

Wolfgang Mieder
“Making a Way Out Of No Way”:
Martin Luther King’s Sermonic Proverbial Rhetoric
Peter Lang, New York 2010, pp. 551

The book reviewed “*Making a Way Out Of No Way*”. *Martin Luther King’s Sermonic Proverbial Rhetoric* was written by Wolfgang Mieder who is an internationally recognized paremiologist and phraseologist¹. One of the focal issues of his research on formulaic language in the broad sense of the term is language of politics, which he discussed in many papers and books².

The book starts with *Preface* in which Mieder gives the reason for analyzing the use of proverbs in Martin Luther King’s idiolect, stating that: “As I was working on Barack Obama’s sociopolitical employment of proverbial language, I realized that he happens to have three American heroes that by chance belong to my list of greatly admired people as well:

¹ Wolfgang Mieder is Professor of German and Folklore at the University of Vermont. He is the author of two-volume *International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology* (2009). He was the founding editor of “*Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverbscholarship*”. He published extensively on various issues of paremiology and paremiography.

² W. Mieder, *The politics of proverbs: From traditional wisdom to proverbial stereotypes*, Wisconsin 1997; idem, *The proverbial Abraham Lincoln: An Index to Proverbs in the Works of Abraham Lincoln*, New York 2000; idem, “*No struggle, No progress*”: *Frederick Douglass and his proverbial rhetoric for Civil Rights*, New York 2001; idem, “*Call a spade a spade*”: *From classical phrase to racial slur*, New York 2002; idem, “*Proverbs are the best policy*”: *Folk wisdom and American politics*, Utah 2005; idem, “*Proverbs Speak Louder Than Words*”: *Folk Wisdom in Art, Culture, Folklore, History, Literature and Mass Media*, New York 2008; idem, “*Let’s Us Have Faith that Right Makes Might*”: *Proverbial Rhetoric in Decisive Moments of American Politics*, “*Proverbium: Yearbook of International Scholarship*” 25, pp. 319–352; idem, “*Yes we can*”: *Barrack Obama’s Proverbial Rhetoric*, New York 2009.

Abraham Lincoln, Frederic Douglass, and Martin Luther King” (p. VIII). As use of proverbs by Lincoln and Douglass has already been discussed by Mieder, he focused on the third African American on his list. In order to discuss paremiological aspects of King’s language, the author read about six hundred pages of his sermons, speeches, essays, letters, and books³.

Similarly to Mieder’s books on Lincoln, Douglass, and Obama, the work reviewed consists of two parts, the first of which comprises sixteen chapters devoted to the analysis and interpretation of the use and function of paremiological units. The second part contains as many as 1 092 proverbs and proverbial expressions which are presented in their contexts and exact details regarding their source and date. Such an approach renders it possible to produce a comprehensive contribution to both paremiology and paremiography, which is at the same time, as Mieder puts it, “a proverbial biography” of Martin Luther King (p. IX).

Chapter One titled “*Convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt*” *Martin Luther King’s Proverbial Rhetoric* performs an introductory function, since the focal issue is King’s use of proverbs, which are abundant in his texts. Attention is drawn to proverbs’ role as the units enhancing the sense of community during sermons, which tended to include call-response or testifying between King as the preacher and his audience (p. 6). In his sermons he relied heavily on fossilized expressions, which are part of oral communication. The phrases he used, among others folk idioms, Bible verses, lines from songs and quotations, are used in their canonical form, modified, blended and alluded to. Moreover, King coined many new units, which gained the status of petrified word combinations in language.

³ The texts analyzed comprise the following books and anthologies listed under the heading *List of Publications by Martin Luther King* (pp. XIII–XIV): M. L. King, *Stride Toward Freedom. The Montgomery Story*, New York 1958; idem, *Strength to Love*, New York 1963; idem, *Why We Can’t Wait*, New York 1964; idem, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, New York 1967; idem, *The Trumpet of Conscience*, New York 1967 [1968]; *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by C. Carson, 6 vols, Berkley, California, 1992–2007; *The Voice of Black Rhetoric: Selections*, edited by A. L. Smith and S. Robbs, Boston 1971 (King: pp. 182–212); *A Testament of Hope. The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by J. M. Washington, San Francisco, California 1986; *A Knock at Midnight. Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by C. Carson and P. Holloran, New York 1998; *A Call to Conscience. The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by C. Carson and K. Shepard, New York 2001.

The next five chapters contain the interpretation of proverbs in various texts written by King. Chapter Two *"Let your conscience be your guide"* *The Proverbial Messages of King's Five Books* presents fixed expressions his argumentative prose through a detailed analysis of many illustrative examples. The proverbs perform important communicative and argumentative functions. Chapter Three *"The cross we must bear for freedom"* *Traditional Metaphors in the Letters* discusses proverbial rhetoric in the letters written by King. The analysis shows that proverbial language is a very important characteristics of King's epistolary style. Chapter Four *"Practicing what we preach"* *Proverbial Expressiveness in Interviews* is devoted to fossilized units used by King in interviews. As Mieder emphasizes, it may come as surprising that "Martin Luther King is not overly proverbial in the many oral interviews that have been recorded or transcribed" (p. 47). His choice of language was determined by the audience of interviews being mostly educated. Therefore, he used proverbs as part of his idiolect, however, he did it in a balanced way to create a shared culture. An interesting fact from King's life is that he wrote an advice column for at least a few months. Chapter Five *"There are rules of the game"* *King's Proverbial "Advice for Living"* deals with the use of proverbs in the answers he gave to questions regarding various problems. Proverbs, both folk and Bible ones, are used in their didactic function. Chapter Six *"Love your enemies"* *Sermonic Explications of Proverbs* discusses formulaic language employed by King in proverbs. Proverbial wisdom constituted "a base of his religious and social messages" (p. 62), which accounts for the high frequency of fixed language units in his texts. Mieder observes that he also used proverbs and proverbial expressions as titles of sermons.

