



*Amit holnap
is megtehetész,
ne tedd
meg ma!*

*Don't do today
what you can put off
until tomorrow.*

*Was du heute
kannst besorgen,
das verschiebe
nicht erst morgen.*

*Pourquoi
remettre
à demain
ce qu'on
peut faire
la semaine
prochaine ?*

*Не делай
сегодня то,
что можно
сделать
завтра.*

Anti-Proverbs in Five Languages

Structural Features and Verbal Humor Devices

Anna T. Litovkina
Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt
Péter Barta
Katalin Vargha
Wolfgang Mieder

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Preface

Proverbs are by no means fossilized texts but adapt to different times and changed values. While anti-proverbs can be considered as variants of older proverbs, they can also become new proverbs reflecting a more modern worldview. In Europe and North America the genre of transformed proverbs is becoming ever more popular, especially due to the mass media and the Internet. In fact, one may easily believe that the Century of the Anti-Proverb is now in progress.

The collection of anti-proverbs (paremiography) has thus begun in several languages. Indeed, the first collection of German anti-proverbs was published by Wolfgang Mieder (“Antisprichwörter.” Band I. 1982/1983). The first such collection in the English language, the book “Twisted Wisdom: Modern Anti-Proverbs” (1999), was written almost two decades later by Wolfgang Mieder in cooperation with Anna Tóthné Litovkina.

In parallel, the study of anti-proverbs (paremiology) also started. Anti-proverbs being a lingo-cultural phenomenon, they deserve the attention of folklorists, linguists, cultural and literary historians, as well as general readers interested in language and wordplay. The authors of this book (researchers and university teachers specializing in folklore and linguistics) established the International Research Group for Folklore and Linguistics in Budapest in 2006 with the aim of exploring certain minor genres of folklore, especially proverbs, anti-proverbs, and jokes, and conducting comparative studies concentrating on texts in different languages

and social and cultural contexts. They presented their research results at several national and international conferences and in various publications.

This book is a pioneering comparative monograph of English, German, French, Russian, and Hungarian anti-proverbs and is based on well-known proverbs. The introductory chapter reviews the international scholarship on proverbs and anti-proverbs. It discusses the frequent occurrence of innovative anti-proverbs and shows which traditional proverbs are particularly suitable for varied anti-proverbs. The remaining chapters are divided into two large parts. The first emphasizes the formal features of the alterations (surface structure, morphology, phonology) used to create anti-proverbs. The second part investigates the functional features (verbal humor, stylistics, rhetoric) found in anti-proverbs.

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Contents

1	The Comparative Study of Anti-Proverbs: An Introduction	1
	Part I Types of Proverb Alterations	53
2	Addition in Anti-Proverbs	55
3	Omission in Anti-Proverbs	77
4	Substitution in Anti-Proverbs	89
5	Blending of Proverbs	121
	Part II Anti-Proverbs and Verbal Humor	141
6	Punning in Anti-Proverbs	143
7	Further Humor Devices as Used in Anti-Proverbs	189

8 Summary and Implications for Further Research	227
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Index	245
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1

The Comparative Study of Anti-Proverbs: An Introduction

At the beginning of this chapter¹ we consider briefly the topics of contradictory proverbs and people's doubts in the truth of proverbs; we also review the background of proverb and anti-proverb research and terminology, as well as the occurrence of anti-proverbs. The fifth section touches upon the question of the possible sources and variants of anti-proverbs. The focus of the sixth section is on those proverbs that are most popular for variation, while the seventh section discusses the most common syntactic structures (patterns) on which proverbs and anti-proverbs are built. The eighth section discusses the question of internationally spread anti-proverbs. The final sections of this chapter give a general overview of the book and indicate where the material of the book comes from.

1.1 Contradictory Proverbs

There are many proverbs about proverbs. More than any other topic, such expressions stress the truthfulness² of proverbs, and assert that proverbs cannot be contradicted or judged.³ Nevertheless, proverbs have never

been considered as absolute truths. While people have appreciated the didactic wisdom⁴ of these sapiential gems (see Mieder 1985a), they have certainly also noticed the limited scope of proverbs when interpreted as universal laws of behavior.

