

# Regulating the reality? Proverbs in Polish graffiti

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**Abstract:** The paper investigates proverbial elements in Polish mural inscriptions. The main aim of the paper is to consider paremic mural inscriptions with an eye to determining if proverbs are used in Polish graffiti only as content-free play on traditional folk wisdom. The starting point in this analysis is the assumption that proverbs and non-paremic graffiti exhibit both similarities and differences and that most paremic use in graffiti can be classified as anti-proverbial in character. Many studies suggest that the dominant feature of anti-proverbs is their mocking and humorous nature. The paper then tries to establish if mural anti-proverbs can be treated also as carriers of various sentiments which do not necessarily deny the traditional nuggets of wisdom, but are used to convey observations and truths based on them which pertain to the contemporary reality and regulate it in the same way as traditional paremias do.

**Keywords:** graffiti, proverbs, anti-proverbs, pragmatics

## Introduction

Studying the presence of proverbs in mural inscriptions contributes to more general observations concerning the place of proverbial wisdom in the contemporary world. It is possible that there is no domain of human activity in which proverbs could not make their presence felt and it is likely that these domains have been studied more or less exhaustively. However, in Poland, considering the fact that graffiti, as well as the study of mural inscriptions, has a relatively short history (for comparison, see also Voolaid 2012), specific interest in proverbs has crystallised only recently. Thus, there is a need for a multi-aspectual examination of graffiti with an eye to revealing the presence of proverbs within mural inscriptions as well as the functions which they play in them.

### Polish studies on graffiti and proverbial mural inscriptions

The literature on Polish graffiti seldom mentions fixed expressions, including proverbs, as a source of inspiration for graffiti writers. Formulaic language has not been extensively examined either (cf. Guz 2001: 16; Jankowska 1999: 24–25; Michow 1995: 116). The author's article (Szpila 2003) is the first attempt to study the formal and semantic aspects as well as pragmatic functions of paremias in Polish graffiti. Another article about proverbs in text messages (Szpila 2006) refers to proverbs in mural inscriptions when comparing and contrasting these two means of communication. These two studies analyse ways of actualising proverbs in mural inscriptions and short text messages as well as describe, amongst other things, their formal and semantic manipulations, the motivations behind proverb use in graffiti and text messages, and the main features of paremic mural inscriptions, to mention only the most important aspects. It is concluded that proverbs serve as a set of useful linguistic signs for graffiti users, which proves that Polish proverbs take part in contemporary communication, such as graffiti and SMSes, although none of the selected mural inscriptions contain unmodified paremias, confirming Wolfgang Mieder's (1993: 58) view that in contemporary communication proverbs are used predominantly in twisted forms. The study of proverbs in mural inscriptions and SMSes confirms as well Marek Skierkowski's observation (2002: 7) that the two modes interact closely, who claims that short text messages may be considered the graffiti of our times. Szpila's article (2007) on the humour identified in proverbial mural inscriptions refers in a more focused way to how graffiti writers modify proverbs in graffiti to achieve their end, namely humour. This study confirms the assertion of paremiologists (for example, Mieder & Tóthné Litovkina 1999) that the contemporary reaction to proverbial wisdom is more often than not humorous in nature. Finally, the author's article (Szpila 2011) offers an extensive examination of Polish graffiti and the proverbial elements therein.

It is felt, however, that the use of proverbs in mural inscriptions requires yet further investigation from the purely pragmatic perspective. Thus far, limited pragmatic attention has been paid to the content of paremic mural inscriptions *vis à vis* their point of reference, that is the original paremic structures to which they so conspicuously allude, and, at the same time, to their extralinguistic referents, amongst which they are immersed as they appear in public spaces. As the latter are understood as physical as well as temporal loci, they seem to be reflections of "the emotional and intellectual" condition of contemporary society (Skierkowski 2002: 7). This paper aims to consider proverbial graffiti from a pragmatic angle.

### **The corpus of paremic mural inscriptions**

The material for the present analysis comprises 100 mural inscription tokens and 63 proverbial types. They were collected between 2002 and 2011 from various Internet sources, as well as from the books and articles on Polish graffiti listed in the References. Since the author's first analysis of proverbial mural inscriptions in 2003, only 8 new tokens and 5 new types have been attested in the available sources (mainly on the Internet), which highlights the relatively infrequent use of new proverbs (and their modifications) in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The number of proverbial graffiti selected for the present analysis is 20, which makes one fifth of the proverbial corpus.

