

Wise and Humorous Words: Hungarian Proverbs, Riddles, and Jokes

Abstract

Proverbs, anti-proverbs, riddles and jokes constitute an ample and varied part of Hungarian folklore. Collecting these texts in and outside the territory of present-day Hungary looks back on a history of several decades if not centuries, and research on the sources, presence, role, context, subgenres, transmission, and shaping of these witty and/or humorous forms of short verbal lore over the time has brought interesting results about their origin, interculturality, as well as formal, thematic, and sociological characteristics. Contemporary forms of texts and appearance are also discussed in this chapter, with a special emphasis on anti-proverbs, and internet joking.

Keywords

Hungarian Proverbs and Anti-Proverbs, Hungarian Riddles, Hungarian Jokes, Hungarian Humor, Hungarian Folklore Collections, Folklore Research in Hungary

Introduction

This chapter is organized into three sections. The first section treats Hungarian proverbs. The beginning addresses some questions about the origin of proverbs, and discusses traditions of researching Hungarian proverbs. What follows is a reviewing of selected dictionaries of Hungarian proverbs and proverbial sayings, and a presentation of anti-proverb research in Hungary. The second section of this chapter discusses Hungarian riddles. After providing an overview of the collection and study of riddles in Hungarian folklore studies, it touches upon the subgenres and poetic features of Hungarian riddles. Finally, the function and use of riddles in traditional and contemporary Hungarian culture are treated. The third section of this chapter

touches upon jokes and joking in Hungarian folklore. At the beginning of the third section joke research in Hungarian folklore is discussed. The next part addresses urban and rural layers of Hungarian jokes, considers the joke phenomenon called “the Budapest joke”, and proceeds to joke tales and folk humor. Lastly, contemporary forms of jokes and joking on the Internet are overviewed.

1. Hungarian Paremiology² and Paremiography³

1.1. Towards the Origin of Hungarian Proverbs

If one were to compile a list of genuinely Hungarian proverbs, one would be facing a daunting challenge. Let us have a look at the following proverbs:

A nép szava Isten szava. [The voice of the people (is) the voice of God]⁴

Nem mind arany, ami fénylik. [All is not gold that glitters]

Aki másnak vermet ás, maga esik bele. [He who digs a pit for others falls into it himself]

The above proverbs, very frequently used in Hungary, belong to the Hungarian paremiological minimum (see Tóthné Litovkina 1993 and 1996 and T. Litovkina–Mieder 2005, 23–29), but are not of Hungarian origin. Could they be treated as Hungarian? Indeed, similarly to Russian, English, French, German, and many other European proverbs, quite a large number of Hungarian proverbs, too, are of foreign origin, but through the centuries or – in case of very new proverbs – mere decades, they have become part of the Hungarian heritage, and more often than not an average speaker of Hungarian might not be able to distinguish among proverbs of Hungarian origin and of non-Hungarian origin.

A number of proverbs coined outside Hungary might be grouped into the following categories:

- 1) from Greek-Latin antiquity, as well as from Medieval Latin;
- 2) from the Bible;

- 3) calques from other languages (e.g., English, French, German, Russian);
- 4) other miscellaneous sources.

As Wolfgang Mieder points out, “[a] large number of proverbs from various ancient languages and cultures entered the Latin language and eventually reached many of the vernacular languages when medieval Latin proverbs were being translated” (Mieder 1993, 12). Indeed, one of the main layers of Hungarian proverbs coincides with proverbs from Greek-Latin antiquity, as well as from Medieval Latin. Let us provide just two selected examples for Hungarian proverbs with their Latin sources and English equivalents.

The first is the Hungarian proverb *Nem mind arany, ami fénylik* [Lat. *Non omne quod nitet, aurum est*; Eng. All is not gold that glitters] for which Paczolay has found equivalents in 47 European languages (see Paczolay 1997, 125–129).

Similarly, the Hungarian proverb *Kéz kezét mos* is also of Latin origin [Lat. *Manus manum lavat*; Eng. One hand washes the other] and is found in 46 other European languages (see Paczolay 1997, 174–178).

Let us list below a few more Hungarian proverbs of Latin origin with their Latin sources and English equivalents (for more on Hungarian proverbs of Latin origin, see also T. Litovkina–Mieder 2005, 65–71):

A baj nem jár egyedül. [Lat. *Nulla calamitas sola*; Eng. Misfortunes never come single]

A cél szentesíti az eszközt. [Lat. *Cum finis est licitus, etiam media sunt licita*; Eng. The end justifies the means]

A pénznek nincs szaga. [Lat. *Pecunia non olet*; Eng. Money has no smell]

The Bible, more than any other source, has contributed to the treasury of Hungarian proverbs and sayings. Let us exemplify this with some Hungarian proverbs originating in the Bible, followed by their English equivalents and sources (for more on Hungarian proverbs originated from the Bible, see also T. Litovkina–Mieder 2005, 61–65 and T. Litovkina 2017):

Nemcsak kenyérrel él az ember. [Man does not live by bread alone (Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:1–4; Luke 4:4)]

Senki sem lehet próféta a saját hazájában. [A prophet is without honor in his own country (Luke 4:24; Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:4; John 4:44)]

Szeresd felebarátodat, mint magadat. [Love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19; Mark 12:31; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8)]

The corpus of Hungarian proverbs has also clearly been enriched by a number of English – and during the last decades by American – proverbs (for more on English/American proverbs borrowed by the Hungarian proverb stock, see also T. Litovkina–Mieder 2005, 71–76):

A házasságok az égben köttetnek. [Marriages are made in heaven]

A kutya az ember legjobb barátja. [A dog is man's best friend]

A puding próbája az evés. [The proof of the pudding is the eating]

A number of Hungarian proverbs have equivalents in other languages as well but to decide whether these Hungarian proverbs are indeed borrowings would require painstaking research into their history and the close examination of etymological data.

