

REPRESENTATION OF SYSTEMIC SEMANTIC RELATIONS IN THE RUSSIAN PAREMIOLOGICAL FUND

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ABSTRACT

The article examines how systemic semantic relations are represented in the Russian paremiological fund through stable lexical oppositions, convergent thematic groupings, and field based associations. The material includes thirty Russian proverbs taken from canonical paremiographic sources by V.I.Dal, V.P.Zhukov, and V.M.Mokienko. The analysis combines descriptive paremiology, lexical semantics, and contextual interpretation in order to show that proverb meaning is produced not only by isolated images, but also by recurrent relations among lexical units and value domains. The results demonstrate that antonymy structures evaluative contrast most strongly, while near synonymic convergence and hyponymic clustering organize broader networks of social instruction.

Keywords: Paremiology, Russian proverbs, lexical semantics, antonymy, synonymy, hyponymy, semantic field, evaluative meaning, linguistic system.

INTRODUCTION

The Russian paremiological fund preserves not a loose accumulation of sayings, but a compact semantic memory in which lexical relations become culturally stabilized and pragmatically reusable. Archer Taylor once remarked that “The definition of the proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking”. [11] Yet the difficulty of definition has never cancelled analytic precision. Wolfgang Mieder writes that “A proverb is a short sentence of wisdom”. [7] Kenneth Burke gives the functional side even more sharply when he states that “Proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations”. [2] From the semantic angle, N.R.Norrick formulates the task with unusual clarity, “This study aims to describe how proverbs mean”. [8] These three positions, generic, pragmatic, and semantic, together make it possible to treat Russian proverbs as a structured domain in which antonymy, semantic proximity, and field relations are not marginal ornaments but core mechanisms of organization.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The material was drawn from three major paremiographic sources that continue to define the canonical shape of Russian proverbial usage, namely the collections by V.I.Dal, V.P.Zhukov, and V.M.Mokienko. The analytical sample includes thirty units grouped according to three recurrent systemic relations, lexical opposition, functional convergence, and field based inclusion, while minor variants were treated as secondary unless they altered the semantic core. This procedure is justified by N.R.Norricks observation that “Fixedness in proverbs is relative, and proverbs are never completely frozen”. [9]

RESULTS

The strongest organizing force in the selected material is antonymy. Brown and Miller define it in exact lexical terms, “Antonymy is the relation between pairs of lexical items whose meanings are related by being opposed to each other in some domain”. [1] In *Ученье свет, неученье тьма*, the pair *свет* and *тьма* turns education into a cosmological and moral contrast, while in *Лучше горькая правда, чем сладкая ложь* the opposition of *правда* and *ложь* is intensified by the sensory pair *горькая* and *сладкая*. A similar evaluative compression appears in *Худой мир лучше доброй ссоры*, *Мал золотник, да дорог*, *Мягко стелет, да жёстко спать*, and *Старый друг лучше новых двух*, where lexical contrast never remains descriptive for long and quickly becomes normative. In *Сытый голодного не разумеет* and *Богатый и в будни пирует, бедный и в праздник горюет*, social asymmetry is verbalized through paired predicates and paired roles, whereas *Не было бы счастья, да несчастье помогло* converts contradiction into a paradox of lived experience. Even apparently simple forms such as *В гостях хорошо, а дома лучше* and *Слово серебро, молчание золото* show the same mechanism, because each proverb places two values in a ranked relation rather than a merely referential one.

Semantic relation	Typical lexical basis	Russian examples	Literal English gloss	Interpretive effect
Antonymy	light and darkness, truth and lie, old and new	Ученье свет, неученье тьма. Лучше горькая правда, чем сладкая ложь. Старый друг лучше новых двух.	Learning is light, ignorance is darkness. Bitter truth is better than sweet lie. An old friend is better than two new ones.	axiological polarization
Scalar contrast	small and valuable, soft and hard	Мал золотник, да дорог. Мягко стелет, да жёстко спать.	The weight is small but precious. He makes the bed soft, but it is hard to sleep.	hidden evaluation
Functional convergence	prudence and delayed action	Семь раз отмерь, один раз отрежь. Поспешишь, людей насмешишь. Тише едешь, дальше будешь.	Measure seven times, cut once. If you hurry, you will make people laugh. Slower you go, farther you get.	shared practical instruction
Effort cluster	labor, patience, initiative	Без труда не вытащишь и рыбку из пруда. Под лежачий камень вода не течёт. Терпенье и труд всё перетрут.	Without effort you will not pull even a fish from a pond. Water does not flow under a lying stone. Patience and labor grind everything down.	ethics of agency
Speech cluster	word, silence, tongue	Слово не воробей, вылетит, не поймашь. Доброе слово и кошке приятно. Язык мой враг мой.	A word is not a sparrow, once it flies out you will not catch it. A kind word pleases even a cat. My tongue is my enemy.	regulation of speech behavior
Field relation	money, animals, gift, social recognition	Копейка рубль бережёт. Дарёному коню в зубы не смотрят. Рыбак рыбака видит издалека.	A kopeck saves a ruble. Do not look a gift horse in the mouth. A fisherman sees another fisherman from afar.	cultural coding of domains

