

SEMANTIC FIELDS IN PROVERBS: A CROSS-LINGUISTIC STUDY OF HONOR AND SHAME IN ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN

Safarboyeva Nozima Jasurbek qizi
safarboyevanozima@gmail.com

Supervisor: Kambarova Marjan Adil qizi
Uzbekistan State World Languages University
marzhan-kambarova@mail.ru

Abstract

This article examines the semantic fields of honor and shame as expressed in English and Russian proverbs. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of paremiology and cross-linguistic semantics, the study analyzes how these two moral concepts are encoded, framed, and transmitted through proverbial language in each cultural tradition. The analysis shows that English proverbs tend to present honor as an individual achievement based on personal conduct and reputation, while shame is linked to public exposure and loss of social standing. Russian proverbs, by contrast, frame honor as a collective moral obligation rooted in community values, and shame as a deeply ethical failure that affects both the individual and the group. Despite these cultural differences, both traditions treat honor and shame as central forces that regulate social behavior and guide moral development. The findings suggest that proverbs function as cultural mirrors, reflecting the values and priorities of the societies that produce them.

Keywords: Proverb, semantic field, honor, shame, cross-linguistic analysis, paremiology, English proverbs, Russian proverbs, moral concepts, cultural values.

Introduction

Proverbs are one of the oldest and most important forms of human language. They carry cultural knowledge, moral values, and social norms that have been passed down through generations. As Mieder (2004) points out, proverbs are not simply old sayings — they are living expressions of how communities think, feel, and judge the world around them. Because of this, proverbs are a valuable source of data for linguists who want to understand how different cultures encode moral concepts in language.

The study of proverbs, known as paremiology, has grown significantly in recent decades. Researchers such as Dundes (2007), Norrick (1985), and Ivanova (2006) have shown that proverbs are not only linguistic units but also cultural texts — they encode the beliefs, priorities, and social norms of the communities that use them. When we compare proverbs from different languages, we can see how different cultures organize their moral world and what values they consider most important.



Among the many moral concepts found in proverbial language, honor and shame occupy a particularly significant place. These two concepts are deeply connected: honor refers to the positive moral reputation that a person earns through good conduct, while shame refers to the loss of that reputation through failure, dishonesty, or socially unacceptable behavior. Together, honor and shame function as powerful regulators of human behavior in most cultures around the world. Wierzbicka (1997) argues that concepts like honor and shame are not universal in their meaning — although they exist in many cultures, they are understood and expressed differently depending on the cultural context.

This article focuses on the semantic fields of honor and shame in English and Russian proverbs. The main goal is to identify how these two traditions encode these moral concepts differently, and what those differences reveal about the cultural values of each society. The study uses the methods of semantic field analysis and cross-linguistic comparison, which are well-established approaches in paremiology and cultural linguistics. The article is structured as follows: after a brief discussion of methods, it analyzes the semantic field of honor, then the semantic field of shame, and finally draws comparative conclusions about both traditions.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative, comparative approach. The primary method is semantic field analysis, which examines how a group of related words and expressions cluster around a central concept and what meanings they carry. The selection focused on proverbs that directly or indirectly express the concepts of honor and shame. Only proverbs that are still widely known and used were included, in order to ensure that the analysis reflects living cultural values rather than historical ones. A comparative method was then applied to identify similarities and differences between the two traditions in terms of meaning, framing, and cultural emphasis.

Results and Discussion

The Semantic Field of Honor

In English proverbial tradition, honor is strongly connected to personal behavior and individual reputation. The central idea is that honor must be earned through one's own actions, and that it is fragile — once lost, it is very difficult to recover. This is clearly expressed in proverbs such as:

"A good name is better than riches." "Honor and profit do not always agree." "It is better to die with honor than to live in shame."

These proverbs present honor as a personal asset — something that belongs to an individual and defines his or her social identity. The emphasis is on the rational choice between honor and material gain, suggesting that in the English cultural tradition, honor is seen as a moral principle that a person must actively choose and maintain. The proverb "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country" further illustrates this, showing that honor is not automatically given but must be recognized and awarded by others.

Another important aspect of the English semantic field of honor is its connection to honesty and keeping one's word. The proverb "An honest man's word is as good as his bond" links personal honor directly to trustworthiness in social and professional relationships. This suggests



that in the English tradition, honor is not simply about reputation — it is about the consistency between what a person says and what a person does. Honor, in this sense, is both a private virtue and a public commitment.

Russian proverbs approach honor from a different angle. Rather than focusing on individual reputation, they present honor as a collective value that belongs to the family, the community, and the moral order of society. Consider the following examples:

«Береги честь смолоду» ("Guard your honor from a young age"). «Честь — лучше богатства» ("Honor is better than wealth"). «Добрая слава дороже богатства» ("A good reputation is more valuable than wealth").

The most famous of these, «Береги честь смолоду» ("Guard your honor from a young age"), is particularly significant. It does not treat honor as something to be earned over time — instead, it presents honor as something that must be protected from the very beginning of life, suggesting that it is a social inheritance and a moral duty. This reflects the broader Russian cultural tendency, identified by Ivanova (2006), to frame moral virtues as obligations to the community rather than personal achievements.

