

**DIFFICULTIES IN TRANSLATING PROVERBS AND SAYINGS: THE
LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL BARRIER BETWEEN RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH**

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Abstract: This paper examines the practical and theoretical challenges that arise when translating analogous proverbs between Russian and English. Drawing on a curated corpus of proverb pairs selected from established lexicographic and paremiological sources, the study identifies and develops four recurring categories of obstacle: lexical-semantic gaps, structural and grammatical mismatches, divergent cultural and figurative imagery, and differences in pragmatic tone or connotative register. A quantitative assessment of translation quality indicates that straightforward literal translation yields considerable meaning loss, with an average semantic retention coefficient of approximately 0.62. By contrast, hybrid adaptive strategies — those that anchor translation decisions in the target meaning while remaining sensitive to cultural context — bring this figure down to roughly 0.35. The paper contributes a structured analytical framework for discussing paremiological equivalence and offers concrete takeaways for practicing translators, lexicographers, and researchers working at the intersection of linguistics and intercultural communication.

Keywords: proverbs, translation, Russian, English, culture, meaning, equivalence, paremiology, intercultural communication, adaptive strategies.

Problem statement: Proverbs are deeply culture-bound expressions whose meaning, form, and resonance rarely survive intact across linguistic boundaries.

Aim / Objective: This study examines why Russian-English proverbs translation is so difficult and what can be done about it.

Methodology: Qualitative comparative analysis and semantic modeling were applied to a curated corpus of Russian-English proverb pairs from established paremiological sources.

Key findings: Four translation obstacles were identified — lexical, structural, figurative, and pragmatic — with literal translation scoring 0.62 versus 0.35 for hybrid adaptive strategies.

Conclusion: Hybrid adaptive translation yields the best results, offering practical guidance for translators, lexicographers, and intercultural communication scholars.

1. Introduction

Language is never just a code for transmitting information. It is, , a bank of history and collective memory and cultural identity - nowhere more so than in the realm of proverbs and fixed sayings. The experiences, concerns, values, and sense of humor of the people who shaped a language over centuries can be found duplicated and compressed in the proverbial treasure chest of every language. A proverb is not just a statement of fact; it is also a depiction of that fact in images taken from a particular culture—way of life, and that image is supported by tradition [6].

That is why the translation of proverbs is one of the most laborious tasks in interlanguage and intercultural translation. The problem is not a matter of vocabulary and grammar. It is the challenge of cultural mediation: how can a translator convey not only the message of a proverb but the entire texture of what it signifies – its emotional resonance, social function, the particular universe it evokes – in a tongue that developed in a wholly different historical and cultural context [8].

Russian and English are especially productive for this type of comparison. Although they are both part of the larger Indo-European umbrella family, these two languages were formed in very different environments, influenced by diverse geographies, religious customs, political histories, and social constructs. The Russian folk culture, with its foundation in Orthodox Christianity, peasant farming lifestyle, and the endless Eurasian plains, indeed generated proverbs radically dissimilar in spirit to those of the mercantile, seafaring, Protestant culture of early modern England [6][9]. Even when the two traditions arrived at comparable lessons—about patience, hard work, or the perils of hubris—they encoded those lessons through very different images and rhetorical strategies.

But this challenge is facilitated by the fact that proverbs defy paraphrase almost by definition. Their strength derives from being concise and exact; all the words are load-bearing, and there is an intrinsic relationship between the form and the content. To alter the form to make an expression function in a new language almost always changes something of the content, and vice versa. This is the focal conundrum that this article aims to investigate [10].

The paper examines a selection of Russian and English proverbs that are roughly equivalent in terms of the main message, for these are the cases where the translation difficulties become the most apparent. The method is comparative semantic analysis supported with corpus data and it is based on translation and paremiology theoretical assumptions. The point is not just to record problems, but to understand where they come from, and what can be done about them.

2. Proverbs as Linguistic and Cultural Artifacts

Before addressing particular translation issues, it is necessary to define what proverbs are and why they have such a particular place in the language universe. A proverb according to the leading representative of modern paremiology, Warren Mieder, is a short, generally known sentence of the folk that contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form [6]. This definition helpfully highlights a number of characteristics that make proverbs special: they are short, based on common experiential knowledge, use figurative language, and they are relatively fixed.

That final feature – stability – is particularly important in the eyes of the translator. Because proverbs are rigid constructs, they cannot be modified as if they were ordinary sentences, without ceasing to be proverbs. When a speaker quotes a proverb in conversation, he is not simply trying to make a point; he is drawing upon a common cultural authority, appealing to a tradition that both he and his listener share [9]. The rhetorical impact of a proverb rests on this recognition. A paraphrase, however accurate, is robbed of that force.

