

Proverbial Language and its Role in Acquiring a Second Language and Culture

The Case of Russian

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1. Introduction

Researchers in the domain of Russian as a foreign and a second language have paid relatively little attention to proverbs as units of linguistic and cultural expression. Due to this neglect and the overall scarcity of statistical data on current Russian proverbial language, many Russian textbooks and dictionaries offer at best some outdated proverbs that have fallen into disuse in contemporary Russia and at worst, disregard proverbial language altogether. However, this expressive language deserves much more serious consideration from both researchers and teachers of Russian. Russian native speakers take it for granted that their interlocutors share the assumptions behind proverbs, which constitute an important part of their cultural heritage. Moreover, proverbs constitute a functional component of spoken Russian. Native speakers use proverbs or allude to them to share certain subtleties of expression, such as humor, irony, erudition, etc. Thus, without understanding the underlying figurative meanings and cultural connotations of this expressive speech component, American students of Russian may experience certain linguistic and cultural misunderstandings that will impede their interactions with Russians.

However, those who study and teach Russian may not want to invest time learning and teaching proverbs if they do not know whether native speakers use these sayings in their daily speech, and if so, which of them are most common in Russia. Therefore, this research attempts to determine the necessity for American students of Russian to learn Russian proverbs. In order to make such a determination, the research seeks to ascertain whether Russian proverbs satisfy the criteria of currency and frequency in both conversational and written speech of native speakers. Furthermore, it investigates American

students' level of comprehension of the most common Russian proverbs in order to determine whether they should consider studying these proverbs and thus improve their level of comprehension of Russian speech. The study goes on to explore the use of the most common proverbs in Russian-language textbooks and proverbial dictionaries. As a result of this exploration, the research offers a new type of proverbial classification based on cultural attitudes and a proposed methodology of introducing proverbs to American students. Discussion of how proverbs can be incorporated into the Russian language curriculum at different levels of instruction remains beyond the scope of the present article. See my dissertation "Proverbial Language and Its Role in Acquiring a Second Language and Culture" for some teaching rationales and suggestions (pp. 32-43, 103-118).

2. Definition of the Proverb

The universally recognized definition of a proverb remains a problem for many contemporary researchers in the domain of proverb study. Wolfgang Mieder, who did extensive research in contemporary paremiology, presents a proverb as a "very complex verbal form of folklore that almost escapes definition" (Proverbs 13).

Since the definition of a proverb proves such a difficult task, this study will consider only the most consistent definitional criteria for a proverb: complete sentence status, generalization, fixedness, didacticism, oral circulation, currency (proverbial recognition, acceptance and usage by contemporary Russians), and pithiness.

Another category that often affiliates with a proverb is a *proverbial aphorism*. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines the *aphorism* as a "tersely phrased statement of a truth or opinion" (Morris 60). In this sense, aphorisms are akin to proverbs in their function, although they are different from proverbs in that their origin is not folkloristic. Their sources include mostly literature and quotes of famous people; however, their users may forget their authorship with time. In Russia, proverbial aphorisms are called "крылатые слова" ("words with wings"), and they are so widely known that it is common to unite them with proverbs. For example, Lomonosov's aphorism "Науки юношей питают" became so popular with time that another variant developed – "Надежды юношей питают", which acquired an independent life as a proverb. Likewise, many Russian movies had such a big

share in creating that aphoristic fund that there was a need for a separate dictionary (Kozhevnikov 31-795).

This study includes both *proverbs* and *proverbial aphorisms* since they both express attitudes, perceptions, or morals and use rhetorical strategies in order to complete that function. For convenience, the study will refer to proverbs and proverbial aphorisms as a single category, *a proverb*.

3. Brief Review of Russian Paremiological Research

A review of literature in the domain of proverbs demonstrates that most of the time, proverbs simply circulate from one collection to another, devoid of contexts. Many Russian compilers include proverbs from Dal's famous collections into their lists without updating their currency.

In the domain of Russian demographic research, both diachronic research, emphasizing traditionality and currency of proverbs, and synchronic research, concentrating on frequency of individual proverbs at a certain time, are still scarce. Grigory Permiakov's pioneering work on a paremiological minimum has made a significant contribution to the field. Permiakov carried out the first ever paremiological statistical survey among 250 Muscovites and compiled a paremiological minimum of 300 sayings that received the highest recognition in his study. Since then, very little has been done to supplement his demographic research.

Classification remains one of the biggest stumbling blocks in Russian paremiology, and a sound theoretical framework for such a classification is still missing in the field. Russian proverbs have been classified in two principal ways: alphabetically (according to the first word or the most important word) and according to subject matter. Basing classifications on the main words of proverbs does not make a lot of sense – paremiological research does not have universally recognized criteria for choosing the pivotal words. The same proverb may be classified with different key words, depending on the intentions of the speaker/writer or the interpretation of the listener/reader or researcher. Some Russian researchers try to solve the problem by ignoring main words in favor of formal characteristics of proverbs. One of the supporters of this type of classification, Levin, makes an attempt to classify Russian proverbs from Dal's corpus "not on the basis of subject matter but according to formal considerations" (180), specifically, according to phonetic,

grammatical, and formulaic repetitions of proverbs. In general, structural classifications ignore the most important aspect of proverbs: meaning.

In the field of anthropology, some Russian paremiologists do not attach much importance to cultural contexts of proverbs, while emphasizing their structural similarities across cultures. Exploring new ways of co-teaching language and culture, Kostomarov argues that proverbs carry programmed “national knowledge” [*natsional'noe znanie*] and serve as a link between language and culture in realistic and tangible ways (83).

The present research aims at filling the gaps in these domains at least partially by compiling a collection of proverbs in current use in Russia, exploring their currency, and attempting to classify the most common proverbs according to cultural attitudes, thus offering some additional insight into proverbs as carriers of cultural and social perceptions of today's Russia.

4. Rationale for Studying and Teaching Proverbs

Investigating classroom applications of proverbial research has been the most neglected area in paremiology, and most existing studies on teaching proverbs to foreigners cannot boast of great depth. Students should study Russian proverbs even for the simple reason that they continue to have an active existence in the contemporary language as full-fledged linguistic units or speech acts. Because the figurative meanings of proverbs do not equal the sum of their individual word meanings, students may take proverbs as literal statements and thus misunderstand their message. As Pasamanick stresses, “the metaphoric proverb seldom wears its meaning on its sleeve” (5). Russians quite often make allusions to the most common proverbs, using incomplete forms that may be incomprehensible to learners. Hence, students should not rely much on discovery learning in this field. Studying the metaphorical meaning of proverbs prior to their experience in Russia will facilitate students' comprehension of native speakers' speech, mass media, and literature.