Similarly to many other languages, the Hungarian language has also developed its own proverbs. Let us demonstrate the richness of its particular proverb stock by a few examples. The first three contain personal names, out of which the first two refer to the Hungarian tradition of celebrating name days and to connecting various name dates to weather prediction. The proverb *Ha Katalin kopog, Karácsony locsog* [If Katalin day freezes, Christmas melts] is connected to Katalin day, celebrated in Hungary on 25th of November. The proverb *Sándor, József, Benedek, zsákban hozzák a meleget* [Alexander, Joseph, and Benedict bring the warmth in a sack] refers to the days of the three saints in March (18th – Sándor, 19th – József, and 21st – Benedek). These saints are said to “bring the warmth in a sack”, that is, the weather usually warms up this time of the year. The proverb *Meghalt Mátyás király, oda az igazság* [King

Mathias is dead, justice is dead] refers to King Matthias (1443–1490), who is remembered as the most just Hungarian king, emphasizing that with the death of Matthias, justice has also died. Literary quotations can also become proverbs (see also T. Litovkina–Mieder 2005, 19–20). Let us look at just two cases. For example, the well-known proverb *Aki a virágot szereti, rossz ember nem lehet* [He who loves flowers can't be a bad man] originated with Sándor Petőfi's poem *Az árva lyány* [The Orphan Girl]. Let us quote here four lines from Petőfi (1823–1849), who was one of the key figures of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 and is considered Hungary's national poet:

Szeresd a virágot
És ne féltsd szívedet,
Mert, *ki ezt szereti,*
Rossz ember nem lehet.
[Love flowers,
And fear not your heart,
For he who loves them (flowers)
Can't be a bad man]

The proverb, however, is nowadays not associated with Sándor Petőfi and his poem by most Hungarians.

1.2. Traditions of Researching Hungarian Proverbs

If we were to explore the full treasury of Hungarian proverbs, we would certainly be overwhelmed by the sheer number of books and studies on the subject. Hungarian scholars are counted among the best paremiologists in the world. Research conducted by Vilmos Voigt and Ágnes Szemerényi in the 1970s mainly concentrated on folkloristic and semiotic approaches to proverbs and their variants (see Voigt 1971 and Szemerényi–Voigt 1972). Subsequently,

Szemerényi went on to treat the everyday use of Hungarian proverbs and sayings, along with their role in social interaction (see Szemerényi 1980 and 1994). She also published a dictionary of Hungarian sayings and proverbs (Szemerényi 2009).

Other present-day Hungarian scholars who concern themselves primarily with Hungarian proverbs and proverbial sayings are Vilmos Bárdosi, Tamás Forgács, Tamás Kispál, Anna T. Litovkina (earlier Anna Tóthné Litovkina), and Gyula Paczolay.

Gyula Paczolay has dealt mainly with compiling collections of equivalent or similar proverbs from various languages (see Paczolay 1987, 1994 and 1997). He has also offered an analysis of the history of a single proverb (e.g., Paczolay 1986).

Vilmos Bárdosi has compiled a number of dictionaries of Hungarian proverbs, proverbial sayings, idioms and collocations (see Bárdosi 2003 and 2012 and Bárdosi–Kiss 2005). He has also done extensive research in other aspects of proverbs, in particular, the mention of body organs in Hungarian proverbs and proverbial sayings (Bárdosi 2013).

Forgács's main emphasis is on the lexicographical description of proverbs and proverbial sayings, contrastive paremiology, proverbs and proverbial sayings containing names of animals, and various theoretical issues connected to phraseology and paremiology (see Forgács 2005, 2007 and 2012). Forgács's paremiographical work is further dealt with below in Subsection 1.3 in the brief review of his dictionary (Forgács 2003).

In the main scope of Tamás Kispál's research interests is paremiography, his main focus being how proverbs are processed in dictionaries (see Kispál 2007 and 2015).

Lastly, let us mention the name of Anna T. Litovkina. For more than two decades, empirical paremiology has been the focus of her studies in paremiology. In 1991–1993 T. Litovkina conducted a paremiological experiment in the form of a socio-linguistic survey in Hungary, and established the paremiological minimum of the Hungarian language (see Tóthné Litovkina 1993 and 1996). While in the beginning of her scholarly career she dealt primarily with

Hungarian proverbs, her publications in the last 15 years have focused mainly on English and Hungarian anti-proverbs (see also Subsection 1.4 below). In addition, as discussed in Subsections 1.3 and 1.4, T. Litovkina has compiled a number of dictionaries of Hungarian proverbs (T. Litovkina 2005 and 2017) and anti-proverbs (T. Litovkina–Vargha 2005a and 2005b).

