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THE WORD ORIGIN OF “ANTI-PROVERB”: A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

It is no secret that the international community of paremiologists has credited me with having coined the scholarly term “*Antispruchwort*” (anti-proverb). Anna T. Litovkina, a most prolific surveyor of such proverb manipulations, may be cited to represent numerous other statements to this effect:

Wolfgang Mieder has coined the term *Antispruchwort* (anti-proverb) for 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 and English. Wolfgang Mieder’s term *Antispruchwort* has been widely accepted by proverb scholars all over the world as a general label for such innovative alterations or reactions to traditional proverbs: *anti-proverb* (English), *anti(-)proverbe* (French), *antiposlovitsa* (Russian), and *anti(-)proverbium* (Hungarian) (T. Litovkina 2015: 326–327).

Naturally the term has by now been translated into numerous other languages, and many studies of anti-proverbs have indeed been published throughout the world to attest to this intentional linguistic “play” with traditional proverbs (Mieder 2009 and 2023).

The German folklorist and paremiologist Lutz Röhrich and I employed the term “*Antispruchwörter*” (the plural form) in our co-authored book *Spruchwort* (Röhrich and Mieder 1977: 115; Mieder 2004: 249) for the first time in 1977 by basing it on the

folkloristic term “Antimärchen” (anti-fairytale) taken from André Jolles’ significant book *Einfache Formen* (1972: 241). But as T. Litovkina mentioned above, five years later I began to publish several books about German anti-proverbs that most certainly helped to establish the word “Antispruchwort” as of 1982:

- *Antispruchwörter*. 3 vols. Wiesbaden: Verlag für deutsche Sprache, 1982 and 1985; and Wiesbaden: Quelle & Meyer, 1989.
- *Verdrehte Weisheiten. Antispruchwörter aus Literatur und Medien*. Wiesbaden: Quelle & Meyer, 1998.
- „Entkernte Weisheiten“. *Modifizierte Sprichwörter in Literatur, Medien und Karikaturen*. Wien: Praesens Verlag, 2017.
- „Hinterfragte Weisheiten“. *Modifizierte Sprichwörter in Literatur, Medien und Karikaturen*. Wien: Praesens Verlag, 2022.
- „Verdrehte Wendungen“. *Sprichwörtliches in Literatur, Medien und Karikaturen*. Wien: Praesens Verlag, 2025.

It is little wonder that the term and concept “Antispruchwort” caught on in the German-speaking countries, and I suppose I can also state that Anna T. Litovkina and I deserve some credit in spreading its English translation of “anti-proverb” worldwide through our two Anglo-American collections:

- *Twisted Wisdom. Modern Anti-Proverbs*. Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, 1999.
- *Old Proverbs Never Die, They Just Diversify. A Collection of Anti-Proverbs*. Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, 2006; Veszprém, Hungary: The Pannonian University of Veszprém, 2006.

With proper scholarly humility, Anna T. Litovkina and I can take some credit for establishing the “anti-proverbial” subfield of paremiology, which is being tilled by ever more folklorists, linguists, phraseologists, and naturally paremiologists (T. Litovkina et al. 2021). But how about the internationally accepted term

“anti-proverb”, which we and many others have used for several decades by now?

The impetus for the answer to this question came from a short e-mail message of September 21, 2022, from my friend and fellow folklorist/paremiologist Charles Clay Doyle:

Dear Wolfgang,

I believe your bibliographies do not include this small article:

William Coyle. “From Scatological to Social History: *Captain Billy’s Whiz Bang*.” *Studies in American Humor*, 3, no. 3 (1977), 135–141.

There’s an (early?) use of the English term *anti-proverb*.

Best, Charlie

The article deals with the humorous content of Captain Wilford H. Fawcett’s monthly magazine *Whiz Bang* that appeared in the United States between 1919 and 1930. Comparing the expressed humor to that of the great humorist Josh Billings (1818–1885) and others (Sweterlitsch 2001), William Coyle writes:

The kind of linguistic mayhem committed by Josh Billings, Petroleum V. Nassby, Bill Nye, and other late nineteenth-century humorists is represented by anti-proverbs and mock quotations and especially puns.

The anti-proverb, a speciality of Josh Billings, subverts a traditional admonitory form with anti-climax or some other incongruity.

[This is followed by a list of 15 examples from Captain Fawcett’s magazine of which these are definitely anti-proverbs]

- Hell hath no fury like a woman’s corn. (May 1923)
- Familiarity breeds attempt. (July 1923)
- Virility is the spice of life. ((Oct. 1923)
- To err is human and sometimes divine. (Jan. 1924)
- The best friends must park. (Feb. 1924)
- It is better to love a short man than never to have loved at all. (March 1924)
- Where ignorance is bliss, ‘tis folly to confess. (April 1924)

(Coyle 1977: 137–138)

Coyle uses the term one more time in the transitionary sentence “Like the anti-proverb, the mock quotation is essentially irrever-

ent as it travesties a traditional form, and the more eminent the original source, the more effective the mockery” (Coyle 1977: 138). One thing is for certain: even though William Coyle does not reveal where he found the term “anti-proverb”, he most certainly applies it in the same meaning as Lutz Röhrich and I did in the same year of 1977. However, while “Antisprichwort” caught on in German and its English translation, Coyle’s ingenious formulation did not.