As “intensifiers of conversation” and persuasive, self-sufficient arguments, proverbs flavor conversation and decorate speech (Abrahams 119). As rhetorical devices, they attract attention and arouse emotional interest. They act as a means of amusement, “injecting spice into ordinary conversation” (Bascom 69). As such, proverbs can facilitate the development of listening and conversational skills of American students.

Proverbs provide effective material for teaching Russian grammar and vocabulary. They may serve as vivid examples of imperative, negative, degrees of comparison, the passive voice, and many other aspects of Russian grammar. Their rhythm, figuration, and rhyme make proverbs memorizable.

Aside from local semantic contexts, proverbs live in global, cultural contexts. For example, the American proverb “Necessity is the mother of invention” and the Russian proverb “Толь на выдумки хитра” have basically the same meaning. However, if we compare the choice of words in them (“necessity” and “invention” versus “голь” (“the naked ones”) and “выдумки” (“ingenious and resourceful creations”), we may see the images of two different cultures: one with a pragmatic attitude to fixing things, and the other with a creative go-around attitude of making something out of nothing. As “the core components of national psychology” [*sterzhnevye komponenty natsional’noi psikhologii*] (Vereshchiagin and Kostomarov 1976), proverbs provide fascinating insights into Russian traditional values. They may prove a more objective and persuasive way of introducing foreign beliefs than their explicit presentation in the form of stereotypes. Since Russian people express themselves in their proverbs “livelier and stronger than all descriptions of outside observers” [*zhivee i sil’nee, nezhe li vse opisaniia postoronnikh nabliudatelei*] (Snegirev 225), proverbs can help American students avoid sweeping generalizations and misconceptions. Although in a somewhat exaggerated way, proverbs also reflect societal norms. Rozhdestvenskii defines the field of paremiology as a folkloristic domain of behavior models [*fol’klornaia oblast’ modelei povedeniia*] (230). Studying social uses of proverbs ensures smoother interaction with native speakers.

5. Research on the Currency of Russian Proverbs in Oral Speech

However, none of the above justifications for learning proverbs will be valid if we do not consider such an important factor as their currency. Vereshchiagin and Kostomarov affirm that it is mass reproduction [*massovaia vosproizvodimost’*] that proves the linguistic character of aphorisms which are “represented in the contemporary linguistic mentality of Russians” [*aktual’no predstavlennye v sovremennom iazykovom soznanii russkikh*] (185). Since Russian paremiological research has paid very little attention to exploring proverbial currency, this research attempts to partly fill this gap.

In order to address the primary goal of this study, that is, to determine whether it is necessary for American students to study Russian proverbs, I attempted to answer the following research question: Do Russians use many proverbs in their oral speech, movies, and popular songs?

5.1 *Exploring Proverbial Currency in Speech*

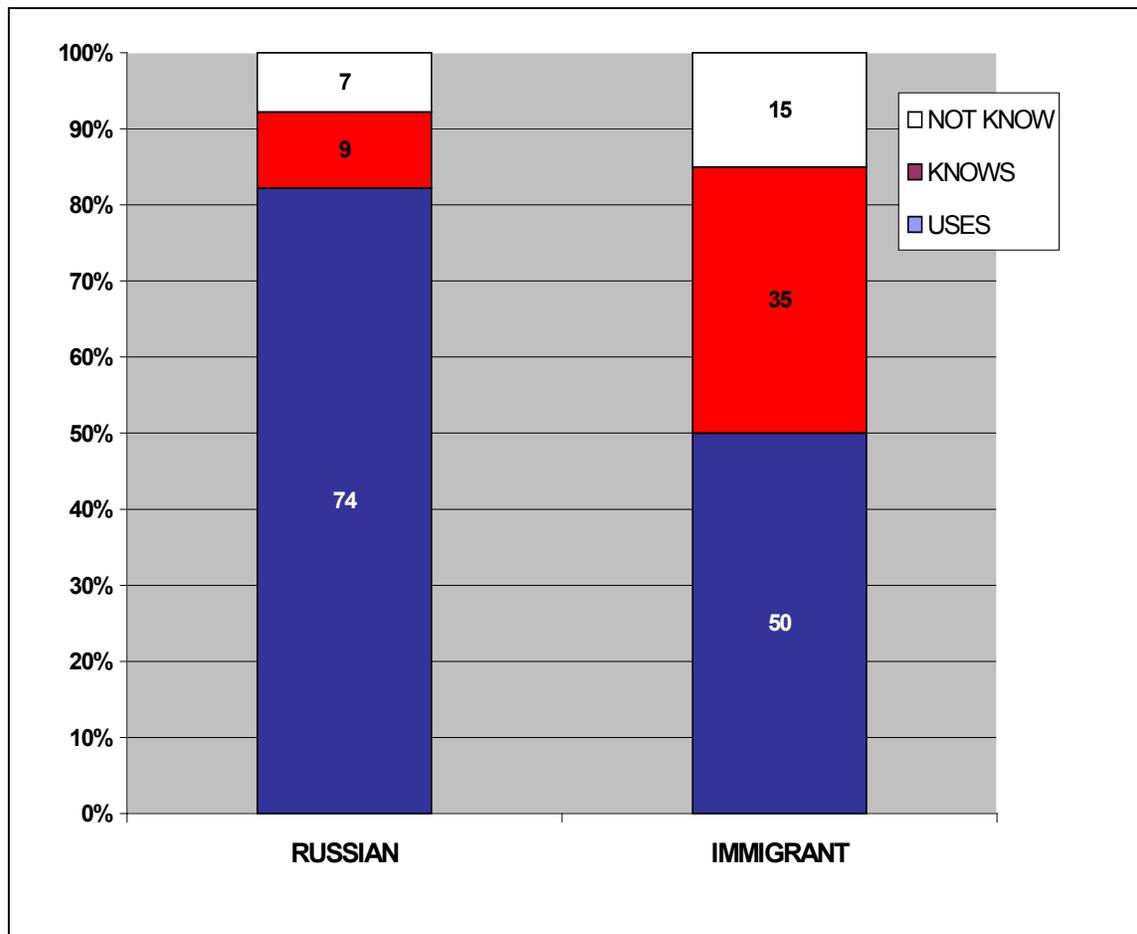
In 1994, I started to collect Russian proverbs from naturally occurring conversations in Russia, from mass media (radio, TV, songs, and movies), and informal interviews with native speakers. Simultaneously, I was collecting proverbs from written speech (newspapers, magazines, and literature), and such items of popular interest as greeting cards, pins, souvenirs, etc. In the domain of written speech, I collected proverbs from 752 newspapers, thirty immigrant newspapers, forty-four magazines, eighteen books, 125 greeting cards, etc. All the proverbs both from oral and written speech sources were recorded in two lists. Then the two proverbial lists were combined into a single list, which contained 2,000 Russian proverbs.

