

**Sylwia Skuza\***

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń  
ORCID: 0000-0003-4621-9342

*CHOROBY ŚMIERĆ UPRZEDZAJĄ*  
*(DISEASES PRECEDE DEATH),*  
OR ON THE UNDERSTANDING OF DISEASE  
IN POLISH AND ITALIAN PROVERBS  
(16<sup>TH</sup>–20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)

The purpose of the paper is to analyse the folk understanding of physical and mental illness in Polish and Italian proverbs. The analysis shows that this is not a uniform picture, and that acceptance of disease and its treatment have had several dimensions in the world of premonitions, superstitions and religion, and the physician treating a disease is just one and not the most important component in the process of recovery. The image of the disease in Italian proverbs seems to be similar to Polish proverbs, though not identical. It is extremely interesting that a part of the folk world connected with diseases and the fight against them has survived in modern Polish and standard Italian languages.

Keywords: proverbs, disease, Polish, Italian

This work is a contrastive paremiological study based on selected Polish and Italian proverbs, where words appear belonging to the lexical-cultural field of the archilexeme *disease*, reaching such lexemes as *physician, doctor, cure, method of treatment, name of the disease* etc. The paper's goal is an emerging of similarities and differences related to disease appearing both in Polish and Italian world by proverbs.

ETYMOLOGY AND SYNONYMS OF THE WORDS  
*CHORоба* IN POLISH AND *MALATTIA* IN ITALIAN

The word *choroba* [disease] is defined as a pathological process manifested by disturbances in the functioning of the body. In contemporary Polish, the noun *choroba* is most often combined with the adjectives: *lekka, ciężka* and *śmiertelna* [light, acute, fatal]. Examples of

\* Corresponding author: Sylwia Skuza, Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika, Wydział Filologiczny, ul. Fosa Staromiejska 3, 87-100 Toruń; e-mail: [sylwia14@umk.pl](mailto:sylwia14@umk.pl).

expressions with this word are: *nabawić się choroby* [catch a disease], *wpędzić się w chorobę* [make oneself ill], *zwalczyć chorobę* [fight a disease], *nawrót choroby* [relapse], *przechodzić chorobę lekko, ciężko* [have a mild/acute case of a disease]. The antonym (Polański 2009: 104) of the noun *choroba* is *zdrowie* [health].

The noun *choroba*, recorded in Poland since the 14th century, derives from the Proto-Slavic adjective \**chvorъ* [ill, rotten, weak, frail, sore, ravaged] combined with the suffix \**oba*, \**chvoroba* (Boryś 2008: 66). In Old Polish, synonyms of the word were used, such as *niemoc* [weakness] and *niedomaganie* [ailment]. Today, these lexemes are seldom used; more often, to avoid the word *choroba*, contemporary synonyms are employed, e.g. *niedyspozycja* [indisposition] and *dolegliwość* [complaint].

The Italian lexeme *malattia* [disease] has been recorded in writing since the 13th century, while rarer in occurrence is the word *male* (recorded since the 12th century), with much more meanings. Both lexemes have the same Latin origin, *māle, mǎlu* ‘evil’ (Cortelazzo and Zolli 2011: 708).

A disease and its names in many proverbs will be shown mainly through the prism of taboo and euphemisation<sup>1</sup>. According to Wardhaugh (2000: 234), taboo is the prohibition or avoidance in any society of behaviour believed to be harmful to its members in that it would cause them anxiety, embarrassment, or shame. Consequently, as far as language is concerned, certain things are not to be said, or certain things can be referred to only in certain circumstances. Taboo subjects can vary widely, such as: sex, death, illness, excretion, bodily functions, or religious matters. The fear of death leads to fear of words concerning death and certain diseases. Some serious diseases are taboo topics as well. Cancer is referred to in a roundabout way as “The Big C” or “terminally ill”. So is it with mental disorders and intellectual disabilities.

## COLLECTIONS OF PROVERBS ON WHICH THE RESEARCH IS BASED

“The aim to collect proverbs and to construct a national heritage of them and other genres of folklore of a language community brings with it a supposition of consistency between the proverbs of one’s own community. The belief that proverbs as such, form a coherent narration of their local users seems natural” (Lauhakangas 2015: 51).

The examples of maxims referring to *choroba* [disease] in the Polish language originate mostly from *Nowa księga przysłów i wyrażeń przysłowiowych polskich* (New book of proverbs and proverbial Polish expressions) (1958, 1960, 1969) edited by Julian Krzyżanowski (1892–1976), whose team relied on Samuel Adalberg’s (1868–1939) *Księga przysłów, przypowieści i wyrażeń przysłowiowych polskich* (Book of proverbs, parables and proverbial Polish expressions) (1889–1894). Adalberg’s work was exceptional, as it contained 3,000 fundamental proverbs and twice as many variants, and the author drew from collections of maxims compiled over four centuries, sometimes reaching back to the Middle Ages, often contained

---

<sup>1</sup> Euphemisms are used to avoid directly addressing subjects that might be deemed negative or embarrassing. (cf. Allan and Burridge 2006).

in manuscripts. Hence, this work was invaluable not only for Polish studies, but also for the Polish nation. The scrupulousness of the authors of these paremiological collections in large part allows us to determine not only the century but also the years in which the quoted proverbs appeared. The collections of Italian proverbs show in turn, not only in terms of the number of maxims, but also in their systematization, how important the issues of health and disease were. In *Dizionario dei proverbi* (Dictionary of proverbs) (Boggione and Massobrio 2007: 222–235), which was the main source of reference and one of the largest Italian dictionaries (with 30,000 proverbs), under the entries *la salute, le malattie, la medicina popolare* (health, disease, folk medicine) about a thousand proverbs are listed on the subject. Teodor Flonta's bilingual<sup>2</sup> *Dictionary of English and Italian Equivalent Proverbs* was also used in the research.