The proverbs *Too many cooks spoil the broth; Too many commanders cause confusion in the ranks; Everybody's business is nobody's business* stress that when too many people try to do the same job at the same time it is never done properly, chaos reigns. But the proverb *Many hands make light work* makes a directly contradictory assertion: the more people there are to carry out a task the more easily it is completed.

While the proverbs *Out of sight, out of mind; Absence is love's foe; Far from the eyes, far from the heart; What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve for* say that absent friends and lovers are soon forgotten, the proverb *Absence makes the heart grow fonder* has a completely opposite meaning: people feel more affection when they are parted. A proverb that makes both assertions possible is: *Absence kills a little love but makes the big one grow* (for the detailed examination of American proverbs about romantic love, see Tóthné Litovkina and Csábi 2002).

Anybody can quickly tell that many more proverbs contradict each other, as can be seen by the juxtaposition of such frequently cited proverb pairs as:

Haste makes waste. – Procrastination is the thief of time.

Caution is the parent of safety. – He that is too secure is not safe.

Fling dirt enough and some will stick. – Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.

Like attracts like. – Two of a trade seldom agree.

Fine feathers do not make fine birds. – Fine feathers make fine birds.

Clothes make the man. – Clothes do not make the man.

Barking dogs don't bite. – A dog will bark before it bites.

Look before you leap. – He who hesitates is lost.

The last pair of contradictory proverbs is discussed in the satirical essay “Better Safe than Sorry When It Comes to Sayings” by Charles Osgood:

I have decided not to live by the wise old sayings anymore. It's not that the wise old sayings don't have a lot of truth and distilled experience in them, it's just that they never quite seem to fit a given situation.

Look before you leap is sound advice, all right. You can get into lots of trouble by leaping before looking.

But if you do too much pre-leap looking, you violate another and completely contradictory wise old saying:

He who hesitates is lost.

It's certainly not going to do you much good looking before leaping, if, in the process, you end up lost because of the inherent hesitating.⁵

But such proverbial dueling with opposite or contradictory proverbs is only one of the many ways in which people have reacted humorously or satirically to this storehouse of folk wisdom. As Wolfgang Mieder (1989a: 240) states:

Upon reading such "attacks," it always becomes immediately obvious that the satirist is contextualizing the proverb in one very definite situation for which the proverb does not hold true. Any one of us could, of course, at once think up a different situation for which the proverb would be a perfect fit.

Vernon Rendall (1929: 443) also comments on the problem of contradictory proverbs: "Whoever paused over the warning of a proverb? The next minute, if he had a fairly good head, he might think of another that contradicted it." The poem "Paradoxical Proverbs" by Frank H. Woodstrike (see Mieder 1989a: 187–188), juxtaposing 16 proverb pairs that possess opposite meanings and demonstrating the contradictory nature of proverbs—which can be "wise" or "absurd," depending on how a given situation is presented—supports Rendall's statement:

Frank H. Woodstrike
Paradoxical Proverbs

If wisdom supreme you really desire,
Just heed the philosophers' word;
Be sure that you act as the proverbs require
And you will be wise, or absurd.

Look before you leap.
Hesitate and all is lost.

Stick with the ship.
Wise rats desert a sinking ship.

Return good for evil.
Pay him back in his own coin.

As you sow, so shall you reap.
A bad start, a good finish.

In peace prepare for war.
Never cross a bridge until you come to it.

When in Rome do as Romans do.
Do only that which is right.

An honest man cannot be bought.
Every man has his price.

Never howl until you are hit.
A stitch in time saves nine.

A rolling stone gathers no moss.
A setting hen lays no eggs.

Never judge by appearances.
Every bird is known by its feathers.

Strive not against the stream.
To reach the top you must climb the hill.

Better half bad than all bad.
A lie that is half-truth is blackest.