In order to investigate the currency of the collected proverbs, I offered the compiled list to 280 Russian participants, who were residents of fifteen Russian cities, towns, and villages. The participants represented both sexes, ages varying from fourteen to ninety, and various places of residence, occupations and levels of education. The same proverbial list was offered to forty-five Russian immigrants, representing both sexes, ages varying from seventeen to seventy-six, and various places of residence, occupations and levels of education. The respondents specified which proverbs they used or might potentially use in their speech, which ones they knew but did not use themselves, and which ones they did not recognize at all. They used "+" for the proverbs in their active use, "-" for the proverbs in their passive use, and "?" for the proverbs they did not know at all.

The descriptive analysis revealed that, on average, a resident of Russia uses seventy-four percent out of the listed proverbs in everyday speech, knows passively an additional nineteen percent, and does not recognize seven percent of them. A Russian immigrant residing in the U.S. uses on average fifty percent out of the listed proverbs, knows passively thirty-five percent, and does not recognize fifteen percent of them. Thus, these results show persuasive evidence for Russian proverbs' continued existence in oral speech of Russians and

Russian immigrants. However, an average native Russian outperforms an average Russian immigrant from the U.S. in proverbial usage (see Chart 1).

Chart 1. Comparison of self-reported proverbial usage among Russians residing in Russia and immigrant Russians



5.2 *Proverbial Use in Oral Mass Media (Films and Songs)*

I also looked for proverbs in 139 Russian films (137 feature films and two documentary films) and five recorded comedic programs. I separated them into three categories: early Soviet (Eisenstein through the 1960s), late Soviet (1970-1988), and post-Soviet (1988-present). Tables 1-3 display the results of the survey. The list of the surveyed films and programs is given in my dissertation "Proverbial Language and Its Role in Acquiring a Second Language and Culture" -(Appendix 3).

Table 1. Occurrences of proverbs in films

	All Films (n = 139)	Early Soviet Films (n = 34)	Late Soviet Films (n = 65)	Post Soviet Films (n = 40)
Total number of proverbs	792	212	402	188
Total number of proverbs in the current proverbial list	627 (79.2%)	149 (77.4%)	326 (81.1%)	152 (80.9)
Average number of proverbs per film	5.70 (4.26)	5.94 (5.16)	6.18 (4.28)	4.70 (3.18)

Table 2. Comparisons of occurrences of all proverbs per film

Categories	Mean			Variance		
Early Soviet	5.94			26.66		
Late Soviet	6.18			18.28		
Post Soviet	4.7			10.11		
Source of Variation	SS	Df	MS	F	P	F _{critical}
Between Categories	57.242	2	28.62	1.593	0.2072	3.0627
Within Categories	2444.1	136	17.97		ns	
Note: "ns" is an abbreviation for "not significant"						

Table 3. Comparisons of occurrences of current proverbs per film

Categories	Mean			Variance		
Early Soviet	4.38			18.79		
Late Soviet	5.02			13.02		
Post Soviet	3.80			7.91		
Source of Variation	SS	Df	MS	F	P	F _{critical}
Between Categories	37.320	2	18.66	1.441	0.240	3.063
Within Categories	1761.4	136	12.95		ns	

The results of two Single-Factor ANOVA tests show no significant differences in the amount of proverb use among the films of the three periods, which indicates that the propensity to use Russian proverbs has not changed much during the past century. They also demonstrate no significant difference among the three periods in terms of currency of the proverbs.

Sixty-two songs represent another domain of oral mass media. Out of those sixty-two songs, thirty-four have proverbs, within the range of 0-3 sayings per song. The total number of the proverbs found in the songs is forty-two.

The overall results of the research on the currency of Russian proverbs in oral speech support my hypothesis about an extensive proverbial use in Russia and give a positive answer to the research question.

6. Research on the Currency of Russian Proverbs in Written Speech

In order to determine whether it is necessary for American students to study Russian proverbs and to supplement the results of the oral speech study to that effect, I attempted to answer the following research question: Do native and immigrant Russians use many proverbs in their written speech?

6.1 *Proverbial Currency in Newspapers and Magazines*

To answer the above research question, I first surveyed proverbs in 752 Russian newspapers and forty-four magazines published in Russia, and twenty-eight Russian immigrant newspapers. Then I separated a working random sample of 207 Russian newspapers¹, all the twenty-eight immigrant newspapers, and eleven random Russian magazines and counted all the proverbs in them. A descriptive analysis of the data from the survey supports the results gleaned from all the oral speech surveys and answers the first research question – Russians use many proverbs in their daily lives. Every single surveyed newspaper and magazine had proverbs in it. The total number of proverbs found in 207 Russian newspapers is 3,772; in twenty-eight Russian immigrant newspapers, 519; and in eleven Russian magazines, 268.

As we see from Table 4, the grand means of proverb use per page and per issue in the newspapers from Russia are significantly different from those of the Russian immigrant newspapers from the U.S. in favor of the native Russian

¹ In order to check if that sample was representative, I separated it into three categories: 1991-1999, 2000, and 2001-2005, and ran a single-factor ANOVA, which indicated that those categories were not significantly different from each other. The surveyed newspapers included 58 different titles. See my dissertation "Proverbial Language and Its Role in Acquiring a Second Language and Culture" for more details on the newspaper samples (Table 6, pp. 67-68).

newspapers. Also, the native newspapers contain significantly more proverbs in headlines and captions than the immigrant newspapers. Thus, the comparison suggests that although Russian immigrants residing in the U.S. consistently use proverbs in their written speech, Russians residing in Russia outperform their immigrant counterparts in proverbial use (see Chart 2). These results support those of the oral survey.