A second pattern is functional convergence, which approaches synonymy without collapsing into full identity. *Семь раз отмерь, один раз отрежь, Поспешишь, людей насмешишь, Не зная броду, не суйся в воду, and Тише едешь, дальше будешь* all recommend caution, yet each does so through a different scene, measurement, ridicule, dangerous water, and controlled movement. The same convergent organization appears in the labor cluster formed by *Без труда не вытащишь и рыбку из пруда, Под лежащий камень вода не течёт, Терпенье и труд всё перетрут, Делу время, потехе час, and На Бога надейся, а сам не плошай*, where initiative is represented not as an abstract virtue but as a repeated social command. Speech ethics produces another compact network through *Слово не воробей, вылетит, не поймаешь, Слово серебро, молчание золото, Доброе слово и кошке приятно, and Язык мой враг мой*, all of which regulate verbal conduct while distributing positive and negative value unevenly across speaking, silence, and restraint. Here the systemic relation is best described as semantic convergence with pragmatic specialization.



The third recurrent pattern is field based inclusion, or the embedding of a proverb in a wider lexical domain whose members carry culturally stabilized value. David Crystal defines the relation in compact form, “Hyponymy is the relationship which obtains between specific and general lexical items”. [3] Russian proverbs project this principle onto value fields rather than dictionary taxonomies alone, which is why *золото, рубль, копейка, друг, конь, волк, заяц, рыба, and дом* appear as dense cultural nodes rather than isolated referents. In *Копейка рубль бережёт* the part and the whole are hierarchically linked, in *Не имей сто рублей, а имей сто друзей* money yields to social capital, in *Не всё то золото, что блестит* a false member is expelled from the field of value, in *Дарёному коню в зубы не смотрят* the horse functions inside the gift code, in *Волков бояться, в лес не ходить* fear organizes space and action, in *За двумя зайцами погонишься, ни одного не поймаешь* multiplicity defeats purpose, and in *Рыбак рыбака видит издалека* shared identity is recognized through occupational sameness.

DISCUSSION

At this point, the structural side of proverbial meaning becomes especially clear. M. Mac Coinnigh writes that “The phonological, semantic, and syntactic devices that occur frequently in proverbs across languages may be termed proverbial markers”. [6] In Russian material, paired lexemes, balanced clauses, and rhythmic symmetry repeatedly support semantic contrast, which explains why units such as *Ученье свет, неученье тьма* or *Худой мир лучше доброй ссоры* are remembered as formulas rather than as paraphrasable statements. P. Grzybek, on a broader theoretical plane, insists that “there is no generally accepted definition which covers all the specifics of the proverbial genre”. [4] That lack of final definition does not weaken the present analysis. It rather confirms that systemic relations offer a more stable entry into the material than abstract generic essentialism.

The cultural dimension also remains decisive. Outi Lauhakangas observes that “The meaning and use of a specific proverb can vary according to culture”. [5] In the Russian fund, this variability does not erase systemicity, but fills it with historically recognizable images, household labor, kinship, money, animals, travel, speech, and gift exchange, so that lexical relations become social knowledge in condensed verbal form.

CONCLUSION

The Russian paremiological fund represents systemic semantic relations with remarkable regularity and economy. Antonymy gives the sharpest axiological contour, functional convergence groups sayings into practical clusters, and field based inclusion binds particular images to broader cultural domains. For that reason, Russian proverbs should be studied not only as folklore texts or phraseological units, but also as compressed models of lexical organization in living cultural memory.

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