While it may perhaps never be known whether Coyle coined the term on his own, my subsequent research on the term “anti-proverb” has yielded several references that predate that of 1977! Imagine my scholarly excitement when I discovered the following short text by British essayist and literary critic Thomas de Quincey (1785–1859), which appeared identically in *The London Magazine* (November 1823), 99. 496–497, and half a year later again in *The Museum of Foreign Literature and Science*, 4, no. 19 (1824), pp. 81–82:

Proverbs

As the ‘wisdom of nation,’ and the quintessential abstract of innumerable minds, proverbs must naturally be true: but how? In what sense true? Not *haplōs* [Greek for: singly, in one way], not absolutely and unconditionally, but in relation to that position from which they are taken, Most proverbs are hemispheres as it were; and they imply another hemisphere with an opposite pole; and the two proverbs jointly compose a sphere – *i. e.* the entire truth. Thus the one proverb says – ‘Fortune favours fools:’ but this is met by its anti-proverb – ‘Sapiens dominabitur astris [The wise will rule the stars].’ – Each is true, as long as the other co-exists; each becomes false, if taken exclusively.

The illustration, by the way, is not the best I might have chosen – with a little more time for consideration: but the principle here advanced of truths being in many cases no truths unless taken with their complements (to use a trigonometrical term), – and until they are rounded into a perfect figure by an opposite hemisphere, – this principle, I shall endeavor to show a little further on, is a most important one and of very large application (de Quincey 2000: 3, 160).

Indeed, de Quincey could have chosen more obvious English contrasting proverb pairs, like “Out of sight, out of mind” and “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” But what he says about the limited truth of proverbs is right to the point. After all, it is the context in which a proverb appears that gives it its truth, and they are most certainly not universally true. Regarding his earliest known use of the English term “anti-proverb”, it is clear that here it has the meaning of a contradictory or opposite proverb. Such dueling proverbs, as they have also been called, have nothing to do with the modern meaning of anti-proverb. Clearly “anti” is here understood as opposite, as can be seen from two other references from 1916 and 1971:

It is manifest that the *art* of ethics can be practiced only when one is sure of his ethics. The practical aids which I have mentioned or indicated will be equally useful for all ethical systems, for they simply help to carry into effect the various principles; and every one of them has been foreshadowed in the proverbial sayings of mankind, although every proverb has, as it were, an *anti-proverb* which needs to be considered (Cox 1916: 218).

I have prepared the following list of looking-both-ways proverbs:

Cloches make the man. – Appearances are deceptive.

Misfortunes never come singly. – Lightning never strikes twice.

Haste makes waste. – Delays are dangerous.

[...]

And there are many more such mirror-pairs. It is great help in public debates to throw an anti-proverb into the teeth of your political rival every time he uses a proverb. But what is sauce for the goose can be sauce for the gander, and what you do to your adversary he may do to you (Khory 1971: 12).

To be sure, there are also some appearances of the term “anti-proverb” where the “anti” simply expresses being against proverbs as such. They consider proverbs useless, outdated, and unfit for today. Such opponents have been referred to as members of an “anti-proverb league,” “anti-proverb clique,” and “anti-proverb brigade”. Clearly the following statements from

1927, 1952, and 1974 have nothing to do with the concept of “anti-proverb” under discussion:

The Anti-Proverb League pridefully points out that Lindbergh couldn’t possibly have had any success had he paid any attention to the familiar saw about the wisdom of keeping one’s feet on the ground (Anonymous 1927: 57).

Every now and then there comes a moment of triumph for the anti-proverb clique. Its members happily treasure the memory of the time a Russian delegate, in a veritable proverb-quoting frenzy, announced that “truth is stranger than a needle in the haystack” (Rosenthal 1952: 14).

I’m just *not* a member of the cynical anti-proverb brigade. These comforting slabs of classical cliché have a great role to play in a world that changes its values on the hour every day. They have something of the therapeutic value of corny jokes, the soul-release and identity-comfort of wagon loads of New York graffiti (Andrews 1974: 181).