Table 4. Comparison of the grand means of proverbs, headlines, and captions in Russian newspapers and magazines

	Newspapers from Russia (n = 181)	Russian Immigrant Newspapers (n = 28)	Russian Magazines (n = 11)	T-Test comparing Russian and Immigrant newspapers	T-Test comparing Russian newspapers and magazines
Mean number of proverbs per page	1.92 (0.84)	1.49 (0.86)	0.71 (0.353)	P<0.005	P<0.0001
Mean number of proverbs per issue	18.57 (11.21)	18.64 (14.3)	24.4 (14.36)	ns	P = 0.010
Mean number of headlines per page	0.60 (0.40)	0.31 (0.19)	0.153 (0.095)	P=0.002	P<0.0001
Mean number of headlines per issue	5.55 (3.64)	4.29 (3.76)	6.0 (5.50)	P<0.05	ns
Mean number of captions per page	0.08 (0.15)	0.002 (0.01)	0.0025 (0.013)	P=0.003	ns
Mean number of captions per issue	0.74 (1.26)	0.036 (0.19)	0.364 (0.013)	P=0.002	ns

Chart 2. Comparison of proverbial use in native Russian versus Russian immigrant newspapers

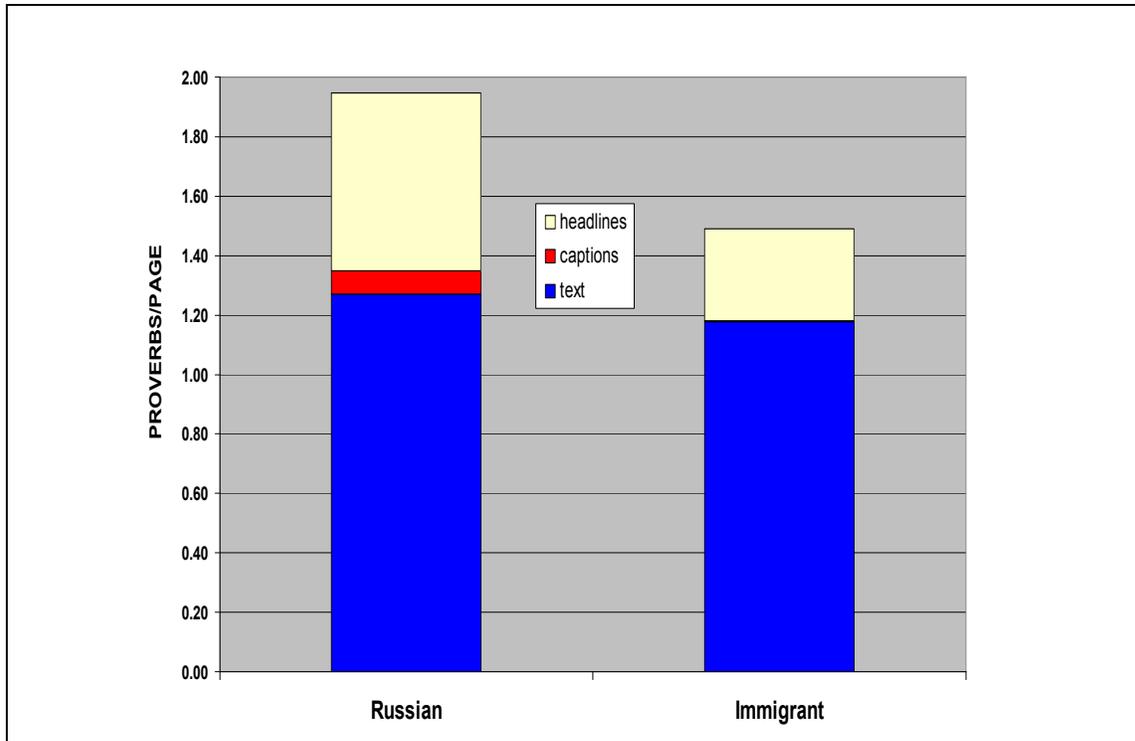


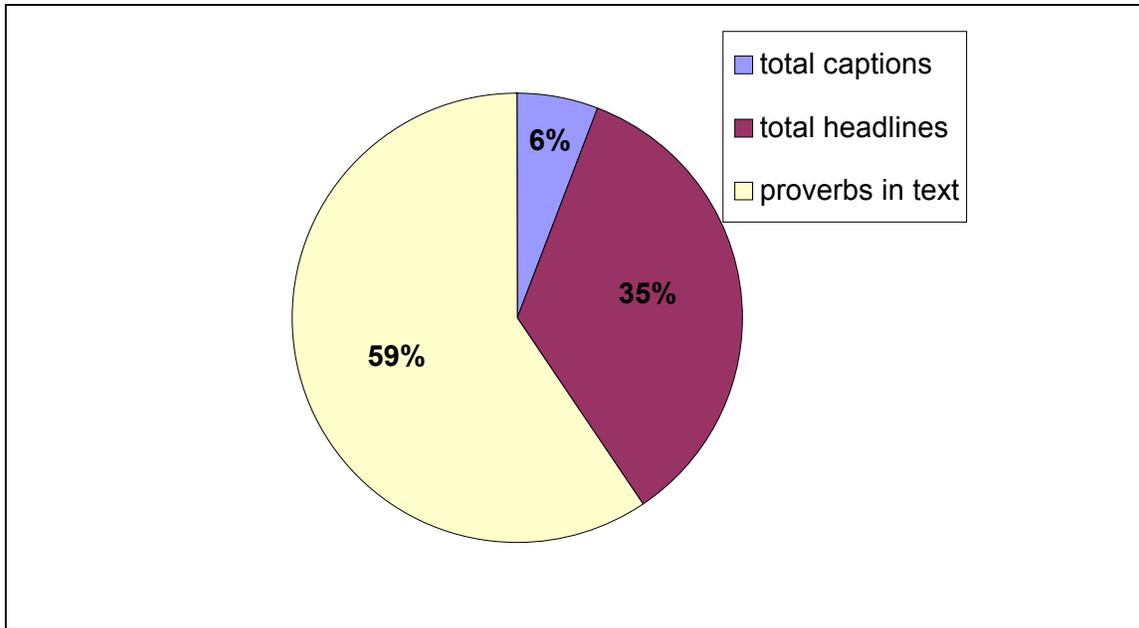
Table 5 presents the results of a single-factor ANOVA comparing proverb density of newspapers in three temporal categories.

