

Book review

Litovkina, Anna T. (2016). *“Do You Serve Lawyers and Politicians Here?” Stereotyped Lawyers and Politicians in American Jokes and Anti-Proverbs*. Monographiae Comaromiensis 20. Selye János Egyetem / Univerzita Selyeho: Komárom/Komárno. 189 pages.

Anna T. Litovkina’s most recent book presents the stereotypical traits of lawyers and politicians as they are reflected in Anglo-American jokes and anti-proverbs. The relationship of jokes and law has been tackled in various ways by humour researchers; in particular, two main areas of interest can be distinguished. In one approach, discourse analysis is employed with special focus on courtroom and public political interactions (Forabosco 2011; Little 2009; Tsakona 2013; Shilikhina 2013).

In the other approach, lawyer jokes are under scrutiny, as in the book discussed in the current review. The theoretical foundation of this topic is laid down in Christie Davies’ (2011) book entitled *Jokes and Targets* that offers explanations on how target choices are governed in folkloric jokes, as well as devotes an entire chapter to “The Great American Lawyer Joke Cycle”. In the Anglo-American culture one of the most popular topics of jokes is lawyers. Davies clarifies this by saying that the target of the jokes in times of economical crisis are characters like lawyers, real estate agents, and bankers, namely the archetypes of professionals selling their services to people in trouble. Litovkina also claims that this sort of joke cycle has been flourishing since the 1980s. In these jokes, lawyers are portrayed as unethical, greedy, and selfish rogues. Thousands of jokes have been collected and published in book form or through internet websites dedicated exclusively to lawyer and politician topics. It seems that great irritation and anger exists against lawyers. Meder (2008) explains this phenomenon via the high legalization of the American society (p. 11). Davies (2008: 373) goes even further, stating that “America is governed not by men but lawyers”.

At the end of her book, Anna T. Litovkina raises the question of whether the stereotypes depicted in these jokes portray the traits and behaviour of these professionals accurately. She does not want to answer the question once and for all, but finds some clues in Dundes’ (1987: 116) words, who states that stereotypes are coming from the folklore: “Folklore does not create society; it only mirrors it. If the mirror image is unattractive, does it serve any purpose to break the mirror?”. On the whole, Anna T. Litovkina’s book represents the first comprehensive collection and content interpretation of lawyer jokes and proverbs without offering linguistic analysis of the jokes. It classifies and explains content-wise several lawyer jokes and proverbs that had been unclassified. In particular, the structure of the work deserves praise. At the beginning and end of each chapter, a summary is provided and the key thoughts are written in bold. It can easily be understood and the examples make it a very entertaining read.

The volume consists of two parts. The first one focuses on jokes, the second – shorter – part presents proverbs and anti-proverbs. The first part is divided into seven chapters, detailing the stereotypes about lawyers (greedy, manipulative, without skeleton, etc.), comparing them with other professionals and fearful animals, and finally presenting the types of their death and

the places after their death. The second part of the book is divided into two chapters detailing the negative characteristics of lawyers and politicians. In the following we take a closer look at individual chapters.

The first chapter examines the general stereotypes about lawyers. How does society see these professionals? The most irritating factor is apparently constituted by the inordinately high fees lawyers charge their clients. Lawyers are greedy and do not show any sympathy towards their clients. They ask for money without offering anything worthy in exchange, they are pushy and snobbish: “What do honest lawyers and UFOs have in common? You always hear about them, but you never see them” (p. 17). Their main aim is to press out as much money as possible from their clients, not to mention that they may even exploit them sexually. Very rarely jokes also mention the weaknesses of the lawyers. Sometimes they are depicted as stupid or lazy: “Did you hear about the lawyer who was so lazy that he married a pregnant woman?” (p. 27).

The next chapter enumerates jokes where lawyers are represented together with other professionals. First, they are depicted with their eternal rivals, doctors (this is the second most popular profession type in jokes, after lawyers). When parents wish their children to have a good job, they often visualise the professions of lawyers and doctors. Most of the jokes usually handle both professions in a disparaging way, but in the competition of skilful manipulation, cunning, and dishonesty, lawyers are the winners. Doctors are mainly depicted as naive, sometimes even unintelligent characters: “Two Jewish women meet on the street, one with children. The other says, ‘Such beautiful children, how old are they?’ ‘The doctor is seven and the lawyer is five’” (p. 40).

Lawyers are also often portrayed together with prostitutes, although not aiming to praise them: “A lawyer is an expert on justice in the same way a prostitute is an expert on love” (p. 55). As another extremity, they are mentioned together with priests. Priesthood serves as a sort of counterpoint, to accentuate the cunning, dishonest, and greedy character of lawyers. There are very few lawyer jokes where lawyers and politicians appear together; rather they are often treated as identical professions in jokes. The main reason might be that in the U.S. lawyers dominate the political area. Most of the presidents started their careers as lawyers, just to mention a few: Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (p. 62). “How can you tell when a lawyer/politician is lying? His lips are moving” (p. 61).