Many more studies and books by the scholars whose work has been treated above could also be addressed here. There are also other outstanding paremiologists and paremiographers in and outside Hungary. (For more on this topic, see T. Litovkina–Mieder 2005, 9–20 and T. Litovkina 2013 and Voigt 2013.)

1.3. Dictionaries of Hungarian Proverbs

In Hungary the tradition of collecting proverbs and proverbial sayings is extremely rich. Hungarian paremiographers have gained serious merits in compiling both historical and comparative dictionaries of proverbs and proverbial sayings.

Collecting and publishing dictionaries of proverbs began in Hungary more than four hundred years ago. The first swallow to make the summer of Hungarian paremiography was the book authored by Baranyai Decsi, entitled *Adagiorum Graeco-Latino-Ungaricorum Chiliades Quinque* (1598), which included about 5,000 Latin, Greek and Hungarian proverbs and proverbial sayings. Since the end of the 16th century numerous dictionaries of proverbs and sayings have been published in Hungary. Let us list here the names of the compilers of the most important Hungarian dictionaries followed by the year of publication: Szenczi Molnár (1611); Kis Viczay (1713); Dugonics (1820); Ballagi (1850); Erdélyi (1851, 1862); Sirisaka (1891); Margalits (1897); O. Nagy (1966); Bárdosi (2003); Forgács (2003); T. Litovkina (2005); Szemerkenyi (2009). (For more on dictionaries, see Tolnai 1910, 22–56; Sirisaka 1891, XLVI–LXIX and T. Litovkina–Mieder 2005, 11–20).

Proverbs have often been included in 19th and 20th century collections of Hungarian folk poetry, and a number of anthologies and local monographs should also be highlighted (Lábadi 1986; Ujváry 2001; Vöő 1989 and 1999; for further details see Voigt 2013, 359–363). Two collections of special interest focus on the paremic knowledge and competence of one informant, that of a small land holder from the Gömör county (Ujváry 1996) and a “common Székely peasant” (Tánczos 2008), respectively.

The study of proverbs has experienced an extraordinary boom during the past two decades in Hungary. The number of collections and studies published during this time period attests to the increasing interest in paremiography and paremiology in Hungary. In 2003, Tinta Kiadó (Budapest) surprised the public with two dictionaries of proverbs, proverbial sayings and idioms (Bárdosi 2003 and Forgács 2003); only two years later followed another major paremiographic work (T. Litovkina 2005). These three dictionaries represent some of the most significant contributions to the field of Hungarian paremiography, phraseology, and lexicography in decades.

The three dictionaries are similar in appearance and size: Bárdosi’s 948-page book presents approximately 12,000 sayings, idioms, proverbial comparisons, proverbial expressions, proverbs, clichés, and other collocations, while Forgács’s 821-page collection contains about 7,500, and T. Litovkina’s 848-page volume demonstrates over 2,000 proverbs. They also share the common goal of giving information on the rich field of Hungarian phraseology and paremiology. The three books, however, address quite different needs and interests, so they complement each other perfectly.

1.4. Anti-Proverb Research in Hungary

Proverbs have never been considered sacrosanct. On the contrary, they have frequently been twisted and/or used as satirical, ironic or humorous comments on a given situation. Wolfgang

Mieder has coined the term *Antispruchwort* (anti-proverb) for such deliberate proverb innovations (also known as *alterations*, *mutations*, *parodies*, *transformations*, *variations*, *wisecracks*, or *fractured proverbs*) (see Röhrich–Mieder 1977 and Mieder 1982). Wolfgang Mieder’s term has been widely accepted by proverb scholars all over the world as a general label for such innovative alterations of and reactions to traditional proverbs. Some anti-proverbs question the truth of a proverb through employing antonyms, transforming the proverb into its opposite, or posing a naive question, e.g., *Éhezés közben is megjön az étvágy* [Appetite comes even while starving] {*Evés közben jön meg az étvágy* [Appetite comes while eating]}.⁵ The vast majority of anti-proverbs, however, place the proverbial wisdom only partially into question, primarily by relating it to a particular context or thought in which the traditional wording does not fit.

As the genre of transformed proverbs is becoming more and more popular, especially due to the mass media and the Internet, both anti-proverb research and anti-proverb collection have been experiencing a boom in the last fifteen years. In the course of 2006 two conferences held in Hungary featured panels on anti-proverbs (see T. Litovkina 2007: 5–6). Moreover, a thematic issue of the journal *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* entitled ‘Anti-Proverbs in Contemporary Societies’, guest-edited by T. Litovkina and Carl Lindahl in 2007, was printed in Budapest.

In the course of 2005, the first two collections of Hungarian anti-proverbs were published: *Viccében él a nemzet. Magyar közmondás-paródiák* [‘The Nation Lives in Its Jokes’: Hungarian Proverb Parodies] (see T. Litovkina–Vargha 2005b); and *Éhes diák pakkal álmodik. Egyetemisták közmondás-elváltoztatásai* [‘A Hungry Student Dreams of Parcels’: Twisted Proverbs of Students] (see T. Litovkina–Vargha 2005a). The two volumes contain about 1,500 and over 1,700 proverb parodies, respectively.