Love never dies.
When poverty enters the door, Love leaps out the window.

Everybody feels for the under dog.
When a man is down everybody jumps on him.

Live while you live.
Put by for a rainy day.

It is never too late.
When a thing is lost, it is too late to lock it up.

Taken separately, each proverb in this series sounds persuasive enough, but the juxtaposition of contradictory proverbs may raise serious doubts concerning the trustworthiness of both assertions.

The “game” of contrasting two proverbs with contradictory meanings was already so widespread by the end of the sixteenth century (e.g., the proverb duels in Shakespeare, Cervantes or Rabelais; see Mieder 1989a: 239) that an entire collection of opposing proverb pairs was published in 1616 under the title “Crossing of Proverbs” (see Breton 1616).

Kwesi Yankah (1984) stresses that proverbs lose their real meaning when listed in proverb collections; he asserts that the problem of contradictory proverbs exists because they are analyzed out of context. Apparent contradiction stems from looking at proverbs outside the frame of the specific discourse which gives them meaning and within which they are not contradictory at all.⁶

As Mieder (1993, 26) states, “Since proverbs reflect human experiences of all types, they are bound to contradict each other just as life is made up of a multitude of contradictions. Used in a very particular context any proverb will express some short wisdom of sorts that comments or reflects on a given situation, even though the truth of it could be put into question when looked at from a larger philosophical framework. Proverbs are context-bound and so is their wisdom, no matter how minute that kernel of truth might be.”

The thesis that “the meaning of any proverb is actually evident only after it has been contextualized” (Mieder 2004a: 134) was verified by a corpus-based study conducted by Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Gotthardt (2017). The authors analyzed the contextual use of three pairs of Hungarian proverbs in the Hungarian National Corpus (see Oravec et al. 2014). The three pairs of proverbs have been marked as items with opposite meaning by T. Litovkina in her “Dictionary of Hungarian Proverbs” (T. Litovkina 2005b). The semantic analysis of the corpus evidence has clearly shown that in one of the three cases the proverbs do indeed have an opposite meaning. However, in the other two cases the assumption that the proverbs have an opposite meaning could not be confirmed. Thus, a hypothetical antonymous relation between two proverbs can only be confirmed after a careful analysis of their use in context.

Of special relevance here are an article by David Cram (1985)—“A Note on the Logic of Proverbs”—and a response by Nkeonye Otakpor (1987)—“A Note on the Logic of Proverbs: A Reply.” While Cram (1985: 271) states that proverbs embody the law of non-contradiction and that “given a proverb there must be another of equal and opposite meaning,” Otakpor argues that proverbs having “equal and opposite meaning” don’t necessarily entail a contradiction. Neither *Apparel bespeaks the man*, nor *Character bespeaks the man* is necessarily opposite or the denial of the other, because “it is the circumstance, situation or occasion that will ultimately determine the appropriateness of proverb usage. If the circumstance or situation is most inappropriate, then such denials would not necessarily entail a contradiction” (Otakpor 1987: 264–265). Otakpor (1987: 267–268) states that proverbs are “neither correct nor incorrect; neither sound nor unsound, but suitable or unsuitable, reasonable or unreasonable, within specific speech contexts” (for more on the question of contradictory proverbs see also Tóthné Litovkina 1996, T. Litovkina and Mieder 2005: 113–117).

Some proverbs may even carry in themselves contradictory meanings. To illustrate this, consider Heda Jason’s example *Father and mother are as guests in this world*, which she interprets as follows: “This metaphor can have two contradicting meanings: a) as the parents will soon leave this world, use the opportunity to take care of them as long as they are with you; or the opposite: b) if parents are a burden to you, don’t worry. They will die soon anyway” (Jason 1971: 621). Arvo Krikmann (1985: 79) expands upon Jason’s explanation:

As to the present example, the meaning of “two contradictory meanings” might be somewhat specified. On the stating (i.e., surface function) level both interpretations obviously give identical results: “the parents will soon die” or something similar. All the contradictions come in just on the evaluative level: interpretation a) proceeds from the presupposition “the death of the parents would be bad (because...),” while interpretation (b) proceeds from that “their death would be good (because they are a burden).” Correspondingly, the prescriptions must also be different.