### **Graffiti, proverbs and anti-proverbs**

Not surprisingly, graffiti is known as an artistic genre in which proverbs find their place and play an important role (for example, Mieder 2007: 20). At the same time, the author's studies confirm the opinions of many a researcher when claiming that "the main aim of graffiti writers is to ridicule the proverbial message or limit and/or pervert its universal appeal. Only occasionally do they use proverbs or better to say proverbial structural models, both formal and logico-semiotic, to propagate novel truths, which, due to their relations to the original proverbs, contain a grain of derision with reference to the annihilated wisdom" (Szpila 2011; cf. Mieder 2007; Nierenberg 1994). The author's analyses of Polish mural inscriptions with an eye to examining their proverbial content (Szpila 2003; 2011) suggest that both quantitatively and qualitatively proverbial mural inscriptions are somewhat aggressive towards the traditional words of wisdom as they attack the core feature of paremias, viz. their characteristic trait of being a parting shot. As Susan Stewart (1991: 18) observes "once the proverb is uttered, there is nothing more to say". This almost sacrosanct attribute is questioned on walls as the essence of proverb use in mural inscriptions is to leave on them a more or less personal imprint by means of utilising a plethora of formal and semantic changes to the original structure (cf. Boronkai and Litovkina 2007: 108; Litovkina *et al.* 2007: 48). These all lead to new insights, as Mieder (2007: 19) says, about observations of the anti-proverbs *vis à vis* the old proverbial truths and regulations (*ibid.*: 42–43). By labeling proverbial mural inscriptions as anti-proverbs, I would like to point out that all mural proverbs are so manipulated that there is no escaping the fact that not only is a war being waged against their content but also against their very existence as linguistic signs; signs that are conveyors of traditional wisdom.

Taking this into consideration, it is tempting to determine if graffiti are exclusively “humour, the guffaw, the chuckle, the smile” (Beck 1982: 74), and indeed to what extent they are or are not, as well as if graffiti can be taken seriously at all, a process which may involve “some dangers” (*ibid.*). The initial observation in disproving, if only partly, Beck’s tentative speculations is the claim made by Frank J. D’Angelo (1974: 173), namely that graffiti “in many ways resemble proverbs” in that

*“they are concise, direct, pithy, and incisive. Like proverbs, they contain moral and ethical truths. Like proverbs, they are familiar to their audience because they are in common currency. And like proverbs, they are usually created by individuals but are placed into circulation by the masses.” (ibid.)*

D’Angelo points, amongst other common features, to the fact that like genuine proverbs, graffiti convey truths which can be treated as regulators in human life. In spite of the similarities, D’Angelo notices certain disparities as well:

*“They are unlike proverbs, however, in that the truths they convey are more particular than universal, although some graffiti do rise to the status of universals. Proverbs are usually associated with folk wisdom, whereas graffiti are often more sophisticated and urbane. Proverbs take a more kindly view of human nature, whereas graffiti are almost always biting and satirical. Whereas proverbs often point to homely virtues, graffiti more frequently point to cosmopolitan vices. Proverbs suggest simplicity, the natural, the unaffected; graffiti suggest low life, ribaldry, and coarseness. Proverbs use folk wit to make their point; graffiti use ridicule, mockery, scorn, or contempt.” (ibid.)*

This is obviously not to say that the two genres of expression are identical and it is not my aim to agree or disagree with D’Angelo as this would require a more comprehensive examination of the relations between the two modes of communication: mural inscriptions and purely proverbial sayings. Rather it is tempting to examine how graffiti incorporates proverbs and how such amalgamations – paremic mural inscriptions – interact with the reality in which they have been produced. In other words, it is worth finding out what proverbial graffiti share with both genuine proverbs and mural inscriptions.

