DIGITAL SOURCES FOR PAREMIOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON TRANSNATIONAL PROSE

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language calls for reference to the culture and literature of the country of the language studied. This article is devoted to the use of modern technologies in the research into proverbs (paremias) found in transnational prose, as created by writers with Czech or Russian roots. It provides a description of the main digital sources and methods of research in the field of paremiological studies on the basis of Czech and Russian transnational novels ("*Immortality*" by Milan Kundera and "*In Search of a Melancholy Baby*" by Vassily Aksyonov). The aim of the current research has been to describe all the cases of proverb use and, how they exist in the text and to assess their stylistic potential. Proverbs form expressive units of language which display the mutual influence of several cultures and languages. Moreover, in a number of cases authors transform proverbs for stylistic reasons. These transformations cause difficulties both in the identification of proverbs or their elements in the texts considered and in the attribution of paremiological units to the language in question. The results of the research show the clear need to make use, among other things, of international paremiological databases (such as the "Matti Kuusi international type system and database of proverbs" and the "SprichWort-Plattform"), national corpora of Czech, Russian and other languages, direct surveys (sociolinguistic paremiological investigations) among native speakers via virtual platforms (such as Google Forms), scholarly bibliographic databases (such as Web of Science, Scopus or eLibrary.ru). The authors demonstrate how such an approach promotes the construction of students' skills in complex research analysis during the preparation of their Master's theses.

Keywords: digital sources, paremiology, proverbs, transnational prose, Czech, Russian.

1 INTRODUCTION

Proverbs have an important place in the description of specific national traits and cultural patterns, which are reflected in the languages concerned. These stable language units are used to represent commonplace situations (usually in a metaphorical way) in order to summarize the experience of previous generations and to moralize. The proverb needs to be generally known by native speakers; it can be easily identified by the vast majority of representatives of the culture the language in question belongs to. Within the framework of studies in the field of transnational prose we have to deal with more than one linguistic picture of the world, since the authors of the texts concerned have experienced the influence of a surrounding foreign language. Among the stylistic features used by the authors with hybrid national identity are proverbs. The actualization of cultural stereotypes largely contributes to the issues of cultural linguistics in terms of the author's self-identity. The mutual influence of native and foreign cultures has clearly led to the emergence of the elements of another code, which causes certain challenges for research in this field.

2 METHODOLOGY

In the current research we have faced the necessity of working out a consistent and complex approach. Close-reading has called for a focus on typically proverbial syntactical structure, and each case of metaphorical transfer of meaning, and how to process these. The close-reading gave rise to a list of probable cases of the use of proverbs or proverb elements, allusions on them and authorial aphorisms. The following analysis and classification of this material has entailed us resorting, *inter alia*, to international digital databases of proverbs, electronic dictionaries, and national corpora. In the following sections we try to give a more detailed description of each digital source and its importance to the research.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Proverbs in the novel "*Immortality*" by M. Kundera

The first object of our analysis was the novel "*Immortality*" (Czech: "*Nesmrtelnosť*") by the Czech writer Milan Kundera. This novel was written and published in 1988 in Czech and became the last work of the author written in his mother tongue [1]. Kundera moved to France in 1975, and it is evident that over the thirteen years of his exile the perceived linguistic and cultural features specific to his French-speaking surroundings left their mark on the author's choice of stylistic elements in the text.

It is important to note that the sample of text selected for close reading was chosen on the basis of knowledge of Czech paremiology from the range of potential instances of the use of proverbial forms and their components.

3.1.1 International paremiological databases

In order to identify proverbs we have resorted mainly to two international paremioligical databases. The overriding criterion was the presence of Czech or French proverbs. The first database is SprichWort-Plattform – an international project which aims to outline and compare the differences between proverbs in different languages. The project was undertaken from 2008 to 2010 - with the participation of German, Czech, Slovak, Slovenian and Hungarian universities. The project includes and compare proverbs in five languages. Each of the proverbs is provided with parallels in other languages, the meaning, the possible ways in which it may be transformed and examples of its usage, taken from the national corpora of these languages. The platform is equipped with the ability to search among proverbs by keywords; the search is carried out both among the proverbs themselves, and in examples of their use [2].

