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COMPARATIVE LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH PROVERBS AND SAYINGS

Abstract

Proverbs are considered to be a cultural heritage, circulating for centuries around the world. As such, they are bequeathed to us by the past generations. This paper aims at analysing the peculiar features of some of the most prominent Russian and English proverbs available in the relevant linguistic literature. One of the main objectives that this work seeks to achieve is to inspect whether the scrutinised proverbs in both languages have similar or different qualities. By utilising the comparative method, we will provide a linguistic description of proverbs in order to identify the grammatical and semantic markers, as well as the use of phonic devices in English and Russian respectively. This work will be based on the analysis of twenty-two short proverbs in English and twenty-one in Russian.

Keywords: proverbs, Russian, English, grammatical/semantic markers, phonic devices

1. Introduction

Proverbs, often considered to be “traditional items of folklore” (Norrick, 1985, p.30) in a language, possess their own generic and linguistic properties. Many efforts have been made to define a proverb. Thus in order to provide a correct definition of what proverbs represent, as well as to clarify their meaning, one should take in consideration their properties. To begin, the branch of linguistics which deals with the study of proverbs is called *paremiology*. Frequently the term ‘proverb’ can be interchangeably used with ‘*aphorism*’, ‘*maxim*’, ‘*gnome*’ and ‘*adage*’. Whichever synonymous term we choose to use, proverbs continue to represent “the condensed good sense of nations” and their durability is not jeopardised if we are ascertained that “time passes, but the sayings stay”. (Soares, 2010, p.14) When attempting to provide a comprehensive analysis of what proverbs are, one of the most prolific contemporary paremiologists, Wolfgang Mieder, acknowledged the issue:

“The problem of defining a proverb appears to be as old as man’s interest in them. Not only did such great minds as Aristotle and Plato occupy themselves with the question of what constitutes a proverb, but early Greek paremiographers in particular wrestled with this seemingly insurmountable task as well”.

(Mieder, 1993, p.4)

One of the major paradoxes of proverbs is that they are usually recognised to epitomize common sense and simplicity, but it seems that they are both complex and difficult to define. Although the majority of people are able to

provide many examples of proverbs, few of them can accurately define what makes them proverbial in essence. Proverbs have challenged scholars for hundreds of years, and hundreds of different definitions have been improved. Thus a considerable number of linguists have devoted their profession on attempting to provide concise, informative and evaluative insights into the nature of proverbs, their poetic, cognitive and pragmatic aspects. (Grambo, 1972), (Kemper, 1981), (Lieber, 1984), (Rothstein, 1969). A proverb, according to Paczolay (1970), “is a short statement, having an evident or implied general meaning, related to a certain typical field of general human conditions, attitudes or actions” (p.742) They include “witty traditional expressions” (Abrahams, 1972, p.119), have “at least two words” (Dundes, 1975, p.970) and a “relatively fixed form which is or has been, in oral circulation” (Brunvand, 1986, p.74). Their importance lies in their continuity, as it is suggested below:

“The vitality of proverbs—the constant emergence of new proverbs, together with their continual expression in new contexts—captures the ways in which folklore draws together our gravest concerns and our strongest commitments, our most precious values and our wisest perspectives, at times even our coarsest humor and our basest beliefs, thereby structuring the world around us.”

(Lau et al, 2004, p.1)

There is a general belief that proverbs are the smallest folklore genre, which are mediated verbally. However, they can be analysed as linguistic units as well. The usage of proverbs is multidimensional- they are utilised in everyday speech, slogans, literature, journalism and other forms of communication. By utilising proverbs in communication, we aim at strengthening our arguments, expressing general ideas, postulating generalisations about a certain idea and conveying a message. Thus Burke’s (1957) definition that “proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations” implies that some situations may eventuate to be alike or identical and consequently we assume that they can have alike or identical linguistic structures. Nonetheless, the task of analysing proverbs of different languages, which emerged in different times, across different regions and cultures, may sometimes seem challenging. For this reason, we have based this essay on the assumption that languages can have proverbs with similar structure. In order to accomplish our objective and justify the proposed hypothesis, we intend to trace patterns of similarities and differences in English and Russian proverbs on the basis of grammar, semantics and prevalence of phonic devices.