## WHO HEALED THE DISEASE – ITALIAN AND POLISH TERMINOLOGY, A DOCTOR IN PROVERBS

Extremely interesting are the most popular lexemes that appear in prover in successive centuries in proverbs, such as *medyk* [physician], *doktor* [doctor] and *lekarz* [doctor]. Two of these three words have the same etymology as the Italian *medico* and *dottore*. *Medyk* (Italian *il medico*) is a Latin borrowing (Boggione and Massobrio 2007: 160): *mēdicu* [doctor] and *medēri* [treat]. The word *medyk* appeared in Polish in the 2nd half of the 16th century, and it denoted a person who treated patients and had a diploma in medicine [the Italian equivalent appears in the same meaning already in 13th century] (Cortelazzo and Zolli 2011: 736). In contemporary Polish *medyk* is used facetiously to refer to a doctor, whereas the Italian *medico* still denotes the profession.

*Doktor* (Italian *il dottore*) originated from the Latin *doctōre* [teacher], derived from *docēre* [to teach] (Brückner 1993: 92, Cortelazzo and Zolli 2011: 378–379). Colloquially, since the early Middle Ages, *doktór* was the title of the adept of the highest university degree (precisely in this sense, it appeared in Italy for the first time in a text written in the 13th century). In the Old Polish biblical texts, the lexeme *doktor* is used with the meaning of 'scholar' (in scripture). The word 'doctor' appeared in the medical sense sporadically from the 16th century. *Dochtór* and *dokrowsko* were folk words popular from the 16th century, and there was also the variant *dochtorowsko*. Today, the lexemes *doktor* and *dottore* are used to denote an academic degree, and colloquially to denote a person with a diploma in medicine who treats others.

*Lekarz* is a Proto-Slavic borrowing from the Gothic *lēkeis* (doctor), which was in turn borrowed from Celtic. However, Bańkowski (Bańkowski 2000: 16) claims that the word is general-Slavic and derives from *lěkarь*, which means 'healer'. It could also be a Germanic

---

<sup>2</sup> The cultural specifics of the Polish units means that the English proverbs should be treated as potential translational equivalents, yet, they are not equivalent at the systematic level (Szerszunowicz 2013). The problems related the systematic equivalence of the unit are important in terms of bilingual lexicographic description. It can be concluded that the semantics as well as cultural connotations should be given in an entry (*cf.* Szerszunowicz 2015: 123–141).

borrowing (which would be consistent with Brückner's thesis): *lĕk-ari(z)* – healer, shaman. According to Brückner (Brückner 1993: 293) '*lekowniki* was a term used in the 15th and 16th centuries to denote healers using superstitious means'. Today *lekarz* [doctor] is simply a person with a master's degree in medicine.

Now, let us investigate the picture of a doctor/physician (*lekarz* and *medyk*) surviving in Polish proverbs. They certainly noticed the helplessness of the patient who died due to malpractice, which not always been obvious: *Błędy lekarza pokrywa ziemia* [A doctor's errors are covered by the ground]. (1894) *Gli sbagli dei dottori vengon coperti dalla terra*<sup>3</sup>; *Błędy medyków pokrywa ziemia, astronomów niebo* [Physicians' errors are covered by the earth, astronomers' errors are covered by the sky]. (1685); *Error di medico, volontà di Dio* [The physicians' fault is the will of God], *Gli errori dei medici sono coperti dalla terra e quelli dei ricchi dai danari* [Physicians' errors are covered by the earth, the errors of the rich are covered by their money].

At the beginning of the 17th century a Polish maxim appeared: *Czego nie wie lekarz, tego nie leczy* [What the doctor does not know, he does not treat] (1620). Thus, a good doctor was highly valued in every century: *Gotowe zdrowie, kto chorobę powie* [He who names the disease, brings back health] (1632); *Dobry cyrulik za medyka stanie* [A good barber-surgeon can do as well as a physician] (1681, 1894); *Lekarz dla chorego wiele cierpi* [The doctor suffers a lot for his patient] (1632, 1746, 1894); *Lekarz wielomówny być nie ma* [A doctor should say but little] (1632, 1894); *Lekarz czyści ciało, spowiednik sumienie, a prawnik worek* [A doctor cleanses the body, a confessor cleanses the conscience, and a lawyer cleans out the purse] (1896), *I medici ti purgano il corpo e la borsa* [Physicians will clean out your body and your purse]; and the Latin maxim *primum non nocere* translates also into the proverbs: *Lekarz choremu dogodzi, gdy w chorobie nie zaszkodzi* [A doctor satisfies the patient when he does not make his condition worse] (1854, 1896); *Medyk głupi zdrowie łupi* [A stupid physician steals health] (1570, 1894), *Fra i dottori in medicina il più bravo è quello che c'indovina* [Among doctors of medicine the best is the one who guesses (right)].

Folk wisdom, both Polish and Italian, did not expect the doctor to perform miracles, it merely noticed and taught that it is God who decides about disease, health and death, not the physician, even the best ones: *Lekarz leczy, Bóg uzdrawia* [The doctor treats, God heals] (1575, 1806, 1894, 1900); *Lekarz ratuje, Pan Bóg skazuje* [The doctor rescues, God sentences] (1901); *Lekarz nie zawsze ratuje* [The doctor does not always save] (1632, 1894); *Il dottore non è il Signore* [The doctor is not God]; *Quando il malato muore è stato il medico; quando guarisce sono stati i santi* [When a sick person dies, it is the doctor's fault; when he is cured, it is the service of a saint].

Negative attitudes towards case conferences, which took place when dealing with serious diseases, can be seen clearly in proverbs dealing with the issue unambiguously: *Lekarzów wiele umorzą chorego śmieie* [Many doctors kill the patient] (1702, 1806); *Gdzie wielu doktorów, mała nadzieja zdrowia* [Where there is a lot of doctors, there is little chance of recovery] (1688); *Lepiej żadnego doktora niż trzech doktorów* [Better no doctor than three] (1894); *Gdzie siła medyków, tam musi być siła chorych* [Where there are many doctors, there

<sup>3</sup> From Latin *Errores medicorum terra tegit* (Krzyżanowski 1970: 285).

must be many ill people] (1580, 1894); *Dove ci sono più medici, ci sono più infermi* [Many doctors mean many sick people].

