

Structural, Semantic and Functional Peculiarities of Anti-Proverbs in Modern English

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A few years ago I was working on my book “Practice English through Proverbs”, creating a wide variety of grammar exercises based on proverbs. In the preface to the book I stated that “Proverbs surround us everywhere and there is a proverb for just about every circumstance. They can be applied to any situation, enabling us to express an idea better and more convincingly and providing us with unique pictures of other cultures, as well.”(1). The book ends with two fun pages of old proverbs with new interpretations. These proverbs or, as I called them, “the new funny parodies on popular proverbs” strike readers as funny and original. The traditional proverbs, such as “He laughs best who laughs longest”, “When there’s a will there’s a way” and “An apple a day keeps the doctor away” are transformed into “He who laughs last, thinks slowest”, “When there’s a will, there’s a relative” and “An onion a day keeps everyone away” respectively.

However, little did I know then that such transformed proverbs are called “anti-proverbs”, the term being suggested and first used by Wolfgang Mieder, the prominent German scholar of paremiology (the study of proverbs). Recently more and more anti-proverbs have been following me everywhere - be it an advertisement in the shop window in California, stating “Shoes speak louder than words” (compare: Actions speak louder than words) or an advert for plastic cards at Doha airport, Qatar, which says “All work and some play” (compare: All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy) , a coffee mug in the café with the quote “Great minds drink alike” (compare: Great minds think alike) or a T-shirt in an Internet store with the words “Nobody is perfect, but I sure am close”(compare: Nobody is perfect) .

Proverbs have always been one of my all-time favourite topics both to teach and to learn, but there was such a strong “anti-proverb” presence in the air, challenging yet tempting, that I couldn’t but undertake in-depth research into this topic. Hundreds of anti-proverbs were collected and studied in the course of our research. The vast majority of the anti-proverbs quoted and analyzed in our paper come from the Internet, from newspapers, advertisements, signs and slogans. We can state that mass media and the Internet, in particular, are the main

channels where anti-proverbs are popularized by their extensive use.

Our collection of more than 500 anti-proverbs enabled us to study their form and meaning, their relationship with the traditional proverbs and the “new” wisdom they

carry, as well as to discuss the large array of techniques through which traditional proverbs are transformed into anti-proverbs.

In the introduction to his book “Proverbs Speak Louder than Words: Folk Wisdom in Art, Culture History, Literature and Mass Media” (notice that the author is playing with the proverb “Actions speak louder than words”) Wolfgang Mieder says: “Changing proverbs into anti-proverbs ... is nothing new, but these international alterations have become very popular in modern times. Such humorous or satirical wordplay with traditional proverbs is to be expected, since there appears to be a natural tendency to parody often repeated linguistic structures. Be that as it may, proverbs and anti-proverbs represent but two sides of the same coin and the interplay between tradition and innovation...” (3)

We have noticed that not all alterations of conventional proverbs become anti-proverbs. They have to comply with some requirements. First, they should be as creative, original and innovative as possible. Only then will they enjoy popularity and spread all over the world. Second, anti-proverbs shouldn't deviate significantly from the original or source proverb; otherwise, the readers or listeners will not be able to identify them and the latter won't stand any chance of survival as anti-proverbs.

The sheer abundance of English anti-proverbs in films and books, in advertisements and headlines, in slogans and cartoons, on greeting cards and T-shirts and on popular websites like “Facebook” and “Pinterest” shows that they have fulfilled these requirements, becoming an efficient means of communication in the modern world.

Analyzing “traditional proverb /anti- proverb” pairs , we have detected a large set of techniques through which traditional proverbs are transformed into anti-proverbs. It was discovered that the lexical and syntactic changes can be on sound, letter, word or phrase levels, various stylistic devices can be used, new parts can be added to the original proverb which may remain intact, two proverbs can merge, the word order can reverse, etc.