Mertvago’s (1995) “The Comparative Russian-English Dictionary of Russian Proverbs and Sayings” is an in-depth comparative study of English and Russian proverbs. In addition, it seeks to provide equivalent proverbs where possible, as well as literal translation where equivalents do not exist. This dictionary is based on the assumption that a large number of Russian proverbs can be paralleled in English and he ascribes the existence of such parallels to two

reasons. The first is due to “a uniform pool of human experience” and the second because of “derivational interborrowing from common historical and cultural antecedents”.

2. Grammatical markers of English and Russian proverbs

The grammatical markers of proverbs in English and Russian will be elaborated in the following paragraph. The linguistic frame in which a proverb operates is a sentence. The structure of the sentence is fixed and the smallest proverb consists of two elements, as in “*Time flies*” and the Russian variant “*Время летит*”. One of the most noticeable grammatical marker in proverbs is that they demonstrate a temporal category which relates to an action which can occur anytime. This denotes that in proverbs the “past is always future and always ready to be present”. The present is the most frequent grammatical tense. This is illustrated in the following English proverb examples: “A book holds a house of gold”, “Honey catches more flies than vinegar” and “Opportunity seldom knocks twice”. It can be also noticed in Russian proverbs: “Вода́ ка́мень то́чит”, (lit. “Water cuts through stone”) and a similar meaning with “Little strokes fell great oaks”. “На во́ре ша́пка горит”, (lit. “A thief’s hat is burning”), conveying the message that “A guilty mind betrays itself” and “Плоха́я молва́ на кры́льях летит” (lit. “A bad rumour flies on wings”), denoting that bad news spread quickly. Another feature of proverbs is their traditional roots. Namely, in some proverbs there is an occurrence of archaisms or archaic structures. This can be observed in proverbs of the following type: “*Manners maketh man*”; *maketh* being an old form of the verb *make*. In Russian, there is a similar change in the noun of the proverb: “Тяжё́лый млат дро́бит сте́кло, куёт бу́лат”, which can be translated into “The same hammer that shatters glass forges steel”. The archaic form in this proverb is *млат* which means *hammer*. By doing this, the speakers distance themselves from being responsible of the claim and transcend it to the wisdom of the past. An immense number of proverbs in both English and Russian are of impersonal and neutral nature, usually in the present tense and in the third person singular, as in “Обже́гшись на моло́ке, ду́ют на́ воду” (lit. “He who got burned by hot milk, blows on water”). For a high percentage of proverbs, an abstract subject is frequently used and this can be observed in, for instance “Truth never perishes” and the Russian version of the proverb “Правда в огне́ не го́рит и в воде́ не то́нет” (lit. The truth does not burn, nor does it sink”). Proverbs in their most usual form are comprised of a statement in two parts, or four smaller elements such as the following one in English: “*Nothing venture/ nothing gain*”, “*Out of sight/ out of mind*”, “*Talk is cheap/ silence is golden*”, “*Same meat/ different gravy*”. Likewise, this is demonstrated in Russian proverbs too: “То гу́сто/ то пу́сто”, “Век жи́ви / век учи́сь”, “Говори́ меньше/ умнее́ бу́дет”, “Како́в по́п/ тако́в и прихо́д”. The prevalence of this structure in English and Russian is evident, as well as among proverbs in various languages explained by Odlin (1986), who argues that “there is probably something akin to a law of

natural selection which tends to promote the remembering of proverbs that have certain characteristics”. (p.89)