This database turned out to be a very useful and convenient supplement to the dictionary search. Let us consider the advantages of this system, using the example of one potential case of proverbial use. In the text of the novel we find the following phrase: *Skromnost je pokrytectví* /lit. "Modesty is hypocrisy"/. By making a request with the first significant lexeme *skromnost* we get seven results of articles including this word in the proverb itself or in an example of its usage. There are two proverbs which suit our demands: Czech *Skromnost šlechtí* /lit. "Modesty ennobles"/ and Slovak *Skromnosť je cnosť* /lit. "Modesty is virtue"/. Moreover, in the process of further research into the representation of this moral category in other languages we came across pan-European examples (e.g. the English proverb *Modesty is the beauty of women* or Russian *Скромность красит человека* /lit. "Modesty adorns the person"/). At this point we can assume that the author is using the stable syntactical structure of the existing Slovak proverb but inverts the meaning through lexical transformation (substitution with antonym). Appealing to the cultural stereotype expressed in proverbs the author uses proverb transformation as a stylistic technique.

Another database, used in this research, is the Matti Kuusi international type system and database of proverbs. It was created on the basis of a collection of proverbs classified by the Finnish folklorist and paremiologist Matti Kuusi. The digital database was presented in 2001 by his daughter Dr. Outi Lauhakangas. Based on Kuusi's international type system of proverbs this database aims at comparison [3]. Retrieval requests may be filtered by the exact type of meaning within the mentioned system. The whole typology includes thirteen thematic categories (such as the practical knowledge of nature, concepts of morality, social life) divided into smaller semantic groups with more than 300 detailed subheadings (also presented on the website). All the proverbs are marked with the area of their geographical distribution, showing the concurrence and difference between several cultural codes.

This database is important for the current research as it includes proverbial parallels in Finnish, English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Czech and Latin and gives references to the dictionaries which include these parallels. Like the SprichWort-Plattform, it offers the possibility of searching by key-words. In the process of proverb identification this option plays a crucial role as it offers the opportunity to examine each lexeme of the structure with suspected proverbial usage and come to more accurate conclusions about its status. For example, in the episode where the main character is thinking about her desire for a happy marriage and to love her husband, we can read the following: *Kdyby na chvíli v té vůli polevila, láska by uletěla jako pták, kterému otevřeli klec* /lit. "If she relaxes this desire for a moment, love would fly away like a bird whose cage was opened"/. In view of the metaphorical usage we refer to each significant word in the second simple sentence in English and French translation. One of the results of the retrieval request *cage* was the French proverb *L'homme marié est un oiseau en cage* /lit. "The married man is a bird in a cage"/ (cf. *A married man turns his staff into a stake*). This proverb has global distribution and is coded as G5h in terms of typology, which refers to the "woman and man - power

relations" subheading. Thus, we can assume that Kundera is giving a deeper psychological portrait of the main character by actualization of the global metaphorical perception of the spouse's social status.

