examples collected from other languages. Anti-proverbial constructions that are entirely based on a language-specific pun and thus are untranslatable in their essence are seldom used. Instead, most anti-proverbs seem to exploit a certain shared experience or logical or conceptual twist of meaning. Therefore, in the majority of cases, the anti-proverbial material would not lose its essence after its translation to English, and English speakers not familiar with the original language could obtain a relatively clear picture of how that particular anti-proverbial construction works in the speech community it is used in. Adding an English version for each example would have enhanced the all-access experience of the book.

Following the Preface (and the Acknowledgements) parts, Litovkina and the co-authors' book employs an *in medias res* beginning, as it immediately overwhelms the reader with examples. This choice aims to capture the reader's interest; however, offering a clear explanation of what proverbs and anti-proverbs entail before delving into numerous examples might be a more effective way to structure the text. The attempts

[1] These languages are English, German, French, Russian, and Hungarian.

to define the two phenomena are presented in Section 1.3, whereas the provision of numerous examples begins right away in Section 1.1.

As mentioned previously, the relationship between the definition[2] and the examples provided induces further consideration. Let us now take a look at the Hungarian example below for blending two proverbs in order to create an anti-proverb, inserted in the book on page 130.:

> **Hun**. *Éhes disznó lehazudja a csillagokat az égről. [Éhes disznó makkal álmodik. Lehazudja a csillagokat az égről.]*

We offer the following English translation for the material above:

> **Eng**. *A hungry swine lies the stars down from the sky. [A hungry swine dreams with acorn. He/She lies the stars down from the sky.]*

But are the proverb components that make up the anti-proverb proverbs at all? Although "*Lehazudja a csillagokat az égről (He/She lies the stars down from the sky)*" could be argued to be a self-sufficient statement, however, does it have a part of truthfulness? Let us compare this supposed proverb to the following, common English proverb: "*An apple a day keeps the doctor away*". This sentence is obviously to be interpreted figuratively: eating fruits keeps you healthy. However, the truthfulness part of this common phrase stands even if the sentence is taken literally. On the contrary, "*He/She lies the stars down from the sky*" lacks such kind of a truthful element. This phrase is obviously also to be perceived figuratively, but the word-by-word interpretation does not seem to project any truthful statement. It is more valid to regard the aforementioned phrase as a saying, rather than a proverb. With this contemplation in mind, one may pose the question whether the "*A hungry swine lies down the stars from the sky*" construction can be an example for anti-proverbs at all, considering that one component is arguably not a proverb of its own. Such instances may serve as the basis of one potential criticism of Litovkina and the co-authors' book, namely, that operating with a remarkable quantity of examples may only be justified if the quality is also established beyond. Section 1.8 touches upon the intriguing point of investigation of the interlinguistic and international dynamics of the anti-proverbial inclination. Clearly, this topic does not constitute the main focus of the book; thus, Litovkina and the co-authors remain quite laconic in terms of dissecting such fascinating fields of examination as the polygenesis of anti-proverbs, leaving such questions open as what is meant by one language inspiring the anti-proverbial mechanisms of another, as which language inspires the other, as how one can discover this direction, as whether it is possible for the same anti-proverb to emerge independently in two or more languages and cultures, or as the body of sources that can serve as the basis for providing answers

[2] Mieder (2004).

to these questions. Once again, although two sets of examples are given illustrating the interlinguistic connections, the theoretical backing is less refined.

There are also some misunderstandings and unclear parts, particularly in relation to the distinction between proverb and anti-proverb definitions. For instance, a proverb is actually *'current among the folks'* (1.3, p. 13), and anti-proverbs are principally presented as *'the playfulness of a solitary author; they do not catch on'* (1.5, p. 21). Thus, one would like to know if this is not simply a contradiction, and does the anti-proverb have to be current among the folks or just one-off? A reader may find some brief explanation, which is given on page 206, that sometimes entirely new word compositions can be observed in the anti-proverbs. Nevertheless, since the same example is used for demonstrating different types of proverbs, how does that fit the (e.g., substitution and repetition) picture in general? It seems that there should be some further precise classification specifically related to the anti-proverb phenomenon, which helps to get a clear picture for its readers in a more transparent way. Additionally, the subsequent attractive positions are based on several further aspects of the book. Litovkina and co-authors did not reveal the proper distinctions between saying and proverb. This point most probably confuses readers with the numerous paraformulated anti-proverbial inclinations. A doubtless sense of confusion arises when one reveals that all proverbs can be considered a type of saying but not the other way around. Additionally, it might be seen as a continuum, i.e., both phenomena are connected with advice, hidden value, truth, wisdom, and further related senses.