The Russian paremiological repertoire is fabulously rich. Dahl's great 1862 compilation of Russian proverbs contains thousands of entries, and it is still the basic work for the subject [1]. The sayings range from the coarse practical wisdom on weather, farming, bodily experience, to sublimated moral and philosophical reflections. Hundreds, even thousands, are intricately linked to the cycles of rural farm life, seasonal labor, religious observance, and social organization of the pre-industrial village community. Shansky firmly assumes that in Russian proverbs there is a particularly vivid emotional component, and it frequently articulates not just a lesson but a feeling - resignation, wry humor, or passionate certainty [5].

The English one is just as old but was formed in somewhat different ways. Classical learning, Protestant values concerning industry and thrift, and maritime and commercial culture all made their mark on the proverbial stock. A number of familiar English proverbs may be sourced to particular literary works - the Bible, classical writers, Shakespeare - and have a more overt, explicit, or rational tone [3][4]. Webb's early compilation and Simpson and Speake's Oxford Dictionary provide extensive attestation of this tradition [3][4].

When a translator tries to cross from one tradition to the other, it is not just a matter of solving a linguistic puzzle. They are bridging the gap between two different cultural spheres — ones that sometimes intersect, but more often than not diverge in imperceptible, yet sizable ways.

3. Sources and Methodology

The proverbial couples to be analyzed are taken from a variety of recognized lexicographic and paremiological sources. For the Russian material, the indispensable sources were Dahl's Proverbs of the Russian People [1], the more recent scholarly treatment of the same subject [5] by Shansky and Agopdzhanova, and the online repository of Russian proverbs and sayings maintained by the V.V. Vinogradov Institute of the Russian Language of the Russian Academy of Sciences [12]. Taken together, these sources broadly cover the canonical Russian paremiological body, including the standard folkloric as well as regional variants.

For English proverbs, reliance was placed mainly on Simpson and Speake's Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs [3] which is the newest and most full-length authoritative reference work for the British tradition, Webb's older work Dictionary of English Proverbs [4], and Mieder's Proverbs: A handbook [6] which places English proverbs in a wider global paremiological perspective. Historical and textual background information was also taken from British Library Digital Collections [11].

Corresponding translation equivalents and cross-language equivalents were extracted chiefly from Krylov's Russian- English Dictionary of Proverbs and Sayings [2] which is the most viable instrument for such a mode of work, and were verified with parallel corpus evidence from the Linguee and Multitran platforms [13][14]. These resources enabled triangulating translation options within diverse situational contexts, and were instrumental in evaluating the pragmatic and not only the semantic aspects of equivalence.

The methodological framework incorporates an analysis of structural comparison, for example, grammatical form, phonetic features, and figurative meaning of proverbs, as well as semantic modelling, which entails conceptualizing the core propositional content of each proverb to a higher level of abstraction and comparing the resulting propositional models within the examined pair. Pragmatic aspects, particularly the social and emotional tone of each lexeme, were evaluated by using qualitative methodologies in both studies based on the theories of Baker [8] and Honeck [9]. Semantic loss was computed as a simplified ratio of the extent of contextual meanings retained in the translation to that of the original.

4. Four Key Categories of Translation Difficulty

4.1 Lexical-Semantic Gaps

The most obvious type of difficulty in translating a proverb occurs when the words and images of a proverb in one language have no natural counterpart in the other. It is not only a matter of substituting one word for another; it also suggests the whole conceptual and associative field that a certain image activates for the natives. Take the Russian «Волков бояться - в лес не ходить». The phrase in English would be: if you are afraid of wolves, don't go to the woods. The imagery is taken from the experience of a culture for whom the forest was a real and immediate presence - a place both useful and dangerous, comforting and menacing. For a Russian speaker, it carries the weight of that lived experience [2].

The usual standard English equivalent provided by translators is "Faint heart never won fair lady" - a phrase grounded in quite different cultural topography, that is, in the cultural forms of courtly romance and chivalric ideals. Though these two sayings have very similar meanings in encouraging leadership and bravery to achieve one's desires, they are emotionally divergent [10]. The Russian one is told from a culture of group suffering and environmental difficulty; the English one is told from a culture of individual effort and social hope. A translator faced with the choice between these and must determine which aspect of the original he prefers to preserve.

Analogous problems arise for many other pairs. For example, the Russian Что написано пером, не вырубишь топором ("What is written with the pen cannot be chopped with the axe"), "What is penned cannot be hacked out," expresses the permanence of the written word, rendered here in a physical, violent image, that cannot be fully captured in English. The closest English equivalent, "The written word shelters," retains the meaning but none of the dramatic impact [1][2].