Proverbs in this connection may be referred to as “official graffiti” – a term borrowed from Hermer and Hunt (1996), who however reserve it for labeling regulating signs in the official spaces. Mural graffiti are consequently called unofficial graffiti *par excellence* and by extension proverbial graffiti are included in the latter category as well. By default then proverbial mural inscriptions may have a regulating function as well by incorporating traditional folk wisdom

into their new domain of application. The rather tempting aspect that can be discussed in this connection is the relationship between the mural inscriptions and the proverbs themselves as linguistic signs, whereby the interaction could be narrowed down to the relationship between the form of the original proverbs and their modifications in the mural inscriptions. This is the main step in incorporating proverbs into graffiti; this is the structural challenge, which is not so much a characteristic of all contemporary proverb use as the defining characteristic of the use of paremias in graffiti. The purely linguistic aspect is ignored in this presentation largely because it has been already studied and to boot this analysis has a different angle from which it looks at proverbial graffiti. The two, however, are never separated as the formal challenge for the most part translates into a shift on both semantic and pragmatic levels. So ignoring the formal changes that directly or indirectly lead to other changes, the author will focus in this analysis on the relationship that graffiti artists try to establish between “themselves” and the reality, speaking in very general terms, to which they refer via proverbial graffiti.

## **Mural inscriptions and proverbial sentiments**

The term “mural sentiments” is used to cover those instances of paremic use in graffiti whereby, under the layer of formal and semantic manipulations, an attempt to formulate new insights can be detected. Those insights regard either the validity of old truths in the contemporary world or those aspects of modern life which are not systematised in the traditional treasure of proverbial regulations, that is by producing new structures, though dutifully following the paremic templates. The presence of proverbs in graffiti is evidence enough to claim that in describing the reality, graffiti writers think of proverbs as potential regulators of the contemporary state of affairs. Of particular interest to the author are those which do not primarily mock or reject the old ways of description and regulation but which relatively seriously essay to articulate a new philosophy of observation, define the redefined relations and suggest possible conducts of behaviour.

The question asked in the title is a tough nut to crack as we would have to find out first if these proverbial mural inscriptions do leave the walls and circulate, at least among the urban masses, and secondly what currency, popularity, permanence or validity they have gained. Only then could we decide if they interact with the reality in the way we believe paremias normally do. The material allows proverbial graffiti to be viewed from a limited, rather narrow perspective, namely that proverbial graffiti are definitely expressions of certain

sentiments that need to be vented. The author does not see in proverbial graffiti pent up hostilities and frustrations alone; to me they infrequently appear as observations on the modern world, reactions to certain phenomena, as well as comments upon ephemeral, recurrent or permanent states or events, amongst others. Graffiti writers may be doing it in the hopes their mural inscriptions will be treated as new regulators.

The following categories are suggested to cover the proverbial sentiments found in the corpus. The number of categories has been reduced to the bare minimum so as not to multiply categorisations, but it should be borne in mind that we could perchance distinguish more specific groups. Additionally, it should not be forgotten, as will transpire below, that the sentiments observed may belong to more than one of the categories enumerated. The categories distinguished for this analysis are CHURCH, CURRENT AFFAIRS, EVERDAY LIFE, MORALITY, PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEMPLATIONS, SEX, SCHOOL and WORK.<sup>1</sup> The categories are discussed in alphabetical order according to the names of the groups, which bear no relation to their semantic importance or the number of representatives.

## I. Church

This group contains proverbs which in their sense are related to religion and the (Catholic) church.

[1] *Bóg dał, Bóg wziął, a kto daje i odbiera ...*

God gave, God took away, and he who gives and takes away ...

(<http://czarnyhumor.pl/pokaz/graffiti/>)<sup>2</sup>

[2] *Gdzie diabeł nie może tam ja wychędoże. Ksiądz.*

Where the devil cannot, I will do the fucking. Priest.

(<http://jonasz.eu/joke11.html>)

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<sup>1</sup> Michow (1995) offers a semantic classification of Polish graffiti in general. The categories presented in this study mostly overlap with hers, although her categorisation cover all graffiti, and are therefore a more varied diversification of graffiti types. Cf. as well Sawicka (1993) and Skubalanka (1999).

<sup>2</sup> The author provides the Polish paremic mural inscription with English literal translations. The Polish paremic mural inscription are cited in italics and their English translations are presented below them in regular type. The original proverbs that relate to these inscriptions follow the same pattern. If no good English equivalent can be found for a Polish proverb, the author offers a literal rendition only. The original Polish spelling has been retained.