Initially, we thought that not all traditional proverbs have undergone transformation so far, yielding anti-proverbs, and among those proverbs that were altered, there is a considerable

difference in the number of new options or anti-proverbs.

According to Mieder and Litovkina, (2), the ten most frequently transformed English proverbs are the following:

-Old soldiers never die (they simply fade away) (79 transformations) -If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. (65) -Money talks. (65) -An apple a day keeps the doctor away. (63) -A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. (49) -Never put off tomorrow what you can do today. (48) -A fool and his money are soon parted. (47) -Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise. (46) -To err is human, to

forgive- divine. (45) -Opportunity knocks but once. (43)

We decided not to base our research on the same proverbs and chose to look into the following four proverbs and the numerous anti-proverbs derived from them.

Proverb #1 - "Good things come to those who wait", meaning "If one is patient and able to wait calmly, they will finally get what they want. The related proverbs are "All things come to those who wait" and "Everything comes to him who waits".

Proverb #2- "Actions speak louder than words", meaning "What someone actually does means more than what they say they will do".

Proverb #3 - "Rome wasn't built in a day", meaning "One cannot expect to do important things in a short period of time."

Proverb #4 - "You are never too old to learn", meaning "However much one knows, there is

always more to learn, and whatever one's age, they can still increase their knowledge". The

related proverbs are "One in never too old to learn" and "It is never too late to learn".

Substitution of a single word is the most popular transformation that proverbs undergo when one word in the traditional proverb, usually the first or the last one, is substituted for one or more words.

In two of the four selected proverbs the initial word is transformed (proverbs 2 and 3) and three proverbs (proverbs 1,2 and 4) highlight the case of last-word substitution, so we can see that in proverb #2 both the initial and final words are subject to change.

Below is the list of the transformations or anti-proverbs where either the first or the last word is changed:

I. Good things come to those ...who bait(1)/ who sweat (2)/ who work (3)/ who hustle (4) /

who initiate (5) / who try (6) / who pray (7)/ who save(8)/ who squat (9)/ who share(10) / who weight(11) / who smile (12) / who wash(13) / who brute-force(14) / who book flights(15) / who are patient (16) / who go vegan(17) / who are great(18)/ who run (19) / who bake(20) / who earn it (21) / who create (22) / who believe (23) / who go out and earn them (24) / who go out and make it happen (25) / who don't wait (26) / who don't wait for lunch (27) / who sew (28) / who work their asses off and never give up (29).

II. Actions speak louder ...than talks (1)/ than meetings (2)/ than awareness(3) / than "like" buttons (4) / than texts(5)/ than tweets(6) / than FB statuses(7) / than Instagram / Pinterest (8)

III. (1)Facts speak/ (2) Numbers speak / (3) Vibes speak / (4) Eyebrows speak / (5) Eyes speak / (6) Emojis speak / (7) Music speaks / (8) Colours speak / (9) Comparisons speak / (10) Design speaks /(11) (Sometimes) silence speaks / (12) Fashion speaks /

(13)Shoes speak / (14) Amps (=amplifiers) speak / (15) Typography speaks ... / (16) The results of your actions speak / (17) Absence speaks / (18) Diamonds speak / (19) Nail polish speaks / (20) Handbags speak ... louder than words.

IV. (1) Home wasn't built / (2) Oprah wasn't built / (3) Beyonce wasn't built / (4) George Clooney wasn't built / (5) Walking on water wasn't built ... in a day.