Let us provide here the five most frequently transformed proverbs in T. Litovkina and Vargha’s corpus:⁶

1. *Addig jár a korsó a kútra, (a)míg el nem törik.* [The pitcher goes to the well until it breaks; ~ *The pitcher will go to the well once too often*] (178)
2. *(A)ki korán kel, aranyat lel.* [He who gets up early finds gold; ~ *The early bird catches the worm*] (153)
3. *Aki másnak vermet ás, maga esik bele.* [He who digs a pit for another falls into it himself; ~ *He who digs a pit for others falls in himself*] (149)
4. *Jobb ma egy veréb, mint holnap egy tüzok.* [Better a sparrow today than a bustard tomorrow; ~ *A bird in hand is worth two in the bush*] (88)
5. *A hazug embert hamarabb utolérik, mint a sánta kutyát.* [A liar is caught sooner than a lame dog; ~ *A liar should have a good memory*] (88)

Anna T. Litovkina and Katalin Vargha have also co-authored a number of articles analyzing types of transformation and humor devices in Hungarian anti-proverbs (see Vargha–T. Litovkina 2007a and 2013 and T. Litovkina–Vargha 2012, etc.). The co-authors have also conducted a survey exploring popular views of proverbs and anti-proverbs in contemporary Hungarian society (Vargha–T. Litovkina 2007b and T. Litovkina et al. 2012).

Anna T. Litovkina and Dóra Boronkai have conducted socio-linguistic surveys in Hungary (Boronkai–T. Litovkina 2007; T. Litovkina–Boronkai 2009 and 2011 and T. Litovkina et al. 2012). The main goal of the surveys was to learn how age, gender and educational background as well as different mechanisms of proverb alteration influence the appreciation of humor in anti-proverbs.

Apart from the productive partnerships already mentioned, other scholarly teams have also been formed in Hungary to conduct various anti-proverb projects. The *International Research Group for Folklore and Linguistics*, which was founded in 2006 in Budapest, has been concerned with the types of alterations and humor devices most frequently employed in Anglo-American, German, French, Russian, and Hungarian anti-proverbs (see T. Litovkina et al. 2007 and 2008;

Barta et al. 2009; Hrisztova-Gotthardt et al. 2009 and 2018a etc). The research group is headed by Anna T. Litovkina, its members include Hungarian paremiologists Péter Barta, Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Katalin Vargha, among others.

Lastly, let us mention a current project carried out by the *International Research Group for Folklore and Linguistics* in co-authorship with the Croatian paremiologist Melita Aleksa Varga. In their previous studies, the members of the research group have covered mainly altered texts alone. However, nowadays, with the evolution of information technologies and the enormous development of computer-mediated communication we are observing the rapid emergence of the significance of the digital visual humor within the domain of anti-proverbs as well. Accordingly, in the scope of their new project, the scholars are focusing primarily on the visual representation of proverbs and their (humorous) alterations as well on the interaction between text and image (see Hrisztova-Gotthardt et al. 2018b).

2. Riddles

2.1. Collection and Study of Riddles

Riddling is assumed to be a part of the oral and/or literary traditions of all cultures, and can be traced back to the ancient civilizations of India and Greece. The earliest Hungarian records of riddles can be found in two codices and an arithmetic book published in the early 16th century (Mándoki 1979, 301–303). The first riddle book in Hungarian, the *Mesés könyvecske*⁷ ('A Small Book of Riddles', 1629, reprint: Voigt 1989) included 300 riddles in 13 conceptual groups, translated from the 1505 edition of the German *Strassburger Rätselbuch* (Voigt 2010, 498; cf. Butsch 1876).

Throughout the next centuries, riddles can be found in various handwritten and printed sources. Handwritten collections of riddles put down by students and clergymen are known from the end

of the 17th century. From the late 18th century, riddles were frequently printed on the last pages of chapbooks and almanacs, to entertain and educate, as well as to fill in the blank spaces. At the same time, following Western European example, periodicals with literary or miscellaneous content (e.g., *Mindenek Gyűjtemény* (1789–1792); *Hasznos Mulatságok* (1817–1842); *Regélő* (1838–1842), and *Hölgyfutár* (1850–1862)) also published a vast number of riddle texts, mostly sent in by the readers themselves. These sources deserve attention because the texts in them significantly overlap with the folk riddles known from the 20th century. Presumably these popular readings, and especially “cheap print could have played a role in transmitting themes and motifs between orality and literacy, as well as between different social groups” (Csörsz–Mikos 2019, 278).

The scholarly collection of folk riddles started in the mid-19th century, motivated by linguistic as well as folkloristic interest, as folklore texts and especially short forms of folklore were considered to preserve the true essence of Hungarian language.