[3] *Jaka praca taka taca.*

As you work you will give to a church collection.

(<http://fuuuu.pl/kawa%C5%82y/graffiti/2446>)

The first proverbial mural inscription in this category is a contamination of two proverbs (*Bóg dał, Bóg wziął*. ('God gave, God took away.') and *Kto daje i odbiera, ten się po piekle poniewiera*. ('He who gives and takes away ends up in Hell.')). It is a mocking comment on God's allegedly wise decision-making skills. The second mural inscription could equally well be grouped with graffiti that refer to sex, however, the author decided to include it here as it is primarily, in his opinion, a comment on the behaviour of certain priests who have sex either with the female staff of the presbytery or have a tendency to have mistresses elsewhere. The original proverb refers to a woman's ability to achieve somewhat unattainable tasks (*Gdzie diabeł nie może, tam babę pośle*. 'Where the devil cannot, he will send a woman'), hence its use with reference to this particular mode of behaviour (homosexual practices cannot be excluded, however). The result is achieved through the replacement of the second part of the original paremia with a new structure, in which the verb *wychędożę* rhymes with the verb *może*. The last mural inscription concerns the collections in Polish Catholic churches and refers to the proverb *Jaka praca, taka płaca* ('As the work, so the pay', 'A fair day's work for a fair day's wage'). The categorisation of this mural inscription under the heading CHURCH is due to the replacement of the word *płaca* with *taca*, the substitution being motivated by the phonetic similarity. The word *taca* (and the concept itself) is undoubtedly associated with the practice of collections, with the anti-proverb making direct reference to the possible existence of a link between how much money people earn and how much they are ready to offer to support the church financially. It is not impossible to see it as an ironic, even critical, comment on the way the clergy accrue their fortunes as it may refer, paradoxically perhaps, to the fact that they earn a considerable amount of money (from church collections) though their work may be deemed undemanding. In either case, example [3] vents a depersonalised, it seems, reaction to the ways of the Polish clergy.

## II. Current affairs

The following mural inscriptions have dissimilar referents; however, they are all comments upon current affairs in Poland and abroad. In none of the cases can we establish their temporal anchoring, as they all can be located only in the space of time after the event mentioned. The oldest event made mention of is in [6] and the most recent comment seems to be mural inscription number [5].



[4] *Komu rano w Sejmie staje, temu Anastazja daje.*

He who has a morning erection in Parliament has sex with Anastazja.

(<http://blog.tenbit.pl/klay92/328>)

[5] *Zgoda buduje, a Niezgoda to qrwa.*

Harmony unites, and Niezgoda is a bitch.

(<http://graffiti.humoris.pl/graffiti-napis/7281/zgoda-buduje-a-niezgoda-to-qrwa-napis-na-murze-szkoly>)

[6] *Niech żyje Czarnobyl! Co dwie głowy to nie jedna.*

Long live Chernobyl! Two heads are better than one.

(<http://www.ciapek.pl/t/33/graffiti/>)

The paremic mural inscription about Anastazja contains a culture-bound allusion. The woman alluded to in the mural inscriptions is believed to have had sex with many a Polish MP back in the 1990s. The graffiti refers to the paremia *Kto rano wstaje, temu Pan Bóg daje* ('The early bird catches the worm'; cf. example [16]). It is both a comment on political life, particularly on members of the Polish Parliament (Sejm), as well a sexually orientated mural inscriptions, though the first meaning supersedes the latter. The second mural inscription is one of the most recent piece of graffiti as it contains an allusion to a celebrity named Katarzyna Niezgoda, who is engaged to Tomasz Kammel (a celebrity TV presenter). Apart from being an offensive slur directed at the woman ("qrwa" is the modified spelling of the Polish word *kurwa* 'whore, bitch'), the mural inscription does not really convey any genuine comment about the woman. The mural inscription's appeal derives from the play on words resulting from juxtaposing the word *zgoda* ('harmony') with *niezgoda* ('disharmony, discord'). However, we cannot definitively exclude the possibility of the mural inscriptions expressing a (personal) negative attitude towards the woman, who has been the centre of tabloid attention as Kammel's partner and whose liaison with the TV presenter has evoked public curiosity, to say the very least. The last mural inscription in this group is a comment on the Chernobyl disaster. The proverbial graffiti morbidly pokes fun at the potential effects of exposure to radiation. As the proverb *Co dwie głowy, to nie jedna* is used in its unmodified form, it is the addition of ironic "Long live Chernobyl!" that entangles the paremia in the mural inscriptions topic-related commentary.