The doctor's experience is important, as evidenced by numerous Italian maxims: *Medico giovane ingrassa il sagrato* [A young doctor fills the cemetery], *Medico vecchio e medicina nuova* [An old doctor brings a new medicine], *Chirurgo come il pane, medico come il vino* [A surgeon is like bread, a physician is like wine]. Folk wisdom advised one to always respect the doctor: *Lekarza trzeba szanować, boć się też trafi chorować* [The doctor must be respected in case of a disease] (1632, 1689, 1779, 1806, 1836, 1851, 1886, 1894, 1896), while recognizing the cleverness and cunning (resulting primarily from the knowledge) of some representatives of the profession. Thus a cunning person was called *medyk* [physician] (1890, 1901).

## DISEASE IN POLISH AND ITALIAN PROVERBS

Proverbs could be interpreted as didactic and medical formulas (see also Marczevska 2012: 309–318). Disease in the Polish and Italian maxims was depicted based on observation and course; these are very general but extremely relevant observations, and they concern many aspects of disease such as:

- duration: *Choroba przybywa na koniu, a odchodzi piechotą* [The disease comes on a horse and departs on foot] (1854, 1894, 1930); *Choroba centnarem się zwali, łótami<sup>4</sup> odchodzi* [The disease comes heavy and departs in ounces]; *Il male viene a carra e se ne va a once* [The disease comes heavy and departs in ounces]; *Il male viene a cavallo e se ne va a piedi* [The disease comes on a horse and departs on foot].
- difficulty in treating a recurrent or not fully cured disease: *Chorobę zestarzałą próżno leczyć. Stare niemocy trudno leczyć, jako i stare nawyki* [An old disease is treated in vain. Old ailments are as difficult to treat, as old habits] (1603, 1632, 1735) *Zestarzałe choroby pomalu się leczą* [Old diseases are treated slowly] (1806, 1896); *È peggio il ricadere che il mal di prima* [Better a recurrent disease than an early pain].
- recognizing that an accurate diagnosis of a disease is half the battle (this belief is still held today): *Choroba poznana, zleczyta* [A recognized disease is a cured disease] (1632); *Gotowe zdrowie, kto chorobę powie* [He who names the disease, brings back health] (1632); *Choroba poznana już na połowę jest uleczona* [An identified disease is half cured] (1852, 1894, 1896); *Guardati da dubitazione dei medici* [Be careful of doctors in doubt], *I medici sono come i ciechi: vanno al tocco* [Doctors are like the blind – they diagnose by touch].
- influence of the course of the disease on fitness and appearance of the patient: *Ciału choroba, rozumowi niewiadałość, domowi szkodzi niezgoda* [Disease is harmful to the body, ignorance of reason, and discord to the family] (1757, 1898); *Jedna choróbka, wrzód, rana, krostka – tak śliczny obraz poszpecić sprosta* [A single disease, ulcer, wound, or pimple can spoil a pretty picture] (1806); *Kogo choroba nie umorzy, to wypotworzy* (to

---

<sup>4</sup> *Łóty* means grams and a *centnar* is 50 kg.

*skrzywi*) [If the disease does not kill you, it will disfigure you] (1894); *Choroba dzieci umarza, albo spotwarza* [A disease kills or disfigures children] (1900); *Allora si può dire „Che bella figlia”, quando son passati varicella e morbillo* [Only after pox and measles can you say: „what a pretty girl”].

- appreciation of health in opposition to the disease: *Nikomiu zdrowie nie smakuje, aż jakiej choroby skosztuje* [Nobody knows the taste of health until he tastes a disease] (1851); *Tylko w chorobie ceni się zdrowie* [Only in sickness can you appreciate health]; *Nell’infermità si conosce la sanità* [Health is not valued until sickness comes].
- patient’s motivation: *Uleczył się już więcej niż w połowie, kiedy kto chore chce ratować zdrowie* [He who wants to protect his health is more than half recovered] (1930).

Typical of the folk wisdom were pessimistic attitudes towards disease, as that which opens the door of death: *Choroby śmierć uprzedzają* [Diseases precede death] (1702, 1763, 1786, 1894, 1956); *Najgorsza choroba jest na końcu* [The worst disease comes at the end] (1894, 1900); *Jedno zdrowie, a tysiączne choroby* [One health and thousands of diseases] (1894, 1900); *Zdrowy choroby, a chory ma się spodziewać śmierci* [The healthy shall expect a disease, and the ill shall expect death] (1806, 1852, 1862, 1900); *Zdrowy musi się bać choroby, a chory śmierci* [The healthy shall fear disease, and the ill shall fear death] (1900); *Malattia e morte bussà a ogni porta* [Death and disease knock on every door]; *Il male della morte non ha rimedio* [There is no medicine for lethal disease]; *La morte medica tutti i mali* [Death cures all diseases].

## CURE FOR DISEASE

Sayings about cures for diseases were often vague: *Każda choroba ma swoje lekarstwo* [Every disease has its cure] (1632); *Nie masz choroby, która by lekarstwa nie miała* [There is no disease without a cure] (1894, 1895); *Choroba ciężka przykrego lekarstwa potrzebuje* [A serious disease requires bitter medicine] (1632, 1894); *Lekarstwo przykrzejsze – pożyteczniejsze* [The worse the medicine tastes, the better it works] (1632, 1806, 1894); *Lekarstwo podczas cięższe niż choroba* [The medicine is worse than the disease] (1587, 1593, 1632, 1670, 1674, 1689, 1806, 1854, 1846, 1862, 1894, 1930); *Bez miary lekarstwo stanie za truciznę* [Too much medicine poisons] (1658, 1763, 1786, 1854, 1894, 1900); *Na choroby są sposoby* [There are ways to recover] (1900); *Każdej chorobie w czas zabiegaj, bo pozdne lekarstwo niedobre bywa* [Quickly treat the disease, because late medicine is bad] (1650, 1793); *Nie goi się rana, jeśli niesmarowana* [A wound that is not treated will not heal] (1894, 1900); *Pomoże, nie pomoże – bierz lekarstwo, nieboże* [Take a medicine though you know not whether it helps] (1894) – an old saying of folk healers. *Tante medicine fanno una malattia* [There are many medicines for a single disease]; *I medici non piglian medicine* [Physicians do not take medicines]; *Colla medicina la salute va in rovina* [Medicines ruin health]; *Troppa medicina e la morte si avvicina* [Too much medicine will hasten death]; *Dio mi guardi da recipi di medici, da cetere di notai e da spacci d’usurai* [May God save you from doctors’ prescriptions, notaries’ scripts, and moneylenders’ shops].