Thus a considerable number of Hungarian folk riddles were first published in linguistic journals (e.g., *Magyar Nyelvészet* (‘Hungarian Linguistics’) and *Magyar Nyelvőr* (‘Hungarian Linguist’)) throughout the second half of the 19th century. Riddles were also published in collections of Hungarian folk poetry (e.g., Kriza 1863) and in folktale anthologies (e.g., Arany 1862). The first bigger local corpus, 578 texts from Nagyszalonta accompanied by comparative notes was published by Zsigmond Szendrey (Szendrey 1924, 133–163; 322–334). He was also the first scholar to attempt developing a classification of Hungarian riddles, distinguishing two main categories: *találós mesék* (riddling tales) and *találós kérdések* (riddling questions) (Szendrey 1923/1924).

After sporadic publications, the collection and analysis of Hungarian riddles took momentum in the 1970s. Vilmos Voigt attempted to record the complete set of riddles known in one settlement, Mezőcsát in 1970 and published the latest results of international research (Voigt

1993 [1971]). Separate scholarly volumes of Hungarian riddles were published from different parts of the Hungarian-language area, mostly outside the current borders (Lábadi 1982; Ráduly 1990; Fábián 1999). János Ráduly (1990, 45–58) also studied the sociological aspects of riddling during his fieldwork in Kibéd. László Mándoki contributed significantly to the comparative study of Hungarian riddles (see Mándoki 1968, 1978, 1979, and 1988), but unfortunately, most of his work has remained unpublished.

The first comprehensive anthology of Hungarian riddles was published in 2010, including all folklore texts that appeared in print in scholarly publications between 1856 and 1924: it can be considered the basic set of Hungarian riddles (Vargha 2010). The 3,100 texts in this volume have been arranged following the systematization developed by Robert Lehmann-Nitsche (1911) for his riddle collection from the La Plata region. A more complete corpus of Hungarian riddles is still under development with a vast number of sources still to be explored, and a database which currently contains ca. 10,000 texts is planned to be launched in 2021.

2.2.Subgenres of Hungarian Folk Riddles

The broad category of riddles and puzzles (Hung. *rejtvény*) consists of miscellaneous texts of both literary and folk riddles. Riddles in a narrower sense (Hung. *találós*) mean only texts from oral tradition, but this category isn't homogenous either. Within this frame, texts share the common features of a question-and-answer format and the exploitation of conceptual or linguistic ambiguity, but several groups of texts can be distinguished based on differences in form and content. This overview follows the basic categories commonly used in international riddle scholarship.

Riddles in the strict sense, often referred to as *true riddles* (cf. Petsch 1899; Taylor 1943) form the core of riddle tradition. These are descriptive, often metaphorical texts that “compare an object to an entirely different object” (Taylor 1943, 129), and include both revealing and

misleading elements. Objects, characters, and topics are drawn from an environment familiar to both the riddler and riddlee, but next to the traditional rural lifestyle, new cultural elements introduced to folk practice also appear in riddle texts in a short time (e.g., *Uton megy nincs lába, tűz ég a gyomrába? Gőzös. [1857] [It follows a road, it has no legs, a fire is burning in its stomach? Steam engine.]*).

Various linguistic and structural features ensure that a text is distinguished from ordinary questions and recognized as a riddle. First, specific introductory and/or concluding frame elements can be used “in which the respondent is urged to solve the image presented before him” (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1977, 65). The common introductory elements are quite similar in different languages, e.g., “Riddle me, riddle me, ree”; “Devine, devine, devinaille”; “Adivina, adivina, adivinanza” (Taylor 1943, 130; cf. Petsch 1899, 49–65). Comparable opening formulas are known in Hungarian riddle tradition but are not commonly used. “Mese mese (mi az?)” occurs regularly in printed sources of riddles before 1850; while the form “Csümő csümő (mi az?)”⁸ can be found in the archaic texts collected from the periphery of the Hungarian-language area (Western Moldavia). In 20th-century texts more often than not simply the question “Mi az?” [‘What is it?’] is added to the end or occasionally the beginning of the riddle (e.g., *Nappal tele, éjjel üres. Mi az?* [Full during the day, empty at night. What is it?]). Closing formulas which usually refer to a reward for those who can guess the correct answer or a complete frame with both an opening and a closing element appear only in texts with a literary origin.

Traditional riddles are also often recognizable as fix-phrased expressions, involving formulated or archaic language. In some languages this involves using a special metre (as the Kalevala metre used in Finnish and Estonian riddles, see Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1977, 65). Hungarian riddles do not use a special metre, but some poetic features distinguish them from everyday speech.

End-rhyme is not typical in Hungarian folk riddles (opposed to literary riddles). Simple alliteration on the other hand is frequently used in riddles, as well as in proverbs and other short

forms (Voigt 2011, 192). See the following example: *Hasa hajó, lába lapát, torka trombita. Lud.* [Its belly is a boat, its foot is a shovel, its throat is trumpet. Goose.]. Other forms of repetition, including parallelism are also used, often combined with alliteration (*Mihelyt meglesz, mindjárt megmar, / Mihelyt megmar, mindjárt meghal. Tűzszikra.* [As soon as it is born, it bites you, / As soon as it bites you, it breathes its last.]). The use of onomatopoeic expressions is also common (*Kertben kátyó, házon mátyó, szegen szittyom? Káposzta, macska, szita.* [Cabbiration in the garden, catiration on the house, sietion on the nail? Cabbage, cat, sieve.]).