We could end this discussion of proverb contradiction with the following proverb: *When the occasion comes, the proverb comes* (African/Oji).

1.2 Doubts Concerning the Truth of Proverbs

A person chooses a proverb according to the demands of the situation—not due to its universal, abstract sense, and any situation can be interpreted in more than one way. The relevance of proverbs and their meaning emerges only in their application and use in specific contexts. “We can thus characterize the particular choice of proverbs in any given context by the popular proverb ‘If the shoe (proverb) fits, wear (use) it’” (Mieder 1989a: 239). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1973: 823) states, “a person tends to select a proverb on the basis of what the situation requires rather than simply or solely because of either a given proverb’s semantic fit or its ‘truth’ in some abstract sense.”

There exists a long tradition of parodying individual proverbs by adding a statement which puts its wisdom into question or negates it completely. Often such short commentaries are introduced by the conjunction “but,” thus immediately flagging the contradictory intent of the message:

Half the world doesn’t know how the other half lives, but not in a small town.⁷ {Half the world doesn’t know how the other half lives}⁸

A fool and his money are soon parted, but seldom by another fool.⁹ {A fool and his money are soon parted}

Doubts about the truthfulness of a proverb may be also expressed by adding the qualifier “may” to a positive statement, or “may not” to a negative statement, to the original proverb, followed by a commentary (usually introduced by the conjunction “but”) questioning the truth of the proverb:

Man may not live by bread alone, but many people live chiefly on crust.¹⁰
{Man does not live by bread alone}

Honesty may be the best policy, but falsies prove it is not always the best policy.¹¹ {Honesty is the best policy}

Money may talk, but have you ever noticed how hard of hearing it is when you call it?¹² {Money talks}

The way to a man’s heart may be through his stomach, but a pretty girl can always find a detour.¹³ {The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach}

Authors reworking traditional gems of wisdom may simply put the proverb in a context in which it doesn't sound truthful and then offer an explanation:

If God helped those who help themselves, those who help themselves wouldn't have to hire expensive lawyers.¹⁴ {God helps those who help themselves}

Cab drivers are living proof that practice does not make perfect.¹⁵ {Practice makes perfect}

Speak no evil, see no evil, hear no evil – and you'll never write a bestseller.¹⁶ {Speak no evil, see no evil, hear no evil}

Next time a man tells you talk is cheap, ask him if he knows how much a session of Congress costs.¹⁷ {Talk is cheap}

Coiners of anti-proverbs often introduce the traditional form of a proverb with such words or phrases as “used to,” “in the (good) old days,” “there was a time,” and then use the words “nowadays,” “then” or “now” to describe a single situation in which the proverb may sound wrong:

In the old days there was one law for the rich and one for the poor: nowadays there are millions of laws for everyone.¹⁸ {There is one law for the rich and one for the poor}

A picture used to be worth a thousand words – then came television.¹⁹ {A picture is worth a thousand words}

In the good old days two could live as cheaply as one; nowadays one can live as expensively as two.²⁰ {Two can live as cheaply as one}

There was a time when a fool and his money were soon parted, but now it happens to everybody.²¹ {A fool and his money are soon parted}

As Mieder (1993: 90) states, “proverbs are no longer sacrosanct bits of wisdom laying out a course of action that must be adhered to blindly. Instead proverbs are considered as questionable and at best apparent truths that are called on if the shoe (proverb) happens to fit. When that is not the case, they are freely changed to express opposite points of view.”