V. You are never too old ...to laugh(1) / to be young (2) / to yearn (3) / for handstands(4) / to move forward (5) / for a Disney movie (6) / to dream (7) / to watch cartoons(8) / to change things(9) / to be a princess(10) / to be crazy (11) / for Lego (12) / to set a new goal (13) / to dream a new dream (14) / to become better (15) / to start from scratch again (16) / to become younger (17) / to learn to play guitar (18) / to get FOMO (=fear of missing out) (19) / to wish upon a star (20) / to play (21) / to hate a new career (22)/ to play with dolls (23) / to grow up (24) / to go back to school (25) / to beg for free candy (26) / to become a musician (27) / to chase your dream (28) / to learn something stupid (29) / for a snowball fight (30) / to find love (31) / to disappoint your parents (33) / to watch SpongeBob (34) / for an adventure (35)/ to play outside (36) / to surf (37) / to rock'n'roll (38) / for Mickey Mouse (39) / to be an entrepreneur (40) / to trick or treat (41) / to need your Mom (42)/ to need your Dad (43) / to choose the life you want (44) / to reinvent yourself (45) / for anything (46) / to have favourite blanket (47)

A closer analysis of these anti -proverbs shows that in some of them the new words or phrases substituting the words of the original proverb belong to the same semantic field, such as proverbs II/1, II/ 2, II/5, II/6, II/7, "Actions speak louder than talks/ meetings/ texts/ tweets/ FB statuses" , where the words "talks", "meetings", "texts", "tweets", "FB statuses" all belong to the domain of speech.

Another example is in proverbs IV/2, IV/3, IV/3 "Oprah/ Beyonce/ George Clooney wasn't built in a day", where the proper names "Oprah, Beyonce, George Clooney" represent popular celebrities who became famous through hard work, consistency, striving and patience and did something every day that benefited their future.

The numerous transformations of proverb #1, where we have different verbs expressing initiative and new, healthy, creative activities, act as inspirational and challenging quotes for people who are not very young but would like to take up some new hobby or occupation. Such are the proverbs I/1, I/5, I/11, I/15, I/17, I/19, I/20, I/22, I/28, "Good things come to those who bait/ initiate/ who weight/ who go vegan/ who run / who bake / who create/ who sew.

In some proverbs the substituting words or phrases give the new proverb a new tinge of meaning, which in some cases has no semantic connection with the source proverb and creates a humorous effect. Examples of such proverbs are I/9, I/14, II/4, III/6, V/19, V/22, "Good things come to those who squat/ who brute-force", "Actions speak louder than "like" buttons.", "Emojis speak louder than words", "You are never too old to get FOMO/ to hate a new career."

Analysing the transformations of the original proverbs, we see that the new words that substitute the words in the source proverb may rhyme, which makes it easier to recognize the traditional proverb and appreciate the humour, irony or the “new philosophy” of the new coinage. Such are the proverbs /1 “Good things come to those who wait”(compare: who wait), IV/1 “Home wasn’t built in a day” (compare: Rome), V/3 “ You are never too old to yearn” (compare: to learn).

The study of the language of the new anti-proverbs reveals the abundance of words and expressions representing our new age with its new inventions, virtual reality, values and wisdom. We come across words like “FB (=Facebook)”, “tweet”, “text”, “vegan”, “Internet”, “emoji”, “amp”, “Instagram”, “Pinterest”, “brute-force”, “Disney” “Like” button”, which symbolize the modern times and people’s attitude to the new phenomena in the modern world.

Very often coiners of new anti-proverbs prefer substituting two words in the original proverb and this helps them to better express their witty observations on life and relations. As Wolfgang Mieder points out, (4) “...proverbs that possess binary structures, have become especially popular formulas on which to base multiple proverb variations”. Since our sample proverbs do not have a binary structure, we have few transformations or parodies based on this technique. One such example is the anti-proverb “Assets speak louder than cash”, based on the traditional proverb “Actions speak louder than words”. Another is “A lovely meal sometimes speaks louder than a thousand loving words”, in which the two words of the source proverb (actions and words) have been substituted for two new phrases (a lovely meal and a thousand loving words).

The second largest group of anti-proverbs was created by keeping the original proverb unchanged and adding a new part, either before or after it, the latter outnumbering the former.