But with this, these deliberations take a sharp historical turn to the early seventeenth century, namely to the two small booklets of Nicholas Breton (1545–1626?) entitled *Crossing of Proverbs. Crosse-Answeres and Cross-Humours* (1616, 10 pp.) and *Crossing of Proverbs. The Second Part. With Certaine briefe Questions and Answers* (1616, 24 pp.). This early British paremiographer understood the “crossing of proverbs” as the juxtaposition of traditional proverbs with an equally short rejoinder (Robertson 1944). His collections always list the proverb (P) first followed in the next line with the crossing (C). Here are but a few examples from Breton’s reprinted works (Grossart 1879):

P. Good wine makes a merry heart.
C. Not when the conscience is wounded.

P. Many hands make quick work.
C. Not among the lazy.

P. Love will go through stone walls.
C. Not till there be holes in them.

- P. Marriage is honourable.
 C. Not when it is dishonored.

Some of these “proverb crossings” could be considered anti-proverbs in the way that modern aphoristic authors have reacted in a couple of lines to traditional proverbs. However, there is more to this when considering how Pierre-Alexandre Gratet-Duplessis documented Breton’s unique collection in his invaluable *Bibliographie parémiologique. Études bibliographiques et littéraires* (1847). Not only does he describe it in a solid page but he also includes two pages of examples of such crossings with French translations! He concludes all of this with this insightful paragraph:

La plupart de ces *Contre-proverbes* (*Crossings*) ne sont presque autre chose que des jeux de mots ou des espèces de calembourgs qui ne sauraient atténuer le moins du monde le sens et la portée des Proverbes qu’ils contredisent ; j’ajouterai toutefois et l’on reconnaîtra sans doute que quelques-uns de ces *Anti-proverbes* sont au moins assez ingénieux, même quand ils ne sont pas vrais (Gratet-Duplessis 1847: 394).

This might then well be the first appearance in French, in 1847, of “anti-proverbe” and it remains to be seen whether this term caught on in the scholarly world before 1977. I have not found it, but delight in citing it here as an example of another linguistic strand. Breton’s idea of proverb crossings continues to this day, as can be seen from a small collection by Spike Milligan in the British humor magazine *Punch* in 1974:

The apples on the other side of the wall are sweetest: Wrong: apples do not grow on the sides of walls.
 Better late than never: Rubbish. If you never show up, you’ll never be late.
 Don’t change horses in mid stream: Supposing the one you are on can’t swim?
 (Milligan 1974: 58)

Such texts could count as anti-proverbs, but there is only the one French reference of “anti-proverbe” just mentioned that has used this term for them.

However, there is a second French reference from a travel account in Germany from 1843 by no one less than composer Hector Berlioz (1803–1969) that contains the French term in its meaning of anti-proverbs as they are understood by scholars today:

J'aurais l'air de reconnaître son [un ami L. Schlosser] hospitalité, quand je ne ferais que lui rendre justice. Nouvelle preuve de la vérité de l'anti-proverbe: Un bienfait est toujours perdu! (Berlioz 1870: 326)

The traditional French proverb is indeed "Un bienfait ne'est jamais perdu" making Berlioz's statement "Un bienfait est toujours perdu" a true anti-proverb"! His use of the term "anti-proverbe" is thus an early French reference! Great! But alas, it did not catch on and gain any currency in the French language.

The English translation from 1932 of this French reference reads as follows:

I should seem to be thanking him [a friend L. Schlosser] for his hospitality, when really I should only be doing him justice. A fresh proof of the truth of the anti-proverb, "A benefit is always lost!" (Berlioz 1932: 343)

This reference could therefore claim that it contains the first occurrence of the term "anti-proverb" in English. True as that might be, it did not gain any currency. It is also highly doubtful that William Coyle had come across this passage when he used the term in his essay from 1977.

Finally, then, there is one even more recent occurrence of the English term "anti-proverb" in an essay by the American economist Kenneth E. Boulding in his article on "The Need for Reform of National Income Statistics" (1971). At the beginning of his essay he writes:

However, one of my favorite anti-proverbs is that nothing fails like success, and the very success of National Income Statistics perhaps has induced a certain complacency among economists, who sit a little too secure in the high prestige of which National Income Statistics have been a considerable part of the purchase price (Boulding 1971: 383).

He is, of course, basing his anti-proverb on the well-known proverb “Nothing succeeds like success!” In fact, he liked his creation so much that he repeats it towards the end of his short article, introducing it once again as an anti-proverb:

The corollary of the anti-proverb that I quoted at the beginning – that nothing fails like success – is that we only learn from failure, which is why it is important to identify the right failures and to learn the right things from them (Boulding 1971: 585).

Together with William Coyle’s statement from 1977, this reference from 1971 is clearly also a precursor to the way the term “anti-proverb” is employed internationally for this play with proverbs today. It is doubtful they influenced each other and that they were of any influence on its scholarly employment that conquered the paremiological world after 1977. I myself used it repeatedly already in my books *Tradition and Innovation in Folk Literature* (1987: 155–156) and *American Proverbs: A Study of Texts and Contexts* (1989: 242–244 and 274–275). For me personally, it fills my heart to know that I have had the honor and privilege to have been part of making the study of anti-proverbs a truly international phenomenon.

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