The two next chapters analyzed the proverbs and proverbial expressions from the Bible and folk idiom in King's texts. The Holy Book was of great importance to King: he was well familiar with it, he was able to quote ample parts and he used well-known passages to strengthen his argumentation. Chapter Seven titled *"Who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword"* *Bible Proverbs as Didactic Argumentation* focuses on the role of biblicalisms as linguistic tool to help the causes he fought for: desegregation and civil rights. At the beginning of Chapter Eight *"No gain without pain"* *Folk Proverbs as Traditional Wisdom* Mieder stresses that "the frequency of Bible proverbs outweighs that of folk proverbs" (p. 87). According to the author, it is connected among others with the fact that King used an uplifting style in order to reach varied audience. However, he empha-

sizes that the preacher used many folk proverbs skilfully, since they were attractive to him because of their traditional wisdom and metaphorical colour.

In the next three chapters the author focuses on proverbial quotations in King's works. Chapter Nine "*The idea whose time had come moved on*" *Turning Quotations into Proverbs* is devoted to quotations being transformed into proverbs. Such units tend to be of literary origins or to come from opinions expressed by experts. Mieder analyzes many examples of such quotations, drawing attention to the fact that many of them appeared in modified forms in King's sermons and speeches. Martin Luther King's predilection for combining proverbs and quotations into paragraphs is discussed in Chapter Ten "*No lie can live forever*" *Quotational and Proverbial Amassments*. The preacher made a string of three or more units and he also used a given phrase repeatedly in a paragraph or two (p. 123). Chapter Eleven "*Freedom is not given, it is won*" *Martin Luther King's Proverbial Quotations* deals with the units the preacher coined himself. Many of phrases he created have proverbial features, yet, it is not easy to indicate which of them can be considered as such: although two compilations exists, they are rather lists of units with no information regarding their quotability⁴.

The examples of somatic, economic and emotive proverbial phrases are analyzed in the next three chapters. Chapter Twelve "*To change someone's heart*" *Somatic Phrases as Emotive Expressions* discusses Martin Luther King's reliance on bodily metaphors verbalized in proverbs and proverbial expressions. Somatic phrases, used intentionally to talk about complex problems, indicate emotional engagement in a given issue, which is shown by the interpretation of many occurrences of such idioms. The units, rich in imagery, are also important in terms of stylistics, since they bring vividness into discourse. Chapter Thirteen "*To be at the bottom of the ladder*" *Economic Phrases as Social Signs* touches upon expressions referring to different group of fixed expressions, i.e. economic idioms and proverbs. The use of such phrases is natural, as economic issues were very important to Martin Luther King who knew that African Americans should fight for a better life and economic stability. Chapter Fourteen "*To*

⁴ Mieder refers to the two following collections of quotations from Martin Luther King's texts: "*I Have a Dream.*" *The Quotations of Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by L. Hoskins, New York 1968; *The Wisdom of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by A. Ayres, New York 1993.

be at the boiling point" *Proverbial Phrases as Signs of Tension* is devoted to the role of formulaic language as means of expressing tension, fear anxiety and other feelings typical of modern man.

Mieder observes that Martin Luther King had an inclination for employing the phrase which contain the noun *way*. Such expressions are analyzed in *Chapter Fifteen "Making a Way Out Of No Way" The Phraseological Way to Progress*. As the author states, "they are by their very nature future oriented and are thus perfectly suited as metaphors to describe and reflect upon the way to progress" (p. 171), which complies with King's being a positive visionary, generally optimistic, who relied on phrases of positive character (p. 170). In fact, Mieder mentions only one occurrence of a *way*-phrase, which is used in a negative context.

Chapter Sixteen "*I have a dream*" *Proverbial Manifestation of a Better Future* contains a study of dream metaphor. The texts with phrases which employ it are analyzed with the most famous *I have a dream* speech delivered at Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. The reliance on dream-metaphors is discussed in detail with the phrase *I have a dream* being described by Mieder as "King's rhetorical signature phrase" (p. 206).

The second part of the book, *Index of Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases*, is a paremiographic work composed of entries devoted to particular proverbs and proverbial expressions used by Martin Luther King in his texts. As to its macrostructure, the phrases are ordered alphabetically by key words given in bold, e.g. *To come of age*. The units are set in the context with the sentence containing it written in capital letters. After each excerpt bibliographical data is given in brackets.

It should be emphasized that the reference section is a valuable source of information on works on Martin Luther King's texts. The impressive bibliography comprises more than 150 books and papers on various aspects of the works analyzed and related issues. The list is of great importance for those interested in King's works, since it facilitates their research.

Wolfgang Mieder shows that Martin Luther King employed fixed phrases in a way which helped him greatly for promoting equality among people. The detailed analyses of the corpus of texts collected rendered it possible to present King's idiolect through his use of petrified expressions. Therefore, the work, being focused on this aspect of his discourse, fills in a gap, contributing greatly to studies on the activist's language, and in a broader perspective, his life.

The book reviewed shows that language of politics is a fascinating area for studies on idioms and proverbs. As Mieder shows, using them ensures credibility of what is fought for. Proverbs, sayings and so-called folk idiom are very important stylistic elements in political discourse as they are rich in connotations and can perform many various functions.

The work is of great important use for linguists who specialize in phraseology, paremiology, phraseography and paremiography. It will be very interesting and useful for those doing research in the field of culture, history, mass communication and rhetoric. It is to be stressed that it truly deserves to be recommended to all persons, including non-specialists, who would like to know more about Martin Luther King.

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