Below is the list of anti-proverbs created from the 4 selected proverbs in this way:

VI. Good things come to those who wait; but only what’s left behind by those who hustle. (1)

Good things come to those who wait but better (great) things come to those who don’t.(2)

Good things come to those who wait but better things come to those who work for it.(3)

Good things come to those who wait but did they tell us how long it’s gonna take?(4)

Good things come to those who wait but greater things come to those who act. (5)

Good things come to those who wait .Our miracle is due in September.(6)

Good things come to those who work their tails off/ who work their asses off.(7)

Good things don’t come to those who wait, and wait, and wait. (8)

VII. Actions speak louder than words but not nearly as often.(1)

Let your actions speak louder than your words.(2)

Actions speak louder than words and sometimes inaction speaks louder than both of them. (3)

Actions speak louder than words. Isn't speaking an action? (4)

If actions speak louder than words, why is the pen mightier than the sword?(5)

Actions speak louder than words; actually they scream.(6)

Actions speak louder than words, but intention speaks loudest.(7)

Actions speak louder than words but words sometimes get all the attention.(8)

What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say. (9)

Actions speak louder than words but words inspire action.(10)

Actions speak louder than words. So act! (11)

No matter what you say actions will always speak louder than words.(12)

Actions speak louder than words, but not nearly as often. (13)

Pictures speak louder than words when it comes to describing condition. (14)

VIII. Rome wasn't built in a day; don't give up.(1)

Rome wasn't built in a day and neither was your body.(2)

Rome wasn't built in a day because I weren't on the job. (3)

Rome wasn't built in a day and neither was Siracuse. (4)

Rome wasn't built in a day but we've got a start.(5)

Rome wasn't built in a day but they worked on it every day.(6)

Rome wasn't built in a day but they were laying bricks every hour.(7)

Rome wasn't built in a day but it can be explored in one. (8)

Rome wasn't built in a day because that was also a government job.(9)

Rome wasn't built in a day and the Internet is our new Rome.(10)

If Rome was built in a day we would have hired the same contractor. (11)

If Rome wasn't built in a day, how long did it take? (12)

Keep going, Rome wasn't built in a day.(13)

Rome wasn't built in a day but you were. (14)

Rome wasn't built in a day, slaves labored for years.(15)

Rome wasn't built in a day, and yet what a difference a day makes! (16)

The analysis of these anti-proverbs shows that a short comment added to the traditional proverbs can become a humorous or ironical twist on the proverb and the wisdom that it expresses. For example, it can be in the form of a naïve question, as in proverbs VI/4, VII/4, VIII/12; "Good things come to those who wait but did they tell us how long it's gonna take?", "Actions speak louder than words. Isn't speaking an action?", "If Rome wasn't built in a day, how long did it take?"

The added parts of some of these the anti-proverbs are sometimes based on metaphors, which have always been an inseparable quality of proverbs, like in the proverb VI/6 "Good things come to those who wait. Our miracle is due in September",

which is from a custom printable pregnancy announcement on ETSY, an e-commerce website, and “good things” here are regarded as symbolic of newborn babies.

Proverb # 2 “Actions speak louder than words” is based on personification, the attribution of human characteristics to things and abstract ideas. In this proverb “actions and words speak” and this emphasizes and makes the point more vivid. Almost all the transformations of this proverb are also based on personification, “Actions speak louder than words and sometimes inaction speaks louder than both of them”(VII/3), “Actions speak louder than words; actually they scream” (VII/6), “Actions speak louder than words, but intention speaks loudest” (VII/7), “Actions speak louder than words but words inspire action” (VII/10).

The language used in these anti-proverbs can be informal, which makes them sound very different from the original proverbs. For example, in proverbs I/29, VI/7 “Good things come to those who work their tails off/ who work their asses off” the idioms “to work one’s tail off” and “to work one’s ass off” are informal phrases for “to work really hard on something”.