The Russian proverb «Без чести нет и совести» ("Without honor, there is no conscience") further deepens this picture. It connects honor not only to social reputation but to the inner moral life of a person. In this framing, honor is not just what others think of you — it is the foundation of your own capacity to distinguish right from wrong. This gives the concept of honor in Russian proverbial tradition a deeper ethical dimension than is typically found in English proverbs.

In both traditions, honor is clearly valued above material wealth, but the reasoning differs: English proverbs emphasize the practical wisdom of choosing honor, while Russian proverbs emphasize the moral necessity of preserving it as a duty to oneself and to the community.

The Semantic Field of Shame

Shame occupies an equally important position in both English and Russian proverbial traditions, though again with notable cultural differences in how it is framed and understood. In English proverbs, shame is primarily connected to public exposure — it arises when a person's failings or wrongdoings become visible to others. This is reflected in expressions such as:

"There is no shame in not knowing; the shame is in not wanting to know." "Past shame, past grace." "He that has no shame has no conscience."

These proverbs reveal an important distinction in English cultural thinking: shame is not simply about doing something wrong, but about the awareness of doing something wrong and the willingness to acknowledge it. The proverb "He that has no shame has no conscience" is particularly revealing, as it links shame directly to moral awareness and self-regulation. In this sense, shame is presented as a necessary and even positive force — a sign that a person is still morally functioning.

The English proverbial tradition also uses shame as a social warning. Proverbs such as "Shame is an ill weed that grows in every soil" suggest that the potential for shame is universal — it exists in all people and all cultures. This universalizing tendency in English proverbs about shame reflects a cultural view that moral failure is a shared human condition, not simply a



personal weakness. At the same time, the proverb "A man without shame can do anything" warns that the absence of shame removes all moral limits from behavior, making shame a necessary boundary of social life.

In Russian proverbial tradition, shame carries a heavier social and ethical weight. It is not simply a personal feeling but a public judgment that affects the entire social group to which the person belongs. This is expressed clearly in proverbs such as:

«Позор хуже смерти» ("Shame is worse than death"). «От стыда сгореть можно» ("One can burn from shame"). «Стыд не дым, глаза не выест, а от людей не скроешься» ("Shame is not smoke — it will not sting your eyes, but you cannot hide from people").

The proverb «Позор хуже смерти» ("Shame is worse than death") is one of the most powerful expressions of the Russian cultural attitude toward shame. It places shame at the very top of the scale of social punishments — even above the loss of life. This reflects a worldview in which social reputation and collective moral judgment are considered more important than individual survival. Norrick (1985) observes that such extreme comparisons in proverbs signal the emotional intensity with which a culture treats a particular moral concept.

The proverb «От стыда сгореть можно» ("One can burn from shame") uses vivid physical imagery to express the intensity of this emotion. The metaphor of burning suggests that shame in Russian culture is not a mild social discomfort but a destructive and consuming force. This physical framing of shame contrasts sharply with the more cognitive and rational framing found in English proverbs, where shame is connected to awareness and conscience rather than physical pain or destruction.

Comparative Analysis: Honor and Shame Across Both Traditions

The comparison of these two semantic fields reveals several important patterns. First, both English and Russian proverbial traditions treat honor and shame as closely related concepts — they function together as a system of moral regulation, with honor representing the positive ideal and shame representing the consequence of failing to meet it. This confirms the view of Wierzbicka (1997) that honor and shame are culturally universal in their function, even if they differ in their specific cultural meanings.

Second, the most significant difference between the two traditions lies in the orientation of these concepts: individual versus collective. English proverbs consistently frame honor as a personal achievement and shame as a personal failure — the emphasis is on the individual's choices, awareness, and moral responsibility. Russian proverbs, by contrast, consistently frame honor as a collective inheritance and shame as a social catastrophe that affects the community. This difference reflects deeper cultural values: the English tradition tends toward individualism in its moral thinking, while the Russian tradition tends toward collectivism.

Third, Russian proverbs about shame tend to be more emotionally intense than their English equivalents. The use of extreme comparisons (shame is worse than death) and physical metaphors (burning from shame) suggests that shame is experienced as a more overwhelming and socially devastating force in Russian cultural tradition. English proverbs, while treating shame seriously, tend to approach it in a more measured and rational way, connecting it to conscience and self-awareness rather than social destruction.



Conclusion

This article has examined the semantic fields of honor and shame in English and Russian proverbs through a cross-linguistic comparative analysis. The findings show that both traditions place great importance on these two moral concepts, but they frame them in different ways that reflect their broader cultural values. English proverbs present honor as a personal asset that must be actively chosen and maintained through honest and consistent behavior, and shame as an internal moral signal connected to conscience and self-awareness. Russian proverbs, by contrast, present honor as a collective moral inheritance that must be protected from an early age, and shame as a powerful social judgment that can be more devastating than death itself. These differences reflect a fundamental cultural contrast between individual moral responsibility in the English tradition and collective moral accountability in the Russian tradition.

This study contributes to the growing field of cross-linguistic paremiology by demonstrating that the semantic fields of honor and shame are culturally specific even when the general concepts appear universal. Future research could extend this analysis to other linguistic traditions, such as Uzbek, Arabic, or Chinese, to explore whether similar patterns of individual versus collective moral framing can be found across a broader range of cultural contexts. Such comparative work would deepen our understanding of how language and culture shape the way human communities define, protect, and transmit their moral values.

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