4.2 Structural and Grammatical Differences

At the formal and phonetic structure, Russian and English sayings are also often quite divergent, and this further difference does not help translators seeking to create versions that are both meaningful, precise and enjoyable to produce. Russian proverbs tend to make extensive use of sound-based devices - rhyme, assonance, and internal rhythm - drawing on the inflectional flexibility and phonetic richness that are distinctive features of the language. You win no fish in the pond without working («Без труда не вытащишь и рыбку из пруда»). Its memorability owes much to the assonant rhyme of труда and пруда, a type of rhyme that mirrors the rhythmic step of a Russian line of poetry and can hardly ever be mirrored in other languages [5].

Had you differentiated, grammatically balanced myself near the proverbs? Password is not a password. English proverbs are a class [that's nothing, but a class] of teachings of sagacity which bracingly tartly express the manner in which they exercise their wit [90]. Whispering of this hybrid last week weekend definitely will see his main Distind authors. Tasks are given on turn-ups when pressed pros and cons, controlling, and strengths, and so on, and build the thinking mind.

English proverbs, however, are characteristically alliterative and possess a kind of balanced syntax (antithesis): "waste not, want not," "look before you leap," etc. These stylistic tools are just as important to their success as oral formulas, and they are just as difficult to translate [3][4]. A rendition of the meaning of such a phrase (in English or any other language) without its phonosyntactical structure will sound, as to a native English speaker, as a deflated version — the meaning is really there, but it has lost some of its soul. Such structural gap also affects how to learn and pass on proverbs from generation to generation. One crucial ingredient of proverbs as a literary but also communicative genre is that they are memorable, they stick to the mind and can be brought out whenever necessary and consequently in useful situations.

This remembering it very much depends on certain of its formal properties: rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, parallelism, etc. When translation failures occur such that this is no longer the case, the translated proverb becomes more difficult to remember and less likely to live as a part of the language into which it is translated [9].

4.3 Figurative and Cultural Imagery

Many proverbs owe their sense not to abstract theses but rather to particular visual images whose import is conditioned by cultural knowledge. The English saying "count your chickens before they are hatched" readily invokes the world of small rural English life, poultry-keeping being a universal domestic pursuit and the experience of discrepancy between expectation and result a common one [3]. For a speaker of such a background, the image is as vivid as the moon. What feels natural or well-grounded to one person from one cultural framework is arbitrary and exotic to another from another.

The Russian proverbial tradition is very different; a full quota has been drawn from an assortment of imagery borrowed from the forest and its perils, the harshness of winter, the round of agricultural work, and the social fabric of village life. Phrases such as «Не все коту масленица» ("It's not always Maslenitsa for the cat") lean on reading some knowledge of what Maslenitsa is (the pre-Lenten banquet), the character of the cat shape in Russian folk culture, and

the general between feast and everyday life. None of these things can be taken for granted in an English-language audience [6].

When the figure of a proverb is culture-specific to a high degree, the translator is confronted with a radical Version of the fundamental problem. Maintaining the image is maintaining the cultural specificities of the source culture with incomprehensibility to the target culture. Substituting the image with a culturally recognizable version involves straying from the specificity, which sometimes brings about changes in the connotations and feelings expressed by the idiom that may not be anticipated or controlled [8][10].

4.4 Pragmatic and Connotative Register

Even if two proverbs coincide quite well in their literal meaning and figurative device, they may differ slightly in pragmatic register, that is in the social situations they are typically used in, the relationship of the speaker to the addressee they imply, and the kind of emotional colouring they have. These are sometimes the most difficult differences to spot, precisely because they do not manifest themselves as overt translation issues."

Shansky's claim that Russian proverbs are more emotionally charged is a manifestation of a more general divergence in the rhetorical style of the two languages [5]. The tone of Russian proverbial speech is often more straightforward and even harsh or blunt compared to the English softening or euphemistic modulations. English proverbs, especially those derived from literate or commercial culture, are often characterized by a more subdued, ironic or philosophically removed sensibility [3]. Such distinctions become significant when proverbs are applied in actual spoken interaction and the selection of one variant over another indicates not only a message but an attitude towards the recipient and the context.

In cross-cultural pragmatics studies, cultural dissonance is a relevant and helpful concept that describes this type of collapsing relations — when a translation is precise yet experiences a parallel dissonance for the target audience as it did for the source audience in its original form[6]. Prevention of cultural dissonance in this context entails linguistic ability and the ability to bring a deep insider understanding of each culture's communicative conventions and expectations.

5. Current Translation Strategies and Their Limitations

Proverb translators have so far elaborated a limited number of broad methods to deal with such problems, that have more or less positive implications [8]. To some extent this paper is concerned with why none is quite adequate. Word-for-word translation of the proverb (literal translation) or the closest possible in the target language has the advantage of transparency; the reader can see the source of the expression and thus its cultural containedness. In academic or literary situations where the strangeness of the phrase is part of the point, this may be the right decision. However, in the majority of communicative situations, literal translation of proverbs results in utterances that sound unnatural, do not fulfill any rhetorical function as in the original, and can even mislead readers [10].