The folk do not consider proverbs sacrosanct, and people are well aware of the fact that proverbs at times are simply too rigid and limited in their prescribed wisdom. Because a proverb is by nature a

generalization, it cannot in itself be defined as “true” or “false.” And because it is easy to find exceptions to nearly every generalization, proverbs are often altered to provide satirical, ironic or humorous comments on a given situation. Some proverb variations question the truth of a proverb by posing a naive question—thus presenting a single situation in which the proverb may sound wrong, or doesn’t fit:

Birds of a feather flock together...How can birds flock any other way?²²
 {Birds of a feather flock together}
 If ignorance is bliss, why aren’t more people happy?²³ {Ignorance is bliss}
 If man believed in leaving well enough alone, where would we be?²⁴ {Leave
 well enough alone}

Examples from other languages:

Ge: Der Klügere gibt nach ... oder doch nicht?²⁵ {Der Klügere gibt nach}
 Ge: Geht Liebe wirklich durch den Magen?²⁶ {Liebe geht durch
 den Magen}
 Fr: Qui dort dîne? Or, l’appétit vient en mangeant! Donc, l’insomnie fait
 maigrir.²⁷ {Qui dort dîne; L’appétit vient en mangeant}
 Fr: N’y a-t-il pas de fumée sans feu?²⁸ {Il n’y a pas de fumée sans feu}
 Ru: Правда? Матка глаза колет?²⁹ {Правда матка глаза колет}
 Ru: Меняют ли коней на переправе?³⁰ {Коней на переправе
 не меняют}
 Hu: Nyelvében él a nemzet?³¹ {Nyelvében él a nemzet}
 Hu: Nem a ruha teszi az embert?³² {Nem a ruha teszi az embert}

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. Since proverbs tend to express wisdom in an authoritative way, the coiners of anti-proverbs undermine that authority to express current attitudes toward proverbial wisdom. In some cases a positive proverb statement may be changed into a negative one:

If you want a thing to be well done, don’t do it yourself – hire a specialist.³³
 {If you want a thing to be well done, do it yourself}
 In the underworld, money isn’t the root of all evil, but evil is the root of all
 money.³⁴ {Money is the root of all evil}

Money is not the root of all evil – no money is.³⁵ {Money is the root of all evil}

There's no such thing as honor among thieves; they are just as bad as other people.³⁶ {There's honor among thieves}

Examples from other languages:

Ge: Der Klügere gibt nicht nach.³⁷ {Der Klügere gibt nach}

Ge: Wer a sagt, der muß nicht b sagen. Er kann auch erkennen, daß a falsch war.³⁸ {Wer A sagt, muss auch B sagen.}

Fr: Dans le doute, ne t'abstiens pas.³⁹ {Dans le doute, abstiens-toi}

Fr: Un sou n'est qu'un sou.⁴⁰ {Un sou est un sou}

Ru: Третий не лишний: он запасной.⁴¹ {Третий лишний}

Ru: На ошибках не учатся. На них зарабатывают деньги.⁴² {На ошибках учатся}

Hu: Nézd meg az anyját, ne vedd el a lányát.⁴³ {Nézd meg az anyját, vedd el a lányát}

Hu: Ami késik elmúlik.⁴⁴ {Ami késik, nem múlik}

And vice versa, a negative statement might be changed into a positive one:

Putting off for tomorrow what you can do today has one advantage: you may be dead tomorrow and then you won't have to do it.⁴⁵ {Don't put off for tomorrow what you can do today}

Crime pays, but you've got to be careful.⁴⁶ {Crime doesn't pay}

Crime pays – be a lawyer.⁴⁷ {Crime doesn't pay}

Examples from other languages:

Ge: Über Geschmack lässt sich streiten.⁴⁸ {Über Geschmack lässt sich nicht streiten}

Ge: Arbeit schändet.⁴⁹ {Arbeit schändet nicht}

Fr: L'argent fait le bonheur.⁵⁰ {L'argent ne fait pas le bonheur}

Fr: Pierres qui roulent amassent mousse.⁵¹ {Pierre qui roule n'amasse pas mousse}