Table 5. Comparison of temporal categories (1991-1999; 2000; 2001-2005) with regard to proverbs per page

Categories	Mean		Variance			
2001-2005	1.9		0.90			
2000	1.97		0.59			
1991-1999	1.9		0.37			
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P	F _{critical}
Between Categories	0.44	2	0.22	0.32	0.729	3.04
Within Categories	140.3	202	0.70		ns	

Chart 3 illustrates the extensive use of headlines and captions in native Russian newspapers. Out of the total number of the proverbs collected, thirty-five percent were headlines and six percent captions.

Chart 3. The relative occurrences of proverbs in headlines and captions in relation to the text in Russian newspapers



The test shows no significant difference between the newspapers with regard to proverb density. It indicates that Russian newspapers consistently used about the same number of proverbs per page within the period of fifteen years (1991-2005). It also supports the choice of this random newspaper sample as a valid representative sample for statistical tests.

Although newspapers function as samples of written speech in the current research, they also give samples of oral speech in such categories of articles as interviews, which appear in newspapers quite often. Therefore, newspapers provide an effective resource for studying proverb use. The ability to study proverbs in modern contexts, including ironic and humorous ones, makes this resource even more valuable. The random newspaper sample included both “serious,” quality newspapers, such as *Izvestiia*, *Kul'tura*, etc., and “gossipy” newspapers for the mass reader, such as *Speed-Info*, *Karavan Ross*, etc. Despite quite a big difference in function and presentation of material, all the newspapers included a substantial number of proverbs. It is interesting to note that the most intellectual newspapers, *Literaturnaia gazeta* and *Kul'tura*, which target people with higher education, had the largest number of proverbs. Russian newspapers feature a significant number of headlines and captions, which present even a bigger challenge to foreign students due to their tendency

to be abbreviated or used as references. For example, such proverbial headlines as “Не дожидаясь грома” and “Мы слишком долго запрягли” from two issues of *Izvestiia* (2000) have undergone noticeable transformations both in form and content. Since they are used as abbreviated and modified variants out of immediate context and they do not have any further mention in the articles, the students may understand the headlines literally (“гром” as something to do with weather and “запрягать” as something to do with horses) and thus misinterpret their meanings. The functions of these two headlines are to attract the readers’ attention by metaphorical images and to alert the readers to the dangers of procrastination. The readers are supposed to know the proverbs “Пока гром не грянет, мужик не перекрестится” and “Русские долго запрягают, да быстро едут” in order to figure out the meanings of the headlines.

6.2 *Proverbial Currency in Literature*

To explore proverbial currency in literature, I analyzed thirty-three Russian books and five immigrant Russian books for proverbial use: ten books written by Russian classical authors, eleven books written by authors of the Soviet period, and four books written by modern authors after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Eight books of contemporary non-fiction and six books by immigrant writers were also included in the analysis of literature. All the books were grouped into four categories: classical (before 1917), Soviet (1917-1988), post-Soviet (1988-present), and immigrant. See my dissertation “Proverbial Language and Its Role in Acquiring a Second Language and Culture” for the complete list of the surveyed books (Table 13, pp.76-78). The grand mean for all thirty-eight titles is forty-four proverbs per book. Several authors used proverbs as chapter titles.

The ANOVA test (Table 6) did not show significant differences between the four categories of Russian literature. However, the sample size of post-Soviet literature was smaller than that of the other categories. In order to expand the sample, eight more sources from contemporary nonfiction were added to the Post-Soviet sample. A T-test compared the individual literature categories against one another (see Table 7).

The probabilities generated by this T-test support the results of the ANOVA tests – none of the literature categories are significantly different with regard to the number of proverbs per page.

Table 6. Comparisons of occurrences of proverbs per book (a) and proverbs per page by single-factor ANOVA

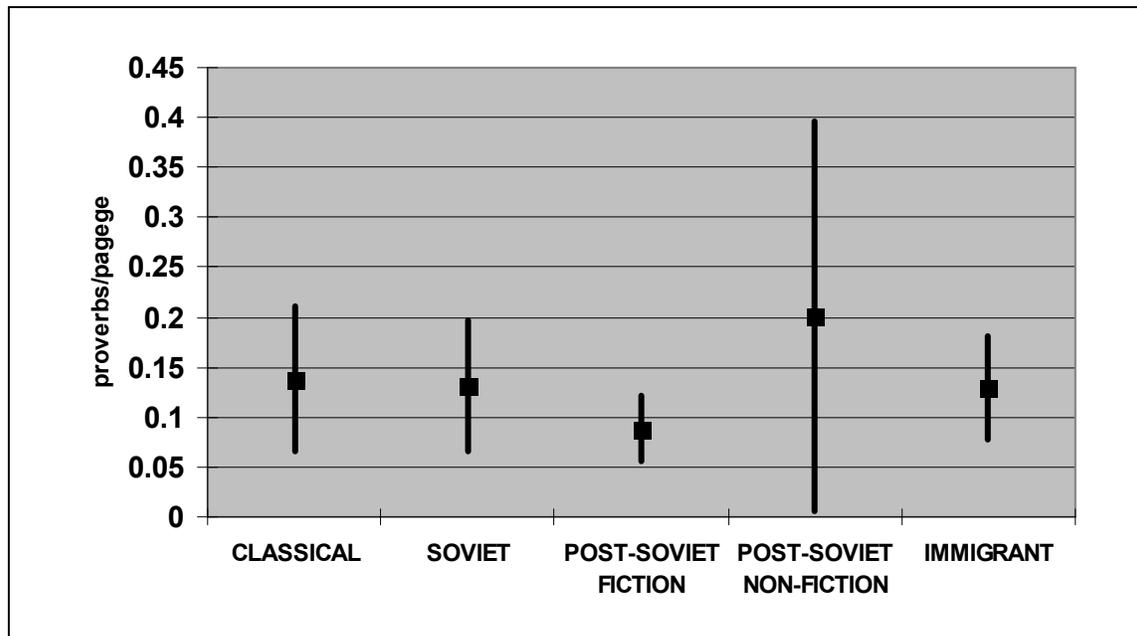
a. Proverbs per book						
Categories		Mean		Variance		
Classical		35.4		572.93		
Soviet		49.8		1556.76		
Post Soviet		47.7		839.36		
Immigrant		40.8		781.70		
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P	F _{critical}
Between Categories	1303.0	3	434.34	0.446	0.721	2.883
Within Categories	33083.8	34	973.05		ns	
Table 14. continued						
b. Proverbs per page						
Categories		Mean		Variance		
Classical		0.1382		0.0053		
Soviet		0.1317		0.0042		
Post Soviet		0.1637		0.0275		
Immigrant		0.1290		0.0027		
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P	F _{critical}
Between Categories	0.0077	3	0.0026	0.217	0.884	2.883
Within Categories	0.4036	34	0.0119		ns	