3.1.2   Electronic versions of dictionaries

The availability of international dictionaries is another point of urgency in paremiological research, because they reflect the proverbial foundation of a language and are an authoritative source of information about existing proverbs. Fortunately, technological advances make it possible to access dictionaries in electronic format. For example, E. Strauss's Dictionary of European Proverbs [4], available on questia.com, has been important for the current study. In the text of Kundera's novel there are several syntactic structures similar to proverbs, one of them being *Mnoho lidí, málo gest* /lit. "A lot of people, few gestures"/. We took the dichotomy *a few – a lot* as the basis of the search, for which we used this dictionary (with the help too of the integral data retrieval function). As a result, it emerged that this proverbial structure is actually common in European languages occurring in English as *Much bran and little meal*, German *Viel Stroh, wenig Korn /lit. "*A lot of straw, a little grain"/, Latin *Multum clamoris, parum lanae* /lit. "A lot of crying, little wool"/, French *Beaucoup de paille, peu de grains /*lit. "Lots of straw, little grain"/, Italian *Molti pampini, poca uva* /lit. "*Many vine leaves, few grapes"/.* In the research on Czech paremiology conducted by M. Yu. Kotova and O. S. Sergienko published in the second issue of "*Handbooks of a Paremiographer*" [5] we can also find a similar structure in the Czech proverb *Mnoho rukou, málo práce* /lit. "A lot of hands, little work"/. The usage of this structure can also be taken as a stylistic element given its recognizability because of its global distribution.

However, controversial issues may arise in connection with the use of dictionaries. For example, not all dictionaries reflect the frequency of use of proverbs or their meanings, and proverbial parallels in other languages are not always represented. Moreover, without a paremiological sociolinguistic investigation among native speakers it is impossible to determine the present status of the proverb in a given language medium. A number of these problems can be partly solved by resorting to national language corpora.

3.1.3   National corpora

The Czech paremiologist F. Čermák considers the use of national corpora for paremological investigation to be a feasible alternative to sociological experiment among native speakers [6]. The national corpus of the Czech language is recognized as one of the largest collections of language data (more than 9 billion word usages, constantly updating). This source has also greatly contributed to our current research since it has given a picture of the incidence of Czech proverbs that we have failed to find in available dictonaries. For instance, in the text of the novel we come across the phrase: *Jedna kapka vody, pro kterou přeteče sklenice* /lit. "A drop of water to overflow the glass"/. The Matti Kuusi database notes the English proverb *The last drop makes the cup run over* as of widespread European distribution. E. Strauss's dictionary, however, does not include the Czech parallel among the other languages. As the result of the retrieval request *kapka* /lit. "drop"/ within the corpus filtered by specified context we managed to figure out that in current Czech this proverb is widely used with the component *pohár* instead of *sklenice* (both with the meaning *glass*). This substitution, however, marks a mainly stylistic difference. Judging by the contexts of these word usages in Czech this proverb maintains its meaning that a little of something is usually enough to lead to grave consequences.

3.1.4   Scholarly bibliographic databases

Particular attention should be paid to scholarly bibliographic databases, which give access to research results in paremiology and linguistics in general, and help to reinforce the urgency of the issue under consideration. They include the international scientific web-portals ResearchGate and Academia, electronic bibliographic databases of papers presented at interdisciplinary colloquia on proverbs from 2008 to 2019 and the Russian scientific electronic library eLIBRARY.ru.

3.2   Proverbs in the novel "*In Search of a Melancholy Baby"* by V. Aksyonov

The novel "In Search of a Melancholy Baby" [Russian: *В поисках грустного бэби*] by the Russian and American writer Vassily Aksyonov (1932 - 2009) was written in Russian in 1986 in the United States [7]. This work has all the characteristics of a transnational novel: an autobiographical, emigrant view of cultural and value orientations abroad, opposition between one's own and another's identity (the "other"), the linguistic embodiment of the hybrid identity of the author - narrator, represented by the insertions in English into the Russian text of the novel. Studying this work from the point of view of the theory of cultural transfer, we encounter elements of the epistolary genre, a narrative in the form of parallel

narrative streams, updating of the stereotypical representations of the "other", restoration of the narrator's own identity, and so forth.

The specific nature of the Russian language of this novel is determined by the great number of English insertions, included in the Russian-language narration. This stylistic feature has been explored in many studies by Russian philologists, for example by D. V. Kharitonov [8].

This publicist novel by Aksyonov was analysed polemically and critiqued from the viewpoint of the literarey achievements of emigrant writers in some American publications, such as the article by D. Remnick "What's a Vassily Aksyonov?", published in 1987 in the American newspaper "The Washington Post" [9].