Ru: И один в поле воин.⁵² {Один в поле не воин}

Ru: Деньги пахнут: маленькие – потом, а большие – кровью.⁵³ {Деньги не пахнут}

Hu: A pénz boldogít.⁵⁴ {A pénz nem boldogít}

Hu: Amit ma megtehetsz, halaszd holnapra.⁵⁵ {Amit ma megtehetsz, ne halaszd holnapra}

Coiners of anti-proverbs often effect their transformations by employing antonyms, for example:

All's unfair in love and war.⁵⁶ {All's fair in love and war}

If you can't stand the heat, go back to the kitchen.⁵⁷ {If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen}

Spare the rod and save the child.⁵⁸ {Spare the rod and spoil the child}

Examples from other languages:

Ge: Ein leerer Bauch studiert nicht gern.⁵⁹ {Ein voller Bauch studiert nicht gern}

Ge: Alles Aufhören ist schwer.⁶⁰ {Aller Anfang ist schwer}

Fr: Bien mal acquis profite toujours à quelqu'un.⁶¹ {Bien mal acquis ne profite jamais}

Fr: L'argent est le nerf de la paix.⁶² {L'argent est le nerf de la guerre}

Ru: Родная душа – потемки.⁶³ {Чужая душа – потемки}

Ru: Каждый сам кузнец своего несчастья.⁶⁴ {Каждый сам кузнец своего счастья}

Hu: Éhezés közben is megjön az étvágy.⁶⁵ {Évés közben jön meg az étvágy}

Hu: Kivétel gyengíti a szabályt.⁶⁶ {Kivétel erősíti a szabályt}

1.3 Proverbs and Anti-Proverbs: Background of Research and Terminology

Throughout the world people have summarized their experiences and observations into small linguistic units that are easily remembered and repeated as bits of wisdom about life and nature. These traditional proverbs have been traced back to the very beginning of written documents with Sumerian cuneiform tablets containing some earliest texts. Many proverbs from Greek and Roman antiquity continue to be in use today in translations into many languages. Such proverbs as *Time flies*, *Big fish eat little fish*, and *One hand washes the other* have lost nothing of their

popularity. The same is true for the many medieval Latin proverbs that were used for translation exercises in schools and which found their way into the vernacular languages, to wit *Strike while the iron is hot*, *All that glitters is not gold*, and *When the cat is away, the mice will play*. The many Bible translations have also spread numerous proverbs throughout Europe and beyond, as for example *Pride goes before a fall* (Proverbs 16:18), *Man does not live by bread alone* (Deuteronomy 8:3, Matthew 4:4), and the so-called golden rule *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* (Matthew 7:12). Of course, different cultures and languages have their very own indigenous proverbs with thousands of texts that have not been spread beyond their original linguistic borders. However, with English having become the lingua franca of the world, many Anglo-American proverbs have now been distributed worldwide either in English or in translation. Some examples would be *An apple a day keeps the doctor away*, *Good fences make good neighbors*, and *One picture is worth a thousand words*. This incredible wealth of proverbs—many thousands of them—has been collected and registered in at times voluminous scholarly or popular proverb collections. In fact, there exists an entire field of study called paremiography based on the Greek word “paremia” for proverb that relates to the writing down of proverbs in such compendia. Bibliographies have registered well over 25,000 proverb collections with over 200 being added every year (Mieder 2011). Among the significant comparative proverb collections are Emanuel Strauss’s “Dictionary of European Proverbs” (1994) and Gyula Paczolay’s “European Proverbs in 55 Languages” (1997), and there is now also an electronic database called “The Matti Kuusi international type system and database of proverbs” (<https://www.mattikuusiproverbtypology.fi/>, see also Lauhakangas 2001).