Simultaneously, folk wisdom recognised and ridiculed persons who are now called hypochondriacs, who reacted exaggeratedly to their complaints: *Chorobę pieścić gorzej. Choroby delikat nielacno zbędzie* [It is not wise to grow fond of the disease. It will not want to depart then] (1632, 1746, 1894); *Chorowici najdłużej żyją* [The sickly live the longest] (1868, 1894); *Kto lubi chorować, nie nada lekować* [He who likes to be ill, does not like medicines] (1894); *Zapalenie włosów i gorączka w łokciu* [Hair inflammation and elbow fever] (1898) – this is how people referred to a person pretending to be ill in the 19th century. *Chi si medica sano è sempre infermo* [If a healthy person heals, he will always be ill]; *Chi piglia medicina senza male, consuma l'interesse e il capitale* [Who takes drugs without being sick is breaching the money and care of others].

It seems that one of the most precise indications of how to treat disease was offered by the Polish proverb *Na duszną chorobę jeno co rychlej łapać czarnej kokoszy* [The best cure for a soul disease is to catch a black hen as soon as possible] (1558), and its many variants, referring to the treatment of mental diseases. This proverb appears constantly in collections of Polish proverbs from the 16th to the 20th century (Krzyżanowski 1970: 257). Its variants were: *Godna głowa czarnej kokoszy* [A head worthy of a black hen] (1599); *Na szaleństwo, czarną kokosz na dwoje rozdarszy, co prędzej na głowę przyłożyć* [In madness, tear a black hen in two and apply to the head quickly] (1675); *Doktorzy wiedzą, sekret w tym natury, że szalonym rozdarte pomagają kury* [Doctors know that the cure for the insane are hens torn in two] (1896); *Wart czarnej kury* [Worthy of a black hen] (1806); *Trzeba by mu do głowy kura czarnego przyłożyć* [A black hen should be put on his head] (1894); *Trzeba by mu czarnej kury* [He should get a black hen] (1900). All numerous and popular versions of this maxim refer to the treatment of a person who had lost their senses, was mad, and who was advised to be treated by applying a freshly killed black hen to their head.

## MENTAL ILLNESSES – TERMS

The Latin maxim: *Mens sana in corpore sano* was known and used for centuries both in Poland: *W zdrowym ciele, zdrowy duch* [A healthy mind in a healthy body] (1669, 1869, 1894, 1901, 1911, 1936), and in Italy: *Mente sana in un corpo sano* [A healthy mind in a healthy body]. The health of the body and mind was considered an indispensable part of the proper functioning of the body.

*Brak mu w głowie piątej klepki* [He is a few sandwiches short of a picnic] (1543); *duszną choroba* [soul disease] (1558); *Czegoś mu w głowie nie dostaje* [Something is missing in his head] (1632, 1782, 1894); *W głowie piąta krokwa szkodzi* [To have a screw loose] (1674); *Ma bzika w głowie, w głowie zgasła świeczka* [He is nuts, the candle went out in his head] (1888). Other expressions used to refer to a mentally unbalanced person, or one with mental health problems were: *Ma źle w głowie* [She is not right in her mind] (1806, 1888, 1894, 1900, 1906); *Ma zajączki w głowie* [He has hares in his head] (1841, 1855, 1884, 1888, 1898), *Biegają mu zajączki w głowie* [Hares are running around in his head] (1916); *Ma głowę jak podciep, krzyczy jak podciep* [He is birdbrained]<sup>5</sup> (1913). At the beginning of the 20th century

---

<sup>5</sup> *Podciep* means ‘misfit’, ‘changeling’ in the Silesian dialect.

Kazimierz Moszyński, whose monumental work *Kultura ludowa Słowian* [Folk culture of the Slavs], the first work in Europe to synthesize the folk culture of a large ethnic group, wrote about the mentally or physically disabled: “It is widely known that sometimes people are born who are handicapped from the very first days of their life: crippled, with enlarged head, sluggish etc. People do not understand the nature of such a misfortune and they ascribe them, as many others, to demons, [...] characteristics of a *podciep* [misfit], i.e. a child left by demons [...] are not uniform everywhere. [...] If such a child survives among the people, it stays as it was in the days of infancy, a duffer or a moron” (Moszyński 1934: 638–639). In Italian proverbs referring to mental illness, it is worth noting, in turn, a multitude of maxims containing adjectives today colloquially determining a person suffering from this ailment: *matto, pazzo, folle* (crazy, madman), *stolto* (madman, fool), as well as identifying certain behaviours as those suggestive of madness: *Chi balla senza suoni è matto nella testa* [He who dances without music is mad]; *Chi parla solo è pazzo* [He who talks to himself is crazy]; *Dal riso molto conosci lo stolto* [Too much laughter discovers folly].

## DISEASES – PREVENTION, TREATMENT, METHODS

In relation to the treatment of physical diseases, there are a few very general snippets of information about treatment and what was examined to help the ill person, but folk wisdom also advised what to do to avoid diseases:

- *Kto się irytuje, krew sobie psuje* [He who gets irritated, spoils his blood] (1894, 1900);
- *Dieta i ruska bania wiele z nas chorób wygania* [A diet and the Russian bath help get rid of many diseases] (1895);
- *Mądry medyk upatruje, aby wątrobę chłodząc nie zaziębił żołądka* [A smart physician is careful not to harm the stomach while he is treating the liver] (1658, 1896);
- *Medyk luboby był znakomity, względ na uryne ma i na womity* [A physician, though he might be excellent, has to examine urine and vomit] (1886);
- *L’orina fa l’onore al medico* [The appearance of urine facilitates a diagnosis].