### III. Everyday life

The author includes in this category proverbial mural inscriptions that refer to two aspects which he believes may form more specific, hyponymic groups with reference to EVERYDAY LIFE, namely the contamination of the natural environment ([7]), and health ([8], [9]).

[7] *Im dalej w las tym więcej butelek.*

The deeper into a forest, the more bottles.

(<http://www.ciapek.pl/t/33/graffiti/>)

[8] *Czas goi rany, ale nigdy nie zaszkodzi zasięgnąć opinii lekarza.*

Time heals wounds but it is advisable to see a doctor.

(<http://humorek3.w.interia.pl/graffiti.html>)

[9] *Gdzie dwóch się bije, tam korzysta dentysta.*

Where there are two people in a scrap, the dentist profits.

(<http://graffiti.humoris.pl/graffiti-napis/7206/gdzie-dwoch-sie-bije-tam-korzysta-dentysta>)

The three representatives in this category literalise the figurative meaning of the original paremias by concretising their application to particular specific and literal contexts. In [7] the original proverb (*Im dalej w las, tym więcej drzew*. ‘The deeper into a forest, the more trees.’) has undergone the process of substitution, whereby the word *drzewo* (in the proverb the plural genitive form *drzew*) is replaced by the word *butelka* (the plural genitive form *butelek*). The paremic mural inscription directly addresses the issue of litter in Polish forests (and forests elsewhere as well). In the second case, the original proverb – *Czas goi rany* (‘A green wound is soon healed’) – is extended by a literal phrase due to the dephraseologisation of the original structure. The general sense of the proverb, namely that of ‘pain and suffering go away naturally with the passing of time’ is understood in the physical sense alone, hence the necessity to consult a specialist. This paremic mural inscription can be taken as a piece of advice suggesting that physical problems should not be neglected but dealt with by a qualified doctor. In [9] there is another example of substitution. The word *trzeci* from *Gdzie dwóch się bije, tam trzeci korzysta* (‘When two fight, the third profits’) is replaced by *dentysta*. As a result the conflict is perceived as a physical fight, the result of which is most probably a loss of teeth. As the meaning is literalised, the need for a dentist’s assistance seems inevitable. This paremic graffiti is a banal observation on the cause-and-effect scenarios of physical violence.

#### IV. Morality

There is only one example in the corpus which refers to morality, and not only through its allusion to the biblical origin.

[10] *Nie ró b drugiemu, co tobie niem ił e – powiedzia ł masochista.*

Do not do unto others as you would not have others do unto you – the masochist says.

(<http://www.ciapek.pl/t/33/graffiti/>)

The proverb *Nie czyń drugiemu, co tobie niem ił e* ('Do not do unto others as you would not have others do unto you') is interpreted from the perspective of a masochist by the graffiti writer, who in the process of this transformation produced a wellerick structure. Although the proverb, which refers to general morality, has been narrowed down in its application to masochistic practices alone, its moral value has been maintained as a legitimate part of a masochist's code of behaviour, advice relevant only in masochistic sexual practices, or perhaps as part of a general sexual code to be followed by everyone.

#### V. Philosophical contemplations

This section is composed of mural inscriptions that can be labeled as philosophical contemplations and so best represent the category of existential graffiti distinguished by Michow (1995: 112). It includes proverbial graffiti that refer to various human experiences, and are themselves derived from original proverbs which focus on life philosophies in the most general terms (cf. Skierkowski 2002: 7). The mural inscriptions refer to wisdom ([11]), friendship ([12]), bad luck ([13]) and, finally, love ([14]). This category is represented by the following four mural inscriptions:

[11] *Mądry głupiemu ustępuje ... i dlatego ten świat tak wygląda.*

The wise concedes to the stupid and this is why the world is what it is.

