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New Horizons in English Studies 1/2016

LANGUAGE

Justyna Mandziuk

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS) in Lublin
mandziuk.justyna@gmail.com

"A Proverb a Day Keeps Boredom Away." Anti-Proverbs, Twisted Proverbs, Perverbs and Other Animals

Abstract. What hides behind such mysterious terms as *perverbs*, *anti-*, *quasi-*, and *twisted* proverbs? What is their status in modern paremiology? Do *bona fide* proverbs influence their modified versions or vice versa? Do modified proverbs belong to the proverbial family or are they completely distinct linguistic formations?

These are some of the many que,stions concerning perverbs, anti-, quasi- and twisted proverbs, ubiquitous nowadays in newspapers, advertisements, cartoons, or health campaigns. As an illustration, the present paper deals with such sayings as *No body is perfect*; *An onion a day keeps everyone away*; *Man proposes, mother-in-law opposes*; *He who laughs last, thinks slowest*; *Where there is a will, there is a war* and others. By providing a glimpse into the goldmine of stylistic and conceptual devices used in their creation, this paper attempts to unveil the mechanisms that contribute to the emergence of the novel meanings found in modified proverbs.

Keywords: perverbs, anti-proverbs, quasi-proverbs, twisted proverbs, paremiology, linguistic modifications, conceptual metaphor

1. Modern paremiology: *anti-*, *quasi-*, or *twisted* proverbs?

Paremiology today[1] deals not only with traditional proverbs, but also with their modified versions called *anti-*, *quasi-* and *twisted* proverbs. To the most telling ones belong*: An onion a day keeps everyone away*; *A penny saved is a penny taxed*; *If at first you*

[1] A classic account of paremiological issues is Norrick 1985; Honeck 1997 offers a cognitivist perspective. More recent contributions to the field are e.g. Kuźniak 2005 or Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Varga 2015.

DOI: 10.17951/nh.2016.1.21

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don't succeed, you are average; *Without pain you gain* and the like. Such innovative variations were for the first time called *anti-*, *quasi-*, or *twisted* proverbs in 1982 by Wolfgang Mieder. In Mieder (1993) and Mieder and Litovkina (1999), the authors treat these terms as synonyms and thus use them interchangeably. Later these names were widely accepted by the linguistic community. The range of terms used for the same purpose also includes *modified* or *fractured proverbs* and *perverbs* (cf. Delibegović Džanić 2007). On the one hand, this is hardly surprising, as new proverbs are being coined at an unprecedented rate and terminological innovations necessarily follow. On the other hand, to treat all these terms as synonymous seems to be a mistaken approach; rather, it is advisable to suggest a somewhat more relationship between perverbs, modified proverbs, anti-, quasi-/pseudo- and twisted proverbs (see Figure 1).

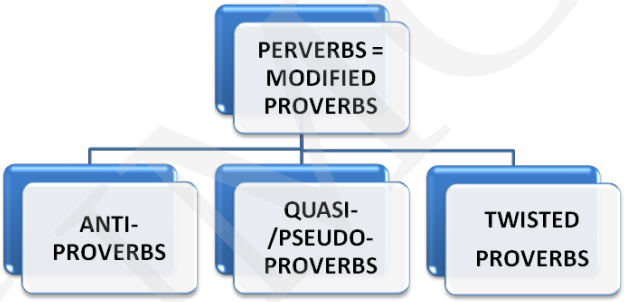


Figure 1. Classification of modified proverbs

The hierarchical structure of Figure 1 shows the terms *perverbs* or *modified proverbs* as clearly foregrounded. In my opinion, they embrace all the other subcategories (i.e. twisted, anti- and quasi-proverbs) and thus may serve as an umbrella category. Etymologically, the term *perverb* can be analysed as a result of morphological blending or a portmanteau word creation. In the process, usually the initial morpheme of one word is combined with the final morpheme of the other. According to *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the word *proverb* derives from the Latin *proverbium* 'a common saying, old adage, maxim', which in turn may be further broken into two separate meaningful units: *pro-* 'forth' + *verbum* 'word' + the Latin suffix *-ium*. Similarly, the word *perverted* 'turned from the right way' may be divided into the morphemes *per-* 'away' + *vertere* 'to turn'. Then the words *perverted* and *proverb* are blended into *perverb*. The term *modified proverb*, in turn, shares semantically with the verb *to pervert* the notion of change. Although the former sounds neutral, the latter may bring to mind additional, negative connotations. These differences notwithstanding, both labels, *modified proverb* and *perverb*, will be taken here as broad and general enough to cover the entire range of the newly coined sayings, and while they cannot be treated as synonymous, they will be used interchangeably as alternative labels for the phenomenon being discussed.