The added part sometimes changes the original proverb into its opposite, as in examples VI/2, VI/8, VII/8; “Good things come to those who wait but better (great) things come to those who don’t.”, “Good things don’t come to those who wait, and wait, and wait”, “Actions speak louder than words but words sometimes get all the attention.”

A very popular technique used in the creation of anti-proverbs is mixing two traditional proverbs, usually by taking the beginning of one proverb and joining it with the ending of the second one. This type of anti-proverb is called “perverb” which is a blend of two words - “perverted” and “proverb”. These humorous modifications of the traditional proverbs usually surprise and confuse the readers, as in the following examples:

(1) Good things come and keep your powder dry. (from “Good things come to those who wait” and “Put your trust in God and keep your powder dry”)

(2) Actions speak louder on the other side of the fence.(from “Actions speak louder than words” and “The grass is always green on the other side of the fence”)

(3) Rome wasn’t built but the caravan goes on. (from “Rome wasn’t built in a day” and “Dogs bark but the caravan goes on”)

(4) You are never too old to be wise after the event. (from “You are never too old to learn” and “It’s easy to be wise after the event”)

The transformations of traditional proverbs by reversing word order are rather scarce and it can be explained by the fact that when we change the word order of the sentence very often the new coinage is meaningless. But there are interesting results here, such as “Better never than late”, which is the transformation of the original proverb “Better late than never”.

In our examples we found only one anti-proverb created from the proverb

“Actions speak louder than words” by reversing word order- “Words speak louder than actions”. This anti-proverb means that if used properly, words can be endlessly powerful and have the ability to initiate more than actions ever could.

We would like to state that we also came across a unique example of an anti-proverb with reverse word order, which itself was a transformation of a traditional proverb. Thus, the modifications of proverb #4 can be portrayed in this way.

Traditional proverb: You are never too old to learn.

Anti-proverb #1: You are never too old to be young.

Anti-proverb #2: You are never too young to be old.

The latter was used with the aim of increasing understanding of the handicaps of old age among the young.

To sum up, we can see that anti-proverbs perform the same function in everyday speech as traditional proverbs - they communicate new, up-to-date ideas to public in a concise form and make our speech more vivid and emotional.

A large group of anti-proverbs, based on puns and word play, are coined and used just for fun, while a wider group of them, if looked at carefully, carry a more serious meaning, reflecting the changes, new tendencies and contradictions in the modern society and culture and our reaction to them. Moreover, anti-proverbs sometimes express doubt about the truthfulness of some traditional proverbs and make a humorous comment on it.

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**Տարառածների կառուցվածքային և
իմաստագործառական առանձնահատկությունները
ժամանակակից անգլերենում**

Մատինյան Գայանե

Ամփոփում

Հանգուցային բառեր. առաձաքանություն, առած, ձևափոխված առած, տարառած, լեզվական ձևափոխություն, ոճաբանական հնարքներ

Հոդվածի նպատակն է ներկայացնել տարառածները (կամ հակառածները)՝ ավանդական առածների նորարարական, հաճախ հումորային կամ երգիծական տարբերակները: Քննարկվում են տարառածների առաջացման տարբեր եղանակները, դրանց ստեղծման ժամանակ կիրառվող մեթոդներն ու հնարքները, տարառածների գրաված դիրքը ժամանակակից առաձաքանության մեջ, ինչպես նաև նրանց կիրառման ոլորտները ժամանակակից աշխարհում:

**Структурные, семантические и функциональные
особенности анти-пословиц в современном
английском языке**

Матинян Гаяне

Резюме

Ключевые слова: паремиология, пословица, трансформированная пословица, анти-пословица, лингвистическая трансформация, стилистические средства

Целью статьи является презентация анти-пословиц, как инновационных, часто юмористических или сатирических вариантов традиционных пословиц. Рассматриваются разные методы образования анти-пословиц, методы и приёмы их образования, их место в современной паремиологии, а также сферы их функционирования в современном мире.