

# SEMANTIC FIELDS IN PROVERBS: A CROSS LINGUISTIC STUDY OF MORAL CONCEPTS

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## Abstract

This article deals with such moral concepts as honesty and truth, hard work and diligence, justice and fairness as well as respect for elders and experience in English and Russian proverbs. It demonstrates how both traditions use proverbs to convey moral values, but with notable cultural differences in emphasis and framing. English proverbs tend to present virtues such as honesty, hard work, and justice in pragmatic, rational, and outcome-oriented terms, highlighting personal responsibility, efficiency, and intellectual reasoning. Russian proverbs, by contrast, emphasize the ethical, communal, and moral dimensions of these values, framing honesty, diligence, fairness, and respect for elders as obligations that strengthen social cohesion and moral integrity. The analysis reveals that despite these cultural differences, both English and Russian proverbial traditions affirm universal moral principles, reflecting shared human concerns about ethical conduct, social order, and personal development.

**Keywords:** Proverb, moral concepts, honesty and justice, hard work and diligence, justice and fairness, respect for elders and experience.

## Introduction

A proverb, as a type of paremiological expression, embodies narratives, practical wisdom, spiritual values, and cultural heritage accumulated over centuries by various peoples around the world. Proverbs are concise, memorable sayings that often encapsulate universal truths, moral lessons, or social norms. They function not only as reflections of everyday life and human experience but also as a means of preserving the ethical and philosophical traditions of a culture. A proverb typically forms a complete sentence, conveys a clear moral or practical conclusion, and can be interpreted either literally or figuratively, allowing it to be applied in multiple contexts.

The study of proverbs – paremiology – provides insights into language, thought patterns, and cultural values, revealing how societies express and transmit wisdom across generations. By analyzing proverbs from different linguistic and cultural traditions, researchers can compare moral concepts, social norms, and collective experiences, highlighting both universal themes and culturally specific perspectives.



## Methods

In the course of this research, a combination of linguistic and comparative methods was employed. These include linguistic description, semantic and stylistic analysis, and the comparative method, which together allow for the systematic study of proverbs' meanings, forms, and functions across English and Russian traditions.

## Results and Discussion

Proverbs have become the object of study not only paremiologists, but also linguists, methodologists, literary critics as well as writers and poets I. Disraeli, V.I. Dal, E.Ya. Kokare, R. Norrick, W. Mieder, E.V. Ivanova, A. Dundes, M. Dzhusupov, P.U. Bakirov [3; 2; 7; 10; 8; 6; 4; 5; 1] etc.

Linguists, methodologists etc. had different viewpoints on the meaning, functions and value of proverbs. W. Emerson considered that “proverbs are boulders, and have the conciseness of boulders” [9, p. 166]; N. Norrick confirmed: “A proverb is a traditional, conversational, didactic genre with a generalized meaning, a potentially free phraseological unit with a figurative sense” [11, p. 78]; A. Dundes stated: “A proverb is a traditional propositional statement consisting at least of a descriptive element, which consists of a topic and a comment”. He clarifies his definition by stating that the topic of a proverb is the main element, the core that conveys its basic meaning, while the descriptive element is the part that supports, explains, or comments on the first part. Examples: Time flies, Money talks, and Opposites attract. In the proverb Time flies, there is only one topic – time – and one comment – flies [4, p. 127].

The semantic field of **honesty and truth** is clearly and richly represented in both English and Russian proverbial traditions. English proverbs such as “Honesty is the best policy” and “Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom” present truthfulness as a rational, practical, and intellectually grounded virtue. Honesty is viewed as a foundation of wisdom and personal consistency, as illustrated by “If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything,” which emphasizes clarity of mind and logical simplicity as benefits of being truthful. In addition, the saying “Honesty is a very expensive gift; don't expect it from cheap people” frames honesty as a rare moral quality that reflects individual character rather than social obligation.

Russian proverbs, by contrast, tend to emphasize honesty as a moral duty and social bond. Proverbs such as «Держись за правду, будут за тебя держаться все добрые люди» highlight truth as the basis of trust and communal respect, while «Не тот честен, кто за честью гоняется, а тот, за кем она сама бежит» stresses that genuine honesty is recognized naturally and does not require self-promotion. The proverb «Лучше горькая правда, чем сладкая ложь» reflects a strong ethical stance, valuing moral integrity over comfort or personal gain.

This comparison shows that while both English and Russian cultures highly value honesty and truth, English proverbs tend to conceptualize them as pragmatic and cognitive virtues that simplify life and support rational thinking, whereas Russian proverbs frame honesty as a deeply ethical and socially unifying principle. Despite these differences in emphasis, both traditions affirm honesty as a cornerstone of wisdom and moral behavior.