The concept of anti-proverb is related to that of anti-language. According to M.A.K. Halliday (1976), anti-language is a construct created by an anti-society, by means of

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the process called *relexicalization*, which involves the introduction of new meanings through lexical and stylistic changes. The prefix *anti-* stands for something 'opposing, against'.[2] Accordingly, anti-proverbs express meanings that stand in opposition to the meanings of the original proverbs. As an illustration consider *Money talks, but it doesn't always talk sense*, or *Never do today what you can put off for tomorrow*. While the former instance introduces negation in the second part of the proverb by means of the conjunction *but*, the latter anti-proverb contradicts the original version (i.e. *Never put off for tomorrow what you can do today*) through a structural shift.

The next term, *quasi-proverb*, also seems to have negative connotations. For the purpose of this study, we can assume it can be used interchangeably with its sister-term *pseudo-proverb*, since both denote sayings which are false, merely pretending to be true or genuine. In other words, they seem to be unsuccessful modifications that do not fulfil elementary proverbial requirements. That is why, with the terms *quasi-* and *pseudo-proverb* used somewhat pejoratively, the modified variants may be seen as not only unsuccessful modifications but also ones that express false truth and pseudo-wisdom.[3] However, quasi-proverbs are based on proverbial grounds and as long as they are easily identified with the traditional proverb they should not be excluded from the "proverbial family". While it is true to say that quasi-proverbs are not prototypical modified adages, yet they do belong to this category as its marginal members. For example, the quasi-proverb *Early to bed and early to rise and it probably means your TV set is being repaired* (Mieder 1991, 90) contains a kernel of truth in that modern society lives in the world of TV and PC screens – but in fact this pseudo-proverb is neither concise (on the contrary, it is rather lengthy), nor memorable, since there are no stylistic devices that would render it smooth and melodious in tone. Another example is *Early to bed and early to rise and your friend will wonder why you can't get a job with better hours*.

Finally, there are twisted proverbs (Mieder 2004, 200), which may be regarded as the most fruitful and productive subgroup of modified proverbs. One characteristic feature which distinguishes them from quasi-proverbs is the fact that they undergo various lexical, conceptual and phonological modifications. As an illustration consider *He who laughs last, thinks slowest,* which involves lexical substitution in the second part (cf. original version *He who laughs last, laughs best*). Moreover, a slight phonological play on sounds may be noticed in the modified proverb *Curiosity thrilled the cat*. An almost unnoticeable change of few letters i.e. *thrilled* instead of the original *killed*, results in a witty and enchanting book title.[4]

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[2] See http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/anti?showCookiePolicy=true, retrieved March 18, 2015.

[3] Interestingly, the negative marking seems to be toned down or even absent from many lexical items containing the prefixes *quasi-* and *pseudo-*, cf. *quasi-governmental*, *quasi-judicial*, *quasi-legislative*, *quasi-particle*, *pseudopod*, *pseudoacid*, *pseudobulb*, etc.

[4] This twisted-proverb is a title of the book *Curiosity Thrilled the Cat* (Magical Cats Mystery Series 1) by Sofie Kelly (2011).

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2. Stylistic devices in the construction of anti, quasi- and twisted proverbs

As mentioned earlier, traditional and modified proverbs function like literary texts. This function arises from poetic devices, which add colour and artistic expression to both traditional and modified adages. In this light, such mechanisms serve as hallmarks of modified proverbs, which may achieve proverbial status. These poetic devices, however, are not mere plays on form but involve conceptualization. This study proposes a possible division of the most common devices into three subgroups: for the sake of convenience, I will call them phonological, syntactic and conceptual. However, it must be borne in mind that each category has a conceptual aspect to it.