Of course, collecting, classifying, and registering multitudes of proverbs is but one side of the coin. The other half is what has been called paremiology, the study of proverbs in all their multifaceted aspects. There are proverb scholars or paremiologists in every country with the International Association of Paremiology being housed at Tavira, Portugal, where annual colloquia take place with participants from all continents. While paremiologists publish their research in monographs or journals in such fields as anthropology, folklore, linguistics, literature, psychology, religion, sociology, and elsewhere, there are also two

international yearbooks that serve paremiologists in particular, namely “Paremia” (Madrid, Spain) and “Proverbium” (Burlington, Vermont, USA), with the latter including bibliographical references for between 400–500 new publications each year about proverbial matters from anywhere. It might also be mentioned that there exists a two-volume “International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology” (Mieder 2009) with over 10,000 annotated entries. And as can be imagined, a number of paremiologists have written important books that present comprehensive overviews of the paremiography and paremiology of their respective languages and cultures. The classic study is Archer Taylor’s “The Proverb” (1931) that remains the very best introduction to proverb studies. A newer version of sorts is Wolfgang Mieder’s “Proverbs. A Handbook” (2004a), and now the invaluable “Introduction to Paremiology. A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies”, co-edited by Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita Aleksa Varga (2015), is available as well.

As can be imagined, one of the major concerns is the actual definition of a proverb. One would think that nothing should be easier or simpler, and yet, even Taylor began his book with the by now almost proverbial statement that “An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. [...] Let us be content with recognizing that a proverb is a saying current among the folk” (Taylor 1931: 3). Of course, he then spends a bit over 200 pages explaining the ins and outs of proverbs. As expected, there are literally hundreds of attempts at defining proverbs in various lengths, with “A proverb is a concise statement of an apparent truth which has, had, or will have currency among the folk” (Mieder 2004a: 4) being suitable as a precise working definition. And there is also Lord John Russell’s telling observation that “A proverb is the wit of one, and the wisdom of many” from 1823 that hits the proverbial nail on the head. Together these three short definitions express fundamental aspects of proverbiality: proverbs start with an individual, they are short, they exhibit currency and traditionality of use, they are known, and they have a certain claim to truth. The problem is that their currency and frequency have to be researched, and it must also not be forgotten that some proverbs fall (should fall) out of use, as for example such stereotypical proverbs as *A woman’s tongue is like a lamb’s tail* or *The only good*

Indian is a dead Indian. Proverbs also disappear because they are no longer understood or irrelevant to modern society. The classical proverb *Cobbler, stick to your last* is more or less distinct in American English because the profession of the cobbler is losing ground, and people do not know what kind of tool a last is. Some proverbs like *The early bird catches the worm* or *You can't judge a book by its cover* will surely live on forever, and very importantly, there are also new or modern proverbs! Way too long have proverb scholars ignored the fact that the time for creating new proverbs is by no means over. Various paremiologists are now working on the identification, collection, and interpretation of new texts, with "The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs," edited by Charles Clay Doyle, Wolfgang Mieder, and Fred R. Shapiro (2012), serving as a model. Much can be learned from these new proverbs regarding the values and worldview expressed in them (Mieder 2020). But there is also this important point: the fact that proverbs contain but "apparent truths" is an indication that proverbial wisdom is not based on a logical philosophical system. Proverbs are generalizations, and they take on their various intended meanings with different functions in a multitude of contexts. The triad of polysemanticity, polyfunctionality, and polysituativity (Mieder 2004a: 9) plays into every instantiation of a proverb. The observation that proverbs do not contain absolute truths is perfectly well exemplified by contrasting pairs such as *Out of sight, out of mind*, and *Absence makes the heart grow fonder*. But since proverbs speak with authority and a claim to truth or wisdom, it should come as no surprise that people have contradicted or parodied them in so-called anti-proverbs, a phenomenon that has gone on for hundreds of years but which has become more prevalent in the modern age.