Another significant semantic field reflected in both English and Russian proverbial traditions is **hard work and diligence**. English proverbs such as “No pain, no gain” emphasize effort and perseverance as essential conditions for success, presenting labor as a rational investment that leads to measurable results. Similarly, proverbs like “Idle hands make one poor, but diligent hands bring wealth” and “All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty” associate moral worth with productivity, contrasting action with idleness. The proverb “Wise words bring many benefits, and hard work brings rewards” further reinforces the idea that effort, alongside wisdom, is a reliable path to achievement.

In Russian proverbs, hard work is portrayed as a moral necessity and a condition of survival, deeply connected to nature, time, and collective experience. Proverbs such as «Без труда не вытащишь и рыбку из пруда» stress that even small rewards require effort, while «Кто не работает, тот не ест» frames labor as a basic ethical rule governing social life. The proverb «Летний день год кормит, а весенний – весь век» reflects an agrarian worldview, emphasizing timely and persistent work as the foundation of long-term well-being.

This comparison demonstrates that both English and Russian cultures share a strong belief in the ethical value of hard work and diligence. However, English proverbs tend to present labor in pragmatic and outcome-oriented terms, focusing on personal gain and efficiency, whereas Russian proverbs emphasize hard work as a moral obligation shaped by natural cycles and communal responsibility. Despite these cultural differences, both traditions regard diligence as a key virtue leading to personal stability and social success.

The semantic field of **justice and fairness** is strongly represented in both English and Russian proverbs. In English proverbs, justice is often presented as a principle of rational balance, where actions naturally lead to appropriate consequences. Proverbs such as “You reap what you sow” and “A fair exchange is no robbery” emphasize that fairness ensures mutual benefit and maintains social stability. Similarly, “What is right is not always popular, and what is popular is not always right” highlights moral integrity as a guide for fair action, while “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” frames fairness as a practical ethical principle guiding interpersonal behavior. Other English proverbs, like “Let justice be done though the heavens fall” and “Justice delayed is justice denied” say that fairness must be upheld even in the face of difficulty, reflecting a commitment to ethical consistency and accountability.

In Russian proverbs, justice is more strongly connected to moral duty and communal ethics. Proverbs such as «Что посеешь, то и пожнёшь» (“What you sow is what you will reap”) reinforce the inevitability of moral consequences, while «Правда дороже золота» (“Truth is more precious than gold”) underscores that ethical principles outweigh material gain. Proverbs like «Справедливость дороже богатства» (“Justice is more precious than wealth”) and «Слово правды крепче железа» (“The word of truth is stronger than iron”) highlight justice as a social and moral ideal that sustains trust and order within the community.

This comparison demonstrates that while both English and Russian cultures highly value justice and fairness, they conceptualize them differently. English proverbs often frame justice in pragmatic and rational terms, emphasizing balance, reciprocity, and the predictable consequences of actions. Russian proverbs, on the other hand, place stronger emphasis on ethical and communal dimensions, viewing fairness as a moral obligation that strengthens



social cohesion. Together, these traditions show that justice is a universal moral concept, but its interpretation and cultural emphasis vary across societies.

The semantic field of **respect for elders and experience** is prominently represented in both English and Russian proverbial traditions. English proverbs such as “Experience is the best teacher” and “Old hands make light work” emphasize experience as a practical source of knowledge gained through time and effort. Respect for elders in these proverbs is often implicit, grounded in the value of accumulated skill and wisdom rather than age alone.

In Russian proverbs, respect for elders and experience is more explicitly connected to authority, tradition, and collective memory. Sayings like «Старый друг лучше новых двух» (“An old friend is better than two new ones”) and «Старость не радость, да ум — клад» (“Old age may not be joy, but wisdom is a treasure”) highlight the idea that age brings insight worthy of respect. Elders are viewed as carriers of moral guidance and social continuity.

This comparison indicates that while both cultures value experience and the wisdom of age, English proverbs tend to frame respect in pragmatic and individual terms, whereas Russian proverbs place stronger emphasis on reverence for elders as moral authorities within the community.

### Conclusion

The comparison of English and Russian proverbs shows that proverbs serve as important cultural vehicles for teaching moral values and guiding behavior. While English proverbs often focus on practicality, individual effort, and rational outcomes, Russian proverbs place stronger emphasis on ethics, social responsibility, and communal harmony. Across both traditions, honesty, hard work, justice, and respect for elders are consistently valued as essential virtues that shape personal character and support the functioning of society. This demonstrates that, although the cultural framing may differ, proverbs in both languages reflect universal moral concepts that continue to inform human conduct and social norms.

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