2.1 Phonological stylistic devices

The most frequently used phonological devices found in proverbs are alliteration and rhyme. Alliteration, according to Valdaeva (2003), is "a repetition of similar sounds, in particular consonant sounds, at the beginning of successive words" (2003, 383). Thanks to alliteration, traditional and contemporary proverbs exhibit melodic play with sounds, which effectively distinguishes them from non-proverbial utterances. As an illustration consider the proverb ***C**ut your **c**oat ac**c**ording to your **c**loth*. In this case the voiceless alveolar plosive [k] is repeated four times. Multiple use of the same consonant reinforces the semantic import conveyed in this saying, i.e. appropriate use of resources. A similar function can be found in the twisted proverb *If **p**ractice makes **p**erfect and nobody's **p**erfect then why **p**ractice?* In this example alliteration is created thanks to the blending of two contradictory proverbs, i.e. *Practice makes perfect* and *Nobody's perfect*, into one innovative saying. As can be observed, in this example the accumulation of the voiceless bilabial plosive [p] draws the readers' attention to the fruitless hunt for perfection. Yet, it may equally well be any sound which, if regularly repeated, draws attention to the meaning. Although the twisted version expresses a bleak and rather pessimistic view of modern society, it is a very down-to earth approach, as expressed in the innovative twisted proverb *No body is perfect* (see below).

Another widely used stylistic phonological device, present not only in traditional but also in modified proverbs, is rhyme. Apart from rhythm and melodious flow, rhyme introduces coherence and fluency to the utterance, at the same time making it aesthetically more pleasing. Consider such proverbial parodies as: *Man **proposes**, his mother-in-law **opposes***, which stems from the traditional proverb *Man **proposes**, God **disposes**.* Both versions employ rhyme to facilitate memorisation and to juxtapose the two rhyming words i.e. *proposes* vs. *opposes* or *proposes* vs. *disposes*. Another instance is *What can't be **cured** must be **insured***, instead of the original *What can't be **cured** must be **endured***. This twisted proverb successfully illustrates the nature of insurance companies in the modern age, since most people want to be on the safe side in the case of misfortune.

All these examples show that alliteration and rhyme serve as natural links between traditional proverbs and their modern modifications, thereby blurring the boundary

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between them. One may even risk the claim that at some points the *bona fide* proverbs are no longer evoked, as their twisted modifications sufficiently embody the modern wisdom for the purpose of communication.

2.2 Syntactic stylistic devices

Having looked at phonological stylistic devices, employed for the purpose of creating proverbs and their modified variations, let us now look more closely at the exemplary syntactic mechanisms, namely rhetorical questions. In a rhetorical question, the answer is not expected, but the listeners are encouraged to ponder over the content. Moreover, it also stresses the main point of the utterance as illustrated in the proverb *What will not money do?*, which indirectly conveys the message that money can do everything. As far as perverbs are concerned, consider the following example: *Hard work never killed anybody ... but who wants to be its first victim?* Although the second part of the anti-proverb functions as a question, in fact the answer to it is implied by the very (rhetorical) question. When viewed from this perspective, the message is that "nobody wants to be the victim of hard work".

The next modern proverb, *If love is blind, how can there be love at first sight?*, illustrates an extremely logical and literal approach to life. Thanks to the ingenious inclusion of a proverb in a rhetorical question, it challenges folk wisdom and provokes consideration. And finally, the anti-proverb *Still waters run deep – but how can they run if they are still?* is a combination of the proverb *Still water runs deep* and the rhetorical question added to the second part of the anti-proverb with the conjunction *but*. Paradoxically, while the original adage is an indirect warning that introverted people may hide bad-tempered nature, the modified version approaches the "water" issue literally, since the proposed way of thinking results from sheer logic. What I call here a syntactic device is a change of sentence type from a statement do a complementary rhetorical question. A change in conceptualisation necessarily ensues: the next section deals with conceptual devices in a more explicit manner.

2.3 Conceptual devices

The first conceptual device to be discussed here is the paradox. The word *paradox* derives from Latin *paradoxum* and refers to something that is contrary to initial assumptions, first-impression logical inferences, etc. The paradox makes use of juxtaposition, and hence throws into doubts seemingly undeniable truths and morals conveyed in proverbs. This device is also a fertile ground for satire, as it mocks folk wisdom. To illustrate, consider the well-known proverb *Jack of **all** trades, master of **none***.[5] The

[5] In logic, a paradox is a statement that cannot be true; for example, *This sentence is false* (I thank Bill Sullivan, p.c., for pointing this out to me). However, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (6th edition) defines paradox as "a statement that seems impossible because it contains two opposing ideas". It is in this everyday sense that I'm using the term here.

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paradox is constructed on the opposition "all equals none". While the first part of the adage seems to be flattering, the witty quip which is later tagged on transforms the whole saying into an ironic phrase. The proverbial Jack, who initially appears to be a handyman in almost all fields, in fact seems to be really good in none of them. In this light it is better to be a specialist in one branch rather than have some surface knowledge in many, since "all" may "equal none".

