

Review article

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Gulnara Omarbekova, and Erik Aasland. *Contemporary Kazakh Proverb Research: Digital, Cognitive, Literary and Ecological Approaches*. New York: Peter Lang, 2023, 236 p. (International Folkloristics, Volume 18.) ISBN 9781433195891 (PDF), ISBN 9781433195907 (ePUB), ISBN 9781433195884 (Softcover), <https://doi.org/10.3726/b19538>

For too many decades proverb scholarship in the language communities of the former Soviet Union was available only in Russian and local languages, accessible to a limited number of scholars elsewhere. This collection of 13 articles about Kazakh proverbs, all written in English, gives outsiders an opportunity to read multiple approaches to the study of their proverbs written by Kazakh scholars.

The book is the result of a research project sponsored by Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan. The goal was to have scholars publish their work in English. This was a success as the chapters are written in a high level of English. The project specifically promoted the use of the “discourse ecologies” approach to studying proverbs. This approach examines the situation and speakers in different contexts. Because of formality or other factors, people may use different proverbs to communicate the same underlying ideas. Aasland, the co-editor, had introduced discourse ecologies to proverb scholars earlier, specifically illustrating its relevance in a study of Kazakh proverbs in his article “Contrasting Two Kazakh Proverbial Calls to Action: Using Discourse Ecologies to Understand Proverb Meaning-Making” in *Proverbiium* (2018).

The editors are a Kazakh professor and an American professor, each bringing their perspectives on proverb study. “We see this book as a meeting of Kazakh and Western scholarship” (p. xv)

They are explicitly aware that there are different expectations for such academic writing between the West and the Commonwealth of Independent States (as well as other parts of the world). They cited two examples that differ from Western scholarship: “The long introductory paragraphs extolling the virtues of proverbs and the literature review sections having a long list of the names of key scholars” (p. xv). To this I would add that explanations of methodology are sometimes general and non-specific.

Some of the questions that the book addresses are different from Western proverb scholarship. The answers may seem incomplete, tangential, or even irrelevant for Western scholars until they learn to think through the categories and questions used by Kazakh scholars, some of which can be traced to using approaches developed by both Kazakh and Russian scholars. It is wise for Western scholars to remember the proverb, “Don’t criticize a person until you have walked a kilometer/mile in their shoes.”

The chapters in this book touch a wide variety of topics related to Kazakh proverbs, including a software corpus of Kazakh proverbs, proverbs used in Kazakh literature, gender and Kazakh proverbs, translation of proverbs between English and Kazakh, and teaching proverbs in digital education. Several use the concept of discourse ecology to study the use of proverbs.

The first two chapters use the theoretical lens of discourse ecology to examine how proverbs are changed and selected in different discourse contexts.

The editor Gulnara Omarbekova wrote the opening chapter “Perspectives on Proverb Use Among Kazakhs: Ecological Issues”. She asks, “Does the younger generation know proverbs well? How well are the proverbs transmitted to the young generation? If their proverb competency is adequate, it is an indication that cultural embeddedness provides a strong moral character in a globalized world” (p. 6). She found “some traditional proverbs have lost their relevance to modern realities. Therefore, new proverbs that reflect contemporary society are created instead” (p. 14).

In sorting various sayings into categories, the intuitions of the test subjects (who included scholars) did not match the categories that the author had in mind (p. 12). This is a reminder

that defining and categorizing proverbs and similar sayings will never be rigidly exact. However, people did agree about categorizing anti-proverbs.

Omarbekova's opening chapter studied people's knowledge and use of a list of proverbs. Not surprisingly, younger people know and use fewer proverbs than older people. In her research, Omarbekova also asked if respondents supported changing traditional proverbs. That question must have started some interesting discussions!

The second chapter is Aasland's article, reprinted from *Proverbium*. Aasland presents evidence that some proverbs are used more frequently to refer to large issues, such as national identity. Other proverbs are used in more "private contexts" (p. 27).

Aiman Zhanabekova explains the origins and goals of the Kazakh proverb corpus. The article gives a description of several different ways to use the search tools. This corpus will be a standard tool for all who study Kazakh proverbs in the future.

Funda Guven and Aidana Amalbekova studied the tradition of *kindik sheshe*, "a spiritual mother of a baby who takes a role in their life from birth to death in Kazakh society." State-sponsored medicine has reduced her role in the birth itself, preventing her from cutting the baby's umbilical cord. Some symbolic parts of *kindik sheshe*'s role remains, illustrated by four proverbs.

Fauziya Orazbayeva and Elmira Orazaliyeva wrote about "Kazakh Proverbs from the Perspective of Cultural Cognition and Communication". Their wide-ranging article touched on how some of their proverbs reflect the Koran, noting that Mieder had observed that the Bible was a major source of proverbs in Europe. They use a different approach to communication than what some in the West will know, neither Conduit, Code, nor Relevance models. The Nazarbayev University research project was aware of differences in the use of proverbs by different generations so they conducted a test asking students to read the beginning of a proverb and then complete it. This showed that younger people are less knowledgeable about traditional proverbs.