It has already been stated that proverbs are complete but quite often elliptical sentences, to wit *First come, first served* or *Nothing ventured, nothing gained*. Many of them are rather plain generalization, as for example *Honesty is the best policy* or *Money has no morality*. The more fascinating proverbs are those based on metaphors, as for example *Little pitchers have big ears* or *Lies have short legs*. In addition, there are certain markers that help to identify many proverbs. Such poetic devices as alliteration (*Many a mickle makes a muckle*), rhyme (*Different strokes for different folks*), and parallelism (*No pain, no gain*) appear frequently, and

there are also several structural patterns upon which proverbs are based: “No X, no Y” (*No guts, no glory*), “X is better than Y” (*A friend nearby is better than a brother far off*), “Where there is X, there is Y” (*Where there is a will there is a way*), “Like X, like Y” (*Like father, like son*), “One X does not make a Y” (*One swallow does not make a summer*), and so on (on the structure of proverbs and anti-proverbs, see Sect. 1.7 of this chapter). When one considers that the average length of proverbs is about seven words, and if one further recalls that there are thousands of proverbs, it should not come as a surprise that many of them can be grouped according to various basic structures. Some new formulaic patterns have appeared for modern proverbs, as for example “My X, my Y” (*My house, my rules*), “X is a journey, not a destination” (*Education is a journey, not a destination*), and “There are no Xs, only Ys” (*There are no bad students, only bad teachers*). Linguists in particular have looked at these and other proverb structures (Norrick 1985), but semioticians have also shown how proverbs function as verbal signs that are employed strategically in oral and written communication (Grzybek and Eismann 1984).

Of great interest to paremiologists has also been the question about what proverbs are actually known and used today? The Russian scholar Grigorii L’vovich Permiakov pioneered what has become known as the establishment of so-called paremiological minima for various languages. Using questionnaires, it is now known for several languages such as Czech, English, French, German, Hungarian, Russian, Croatian, and so on, which are the most well-known proverbs. Depending on the sophistication of the questionnaires, it can also be ascertained whether the knowledge and active use of proverbs differ between the genders, age groups, educational level, urban or rural population, and so on. These demographic studies are getting ever more sophisticated and should be repeated from time to time. One of the criticisms thus far would be that the questionnaires do usually not include modern proverbs. It obviously stands to reason that teenagers might know a modern proverb that their parents have not even heard of before. There is still much more exciting empirical work to be done here. And it should also be stressed that paremiological minima are indeed very instructive for foreign language teaching. It does not make much sense to teach obsolete or infrequently used proverbs.

Social scientists have also made major contributions to paremiological research. Anthropologists have long studied native populations and that has resulted in important proverb collections of tribal languages as well as a better understanding of the important communicative role that proverbs play in oral societies. Together with sociologists it would be desirable that further investigations would be undertaken to learn more about the use and function of proverbs at various workplaces, in different social groups, among students or athletes, and so on. Psychologists and psychiatrists have used proverbs for the past 100 years for various types of mental testing, such as intelligence, behavior, schizophrenia, and aphasia. Especially psycholinguists have done pioneering work in studying the mental processes that go into understanding metaphorical proverbs (Honeck 1997). There is also a tradition of looking at the wisdom literature of various religions (Griffin 1991). Much has been done regarding the Bible proverbs of the Old and New Testaments and how they have become folk proverbs over time. With refugees and immigrants bringing their religious background with them, there should now also be more interest in the proverbs of the Koran and other religious texts. There is no doubt that proverbial wisdom is part of religion that provides moral and ethical rules of conduct. More work could be undertaken to see how philosophers have dealt with proverbs. Immanuel Kant and most certainly Friedrich Nietzsche have employed proverbs with deep insights. The use of proverbs in politics has also resulted more recently in major studies of the proverbial rhetoric by world leaders such as Otto von Bismarck, Winston Churchill, Willy Brandt, Martin Luther King, Barack Obama, and others. There is no doubt that proverbs do play a significant role in political speeches that can unfortunately also become manipulative, as was the case with Adolf Hitler's propagandistic misuse of proverbs (Mieder 2014b).

But there is so much more! Folklorists as well as cultural and literary historians were and continue to be dominant paremiologists. Folklorists have looked at the occurrence of proverbs in folk narratives, and they have also, together with historians, studied the age and social background of proverbs with their references to various realia. Art historians have done the same with their detailed iconographic studies of proverb pictures, above all the famous "Netherlandish Proverbs" (1559) by Pieter