How does the paradox function in perverbs? It is well illustrated by e.g. *If practice makes perfect and nobody is perfect, then why practice?* This anti-proverb comes as a result of two conjoined proverbs into one coherent proverbial modification. On the semantic level, this anti-proverb presents two conflicting attitudes, of which the first one gives hope for perfection, and the second one discourages from hard work, suggesting that flawless people do not exist. Therefore, it is of little wonder that the anti-proverb conveys contradictory morals, thereby teasing the gullibility of the society. As a second example consider *Light thing is carried together, heavy thing take by yourself*, which comes from the original proverb *Light thing is carried together, heavy thing is taken together*. The original describes an idealised reality in which friends stand by us for good and bad. The paradoxical twist, in contrast, alludes to the tendency for people to be self-sufficient and independent, rather than collaborative and supportive. In sum, although the paradox in modern paremiology seemingly introduces ambiguity through inherent self-negation, in fact it conveys innovative wisdom presented in a jocular fashion.

Another important conceptual device is metaphor. Originally, in Latin the word *metaphora* meant 'carrying over', from Greek *metaphora* 'transfer'. Conceptual metaphor is a transfer of meaning from one domain (source domain) to another domain (target domain). In a conceptual metaphor, then, one domain of experience is understood with reference to another. Conceptual metaphor is a faculty of the human mind and hence a matter of not only language but thinking (Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980], 4). As an illustration, the metaphor TIME IS MONEY expresses transfer of meaning between two conceptual domains: MONEY (the source domain) and TIME (the target domain). Interestingly, the semantic mapping occurs here from the concrete noun (i.e. money) to the abstract one, and as a result time is perceived as a precious thing, which can either be saved or spent. Modified proverbs also employ metaphor in order to achieve figurative meanings. Consider the following example: *Life is like a bed of roses – full of pricks*, in which an innovative use of ellipsis (the elliptical part being *life is*) enables metaphorical transfer of meanings. The key to unlock this metaphor lies in the word *pricks*, which may symbolise troubles and difficulties of day-to-day life. It should also be noted that the traditional version, i.e. *Life is not a bed of roses*, is also based on metaphor; however, in this case *bed of roses* denotes virtues and merits which are frequently lacking during one's daily routine.

Equally intriguing is the metaphor presented in the twisted proverb *Where there's a will there's a war*[6] (cf. Figure 3). This example for the first time occurred in an on-

[6] A relatively old twisted-proverb is *Where there's a will, there's a lawsuit*, which is ascribed to Addison Mizner (1872–1933). I thank Bill Sullivan for drawing my attention to this point.

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line article on *The Guardian*'s official site on the 7th of December 2010. In order to correctly understand the metaphors hidden in this expression, it is helpful to start from the original proverb, namely *Where there is a will there is a way*. It is a motivational saying, pointing at one's willpower, which might be sufficient to find an appropriate solution to achieve a desired goal. There are two metaphorical ways of looking at the ingenious twisted proverb *Where there's a will there's a war*. One way to understand this perverb has to do with the recent hostile relations between Russia and the Ukraine. At the present moment (September 2016) there is a military conflict between the two countries taking place on Ukraine's territory, initiated by separatist forces within Ukraine but with clear support from Russia. Therefore, from this gloomy perspective the twisted proverb *Where there's a will there's a war* may suggest that the proverbial *will* presupposes that any pretext is good enough for the war to start.

Nevertheless, what the author of the twisted proverb means through this innovative headline may only be understood after reading the whole article. In a nutshell, the article concerns arguments over a person's will and testament. When someone dies without making a will, the situation may cause uproar among relatives. However, when the departed person makes the last will, the arguments between those who inherit and those who were hoping to inherit the property of the deceased seem to be even more heated. In accordance with the general gist of the article, the noun *will* stands for 'a legal document containing instructions as to what should be done with one's money and property after one's death'[7] rather than determination to perform some action as it is presented in the first interpretation above.