Further riddling forms are often considered to be incomplete, for they do not provide sufficient information for the riddle to be solved. These are partly from written sources and made their way to folk tradition through popular literature (chapbooks, small printed documents, and readers). The largest group among these are *joking questions*, which are direct 'wh'-questions that shift the frame of reference by punning (*Mikor fél a nyúl? Mikor kettőbe vágják* [Ambiguous: 1/ When is the rabbit only a half? 2/ When is the rabbit afraid? When it is cut in two.]).

Wisdom questions require special knowledge. In Hungarian, they inquire mostly about biblical lore. Some of these are simple questions (*Ki született anya nélkül? Ádám.* [Who was born without a mother? Adam.]), but most depend on a twisted, unexpected wording (*A temető rengett, a koporsó sétált, a halott sírdogált. Jónás a cethalban.* [The cemetery rocked, the coffin walked, the dead man wept. Jonah in the fish.]) (see Vargha 2018a). A special type of wisdom questions are *arithmetic riddles*, the solution of which the riddlee is expected to say right away without taking time to think or count (e.g., *Ipadnak, napadnak, három papnak, hat kappannak hány körme van? Száznegyvennyolc.* [How many nails have your father-in-law, your mother-in-law, three priests and six capons? One hundred and forty-eight.]).

Parody riddles use and frustrate conventional riddle patterns, with the intention to confuse the

riddlee. The most typical examples are those texts that have to be understood literally instead of the expected enigmatic interpretation (e.g., *Szarka repül a Tiszán, szalonna csüng az állán, hordó bor az oldalán, ajtó forog a sarkán, kis kutya ül a farkán. Mi az? Ki van mondva.* [A magpie flies over the Tisza, bacon dangles from its chin, a barrel of wine on its side, a door swivels around its corners, a little dog is sitting on its tail. What is it? It has been said.]).

Neck-riddles and *riddle tales*: depending on the level of the formulation they are classified sometimes as tales, sometimes as riddles. In the texts conveyed as riddles, the puzzle to be solved is presented as a brief story, often in verse, and the solution is its interpretation.

2.3.Function and Use of Hungarian Riddles

In Hungarian folk tradition, riddles were told mostly as a form of entertainment and pastime, especially connected to social gatherings and collective activities (e.g., spinning, defeathering, corn husking and geese grazing). They have also played an important part in rites of passage such as courtship, weddings, and wakes (Gönczi 1914, 342–344; Ráduly 1990, 38–45; Vargha 2018a, 328–330).

In the second half of the 20th century, the disintegration of the traditional rural lifestyle brought significant changes to the riddle genre. Traditional riddles have reached the state of static folklore or become children's lore. Joking questions and parodistic forms are still popular, especially among the youth. At the same time, their function has changed, as they are dialogic only in form. They are not expected to be solved, but presented as a part of humorous discourse mostly in the generic frame of jokes, with the answer functioning as the punchline (Vargha 2013).

3. Jokes

In Hungarian folkloristics, jokes are usually interpreted as a genre of (urban) folklore. As a type of text, joke (Hung. *vicc*) “denotes a usually short narrative ending in a humorous punch line” (Attardo 2014: 417). A category of jokes is plotless: a pun achieves a humorous effect by using language humor.

More generally jokes can also be understood as “an instance of humor” (Attardo 2014: 417). This section however will not explore the vast territories of humor in interaction (Norrick–Chiaro 2009) including joking relationships, practical jokes and other aspects of conversational humor. In Hungary, their study belongs more to the field of anthropology (e.g., Bíró 1997). Instead, it focuses on the joke as a textual genre, taking into account the impact of historical, social, and technological changes.

3.1. Joke Research in Hungarian Folkloristics

Hungarian folkloristic joke research has an obvious characteristic feature: in contrast to the more traditional short genres of humorous folklore (see Voigt 1998), joke research has always been a peripheral topic.

Imre Katona was the most thoroughly involved in collecting and analyzing jokes, focusing on a narrower thematic group: political jokes. In his collection, he published the jokes, a total of about 1,500 texts he collected between 1945 and 1994, broken down into years (Katona 1994). In his analysis of political jokes, in addition to the formal and thematic characteristics of jokes, he also conducted folkloristic–sociological studies, examining, among other things, the propagation speed of jokes or the fluctuation of their number on an annual, monthly, and even daily basis (Katona 1980).

Transylvanian researcher Győző Zsigmond has been collecting political jokes among the Hungarian minority in Romania since the 1970s, and has published a volume (1997) and a small compilation (2003). Political jokes have had a special significance in the socialist and post-

socialist countries of Eastern Europe for a long time (cf. Krikmann–Laineste 2009), and Hungarian texts fit well into the international joke material. At the same time, they also show national characteristics, complemented by peculiarities of the Hungarian-language jokes in Romania arising from the minority situation, such as the appearance of the cunning Szekler as the hero of the jokes.

In addition to political jokes, ethnic and especially Jewish jokes are a popular research topic, and in the case of the latter, their role in Jewish communities in Hungary (Papp 2009).