Both Polish and Italian sayings mention bloodletting, this was thought of as a popular effective treatment for various diseases from ancient times to the 19th century: *Kogo głowa boli, niech sobie ją ogoli; gdy to nie pomoże, niech sobie nogę pod kolanem zwiąże. Jak cie głowa boli, zwiąż se nogę pod kolanem* [If you have a headache, shave your head, and if that does not help tie your leg tight below the knee] (1895, 1906); *Il sangue una volta l’anno, il bagno una volta al mese, il mangiare una volta al giorno* [Let blood once a year, bathe once a month, eat once a day].

Scabies was a disease that, apparently due to the annoyance of its course, was firmly established in the proverbs of both nations: *Gdzie cię nie świerzbi, nie ciesz, być się nie jątrzyło* [Where you feel no itch, do not comb, to avoid itching] (1524, 1632, 1806, 1896); *Gdzie cię nie świerzbi, nie ciesz* [Where you feel no itching, do not comb] (1900); *Tam drap mówią, gdzie świerzbi, nie tykaj, gdzie boli; we wrzód i ranę świeżę nie nasypuj soli* [Scratch where it is itch, do not touch the painful places, and do not sprinkle salt on a fresh wound]



(1658, 1696, 1894, 1896); *Chi ha pelle, ha rognà* [If you have skin, you have scabies]; *Chi ha rognà, altro mal non gli bisogna* [If you have scabies, you have enough problems]; *La rognà s'attacca* [Scabies is contagious].

The folk wisdom of both nations saw filling the stomach as a means to fight headache: *Na ból głowy lekarstwo chleb* [Cure a headache with bread] (1632, 1689, 1746, 1851, 1894, 1954); *Jeśli boli łeb, w gębę kładnij chleb* [If you have a headache, put bread in your mouth]; *Doglia di testa vuol minestra* [Soup is good for a headache]; *Mal di testa vuol mangiare, mal di pancia vuol cacare* [A headache means that you need to eat, a stomachache means you need to defecate].

There is a large group of Italian proverbs that mention tuberculosis and its symptoms, while Polish proverbs do not mention the problem at all: *Tisico, puttana e pazzo han da esser di razza* [Tuberculosis, debauchery and madness are inherited]; *La tosse è il tamburo della morte* [Coughing means death is coming]; *Tosse malsana, morte sicura* [Tubercular cough is certain death]; *La tossetta porta alla cassetta* [Coughing leads to a coffin]; *La tisi passa sette mura* [Tuberculosis punches through seven walls].

Again, ophthalmic diseases and the ways of treating them are not evidenced in Polish proverbs, while there is a group of Italian maxims referring to them; the most common recommendation is not to touch sore eyes: *Chi vuol tener occhio sano, leghisi la mano* [If you want to have healthy eyes, tie your hand]; *Se vuoi gli occhi sani, non toccarli mai colle mani* [If you want to have healthy eyes, do not touch them with your hands]; *L'occhio malato s'ha a toccar col gomito* [Touch a sore eye with your elbow].

Polish proverbs, on the other hand, provide general advice on how not to fall ill: *Grzej brzuch i nogi, głowę trzymaj chłodno, a będzie lekarzom głodno* [Keep the stomach and legs warm and the head cool, and the doctors will go hungry] (1894); *Głowa chłodno, brzuch (żołądek) głodno, nogi ciepło, a będziesz zdrow* [Cool head, hungry stomach, warm legs – and you will be healthy] (1894); *Nogi w ciepłe, głowę w chłodzie, żołądek w głodzie, a unikniesz choroby* [Warm legs, cool head, hungry stomach and you will not be ill] (1900, 1930).

## SYMPTOMS OF DISEASE, NAMES FOR DISEASES

An analysis of the collections of proverbs on diseases leads to the conclusion that folk wisdom preserved the following groups of diseases. First there were unusual illnesses, causing anxiety, as in the case of chorea (called St. Vitus' dance), with jerky body movements, emotional disorders, and locomotor activity constraints: *Taniec świętego Wita* [St. Vitus' dance] (1806); *Tańczy, jakby go święty Wit nawiedził* [He is dancing as if visited by St. Vitus] (1900); apoplexy was considered in a similar way, Italians called it "a blow from God": *Il colpo (apoplettico) che dà Dio lo cura la terra (tomba)* [The (apoplectic) blow from God, is cured with earth (the grave)]. Secondly, there were serious diseases that suggested looming death: *W głowie szum, w kościach łom, w mieszku trwoga: ratuj dla Boga!* [Noise in the head, pain in the bones, no money: God save me!] (1618, 1852, 1894, 1900); *Zębów utrata wyprzedza zejście ze świata* [The loss of teeth precedes death] (1894).

*Flegma – powróż na stare* [Phlegm – a rope for the old] (1618, 1806, 1894, 1900) meaning the phlegm in the airways in the elderly, a symptom of a disease, suggesting that the death of such a person is near.

*Tre C portano via i vecchi: catarro, caduta, caccarella* [Three things take the old to the other world: cold, falling, excretion].

*Bandiera rossa (emottisi) è segno di guerra<sup>6</sup> (di gravi malattie)* [The red flag (coughing up of blood) is an expression of a fight (serious diseases)].

*Se t'acchiappa tifo o polmonite, chiama subito notaro e prete* [If you get typhus or pneumonia, call the notary and the priest right away].

*La rosolia in tre giorni si secca e va via* [German measles dries out and goes away in three days].

In the 19th century and later, in the collections of Polish proverbs expressions related to cancer begin to appear, while the Italian proverbs do not mention the disease at all<sup>7</sup>: *Rak go toczy* [He has got cancer] (1870, 1877, 1899, 1957); *Rak tym niebezpieczniejszy, że toczy w ukryciu* [Cancer is more dangerous because it develops stealthily] (1877).