The other specified categories of examples highlighted by the book evoke a set of questions deeply intertwined with the issue outlined above, that is, the interlinguistic dynamics of anti-proverbs. On different levels of specificity, Litovkina and the co-authors' book take note of two unique types of anti-proverbs: Wellerisms (2.6, p. 81), and Tom Swifties (2.7, p. 64). As for Wellerisms, namely the anti-proverbial instances in which the proverbial statement is complemented by a contextualizing remark in a reported speech form, the provision of material aiding the reader to grasp its essence is abundant. In addition to making clear where the designation comes from, Litovkina and the co-authors also claim that this specific kind of anti-proverbial material is especially productive in the USA, Germany, Great Britain, and Ireland. However, as the examples provided show, instances in other languages—all five of the target languages of Litovkina and the co-authors' book—are detectable. Considering the English designation and the fact that Wellersims originate from the novel titled Pickwick Club written by Charles Dickens, the presence of this type of anti-proverbial structure in other languages and cultures is a thought-provoking observation; nevertheless, apart from the provision of examples in each language, the book does not have the capacity to immerse in the details of the degree of ubiquity of this particular phenomenon. Instead, within the English-speaking context, the book takes special note of several proverbs that appear to give exceptionally fertile grounds for the creation of Wellerisms.

Tom Swifties appear to constitute a sub-type of Wellerisms, one in which the particular remark is explicitly made by Tom. This, however, is not the only feature that differentiates this kind of anti-proverb. It seems like an additional criterion for Tom

Swifties is that an adverb always hints at the non-conventional approach Tom takes using the particular proverb. Nevertheless, the book also uses an example in which this adverbial part is missing. Consider the example below:

> **Eng**. "*There's room for one more" Tom admitted*.

The phenomenon of Tom Swifties is substantially less detailed in the book than Wellerisms in general. Firstly, the reader, previously not consciously familiar with this sort of linguistic construction, is left wondering where the designation comes from, and why Tom Swifties are called Tom Swifties. Secondly, one particular example incorporated in the book causes confusion concerning what qualifies as a Tom Swifty, and what does not. It is arguably a reasonable assumption that the hero of Tom Swifty is Tom himself, as all the other examples given in the book suggest. Thirdly, based on the term itself, one might assume that Tom Swifties are examples of anti-proverbial expressions that are specific to language and culture. Additionally, it appears that parallel constructions are detectable in other languages, in which one specific character with an exact name is the interlocutor. Following the phenomenon of Tom Swifties, our next attention is drawn to proverbs and sayings, since they reflect such factors as the history of a nation, language, and culture of communication. As folk wisdom in such expressions is associated with a person and his name, why are the examples not presented in other investigated languages at all? For instance, the argumentation relies on the proverbs that are particularly related, particularly to the Russian equivalent *Иван*[3] whose name is so lightly presented as typically for a dull person, to his action, performance, and/or manner, etc., i.e., *Иванушка дурачок.* Specifically:

> **Rus**. *Пока не знали – Иваном звали, а узнали – болваном нарекли*. (Anikin 1988, 259)
> lit. Yet (they) did not know – (they) called (ones) as Ivan, but when (they) recognized, (they) blame/criticize as fool/idiot
> **Rus**. *Я говорю про Ивана, а ты про болвана*. (Anikin 1988, 335)
> lit. I (talk) about Ivan, and you about fool/idiot

Thus, if there is a precise equivalent of Tom Swifty available to its counterpart in Russian, then how about other languages? Are there any Toms or Иван-s also similarly available in the other German, French, and Hungarian proverbs? If yes, what is the reason for the omission of those personages? Our, so to speak, critical position and analysis might be accurately supported even through other languages and cultures as well. For example, here we can provide our explanation, particularly throughout the distant Tajik and Uzbek languages. Certainly, these two latter languages are not investigated in the current book. Nevertheless, we tend to show the role and function of similar Tom Swifties or Иван perspectives in these languages and cultures.

[3] Mokienko, V. M. et al. (2010).

For instance, in both Tajik and Uzbek, there is a hero whose name is called *Ходжа Насриддин Афанди*[4], and also most frequently in shorter fashion, just as *Афанди* is available in fact. Actually, this national character is presented in the double protagonist positions in these two latter languages. Initially, he is just a person who quite similarly acts as *Robin Hood.* However, he is also, even most frequently, introduced identically as *Иван.* For example:

> **Tjk**. *Акли Афанди баъд аз пешин медарояд*.
> lit. Afandi's idea comes up in the afternoon.
> **Uzb**. *Афанди хавли олмай туриб эшикни каерга курсам экан, деб мулжаллаган экан***.**
> lit. Afandi considered, where to put the door even though he did not have an apartment.

As we have seen from the examples presented above, there are numerous features that might be considered when we judge, particularly the absent character of Иван in the present book. The main reason is that both Tom and Иван have well-presented cross-linguistic and cross-cultural specificities. As well, the same lack of position might also be true for the rest of the analyzed languages.

Structure and Examples – Part II.

As mentioned above, the second part of the book is related to verbal humor. According to a brief introduction, this section is devoted to a number of pragmatic values of speech situations, such as warning, persuasion, consolation, and other related conditions. Along with this line, the main point is language play (or pun) and linguistic humor in a given context or speech situation—as a specific type of humor—which can be seen as the key force behind the metaphorical aspect of anti-proverbs.