3. Semantic features

Having highlighted the core grammatical markers in proverbs in English and Russian, the semantic features in both languages will be studied. As explained by Liddell and Scott (1940), “linguistic semantics is the study of meaning that is used for understanding human expression through language”. The term originates from the Ancient Greek word *semantikos* - “related to meaning, significant”. A key goal in linguistic semantics is discovering how meaning attaches to texts. In this case, it seeks to determine what proverbs mean. From the examples shown above, one can notice that proverbs are polysemous- they can have multiple meanings. Thus, the semantic markers that I wish to analyse will further highlight the existence of polysemy in proverbs, as they are devices which are frequently found in proverbs and are used to make them more vivid and memorable. The semantic markers of proverbs are comprised of stylistic devices such as metaphor, metonymy and personification, which contribute to their rhetorical efficiency. Bearing this in mind, one of the most frequent semantic feature of proverbs is the usage of metaphorical techniques. To clarify, Deignan (2005) defines metaphor as a “word or expression that is used to talk about an entity or quality other than that referred to by its core, or most basic meaning” (p.54). Its purpose is shifting the meaning of the sentence or proverb from literal to figurative. There is an abundance of both English and Russian proverbs which bear a figurative meaning. Some of them include: “*Не говори гоп, пока не перепрыгнешь*” (lit. “Don't exclaim ‘Up’ having not yet made a jump”) and the English variant of the proverb with the same connotation: “Don't count your chickens before they hatch”. Obviously it does not refer to actually counting the chicken before the hatched, but to not making any plans before one is certain that they will occur. Or if someone claims that “*Хлеб всему голова*” in Russian, they do not mean that bread is actually the staff of life, but that it is inevitable for one's survival. The message that these proverbs convey should be interpreted in a figurative way. “All that glitters is not gold” and the Russian equivalent “*Не всё то золото, что блестит*” are some of the plentiful number of metaphors. In order to provide an answer to the rhetorical question “why so many proverbs are metaphorical”, Sackett (1964) highlights that metaphor makes proverbs more succinct, more concrete and more indirect. The importance of these proverbial features is explained by Bascom (1965): “Concreteness provides imagery and succinctness, both of which make proverbs easy to remember, while indirection pro- pounds a riddle which gives pleasure to the individual who solves it.” (p.69)

Roman Jakobson claims that metaphor and metonymy are the two fundamental opposite poles of communicating meaning. Accordingly, Lakoff and Johnson argue that they constitute the basis for our understanding in everyday communication. (Jakobson & Halle, 1956); (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In the

words of Sadler (1980), “metonymy is the use of one word for another, and metaphor is the use of a word in a transferred sense. The metaphorical word will normally be used in place of one which carries the meaning regularly” (p.157) Further on he suggests that these two figures of speech abound in literature, but they also appear regularly in language under the topic of semantic change in linguistics. “Rome was not built in a day.” and the Russian variant “*Москва не сразу строилась*” are illustrations of metonymy. Another frequent feature of proverbs is personification. This figure of speech endows abstractions or inanimate objects with human characteristics and qualities. When using personification, the objects are bestowed as having a human form. It can be found in high percentage in both English and Russian proverbs. If we consider the English proverb “Actions speak louder than words” and the Russian equivalent “*Дела говорят громче слов*” we observe that the phoneme ‘actions’ is given the ability to speak, which is a human quality. “Fear has big eyes” and “*У страха глаза велики*” are also examples where ‘fear’ is personified. This literary device enables us to relate actions of inanimate objects to our feelings.

4. Proverbs and phonic devices

Another significant characteristic which is prevalent in proverbs is the usage of phonic devices or rhythmic features. They include: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, repetition etc. By using them, the proverb becomes more memorable and comprehensible. Due to the fact that the phonic devices greatly contribute to the proverbial utterance, it can be suggested that they are accountable for the universal popularity of proverbs throughout the worlds, regardless of time, place, language or culture. The repetition of similar, or the same sound in at least two words can be found in the following proverbs: “A fault confessed is half redressed”; “Loose lips sink big ships”; “Little strokes fell great oaks”; “Money spent on the brain is never spent in vain”. These examples demonstrate that rhyme is predominantly frequent in the final syllables. This is analogous with some Russian proverbs: “*Велик тѣлом, да мал делом*”; “*Дай с ноготок -- попросит с локоток*”; “*Знай толк, не бери в долг*”; “*Как нажито, так и прожито*”. In the last instance, the rhyme occurs as a result of the two underlined words which have the same affix. Likewise, repetition provides proverbs with poetic flavour. It is mainly a rhetorical device, but makes proverbs structurally concise, vocally impressive, and interpretatively emphatic: “Out of sight, out of mind”; “No song, no supper”; “No pain, no gain”. From the last proverb it is evident that it contains both repetition and rhyme, as repetition in proverbs is sometimes used to create rhyme. Repetition appears in Russian proverbs equally: “*Век живи -- век учись*”. Repetition of words with the same root is also evident here: “*Никто не может, так бог поможет*”.

According to Yang (2002), alliteration is “the repetition of a particular sound in the first syllables of a series of words or phrases in a sentence” (p.152). This is evident in: “*Рукá рýку мóет, вóр вóра крóет*”, where there is a dual

alliteration in one proverb. It is more prevalent in English, than in Russian proverbs: “Want of wit is worse than want of wealth.”; “Money makes the mare go” and “Fortune favours fool.”