Syphilis, commonly known in Poland as the “the French disease<sup>8</sup>”, (Italians also referred to syphilis that way, as *il mal francese*), but also: *franca*, *choroba dworska* [court disease], *choroba hiszpańska* [Spanish disease], *choroba sekretna* [secret disease], *pani franca* [lady franca], *świerzba* [itching disease], *syf*, *weneria*, *ospa miłosna* [love measles], *niemoc kurewników i cudzołóżników* [ailment of prostitute lovers and adulterers], which must have been popular among the common people as well, judging by the numerous appearances in proverbs from the 17th and 19th centuries:

*Franca hiszpańskiej natury, kogo raz opanuje, nie odstępuje* [The Spanish disease – once it gets you, it will not leave you] (1650).

*Kto raz francie statecznie prawdziwej dostanie, jak majątność wiecznością przy nim się zostanie* [The disease will never leave once contracted] (1650).

*Gdy Francycja ma katar, cała Europa kicha* [When France is ill, the whole of Europe is sneezing] (1901).

*Tigna di vergognoso e mal francese di goloso non guarì mai* [Lichen in the shy and syphilis in the lewd have never been cured].

The disease was so cumbersome and difficult to treat that in Poland one wished it not only on the enemy but also on a person one did not like: *Niechże kolegę flanela ogarnie. Niech cię flanela ogarnie* [May syphilis strike you] (1890, 1896, 1900).

<sup>6</sup> Paremia has a metaphorical meaning, the literal translation is: The red flag is a sign of war.

<sup>7</sup> The word *cancro* or more technically *tumore* does not appear either in the first scientifically compiled assemblage of Italian proverbs of Giuseppe Giusti from 1874, nor in any later assemblages of Italian proverbs. The word *cancer* has multiple synonyms in Italian: *gonfiore*, *carcinoma*, *impiastro*, *malaccio*; there are also periphrastical determinations: *morbo inesorabile* (mortal disease), *brutto male* (ugly disease), *terribile male* (scary disease), *male che non perdona* (disease that does not forgive), *malattia (male) inguaribile* (incurable disease) (Galli De Paratesi 1964). Therefore the Italian proverb *A mal mortale né medico né medicina vale* [A deadly disease neither physician nor physic can ease] may, but does not have to, refer to cancer.

<sup>8</sup> Syphilis was called *French disease* in Germany, Italy, Poland and England, while the French called it *English disease*, the Russians *Polish disease*, the Dutch *Spanish disease*, and Turks the *disease of Christians*.

Both in Polish and Italian proverbs, the most frequent symptom of disease was perpetuated, namely fever: *W gorączce, by żywe, snują się mary fałszywe* [In fever false illusions seem true] (1806); *Doprowadzić kogoś do białej gorączki* [go off the deep end] (1957); *Jak w gorączce prawić, pleść* [Talk as if in delirium] (1806, 1894, 1900); *La febbre spezza il leone* [Fever will kill even a lion]; *La febbre continua ammazza l'uomo* [Lasting fever will kill the man]; *Febbre di cani e di bambini non preoccupano e poco durano* [Fever in dogs and children does not worry and lasts a short time]; *La febbre quartana, il vecchio uccide e il giovane risana* [Quartan agues kill old men, and cure the young]. Fever was also used to invoke evil against others by saying: *Niech cię febra trzęsie (ciśnie)! Bodaj cię febra trzęśla!* [May fever strike/squeeze/shake you] (1855, 1901).

Wounds were treated in a similar way: *Wszystkie rany mają swe plastry, mają swe maści* [All wounds have their plasters and their ointments] (1696, 1806, 1896, 1900); *Przyłożył mu plaster na ranę* [He put a plaster on his wound] (1806, 1895); *Z ranki często bywa rana* [A small wound often turns into a large one] (1675, 1806, 1896); *Per guarire le crepe delle mani ci vuole la polvere delle tasche* [To heal wounds (chapping) on the palms, you need dust from the pockets of trousers].

In this case, the act of dressing wounds found its way into Polish as well: *(Przyłożyć komuś) balsam na ranę* [Apply balm on somebody's wounds] (1957); there is an identical expression in the Italian language: *un balsamo su una ferita*.

According to Italian folk wisdom, there was no cure for a heart disease: *Chi ha mal di cuore, vive finché muore* [Who has a sick heart, lives until he dies], there was however an original medicine for jaundice: *Se t'ha acchiappato l'itterizia, ingoia tre pidocchi* [If you have jaundice, swallow three lice].

## HERBS FOR DISEASE

In the old times, the best remedy for diseases was herbs, primarily because they were free. They were therefore harvested and dried willingly and often, and knowledge of their effects on various abnormalities was passed down from generation to generation. Today chamomile, hawthorn, sage, lime blossom, and St. John's wort are recognizable names of herbs still used for a variety of ailments, and they are quite often mentioned in Polish maxims. In Italian proverbs, sage is surely an herb equally appreciated in Polish proverbs; apart from that there are rut, mallow, aloe, artemisia, and chicory, which are not mentioned in Polish proverbs. *Dzień świętego Jana woła: rwij rumianek, zbieraj ziola, bo domowe ziółka, leki, lepsze nieraz niż z apteki* [St. John's Day calls: pick chamomile, collect herbs, home-grown herbs, medicines, sometimes better than from a pharmacy].

*Gdzie u progu są głogi, tam nie przejdą złe trwogi* [Where there are hawthorns at the threshold, no anxieties will come near] (1895).

*Kto ma szatnię w ogrodzie, tego śmierć nie ubodzie* [Death will not get you if you have sage in the garden].

*Mądry aptekarz ma w cenie ziola* [A wise apothecary knows the value of herbs].

*Kto będzie pił biedrzeniec, dzięgiel, kosajec i tyrniec, temu bieda nie zrobi nic* [He who drinks burnet, angelica, iris and tyrniec, will be free from poverty] (1874) this is a proverb quoted

by Adam Fischer (Kujawska et al. 2016: 86), and it shows that the people from the region of Krakow used herbs to prevent cholera and dysentery.

*Kwiat lipcowy – napój zdrowy* [Linden flower – healthy drink].