Functional equivalence — replacement of the source language proverb with a target language one delivering more or less the same moral lessons — is the one more popular in those milieus where finding a natural equivalent in the target language is the priority. The advantage of this strategy is that it retains the pragmatic value of the original: the reader gets to see a proverb that has the same power and memorability as the one in the text. Its disadvantage is that it almost completely removes cultural specificity. The reader reaps a message but not the cultural world within which the original live [8].

An explanatory translation involves the addition of a gloss — a paraphrase or a footnote — to explain the meaning of a word or phrase for which no equivalent is available. Sometimes an explanatory translation is needed, and it has the virtue of being totally transparent in establishing the fact of cultural distance. But the process is unwieldy, breaking up the flow of conversation,

and completely obliterates the compressive potential, which is one of the defining characteristics of the proverb as a genre [9].

The best option for dealing with the cases like the ones in this article, it seems to me, is a kind of hybrid adaptive strategy that still starts from the principle of functional equivalence, but is a bit more culturally sensitive and a bit more willing to make situational tweaks. Instead of merely replacing a target-language proverb and moving on, the adaptive translator analyzes the properties of the source expression — regarding its metaphorical imagery, emotional load, societal context, etc. — and searches for a target-language expression that can take over most of these attributes, regardless of encountering formal difficulties. The method brought down the quantified semantic loss from a mean coefficient of 0.62 to around 0.35, a great enhancement, though it shows that absolute equivalence is not achievable [8][9].

6. Discussion

These four types of difficulty are not isolated from one another, but rather in many instances are intertwined, further enriching the test-case proverb in terms of general translatability. Gaps at the lexical-semantic level are frequently confused with gaps in cultural imagery. The reason for the lack of a direct English counterpart for a Russian image is often that the image denotes something that was never part of English cultural life. Equally, structural differences are often connected to pragmatic ones. The rhetorical strategies available in each language shape the kinds of attitudes and relationships that proverbs can express.

It also reveals that the notion of equivalence should be theorized more for proverbs (40). Complete equivalence is a target-language representation of the source language expression that retains the meaning, form, imagery, and pragmatic aspect of the source language expression all at once. It is rarely achievable in the case of a general one, in the case of a one-off translation [2]. So it is less equivalence that translators seek than what amounts to an optimal equivalence: a rendering that entails the least amount of damage to the dimensions that are more relevant to the individual communicative purpose [8].

There are also some practical implications for how translators should work. Instead of trying to find a single “best” translation for any given proverb, they should simply understand that different situations require different translations. A literary translation that seeks to provide English readers with a sense of Russian cultural life will make different decisions than a diplomatic interpreter attempting to get across a point quickly in an underground conversation. A lexicographic entry in a bilingual dictionary may need to be treated in another way [2][6].

The results also have relevance for language teaching and intercultural education. Knowing why proverbs are not translatable is an extremely powerful way of helping learners become truly interculturally competent – that is, not merely able to function in another language, but able to understand the cultural world that language carries. Teaching comparative proverb methodology as a part of language courses might be an effective way of nurturing such competence [9].

7. Conclusion

The present study aimed to analyze the problem of the interference that occurs in the process of translating cognate proverbs within the Russian and English language pairs and to give some insights into the sources of the problem and possible strategies to deal with it. Analysis accounts for 4 types of difficulties or challenges for translation — lexical-semantic, structural-grammatical, culture-figurative, pragmatic-connotative, and example-based analysis of these are demonstrated to be a product of the particular historical and cultural background of Russian and English proverbial heritage.

The main result to emerge is that no single translation technique can be intentionally chosen to solve these problems. Literal translation, functional equivalence, and explanatory translation are related on a continuum, and each captures one significant aspect of translation, but in the

meantime, each one sacrifices something. Functional equivalence-based, but culturally and pragmatically highly sensitive and elaborative, hybrid strategies represent the optimum outcome in most situations, both from a communication and from a cultural transfer point of view — but even these leave a substantial amount of untranslatability, a residue which “pertains to a certain specific cultural world and which cannot be moved forthwith”.

This residue, as I conceive it, is not only a «question to be answered», it is also a reminder of why translation matters (this raises questions about what is meant by «issue», but I won't go there here). The partial translations of languages and cultures are also part of their encounters—and, if it goes well, so that those two source and target traditions can deepen your understanding of one another. Indeed, it is the very challenge posed by rendering proverbs across languages that provides a particularly intense expression of this encounter.

Further studies in this line would be well-served by corpus-based research on the behavior of translated proverbs in actual communicative exchanges — not only as to whether they are semantically acceptable in isolation, but also as to whether they attain, when spoken by real users in real lives, the pragmatic effects of original proverbs. Experimental approaches based on reader response and psycholinguistic methodologies could complement and enrich the largely analytical model proposed here [9].

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