In terms of the specifics of "updating stereotypes", it is worth mentioning the stylistic functions of such language units as proverbs, which by their nature are stereotypes of value orientations of national consciousness.

According to the research of the Russian and German paremiologist Prof. Valeriy M. Mokienko, one of the most important aspects of modern paremiology is "the function of proverbs in modern literary languages" [10: 257]. This perspective was established by one of the members of the Prague linguistic school, Jan Mukařovský [11]. It was then actively explored in the works of paremiologists from Russia and elsewhere, such as V. M. Mokienko, T. A. Naimushina, M. Nováková, L. B. Savenkova, E. I. Seliverstova, F. Schindler and S. I. Vyaltseva [10: 257 – 258].

The selected Russian proverbs from the novel "*In Search of a Melancholy Baby*" can be divided into two groups.

The first group represents common, well-known Russian proverbs, e.g. *Чья бы корова мычала, а твоя бы молчала* [7: 124] /lit. "Whoever's cow lows, yours would be silent"/ cf. the English proverb *The pot calls the kettle black* [12:149]; *Что русскому хорошо, то немцу плохо* [7: 47] /lit. "What is good for a Russian is bad for a German"/. Both proverbs belong among those currently active in Russian; the first is included by G. L. Permyakov within the paremiological minimum of the Russian language [13: 164].

The second group consists of proverbs, transformed or updated by the author, e. g.1. *Игра все-таки стоит свеч* [7: 270] /lit. "The game is still worth the candle"/ cf. the opposite English proverb *The game is not worth the candle* [12: 145]; 2. *Цезарю – Цезарево, быку – быково* [7: 226] /lit. "For Caesar – Caesar's belongings, for the bull – the bull's belongings"/ cf. the Latin original maxim *Quae sunt Caesaris Caesari et quae sunt Dei Deo* [14].

The English insertions in Aksyonov's novel are not only words (lexical units), but also whole phrases (sentences) and even poems and lyrics. It is necessary to point to the English-American proverb *Every cloud must have a silver lining* [7: 19, 21], which is repeatedly mentioned in the novel and encoded in its title, "*In Search of a Melancholy Baby*". The proverb is one of the well-known English examples that was updated in 1939 in the American movie "The Roaring Twenties" [8] in the song "My Melancholy Baby" [15]. This blues song was a part of the repertoire of the leading American singers Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand and others. This proverb is repeated three times as a refrain in this blues song, as a consolation to the melancholy baby: "Come to me, my melancholy baby, / Cuddle up and don't be blue. / All your fears are foolish fancy, maybe, / You know, dear, that I'm in love with you. / *Every cloud must have a silver lining*, / Wait until the sun shines through. / Cuddle up, my dear, / While, I kiss away each tear. / Or else, I shall be melancholy too. / *Every cloud must have a silver lining*, / Wait until the sun shines through. / Cuddle up, my dear,/ While, I kiss away each tear. / Or else, I shall be melancholy too. / *Every cloud must have a silver lining*, / Wait until the sun shines through [16]. The Matti Kuusi database identifies this proverb as distributed throughout Western Europe, as well as North and Latin America.

The bipolarity of American reality is emphasized by the melancholy of the lyrical hero/heroine of this jazz blues song. This is the kind of all-understanding companion the author of "*In Search of a Melancholy Baby*" is looking for in America, and he tries to describe this search on the pages of his novel, where both – the dark and the light side of the American sky are transparent.

4   CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research have clearly shown the benefits of electronic proverbial databases and dictionaries, equipped with a number of functions that greatly simplify the search for necessary, allowing researchers to save a significant part of their time resources. A detailed classification of meanings, and

information on the frequency of proverbial usage through the examples of proverbial parallels in other languages allow us to identify more accurately the elements that are most important for linguistic cultural research in transnational prose texts and to draw conclusions not only about the stylistic significance of these elements, but also about the issue of the cultural and national self-identification of the authors.

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