*Lipca ni żyłki nie ruszaj, a o miód się nie pokuszaj, nie śpij wiele, łaźnie niechaj, kopru z szatwią używaj* [Do not touch linden or veins or honey, do not sleep long, do not use steam bath, use fennel and sage] (1901).

*Od brzucha bolenia użyj (zażyj) świętojańskiego korzenia* [If you have stomachache, use a root of St. John wort] (1903).

*W domu pokrzywa, róża za domem* [Nettle in the house, rose behind it] (1876, 1896).

*Erba ch'è amara stomaco rischiara* [The bitter herb purify the stomach].

*Chi ha la salvia nell'orto, ha la salute nel corpo* [He who has sage in the garden, has health in the body].

*La salvia ti salva* [Sage will save you].

*Se la donna sapesse la virtù che ha la salvia, non verrebbe mai malata* [If a woman knows the benefits of sage, she will never be ill].

*La ruta ogni male stuta* [Rue will stifle any disease].

*La malva tutti i mali calma* [Mallow will calm down all disease].

*Chi mangia aloè, campa gli anni di Noè* [Who eats aloe vera, will live as long as Noah].

*La frassinella ogni vecchia fa zitella* [Dictamnus albus will rejuvenate an old woman].

*L'acqua di lino fa bene* [Water from flaxseed does well].

*Per guarire i geloni ci vuole il fiore del trifoglio* [Clover flower will cure frostbite].

*Povera quella casa dove di maggio non entra erba* [It is a poor house, where in May there are yet no herbs].

*Chi conosce la cicoria leva la palandrana al farmacista* [He who knows the effect of chicory makes the chemist unemployed].

*Radici di cicoria son salute* [The roots of chicory are all health].

*Se l'uomo sapesse la virtù che ha l'artemisia, la terrebbe perfino sotto la camicia* [If you knew the advantages of artemisia, you would hold it even under your shirt].

At the opposite pole there were proverbs that reminded people that herbs, even the most effective in treatment, are not and cannot be a cure for the inevitable death.

*I trucizny, które zabijają, od ziół zdrowych swój początek mają* [Even deadly poisons have their origin in healthy herbs].

*Nie pomoże ziele, jak sił niewiele* [Herbs will not help you if you lack strength].

*Nie pomogą zioła, gdy czas do kościoła* [Herbs will not help you if it is time for the church].

*Nie znajdziesz ziela przeciw śmierci* [No herb against death].

*Erba cruda e donna nuda fanno male alla salute* [A raw herb and a naked woman are not good for your health].

*Non si faccia mai di ogni erba un fascio* [Not every herb is good].

## TIPS – WHAT TO DO TO AVOID ILLNESS AND STAY HEALTHY

Already the earliest recorded proverbs appreciate the importance of drinking water, and washing the body: *Po smacznym kąsku i wody napić się nie wadzi* [After a tasty meal you

should drink some water] (1624, 1675, 1761, 1779, 1806, 1894, 1900); *Czysta woda zdrowia doda* [Pure water will make you healthy] (1894); *Świeża woda siły doda* [Fresh water will make you strong] (1957); *Zimna woda zdrowia doda* [Cold water will make you healthy] (1954); *Woda czyści żołądek, a piwo kabzę* [Water cleans out your stomach and beer cleans out your purse] (1954); *Wodę pij, wodą się myj, a będziesz zdrow* [Drink water, wash in water, and you will be healthy] (1894); *Nell'acqua ordine, nel vino disordine* [Water neatens, wine destroys]; *Alla donna pulita non mancò mai l'acqua* [A neat woman never run out of water].

The Polish and Italian folk wisdom exhorted and encouraged moderation in eating and drinking, and the guidelines for nutrition and drinking are still valid in the 21st century.

*Kto zje korzec marchwi, temu przybędzie kropla krwi* [A carrot root is one more drop of blood].  
*Kto lipny miód pije, ten w zdrowiu wiele lat żyje* [He who drinks linden honey, lives a long time healthily].

*Najlepsze jest zdrowie, a przy zdrowiu mleko krowie* [The best thing is health and cow's milk] (1930).

*Po jedzeniu stać albo chodzić potrzeba* [After eating stand or walk] (1786).

*W jedzeniu i w picciu miarę zachowaj* [Exercise moderation in eating and drinking].

*Kto nie doje, nie dopije, ten mądrze i długo żyje* [He who eats and drinks moderately will live long and be wise] (1632, 1746, 1894, 1930).

*Mierne jedzenie i picie najpewniej zachowa życie* [Moderate food and drink is sure to keep you alive] (1902).

*Kto pod noc mało jada, ten długo żyje* [He who eats little before sleep, lives long] (1846, 1894).

*Każdy napitek po salacie wyrzywa lekarzom po dukacie* [Every drink after a salad reduces the doctor's pay] (1894).

*Śliwy, ogórki, melony i dynie kto nieostrożnie jada, febrą ginie* [Who carelessly eats plums, cucumbers, melons and pumpkins, dies of fever] (1830, 1896).

*Ni má lepszego léku jak gorzalka po mleku* [No better medicine than booze after milk] (1885, 1894, 1900).

*Choroba trzeźwości nauczy* [Disease teaches sobriety] (1632, 1851, 1894, 1896).

*Jak się dupki dobrze mają, to dwa razy dziennie srajom* [When the arse feels good it shits twice a day] (1956).

*Z fasoli brzuch boli* [Beans bring stomachache] (1956).

*Za smaczne w wieczór frykasy, w nocy w brzuchu obertasy* [For tasty food before sleep, the stomach dances at night] (1844, 1930, 1957).

*Chi vuol esser sanino, dopo mangiato si corica un tantino* [He who wants to be healthy should move a little after eating].

*Piscia chiaro e fatti beffe del medico* [Pee bright urine and laugh at the doctor].

*Cacare ogni mattina è la meglio medicina* [The best remedy is daily defecation].

*Bisogna farla ogni mattina perché la salute si mantenga* [Do it (defecate) every morning to stay healthy].

*L'aglio è la spezieria dei contadini* [Garlic is a man's medicine].

*L'aglio spazza la malaria* [Garlic will cure malaria].