The text of the jokes has been examined by researchers in other disciplines from their own perspective. In the last 15 years, Hungarian humor research has become especially active, not least thanks to the humor conferences that have been held regularly since 2007. The diversity of topics is well reflected in the volumes closely related to the conferences (most recently: Nemesi et al. 2018) and in English-language publications (e.g., Barta–T. Litovkina 2009; T. Litovkina et al. 2012; Zolczer–T. Litovkina–Barta 2016). Many writings in the volumes also deal with jokes, mainly from a linguistic point of view (pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and cognitive linguistics) or by examining them in a historical context. However, some writings explicitly show the social and cultural embeddedness of certain themes in the jokes (e.g., blonde jokes – Géro 2012; marital infidelity – Barta 2012).

3.2. Urban and Rural Layers of Hungarian Jokes

Since the middle of the 20th century, the joke has been one of the most vivid oral genres, spreading until recently mainly by word of mouth, although its written manifestations have long been known. It is popular in all strata of society; as for its formulation, the role of the urban middle class and intellectuals should be emphasized, while it reached its heyday in the big cities of the modern era.

3.2.1. The Budapest Joke

The prototype of Hungarian jokes, the so-called “Budapest joke” (Hung. ‘pesti vicc’; see Erőss 1982; Buzinkay 1994; Géro–Barta 2016, 15–16) was born in the 1860s, at the time of the formation of the Hungarian capital, in an “ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socially heterogeneous and permanently changing environment” (Géro–Barta 2016, 18). In fact, at the end of the 19th century, the ever-growing Budapest was a boiling melting-pot. Hence the diversity of the Budapest jokes. In this process, written culture has played an important part along with the vivid urban oral culture. Jokes appeared in numerous comic weeklies mostly connected to the political opposition, e.g., *Üstökös* (1858–1919), *Ludas Matyi* (1867–1873), and *Borsszem Jankó* (1868–1936) (see Buzinkay 1994, 229). Texts were constantly moving between the written and the oral mode, and their spread was promoted by a multitude of cafés (a real way of life for their regulars) and cabarets, then in the 20th century by an increasing number of book-shaped joke collections (the first one being Gracza 1901).

“The Budapest joke had its own special qualities” – as Géza Buzinkay sums it up – “It often combined various international motifs, played with words, emphasized puns, and preferred political subjects, conveying the unique outlook of petit bourgeois wisdom.” (Buzinkay 1994, 225)

3.2.2. Joke Tales and Folk Humor

Although the joke crystallized in the big cities as a genre, it also incorporated many humorous stories of rural folklore. Folk humor appeared in different genres, partly in historically variable forms (e.g., Schwank, anecdote, joke tale, etc.) (see Landgraf 2013, 116–121). In the course of this process, a strong shortening can be observed from the 18th century to the present day, as well as an increasingly strong typification. The formally diverse texts were summarized by the Hungarian folklorists in five volumes as part of the Hungarian folk tale catalog (Vöö 1986;

Vehmas 1988–1989; Kovács–Benedek 1989 and 1990). Relying on the international type catalog (cf. ATU 1200–1999 *Anecdotes and Jokes*, Uther 2004 / II, 72–510), humorous stories were arranged primarily on the basis of plots (e.g., stories about a fool; stories about married couples; jokes about clergymen; etc.).

In the second half of the 20th century, the closest to urban jokes were joke tales or funny folk narratives. These are comic concise stories with a punchline and with an entertaining and at the same time normative, behavior-regulating function (Vöö 1981, 7). They are longer than jokes, the formulation of the texts is more epic and they are more old-fashioned in terms of the characters and the venue. However, a number of similarities can be observed both in terms of the peculiarities of the ridiculed characters (e.g., stupidity, laziness) and the types of conflict (e.g., marital infidelity, clash between the little man and his superior).

In parallel with the disintegration of the traditional way of life, funny short narratives and jokes came to the fore as opposed to more traditional, longer epic forms such as fairy tales or historical legends. The change in the repertoire of storytellers is also well reflected in the publications (e.g., Nagy 1977; Vöö 1982; Ujváry 1998; Magyar 2009).

3.3. Contemporary Forms of Jokes and Joking on the Internet

From the late 1990s, in addition to orality, jokes (and other short humorous folklore products) have spread increasingly through the channels of so-called secondary orality, in electronic form – first via SMS, then e-mail, social media, etc. The fact that the internet has clearly become an everyday communication arena has a considerable impact on the humor conveyed here.

The increase in numbers and the rapid spread of jokes are also due to this. As humor scholar Christie Davies states: “The use of e-mail and web sites has a snowball effect, since the existence of an accessible core of jokes stimulates further jokes through imitation, modification, inspiration, emulation, and legitimation.” (Davies 2003, 30)

At the same time, not only does the mode of transmission change, but the concept of joke has also expanded in meaning, and specific traits have emerged.