The third chapter shows the long tradition of comparing lawyers to different animals. The depicted animals are mostly poisonous, dirty, parasitic, or lazy (people often associate them with war, aggression, death, trickiness, or swindle). The most pronounced parallel has been drawn between lawyers and sharks. Such parallels can even be found on T-shirts, cards, or in advertisements. Sharks are spineless, they are searching for the dead or dying, they are equipped with a fine sense of smell, and their skin is very soft. Lawyers are also known as spineless, abusive persons, with a skin on the face that can carry anything. In their own environment both of them are the representatives of power and ferocity. “A man walks into a bar with a crocodile and asks ‘Do you serve Lawyers here?’ ‘We sure do’, the bartender answered. ‘Good’, the man says ‘I’ll have a beer and my croc will have a lawyer’ (p. 97). Known from Christianity and Judaism, the serpent is also a frequent character in lawyer jokes. At the third place, Litovkina mentions rats, frequently used for medical experiments. A smaller amount of jokes compares lawyers to unintelligent animals:

The National Institute of Health has announced that it will no longer be using rats for medical experiments. In their place, they will use lawyers. They have given three reasons for this decision: There are now more lawyers than there are rats. The medical researchers don’t become as emotionally attached to the lawyers as they did to the rats. No matter how hard you try, there are some things that rats won’t do. (p. 83)

The motto of the fourth part is the famous sentence from Shakespeare's IV. Henry: "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers". The section further elaborates on a dark topic: the killing of lawyers. There are different ways extermination can be reached, for example drowning, burying alive, hitting by car or bus, running of a cliff, cutting, shooting, throwing out of a window, etc. (p. 94): "Good News: A busload of lawyers ran off a cliff. The bus was destroyed and there were no survivors. Bad news: There were three empty seats" (p. 96). Naturally the jokes do not contain instructions for carnage, they exist merely for entertainment purposes.

The focus of the fifth chapter is the places where lawyers end up after their death. Evidently this can only be Hell that often appears in the form of allusion in the jokes. Very rarely lawyers enter Heaven, but finally it turns out that it only serves to show their negative characteristics. Let us look at the joke about the first lawyer who was allowed to enter Heaven:

Following a distinguished legal career, a man arrived at the Gates of Heaven, accompanied by the Pope, who had the misfortune to expire on the same day. The Pope was greeted first by St. Peter, who escorted him to his quarters. The room was somewhat shabby and small, similar to that found in a low grade Motel 6 type establishment. The lawyer was then taken to his room, which was a palatial suite including a private swimming pool, a garden, and a terrace overlooking the Gates. The attorney was somewhat taken aback, and told St. Peter, "I'm really quite surprised at these rooms, seeing as how the Pope was given such a small accommodation". St. Peter replied, "We have over a hundred Popes here, and we're really very bored with them. We've never had a lawyer." (p. 112)

The second part of the book deals with proverbs and anti-proverbs about lawyers. Proverbs are often carrying an underlying satiric or ironic meaning. During the last decades they have undergone certain modifications, and some of these modified versions have become more popular than the original ones. Mieder (1989) designated them as *Antispruchwort* or anti-proverbs. Most of the anti-proverbs partially question the truth of the proverb. The anti-proverb is humorous if and only if the original proverb is known to the intended audience. As they convey general wisdom, anti-proverbs are found in a broad range of contexts, from personal letters through philosophical journals, public lectures, sermons to songs, science fiction to comics and cartoons. As Mieder (1989) notes, anti-proverbs address all levels of daily life. There is a wide range of professions addressed and, without doubt, the lawyer – as well as the politician – are the most popular topics of humour in Anglo-American proverbs. The second part of the book is divided into two chapters, the first introducing proverbs and anti-proverbs about lawyers, the second one about politicians. The author has studied hundreds of American and British books and articles on puns, one-liners, toasts, wisecracks, quotations, aphorisms, maxims, quips, epigrams and graffiti, and the examples were taken from these written sources. The vast majority of them can be found in the collections of Anna T. Litovkina and Wolfgang Mieder (Mieder & Litovkina 1999; Litovkina & Mieder 2006).

Proverbs often provide instructions on how to handle the law: "Keep the law and keep from the law" (p. 123). Proverbs talk positively neither about the law itself, nor about lawyers: "Laws are made to be broken" (p. 123). Also the proverbs clarify that the biggest anger and irritation are generated from the questionable nature of lawsuits, the mad pursuit for money. Lawyers are manipulative and corrupt: "Practice does not make a lawyer perfect, but enough of it will make him rich" (p. 125). Lawyers are often called "money grabbers", based on the common belief that they put their hands in their clients' pocket. Numerous transformations of the proverb "Where there's a will, there's a way" (p. 126) have been created to express this. Litovkina explains that these anti-proverbs are based on the different connotations of the noun *will*. There is homonymous punning at work in a way that the listener has to reinterpret the first part of the sentence with the help of the second part of the sentence, and shift to the

adequate connotation (p.127). The anti-proverbs mention lawyers together with criminals, and also the doctor–lawyer parallel reappears.

The last part of the book deals with anti-proverbs about politicians. It covers six main topics: the two most frequent proverbs, the immoral behaviour of politicians, their focusing exclusively on money, lying, the lack of necessary competence, and some further negative characteristics. For example: “In politics the choice is constantly between two evils” (p. 146); “Give a politician a free hand and he will put it in your pocket” (p. 149). One of the most frequently used proverbs is: “You can fool some of the people all the time, all the people some of the time, but you can’t fool all the people all the time” (p. 143). Several anti-proverbs have been generated from this original one, such as: “A clever politician knows that it isn’t necessary to fool all the people all the time – just during the campaign” (p. 144).

All things considered, the volume is a most entertaining collection of jokes and anti-proverbs, providing a thorough content analysis and classification. Such a large collection of lawyer jokes and anti-proverbs could serve as a corpus for in-depth linguistic analysis, too. Considering that humour studies are scarce in the mother-tongue of the author of the current review, it would be useful to translate the volume into Hungarian and/or add a corpus specifically dealing with the relationship between jokes and Hungarian cultures.

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