*Se vuoi stare bene mangia aglio e cipolle* [If you want to be healthy, eat garlic and onion].

*Fava e mela con l'acqua allega* [Broad beans and apples go well with water].

*Se vuoi molto campare rape devi mangiare* [If you want to live long – eat turnips].

*La rapa e il rapanello fanno il viso bello* [Turnips and radishes will make your face beautiful].

*La verdura è una pietanza che vuol olio in abbondanza* [Vegetables are the a food that needs to be sprinkled with oil].

*Se la donna sapesse cosa il sedano all'uomo fa, lo andrebbe a trovare in Canada* [If a woman know sew how celery works on a man, she would will even go to Canada to pick it].

## CONCLUSION

To sum up: the spectre of disease in Polish and Italian maxims is persistent, but not ubiquitous. There are no prescriptions in the collections of proverbs (maybe with a few exceptions) on how to cure an illness. Only very general comments and observations are available. As the proverbs of both nations show, recovery is the effect of actions taken by a good doctor, but they also indicate the involvement of the supernatural.

Life and death, health and disease are the effects of God's will and there is no cure for that. In the proverbs of both nations there are names of specific diseases, namely syphilis and scabies, which are infectious and extremely bothersome in their course, and which until the 20<sup>th</sup> century (syphilis) were incurable. The Polish proverbs mention chorea and phlegm, while the Italian ones mention tuberculosis and jaundice. In both languages there is also a rather merciless and contemptuous approach towards mentally ill people.

Folk wisdom, on the one hand, pointed out how to prevent illness (for example, by eating properly or using pure water both externally and internally), and if a disease had already occurred, it was important to find a good doctor and then a proper remedy for ailments. Nowadays, we are experiencing a specific revival of interest in herbal medicine in combating diseases and maintaining health, so proverbs on these issues can arouse more interest than others, but also because they are quite numerous. The Polish proverbs are dominated by herbs and medicinal plants such as chamomile, linden, St. John's wort and nettle, while in the Italian proverbs the dominant ones are chicory, aloe and artemisia. Only sage and its beneficial properties are quite numerous mentioned in both Polish and Italian proverbs.

## REFERENCES

- Allan, Keith and Kate Burridge. 2006. *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Apperson, George. 1993. *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Proverbs*, Ware: Wordsworth Editions.
- Bańkowski, Andrzej. 2000. *Etymologiczny słownik języka polskiego*, Warszawa: PWN.
- Boggione, Valter and Lorenzo Massobrio. 2007. *Dizionario dei proverbi*, Torino: UTET.
- Boryś, Wiesław. 2008. *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Brückner, Aleksander. 1993. *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego*, Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna.

- Cortelazzo, Michele and Paolo Zolli. 2011. *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*, Bologna: Zanichelli.
- Flonta, Teodor. 2011. *A Dictionary of English and Italian Equivalent Proverbs*, Milano: De Proverbio.
- Galli de' Paratesi, Nora. 1964. *Semantica dell'eufemismo. L'eufemismo e la repressione verbale con esempi tratti dall'italiano contemporaneo*, Torino: Giappichelli.
- Giusti, Giuseppe. 1874. *Proverbi toscani*, Firenze: Giusti Editore.
- Lauhakangas, Outi. 2015. *Categorization of Proverbs*, in: Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita Varga (ed.), *A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies*, Berlin: de Gruyter, pp. 49–67.
- Krzyżanowski, Julian. 1970. *Nowa księga przysłów i wyrażen przysłowiowych polskich*, v. II, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Kujawska, Monika and Łukasz Łuczaj, Joanna Sosnowska and Piotr Klepacki 2016. *Rośliny w wierzeniach i zwyczajach ludowych. Słownik Adama Fischera*, Wrocław: Polskie Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze.
- Marczewska, Marzena. 2012. *Ja cię zamawiam, ja cię wypędzam... Choroba. Studium językowo-kulturowe*, Kielce: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jana Kochanowskiego.
- Moszyński, Kazimierz. 1934. *Kultura ludowa Słowian. Kultura duchowa*, v. I–II, Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności.
- Polański, Edward. 2009. *Wielki słownik języka polskiego*, Kraków: Krakowskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
- Szerszunowicz, Joanna. 2013. *On paremiological lacunae in a contrastive perspective*, in: Rui Soares and Outi Lauhakangas (ed.), *6° Colóquio Interdisciplinar sobre Provérbios / 6th Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs: Actas ICP12 Proceedings*, Tavira: Tipografia Tavirense, pp. 131–143.
- Szerszunowicz, Joanna. 2015. *Cultural Connotations in Bilingual Dictionaries of Winged Words*, in: Joanna Szerszunowicz, Nowowiejski Bogusław, Priscilla Ishida and Katsumasa Yagi (ed.), *Intercontinental Dialogue on Phraseology 3: Linguo-Cultural Research on Phraseology*, Białystok: University of Białystok Publishing House, pp. 123–141.
- Wardhaugh, Ronald. 2000. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

#### **CHOROBY ŚMIERĆ UPRZEDZAJĄ, CZYLI O POJMOWANIU CHORÓB W POLSKICH I WŁOSKICH PRZYSŁOWIACH (XVI–XX W.)**

Celem badania jest analiza ludowego pojmowania zjawiska, jakim była choroba zarówno fizyczna, jak i psychiczna w przysłowiaach polskich i włoskich. Z analizy paremii wynika, że nie jest to do końca obraz jednolity i że akceptacja choroby, a także jej leczenie miało w świecie ludowym kilka wymiarów wynikających z przeczuciu, przesądów czy religii, zaś postać lekarza leczącego choroby jest w tym przypadku zaledwie jedną, nie najważniejszą, z części składowych procesu wychodzenia z niej. Obraz choroby w przysłowiaach włoskich wydaje się podobny, choć nie identyczny. Niezwykle interesujące jest to, że część owego ludowego świata związanego z chorobami i ich zwalczaniem przetrwała we współczesnym języku polskim i standardowym języku włoskim.

Słowa kluczowe: przysłowie, choroba, język polski, język włoski