(<http://graffiti.humoris.pl/graffiti-napis/7377/madry-glupiemu-ustepuje-i-dlatego-ten-swiat-tak-wyglada>)

[12] *Pewnego przyjaciela poznasz w sytuacji niepewnej.*

You meet a true friend in uncertain circumstances.

(<http://michal671.ubuntu-pomoc.org/forum/showthread.php?tid=321>)

[13] *Nie ma tego dobrego, co by na złe nie wyszło.*

Good always turns into bad.

(<http://www.ciapek.pl/t/33/graffiti/>)

[14] *Stara miłość nie rdzewieje, ale niestety – siwieje.*

Old love will not be forgotten, but sadly will go grey.

(<http://windows7forum.pl/501-x-graffiti-20722-t>)

The first mural inscription is an anti-proverb *par excellence*. The comment in the extension eloquently demonstrates the foolishness of putting into practice the “sagacity” of the original *Mądry głupiemu ustępuje* (‘The wise concedes to the stupid’), therefore the whole mural inscription is explicitly anti-proverbial in nature. The second example ([12]) is a paraphrase of *Prawdziwych przyjaciół poznaje się w biedzie* (‘A friend in need is a friend indeed’). The paraphrase conveys the same sense as the original paremia, with the reason for transforming the original structure seemingly only being a play on the words *pewny* (‘true, reliable’) and *niepewny* (‘uncertain, insecure, unsafe’) in Polish. We may treat it as genuine confirmation of the old wisdom. In [13] the structure of the original is reversed. That is, the end result (good luck) of the original paremia – *Nie ma tego złego, co by na dobre nie wyszło* (‘Bad always turns into good’) – is the starting point in the mural inscriptions. The relations are reversed, the sense of the original paremia is not directly denied yet the graffiti writer creates a novel structure that conveys a new piece of wisdom, which, however, is definitely less optimistic than the original paremia. In the last example, the truth of the proverb *Stara miłość nie rdzewieje* (‘Old love will not be forgotten’) is confirmed, but a literal reading of the paremia prompts a literal, and undeniably true, assertion that the older we get, the greyer we become, whether we are loved or not.

## VI. Sex

The category SEX is composed of paremic mural inscriptions which semantically refer to the domain of sexual activity.

[15] *Palcówka jest srebrem, a mineta złotem.*

Fingering is silver, fellatio is golden.

(<http://jonasz.eu/joke11.html>)

[16] *Dlaczego pedały wstają wcześniej? Kto rano wstaje, temu pan Bóg daje.*

Why do faggots get up early? The early bird catches the worm.

(<http://jerzy.friko.pl/inne.html>)

Example [15] is an evaluation of two sexual practices: fingering and fellatio, with the latter being regarded more highly. The mural inscription alludes to a well known proverb: *Mowa jest srebrem, a milczenie złotem* ('Speech is silver, silence is golden'). The second graffito may be considered blasphemous by some as it can be read literally, that is its interpretation may involve God himself as the one who rewards homosexual "early birds" sexually. In another interpretation, though, God (or Providence) may be understood as the omnipotent power that rewards those gays who get up early. The key to the understanding of the mural inscriptions is the word *daje* (Pol. *dawać* 'give'), which is used to refer to men (when interpreted in a sexual context) who assume the bottom role in an homosexual sexual act. The word may be understood as well in a neutral fashion, as it is in the original proverb, *Kto rano wstaje, temu Pan Bóg daje* ('God gives to those who get up early', ~ 'The early bird catches the worm'), in which case it can be rendered in English by such verbs as *reward*, *help*, *support* and similar.

## VII. School

There is only one representative in this group and it refers unmistakably to school life in Poland.

[17] *Pokorny uczeń z dwóch ściąg korzysta.*

The humble student uses two crib sheets.

(<http://www.jajcarz.ksiazkowo.net/kawal/2323/>)

This paremic mural inscription has a very practical regulating function in the Polish reality. Cheating in tests and examinations, or cheating at school in general, is well encapsulated in this graffiti. Although much disapproved of, cheating is commonly practiced in Poland at all levels of education and this practical advice seems to provide a guideline for those who want to excel at cheating. The wisdom of the original paremia (*Pokorne ciele dwie matki śsie* – 'A humble calf sucks two mothers', 'The still sow eats up all the draff') is retained in this new manifestation, but its generality is shifted into a more specific area of (student) activity and may as well be treated as a new regulator. Paradoxically, the counsel contained in the modified proverb suggests, from the ethical point of view, a negative course of action, which is not typical of traditional proverbs.