Fast processing of current topics and news is typical. Thanks to news broadcast globally in the mass media, people and jokes can also react to events that are distant in space. This was the case, for example, following the terrorist attack on the *World Trade Center* in New York on September 11, 2001, when the number of jokes transmitted on the Internet exploded for the first time (cf. Ellis 2002). In addition to the texts translated from English, the jokes that combined the topic of 9/11 with specific Hungarian characters and topics soon appeared on the Hungarian-language Internet. According to Lajos Császi (2003, 180) the most frequently heard WTC joke in Hungary was the following one:

Hallotta, hogy a terroristák fogadást kötöttek Besenyei Péter magyar műrepülő világbajnokkal, hogy át tudnak repülni a WTC két tornya között? Vesztettek. [Did you hear that the terrorists made a bet with Hungarian world champion aerobat Péter Besenyi that they can fly between the two towers of the World Trade Center? They lost.]

Other popular Hungarian jokes were based on language-specific wordplay:

– *Hogy mutatkozik be a német terrorista? – Ich bin Laden.* [– How does the German terrorist introduce himself? – Ich bin Laden.]

– *Hogy kártyázik a széki az arabbal? – Osszá má, bin Laden!* [– How does the Székler play cards with the Arab? – Deal, will you, bin Laden!] [homophone with “Ossama bin Laden”] (see Zsigmond 2003, 12–13)

In addition to politicians and public figures, the appearance of actors and celebrities as heroes of jokes, as well as the formation of joke-cycles around a topic or person are also characteristic of the choice of topic. One example could be the extensive Hungarian joke-cycle linked to American actor Chuck Norris, including jokes with special Hungarian references:

A koronavírus Chuck Norrist is megtámadta. A vírus azóta a Szent László kórházban lábadozik
[The coronavirus has also attacked Chuck Norris. Since then, the virus is in convalescence at Szent László Hospital].

Formally, further shortening of jokes can be observed, some popular forms are question-and-answer jokes or riddle jokes (see Vargha 2013) and one-liners. People often just refer to a joke, quoting part of it (primarily the punchline) (see Laineste 2016, 18). At the same time, an increasingly important role is played by visuality, which brings us to the topic of the so-called *internet memes*. In a general sense, these are understood as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (Shifman 2013, 367). Among the various forms of internet memes (which are usually meant to be humorous) some types can be interpreted as verbal–visual jokes. These forms (e.g., *image macros* and *demotivators*) combine verbal and visual components, and follow the working mechanism of verbal jokes that consist of a setup and a punchline (Dynel 2016, 668–684).

Humorous memes are also popular in Hungarian-language Internet communication, and their folkloristic research has begun, focusing mainly on patterns and variation (Domokos 2014; Vargha 2016 and 2018b). A specifically Hungarian meme type, the so-called *hungaromemes* have been identified (Balázs 2018, 59). Their special feature is the textual part imitating a dialect, and the drawing of a “Hungarian” mustache on the face of the person(s) in the picture. The spread on the Internet opens up new perspectives for joke research: jokes can be captured already in their development phase, and the Internet helps our work as a kind of time machine, preserving complete conversations on a mailing list or message board. In 2020, the crisis in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic will once again provide an opportunity to examine the evolution of the jokes. Restrictions to help manage the crisis have changed radically people’s lifestyles around the world, and getting over it is greatly aided by humor, which reacts

to many of the components of change (e.g., curfew restrictions, home office, distance learning, feeling locked up, and temporary shortages). In addition to the internationally spreading memes (e.g., *Sisyphus works from home*), specifically local jokes also appeared:

– *Miért nem regisztráltak még Magyarországon koronavírusos fertőzöttet? – Mert augusztusra kaptak időpontot* [Why hasn't any coronavirus-infected person been registered in Hungary yet? – Because they have an appointment for August].

Conclusion

Many other things could have been discussed in this chapter but we have to put an end to it now. In these general remarks, while considering Hungarian proverbs, riddles and jokes, we hoped to demonstrate the most essential achievements of Hungarian paremiologists, paremiographers, folklorists and humor researches. It goes without saying that Hungary can be proud of its achievements in the field of folklore, humor research, paremiology and paremiography, though this by no means implies that there is nothing else for scholars to work on. We are fully confident that the coming decades will continue to be as productive as the last decades have been, and that many new studies, monographs and dictionaries will be written and published.

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² The term “paremiology” is used when referring to the study of origin, nature, use and dissemination of proverbs.

³ The term “paremiography” refers to the study of collecting proverbs and organizing them in (printed or electronic) dictionaries.

⁴ In this chapter, examples of Hungarian proverbs, riddles and jokes are followed by their translations into English (given in [] brackets).

⁵ For the reader's ease, all anti-proverbs are followed by their original forms, given in { } brackets.

⁶ Proverbs are followed by their translations into English (given in [] brackets) and their English-language equivalents (introduced by the sign ~). Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of anti-proverbs that have been located for them.

⁷ It has to be noted here that from the earliest sources until the middle of the 19th century, literary and folk riddles were both generally referred to as *mese*, which term denotes folktales and children's stories in contemporary Hungarian. For a discussion of the changing meanings of *mese* with special regard to riddles, see Voigt 1980; Gulyás 2008, 166–175; and Vargha 2011.

⁸ Both introductory formulae can be translated as “Riddle, riddle, what is it?”. *Csümő* is a Romanian loan word meaning ‘riddle’ or ‘tale’ in the dialect spoken by the Hungarian minority in Western Moldavia (cf. Péntek 2016, 160).