The manifestation of a strong dissimilarity between two entities compared in a proverb can be emphasised by using ‘contrast’ or ‘antithesis’. That is the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, or words. While making the proverb symmetrical in structure, this device can be also used to convey a sense of satire and irony. Once again, it makes the proverb easily comprehensible. For instance: “Speak is silver, silence is golden.”; “Faults are thick where love is thin.”; “Flattery makes friends and truth makes enemies”. Similarly, in Russian: “Говорить правду - потерять дружбу”; “На языке мёд, а на сердце – лёд”.

It ought to be highlighted that the majority of the English and Russian proverbs and sayings are poly-semantic as they tend to have not only a literal meaning but a figurative one as well. This makes them very difficult for interpretation, explanation and comparison. When choosing the best Russian equivalent for an English proverb or saying we should be guided by such a criterion as correspondence at least in the main meaning of the unit. There is a plentiful number of proverbs and sayings which can be easily translated into the Russian language and can be referred to as their full equivalents. These include: “Seize the bull by horns” or the Russian equivalent “*Взять быка за рога*”. Other proverbs need explanations, as they have nothing in common with the Russian variants. For instance, the English proverb: “Between the devil and deep blue sea” is translated into Russian as “*Между двух огней*”. If we wish to use the literal translation we would have the following: “*Между чертом и глубоким синим морем*”, which also corresponds to the saying “*Находиться между Сциллой и Харибдой*” and does not need a special explanation.

In addition, even if a non-native speaker fully understands the semantic and grammatical meaning of every word in a proverb, the connotation of that proverb or saying may seem obscure and strange to them, as Duval (1996) clarifies that: “the best proverbs take advantage of the particular features of a particular language and show them off in ways that might be less persuasive” (p.23) This demonstrates that proverbs are a reflection of one’s cultural traits and may not necessarily be understood by others.

The attempts to translate these expressions word for word can lead to often very odd denotations. For example, the English phrase “No room to swing a cat” (literally “*Нет места, чтобы размахивать кошкой*”) corresponds to the Russian equivalent “*яблоку негде упасть*”. When choosing an equivalent to English proverbs and sayings we should try to find some grammatical and semantic correspondence in both expressions, for instance to correlate some familiar parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives): green with envy – «*позеленевший от зависти*»; or to search for similar syntactic structures: “As a

man sows, so shall he reap” – ”Что посеешь, то и пожнешь”; “As you make your bed, so must you lie in it” – ”Как постелешь, так и поспишь”.

Therefore we may come to the conclusion that when comparing Russian and English proverbs and sayings we can divide them into several groups. The first group is comprised of full equivalents: i.e. when English proverbs and sayings correspond completely to their Russian variants (e.g. “As clear as day” – “Ясно, как день”; “Health is better than wealth” – “Здоровье дороже денег”; “A sound mind in a sound body” – “В здоровом теле здоровый дух”); The second group is comprised of partial equivalents: i.e. when English proverbs and sayings are slightly different in their meaning from Russian ones (e.g. “Better an egg today than a hen tomorrow” – “Лучше синица в руках, чем журавль в небе”; “Better pay the butcher than the doctor” – “Добрый повар стоит доктора”; “When it rains it rains on all alike” – “Все равны под солнцем”); The third group is comprised of English proverbs and sayings which do not have corresponding variants in the Russian language and need some special search and explanation (e.g. “A cat falls on his legs” – “Правда восторжествует”; “There’s many a slip ‘twixt the cup and the lip” – “Это бабушка надвое сказала”; “Where there is strong riding there is strong abiding” – “Лес рубят – щепки летят”). The usage of rhythmic (alliteration and rhyme), syntactic (contrast and repetition) and semantic features (metaphor, metonymy, personification) of proverbs is a common characteristic of both languages.

5. Conclusion

This comparison of the peculiarities of proverbs in the two languages has revealed a lot of similarities in meaning and syntactical features. This is an evidence that even though English and Russian are classified in different language groups, the Germanic and Slavic respectively, their mutual root- the Indo-European family and cultural heritage have engendered similar and equivalent ways of constructing proverbs. This affirms Martvago’s account of the existence of analogous proverbs in the English and Russian as a result of a universal human experience and derivational processes from a collective cultural and historical path.

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