## VIII. Work

The last category includes paremias which make reference to the nature and value of work as well its impact on people.

[18] *Jak cię widzą to pracuj.*

Work when you are looked at.

(<http://www.hwbaran.eu/Graffiti.htm>)

[19] *Uczciwością i pracą ludzie się męczą.*

Honesty and work make people tired.

(<http://graffiti.humoris.pl/graffiti-napis/9172/uczciwoscia-i-praca-ludzie-sie-mecza>)

[20] *Żadna praca nie hańbi, ale każda męczy.*

No work is a disgrace, but each job tires you out.

(<http://pszoniak.net/edukacja/strony/graffiti.htm>)

The attitude to work expressed in the three mural inscriptions can be summarized as “work is a tiring activity and if you have to work, do it only in order to be seen to be working”. The first graffiti refers to the proverb *Jak cię widzą, tak cię malują* (‘As you look so you are painted’) that actually has nothing to do with work, but the proverb has been altered so that its semantics might be applied to the sphere of work. It includes an observation that you should work or at least look occupied only if directly supervised. The remaining two in this group allude to the proverbs *Uczciwością i pracą ludzie się bogacą* (‘Honesty and hard work makes people rich’) and *Żadna praca nie hańbi* (‘No work is humiliating’). Here the attitude to work from the original paremia has been modified to express the graffitist’s negative attitude to labour (and honesty as well).

## Conclusion

The examples adduced in this paper articulately show that paremic mural inscriptions contain various sentiments which can be named proverbial as they share certain elements with genuine proverbs. They demonstrate too the careful power of observation on the part of their creators, they display a certain level of generality in passing judgment, and engage as well in more universal disputes, apart from being focused on many an occasion on particularised referents. But even then, some relatively global reflections can be extracted from them. They also use the categorical force of paremias and shift this onto novel

domains, not yet embraced by proverbs. It is, however, evident that graffitists resort to proverbs in order to meaningfully express their sentiments relatively infrequently, certainly in comparison with all the different types of graffiti whose semantic analyses have definitely rendered more categories, domains and senses (cf. Sawicka 1993; Michow 1995; Skubalanka 1999).

Yet, in the light of the above, do proverbial graffiti act as regulators? It is not easy to answer the question. If we consider the fact that proverbial mural inscriptions are in the main anti-proverbs, especially those which are eloquently anti-proverbial in nature, even anti-proverbial in the categorical sense, they could be regarded as anti-regulators. They act against the category of regulators *per se*. When we consider them as anti-proverbs with reference only to specific nuggets of wisdom, they are not categorical anti-regulators but rather ways of revising the system established by traditional proverbs. Even those mural inscriptions in which proverbs are twisted with no other aim than to creatively affect paremias as linguistic units seem to manifest the need to degrade the sanctity of traditional proverbs. The proverbial mural inscriptions discussed in this study, although constituting only a fraction of the proverbial graffiti in my corpus, show that the manipulation of the traditional form and meaning may have a different, specific objective. They are not anti-proverbial as such, not anti-everything-that-paremias-stand-for. They reflect an attempt to come to terms with the extra-linguistic reality as traditional proverbs do. Although only marginally, the changing world, the changing value systems and priorities are also addressed by proverbial mural inscriptions. This is not surprising as anti-proverbial statements, in the sense of modified proverbs, are extremely sensitive to the actuality (Komenda-Earle 2009). And in this sense proverbial mural inscriptions may be conceived as new regulators, neoregulators, replacing those proverbs which are no longer applicable and turning others into more apt systematisers of human experience. Even though they may never become permanent regulators, they show that the reality regulated by a system of traditional proverbs is changing and that it may require new regulators, not even necessarily in the form of new proverbs, anti-proverbs, pseudo-proverbs or similar. The permanence of a new linguistic coating of sentiments will depend on a number of factors, such as the permanence and relevance of the postulated values and attitudes, the acceptance and circulation of the new forms, their mural inscriptions permanence and the importance of such signs in our culture in general.

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