By way of summary, it can be concluded that not only *bona fide* proverbs but also their modified versions involve phonological, syntactic and conceptual devices. Therefore, the secret of creating a successful modified proverb lies in a skilful use of these processes, which not only introduce melodious flow and rhythm, but also render the seemingly obvious proverbial phrases ambiguous, so that semantic puzzles emerge. The key to unlocking them is the polysemous nature of words, which the addressee has to place relative to a given context. Additionally, as acknowledged by Mieder, "proverbs don't always have to be didactic and prescriptive; they can always be full of satire, irony and humour" (Mieder 1993, Introduction). Admittedly, this observation concerns proverbs only, yet such anti-proverbs as *Hard work never killed anybody ... but who wants to be its first victim?,* or the twisted proverb *Man proposes, and his mother-in-law opposes*, fit perfectly into the above-mentioned formula and consequently might be regarded as legitimate successors of *bona fide* proverbs. Admittedly, *When there is a will...*, being certainly a play on conceptualisations, is also used for a phonetic effect (the glide [w] being repeated). On the other hand, *Cut your coat...* could easily be classified as "conceptual". The borders are – unsurprisingly – fuzzy, and these are problems that beset all taxonomies.

[7] http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/will#will-2; retrieved March 26, 2015.

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Where there's a will there's a war

Neil Rose

There are many routes to challenging a will - but 'it's not fair' and 'I deserve more' just won't do

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A question of inheritance: it is impossible to draft a bomb-proof will, say legal experts. Photograph: Martin Jones/Corbis

The law generally gives us freedom to dispose of our property after death however we wish. But it also allows those we have slighted in our wills the right to challenge those choices. Disputes over wills and inheritances are nothing new - Dickens's fictional case of Jarndyce v Jarndyce in Bleak House only ended when the entire estate of the deceased had been swallowed up by legal costs.

To judge by the column inches they attract, this is the new divorce. The cases have all the elements of human drama - money, family feuds, long-buried grudges, painful rejection, often mistresses and dark secrets - and are all the more intriguing because the key witness is, by definition, unavailable.

Figure 3. Fragment of the article "Where there's a will there's a war" from *The Guardian*'s official website (available at http://www.theguardian.com/law/2010/dec/07/neil-rose-will-disputes; retrieved March 23, 2015).

3. Conclusion

The study has only concentrated on a body of data that most unambiguously belong to the category of proverbs or their modifications, omitting the huge area covered by other, related forms of verbal expression, such as clichés, wellerisms, maxims, aphorisms, idioms, etc. (cf. Kuźniak 2005, 38–47). The renaissance of traditional proverbial spirit manifesting itself in the form of anti-, quasi- and twisted proverbs is symptomatic of what may perhaps be viewed as a modern-time desire to adjust to every context and situation with minimum wording and maximum effect. Moreover, these modified proverbs encapsulate the spirit of folk wisdom with the innovative breath of the modern age. A saying such as *Leap before you look* augments the validity of the saying *He who*

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hesitates is lost, encouraging people to be foolhardy and at the same time emphasising the competitive aura of many contemporary societies. What is really surprising is the fact that in light of the above, both modified and traditional proverbs are sometimes closely intertwined, successfully complementing each other. Yet, some perverbs function alongside their original counterparts, neither replacing, nor complementing them. They seem to function as separate linguistic units, which only superficially resemble the traditional sayings, but in fact produce new meanings and effects. For example, the traditional proverb *No pain, no gain* has given rise to *Without pain you gain*, the meanings of the two sayings being opposite.

When comparisons are made between *bona fide* proverbs and their modified versions, genuine proverbs seem to be lofty and serious, whereas perverbs tend to be humorous and witty. Moreover, modified proverbs frequently mock the genuine sayings through hyperbole, irony, humour or parody, as in *He who laughs last, thinks slowest*. This twisted proverb becomes a satirical version of the genuine adage *He who laughs last, laughs best*. Sometimes, however, perverbs are created to adjust the traditional proverb to the requirements of the twenty-first century, for instance *No body is perfect* instead of *Nobody is perfect*, or *Home is where computer is* instead of *Home is where the heart is*. While the former is a form of consolation that ideal body shapes are impossible, the latter presents the harsh truth that the traditional proverbial "heart" has to give way to the technological device without which modern society cannot survive.

Yet, in the light of the above-presented examples, one may ask whether modified proverbs have a function the same as or analogous to that of *bona fide* proverbs. Although there is no definitive answer, it seems that perverbs do really act as genuine proverbs. Anti-, quasi- and twisted proverbs not only make use of the same linguistic and conceptual devices as genuine proverbs do, but they also embody the elementary proverbial features of PCW (i.e. pithy, catchy and wise), which may serve as the first criterion for deciding whether a given saying is a proverb or a mere cliché. On balance, whether modified proverbs find their honourable place among traditional ones remains to be seen.

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