Table 7. Comparisons between literature categories relative to proverbs per page

	Classical	Soviet	Post-Soviet	Post-Soviet + nonfiction	Immigrant
Classical		0.8322	0.1097	0.6576	0.7763
Soviet			0.1153	0.5566	0.8998
Post-Soviet					0.1070
Post-Soviet + nonfiction					0.6447
Immigrant					

Chart 4 provides a graphic representation of variation among the categories of Russian literature.

Chart 4. Comparison of variations in proverb use among the categories of Russian literature



As seen from Chart 4, contemporary nonfiction shows the greatest variance among the literature categories and the highest mean number of proverbs per page. Other comparisons between Russian fiction and nonfiction relative to proverbial use showed that the average number of proverbs per page was higher in nonfiction than in the pooled results for Russian fiction. A T-test comparing the two means yielded a probability of 0.051 despite the range in variance of the post-Soviet nonfiction.

The results of the comparison of proverbial use in Russian fiction and contemporary nonfiction are quite intriguing. The fact that the average number of proverbs per page was almost twice as high in nonfiction as in the pooled results of Russian fiction demonstrates that proverbs can serve as effective tools for making and supporting arguments. Despite the fact that nonfiction does not usually use dialogs, which appear to be the main sources of proverb use, authors use succinct, expressive aphoristic language in support of their opinions. The literature research allowed for the comparison of proverbial usage over time. In that respect, the results are quite astounding – many

proverbs have shown an amazing staying power from the 19th century to the present. Some of the traditional proverbs have undergone certain transformations to adjust to the existing conditions, and others have kept their integrity intact.

Aside from the proverbs in the surveyed newspapers and books, I found commonly used proverbs on 125 greeting cards, out of which fifty-five proverbs are traditional common proverbs; seven – their incomplete versions, forty-six – their variants with modern alterations, and seventeen modern, newly created proverbs. I also found twenty-four pins with proverbs so far: eight pins with traditional proverbs and sixteen pins with modernized versions of traditional proverbs, reflecting some recent developments. I also found sixty-six Russian items (eighteen mugs, two wine-holders, two trays, four plaques, three cutting boards, two table cloths, a collection of twelve match boxes, seven hats, seven toys, and nine birch-bark containers) which have common Russian proverbs on them. Items of popular interest also illustrate the longevity of traditional proverbs. The other examples of proverbial use include cookbooks, coloring books, children's books, calendars, bookmarks, etc. A book containing sheet music for singing 230 proverbs (a separate tune for each proverb!) deserves a separate mention. Proverbs can be also seen as advertisements on the walls of Russian stores, banks, and other public buildings, and even in menus and food labels.

The overall results of the written speech research provide an affirmative answer to the first research question: Russians consistently use proverbs in newspapers, magazines, literature, and various items of popular interest.

The research points to a significant difference between the levels of proverb use among Russians residing in Russia and immigrant Russians both in oral and written speech (with the exception of literature). The fact that Russians residing in Russia tend to use more proverbs may be explained by immigrants' restricted communication within their Russian communities of bilingual people. In such restricted surroundings, immigrants may lack the scope and versatility of exposure to proverbs in Russia, where people encounter them in most spheres of their lives on a daily basis. Proverb creation in Russia seems to be an ongoing, nonstop process, whereas Russian immigrants tend to be more conservative in their use of proverbs.

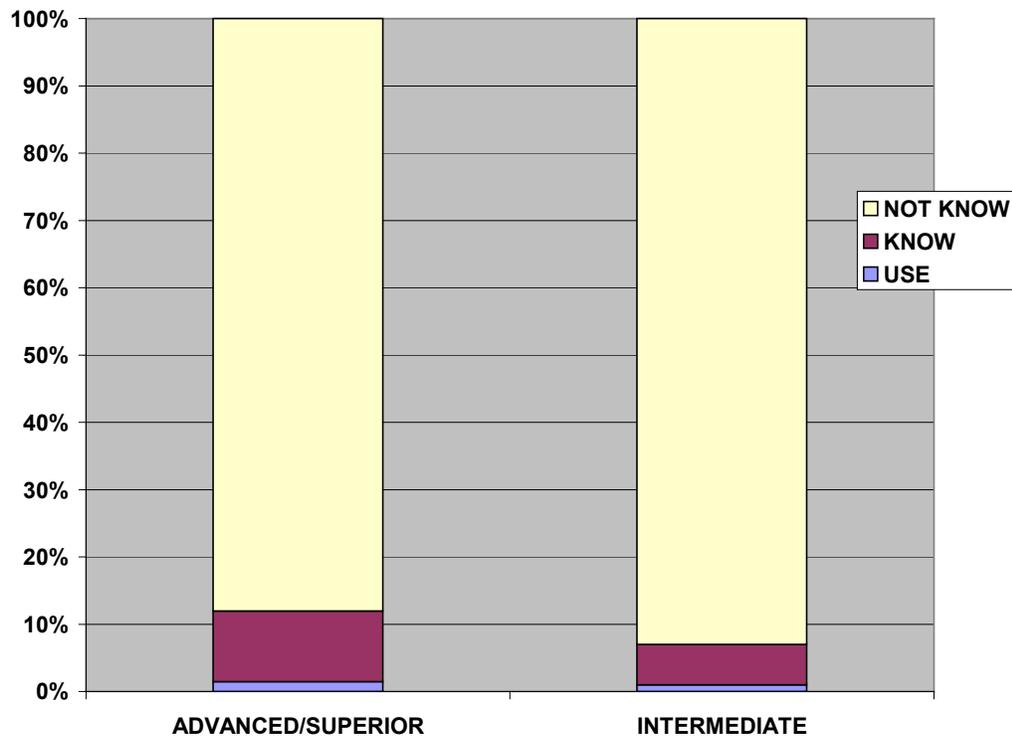
7. Research on American Students' Knowledge of Russian Proverbs

To assess American students' knowledge of Russian proverbs and thus determine the necessity for more advanced students of Russian to study them, I attempted to answer the following research question: Do American students know common Russian proverbs? If more advanced American students do not know common Russian proverbs and they want to achieve a more effective communication with native speakers, they should consider investing more time into studying Russian proverbial language.