Chapter 6 summarizes the appearances and functions of punning and highlights its significant role in creating humorous effects of anti-proverbial meaning-making. The illustrations are well-presented in all sub-sections, e.g., paronyms, homonymous, polysemous, and other types of puns. Chapter 7 is mainly devoted to the conceptual mechanisms behind the humorous effects of modifications of the anti-proverbial type. The next point of our review is focused on the metaphoricity of proverbial statements described in Section 7.2 on page 198 of the current book. In general, proverbial statements are considered to reflect the culture and worldview of any given speech community and, additionally, to express the beliefs and truths of a particular group about reality and the world one lives in. Therefore, it is apparently impossible to imagine and express our thoughts without metaphor. On the other hand, metaphor is strongly connected with proverbs in order to make proverbality powerful in

[4] https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/telling-tradition-of-nasreddin-hodja-molla-nesreddin-molla-ependi-apendi-afendi-kozhanasyr-anecdotes-01705

the traditional sense of creating figurativeness in the proverbial statement. We use language to communicate, share ideas, and employ various forms of expression in order to convey the intended meanings of both literal and figurative nature. Many researchers, including Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Kövecses (2004, 2005, 2010), and others, have extensively studied the phenomenon of metaphor, particularly from a conceptual standpoint. These scholars stress that metaphor is commonly employed in human communication. For instance, in more classical terms, "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another," i.e., understanding one domain in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). It emerges in human speech throughout numerous specific disciplines and/or simply in our usual daily lives that the present anti-proverbial phenomenon is basically not an exception. Thus, the necessity of metaphorical nature is a growing area of various investigations, i.e., "... CMT made contact with a variety of disciplines and approaches in the study of the human mind and human behavior" (cf. Kövecses 2018, 125). In the process of developing contemporary metaphoricity, it is also well established that metaphor is a multifaceted phenomenon in nature. The approaches are mostly analyzed via two significant linguistic and conceptual approaches. However, both perspectives are somehow intertwined in order to emphasize how people are thinking, which can specifically indicate socio-cultural conventions while revealing one's attitudes, emotions, and experiences (cf. Cameron, 2008).

Litovkina and co-authors gave the explanation that proverbs, as being metaphorical in nature, are remarkable not merely as well-familiar statements or expressions, but rather as serving for some specific situation of referent in application. This section is indeed quite complex and therefore needs more analytical depth and further investigation. The suggestive reason is due to the strong relationship between proverb and metaphor, as a matter of fact. Such an approach most probably helps to exhibit and reconstruct the transformation practice from the original proverbial statement into an anti-proverbial presentation. This approach underscores that the meaning of a metaphorical proverb is primarily limited due to its complex metaphorical nature. This complexity often leads to the transformation of well-known proverbs into anti-proverbial expressions. In addition, based on their analysis, the numerous examples of anti-proverbs are interpreted literally in order to present the literal-metaphorical relationship. Additionally, we suggest that it would also be worthwhile to investigate the metonymic basis of meaning construction in anti-proverbs in the future (see Kövecses and Radden 1998, Panther and Radden, eds. 1999, Barcelona 2003 etc.). This idea can be backed up with specific examples, especially those extracted from the book at hand, e.g.:

> **Eng**. *It feeds the hand that bites it. {Don't bite the hand that feeds you}*
> **Rus**. *Одна голова хорошо, а голова с туловищем лучше. {Одна голова хорошо, а две лучше}*

Metonymy can offer a useful conceptual framework for precisely analyzing both proverbs and anti-proverbs. From the example above, we may see that the concepts 'hand' in English and голова 'head' in Russian are used to refer to Category and Property ICM, as in PART FOR WHOLE: DEFINING OR SALIENT PROPERTY OF A CATEGORY FOR WHOLE CATEGORY, whereas both body parts stand for whole human body, as well as for person.

Also, Section 7.4, beginning on page 204, illustrates that many anti-proverbs are simultaneously approached by several methods in the present book. It should be underlined that morphological and morphonological processes indeed may play a significant role in creating anti-proverbial expressions, though in most cases they are of the one-off type. Chapter 8, the last structural unit of the volume, summarizes the main findings and presents suggestions for further research.

Conclusion

The book under review offers a well-balanced overview of the state-of-the-art research in the area of anti-proverbial modifications, based on empirical data from five languages. The examples are presented in a careful and systematic way, i.e., the original proverb is given in parenthesis. This method is very helpful for the reader, as it helps to understand the emergence of anti-proverbial applications in detail. Additionally, it appears that this type of approach, despite all the shortcomings mentioned above, may bring to light cross-linguistic equivalents in well-defined contexts of sociolinguistic communities. On the other hand, Section 1.10, titled "Selection of Material," is a well-articulated and important chapter, although some criteria and interrelations still remain partially unclear. The sequences of the analysis of both Part I and Part II are completed according to a systematic methodology that enables the reader to navigate smoothly through the whole work. Consequently, there is no doubt that this specific way of investigation deserves credit, serving as a springboard for further research on anti-proverbs in the future.

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