After the Russian survey of self-reported proverbial usage, I explored the currency and frequency of the included proverbs to single out the most common proverbs. Then the least common proverbs (the proverbs that received less than ten percent recognition among all the native Russian participants of the oral speech survey) were excluded from the compiled list. The reduced proverbial list of common Russian proverbs, recognized by ninety percent of the Russian respondents, contained **1,017** items. Between 1998 and 2003, I carried out three surveys of American students' reading comprehension of Russian proverbs. Forty-two American undergraduate and graduate American students of Russian participated in the study. Their average age at the time of the test was 26.5, ranging from nineteen to thirty-four. Sixty-five percent of the participants were females, and thirty-five percent were males. All of them had been to Russia for at least one month, and two of them for more than two years. They had taken from three to twelve years of Russian, including high school and college. Eighty-four percent of them were or had been Russian majors. Forty-five percent of the participants reported that they had scored at the intermediate-high level (1+), forty percent at the advanced level (2 – 2+), and fifteen percent at the superior level (3) in an oral proficiency interview (OPI) assessing their speaking ability in Russian.

The American participants indicated which Russian proverbs in the compiled reduced list they themselves used or might potentially use, which ones they knew but did not use, and which ones they did not know at all. The descriptive statistical analysis of the data obtained from the survey revealed that, on average, an advanced or superior student of Russian may use 1.5 percent of the proverbs listed, knows 10.5 percent of them, and does not know eighty-eight percent. The average intermediate learner may use one percent proverbs from the list, knows six percent, and does not know ninety-three percent.

Chart 5. Comparison of proverbial knowledge between advanced/superior and intermediate students of Russian



It should be noted, however, that the participants of the survey were not asked to explain the meanings of the listed proverbs in other words. Some of them may have inflated the number of proverbs that they know in an effort to boost their self-esteem, and some of them may have thought that they knew certain proverbs just because they recognized all their component parts and thus may have overlooked their hidden metaphorical meanings. Therefore, the above statistics on the American student mastery of Russian proverbs may be overly positive. The American participants with more extensive immersion experience and more years of Russian do not significantly outperform less experienced students in their comprehension of proverbs. Those who have had an immersion experience in Russia for at least one year and have studied Russian for ten or more years use 2.5 percent and know twelve percent of the proverbs, which indicates only a small difference between their results and the results of the other students. However, there may be a certain correlation between limited formal study of Russian proverbs and the number of proverbs recognized. Only six participants out of forty had some limited experience learning proverbs in class. Their level of proverb use (four percent) and

knowledge (twelve percent) tends to be a little higher than the level of the other students; thus, the comparison results show that direct training of proverbs may produce a measurable effect. However, the sample is too small to draw any definitive conclusions.

The total results of the survey give an answer to the research question – American students of Russian display limited knowledge of the most common Russian proverbs.

Since there is no significant correlation between the number of proverbs recognized and the amount of time the participants have studied Russian or have spent in Russia, lack of formal study of proverbs may explain this limited knowledge. Students may experience difficulty figuring out the metaphorical and culture-laden meanings of proverbs in the fluent speech of native speakers if they have not learned these proverbs before.

A lack of motivation to study proverbs may also contribute to the participants' ignorance in this domain of the language. Students may not consider proverbs seriously, being unaware of their own proverb use in their native language and assuming that this aspect of language is a relic of the past. Furthermore, American students may erroneously assume that Russians do not usually use proverbs in their speech, because students may fail to understand proverbs that they hear and hence fail to identify them as such. In such a case, students often just ignore what they missed and concentrate on the rest, trying to get the gist of the meaning. Likewise, American students may not recognize certain phrases they encounter in mass media as proverbs, especially if these proverbs are reduced or referenced only. For example, if students do not know the proverb "Лес рубят – щепки летят", they may not figure out the reference to this proverb in the newspaper headline "Лес рубят." Instead, they would most likely understand this phrase just literally: "the forest is being cut." Also, Russian native speakers may simplify their idiomatic speech in order to adjust to the level of comprehension of foreigners and thus use a very limited number of proverbs, if at all, while conversing with Americans.

The compiled paremiological minimum serves as a diagnostic tool in identifying comprehension difficulties of the participants rather than their ability to use Russian proverbs in their speech. To date, no research has been conducted to determine the required level of fluency needed for mastery and production of proverbs. This kind of data would certainly help to explore the

role of proverbs in the emerging interlanguage of American students of Russian.

8. Research Related to Resources for Teaching Proverbs

Without effective teaching materials, teachers may end up teaching Russian proverbs as ornamental pieces of universal outdated wisdom or as colorful examples of some grammar patterns at best. In order to generate the resources necessary for teaching Russian proverbs, I posed the following research questions:

- 1) Do many existing Russian-language textbooks/proverbial dictionaries teach/include the most common Russian proverbs?
- 2) If so, do they provide all the necessary information (contexts, explanations, and meaningful classifications) for their interpretation and use?

If most surveyed textbooks either do not teach common proverbs at all or include them only in a fleeting way, a proverbial manual is needed to supplement the existing textbooks. If most surveyed proverbial dictionaries are not based on current demographic research and do not provide all the necessary information for proverbs' interpretation and use, a frequency paremiological minimum is needed to supplement the existing dictionaries. In order to answer the above research questions, I conducted a survey of twenty textbooks of the Russian language. The research investigates in what kind of linguistic and cultural teaching situations proverbs occur throughout the textbooks. Three of the Russian-language textbooks were for beginners; fourteen for intermediate or intermediate/advanced; and three for advanced or superior learners of Russian as a second or foreign language. Their authors are both Russians and Americans. (See my dissertation "Proverbial Language and Its Role in Acquiring a Second Language and Culture" for a list of the surveyed textbooks (Table 16, pp. 121-122)).

Five out of twenty surveyed textbooks do not offer proverbs at all, six of them offer a very limited number of proverbs, eight of them offer from ten to forty-six (eight to forty-six common) proverbs, and one offers a substantial number of them (111, out of which ninety-five are common ones). The bigger number of proverbs, though, does not always reflect the effectiveness of their presentation. The average percentage of uncommon proverbs used is twenty-

one percent (approximately one out of five). No variants or abbreviations are given for the ones that are in current use, whereas in Russia they are used as such most of the time. Also, not a single textbook places proverbs in ironic or humorous settings, which often changes their meanings to the opposite ones. Six textbooks use proverbs in lists (with translations or without), unrelated to the texts or grammar and vocabulary presentation. Such an out-of-context use can be justified in case of a special section devoted to presentation of the proverb as a separate unit of language; for example, Offord lists forty-six examples of common proverbs after the definition. In such a case, the author's goal appears to compare the proverb to other types of idiomatic language rather than to teach them functionally. However, in general, proverbs in lists are like "homeless orphans" – they don't belong anywhere, and their future is hopeless. The same fate awaits the proverbs that appear in textbooks only in a casual, fleeting way; for example, within sentences that deal with other aspects of language in exercises. In such a case, it is clear that authors do not mean to include proverbs with the intention of teaching them; rather, a proverb just "happens to be there." Its use is not really justified for *teaching* purposes because students may either not detect it at all, or may skip it as an unimportant detail. Only in five textbooks some of the included proverbs are recycled; that is, they have more than one reference.

Only four textbooks use Russian proverbs in titles or subtitles; although, as the mass media research indicates, Russians use a lot of headlines and titles in written speech. The textbook by Annushkin uses them quite successfully as mostly titles of lessons; however, the titles appear to have the only mention of these proverbs (1991). For some reason, some authors use English proverbial titles (for example, *All work and no play*) in textbooks for advanced learners, instead of using Russian proverbs with similar meanings.

Only five authors out of twenty include some examples of proverbs for introducing certain grammar topics. Proverbs as examples of grammar use are used only occasionally and unsystematically (the exception is Rosentahl, 1996). The use of proverbs in lexical and communicative exercises appears to be more popular with Russian authors, who sometimes include proverbs as invitations to discussions (or even topics for compositions); for example, explain why students dis/agree with certain proverbs. In some lexical exercises proverbs are included in a meaningful way, although the contexts for inferring their meanings are not provided for the students. Most of the exercises do not explore the figurative meanings at all.

Quite often the titles of sections where proverbs are given as examples and the meanings of the proverbs do not match. For example, one of the authors lists the proverb “И на старуху бывает проруха” (which means “things happen”) – in the section entitled “Older and Wiser” only because the proverb has the word “старуха” (“old woman”). As to culture, only two authors include brief cultural notes or some reference to cultural attitudes behind the included proverbs, and they do not do it consistently.

The range of the proverbs used in the textbooks is quite broad: from 0 to 111 for all kinds of proverbs and from 0 to ninety-five for commonly used ones. It goes beyond the scope of the study to explore the reasons for such a discrepancy. It seems that it is authors’ individual attitudes to proverbs that account for the inclusion of many proverbs in some cases and their complete absence in others.

I also examined thirty-four Russian proverbial dictionaries, in order to find out whether they included common Russian proverbs, what types of support for understanding and using of Russian proverbs they provided, and what type of classification, if any, they used. The situation with proverbial dictionaries is similar to that of textbooks. Only one of them (Permiakov’s dictionary) is based on demographic research and thus, uses only common proverbs. Although some of them claim that only most common Russian proverbs are included, they do not say how they determined the proverbial currency. Besides, the very fact that the sources for some dictionaries include only old dictionaries (1741-1848) speaks for itself. None of the dictionaries provide authentic samples of oral speech as contexts for the entries; six dictionaries use examples from literature. Most of the dictionaries can be used only by advanced learners because they do not provide any translations into English or give English equivalents (only six dictionaries do).

Thirty dictionaries mix proverbs with other types of proverbial expressions and phraseologisms, which interfere with a more meaningful classification – proverbs express an attitude, whereas the other phrases only describe things or people in a colorful way. Only six dictionaries provide a meaningful semantic classification (sometimes with certain inconsistencies) versus an alphabetical one, or the one with components united by “key” words rather than by commonality of meaning. (See my dissertation “Proverbial Language and Its Role in Acquiring a Second Language and Culture” for a list of the surveyed dictionaries (Table 17, pp. 127-128)).

Thus, most of the thirty-four proverbial dictionaries lack some authentic and contemporary contextual and cultural information, which is indispensable for studying Russian proverbs. What is even more important, they lack the main aspects of demographic research: currency and frequency of the included proverbs. This is not meant to detract from the merits of the surveyed dictionaries. This is just to argue that the domain of proverbs calls for a more versatile and effective organization of proverbs and a constant update of these linguistic units, subject to change. In order to allow immediate classroom application of the present research on the currency of Russian proverbs, I have undertaken the following two projects: 1) designing a proverbial manual for intermediate/advanced Russian-language students; 2) creating a frequency proverbial dictionary, with a classification of proverbs according to cultural attitudes. It goes without saying that neither the proverbial manual nor the frequency dictionary can replace the existing Russian-language textbooks and dictionaries – they can only complement them.

Conclusion

This article provides an empirically-based investigation of the linguistic rationale of incorporating proverbs into the teaching of Russian language and culture to American students. It presents statistical results of extensive research on the currency of Russian proverbs, collected in the domains of mass media, literature, and everyday speech of native and immigrant Russians. Multiple surveys of both oral and written speech, reflected in this study, clearly demonstrate that Russian contemporary speakers use proverbs in a full range of expressive meanings and cultural contexts.

Based on the distribution of proverbs across a broad range of text types and a series of reading comprehension checks for U.S. students of Russian, the present study demonstrates that without special training, English-based learners of Russian may fail to infer the meanings of proverbs in many contexts, thus impeding their comprehension of the general meanings of these texts as well. The research also identifies the particular role played by Russian proverbs in contemporary presentational discourse in quickly establishing rapport between/among interlocutors.

Finally, the survey of Russian textbooks and proverbial dictionaries reveals the need for creating a proverbial manual and a frequency dictionary in order to provide additional resources for teaching Russian proverbs.

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