Gulzia Pirali and Aizhan Kurmanbayeva studied the use of proverbs by Muktar Auezov (1897-1961), a great Kazakh writer,

who produced poetry, plays, novels, and stories. His collected works fill 50 volumes. The authors list some of Auezov's use of traditional proverbs in some of his writings. In addition, they also list some of his quotations that have become proverbs, e.g. "The punishment of conscience is the most severe punishment" (p. 81).

Zhanar Abdigapbarova examined the use of proverbs by the Kazakh writer, Mukhtar Maguin. In 1969, during the Soviet era, Maguin wrote "Death of Tazy", *tazy* being a valued dog breed of Kazakhstan. "The death of that *tazy* is a death of our spirit, traditions, and people" (p. 90). In the story, a man defends his *tazy* from death, quoting a proverb "White does not bend" (a pure person does not bow) (p. 90). Abdigapbarova shows that this traditional Kazakh proverb, used twice, made this story more powerful. Abdigapbarova summarized, "the main problem raised in the work is the destruction of the centuries old native culture and national values of the Kazakh people by the colonial Soviet Union" (p. 90).

Dolores Nurgaliyeva and Bakhyt Arinova examined the use of proverbs by Mashkhur-Zhusip Kópeiuly, a famous Kazakh poet who wrote at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He also collected proverbs from people, noting where and from whom he collected them, adding explanations as needed. The authors categorize his proverbs by two sets of criteria. In his poetry, he used a number of proverbs from the *Koran* and the *Hadith*.

Three times the authors noted that he used "ancient words". This is likely related to the fact that some of the proverbs he quoted have already fallen out of use. They believe it is important to revive his works. "The legacy of Mashkhur-Zhusip [Kópeiuly] in the history of humankind has profound educational value and strength and is the beginning of wisdom."

Gulzhan Shokym, Elmira Burankulova, and Karylga Duise-nova wrote about gender in Kazakh proverbs. They stated a six-point framework for characterizing people. They matched Kazakh proverbs about gender to three of these. Then they describe traditional Kazakh expectations of women and illustrate each of these with proverbs.

Gulmira Abdimaulen wrote about different words that are used for women, roughly distinguished as "girl", "daughter-in-

law”, and “mother”. She explains the expected social roles of various stages of life, illustrating each with several proverbs. She illustrated one point by citing a similar English proverb from English proverb collections, “Who finds a wife finds a good thing”, echoing a Biblical proverb (Proverbs 18:22). The chapter concludes that the status of some women in society may change, but “the status of *ana* [mother] remained unchanged” (p. 132).

Gulnar Bekkozhanova, Rozalinda Shakhanova, Gulmariya Ospanova wrote a chapter titled “Cognitive and Linguo-cultural Aspects of Transference of English Proverbs and Sayings into the Kazakh Language.” They analyzed more than 100 proverbs and sayings, studying the ways they had been translated between English and Kazakh languages. “We tried to distinguish cultural realia and understandings of different objects through cognitive and linguo-cultural peculiarities of proverbs and sayings in Kazakh and English languages” (p. 137). For some proverbs, they identified similar proverbs in the target language.

Roza Zhussupova and Aizhuldyz Tolegen wrote about “Teaching Paremiological Units in Digital Education”. These authors explained the most rigorous research design in the book, examining and evaluating teaching English proverbs using mobile phones. Their results are both quantitative and qualitative. This chapter can be useful for those interested in using digital methods for teaching proverbs and language, for teachers in Kazakhstan and in other countries.

The final chapter is a collection of contemporary anti-proverbs. In the Foreword, Gulnara Omarbekova wrote, “The anti-proverb has not yet become an object of close attention of linguists of the Kazakh language” (p. xv). As a big step to change this, the final section of the book is a collection of 100 anti-proverbs. Each traditional proverb is translated and explained, then the derived anti-proverb is also translated and explained. For example, there is a traditional proverb “Marry the girl after knowing her mother, eat her meals after looking at her dish.” After this translation, an English equivalent is given, “Like mother, like daughter”, the English form being derived from the Bible (Ezekiel 16:44). The Kazakh anti-proverb is “Marry the girl after looking at her Instagram” (p. 223). This very recent anti-proverb

shows the awareness and use of proverbs by the young, though not always valuing the traditional form.

The title of the book is *Contemporary Kazakh Proverb Research*. The word “Contemporary” is important. All through the book, the authors cite many points where changes related to proverb research and proverb use are seen: freedom from Russian control, the loss of proverb knowledge among the young (but at the same time, the rise of anti-proverbs based on traditional proverbs), teaching proverbs digitally instead of in conversations, the changes in the role of *kindik sheshe*, the beginning of a digital corpus of Kazakh proverbs, using internet tools (e.g. Google.kz) to study proverbs, use of the “discourse ecologies” approach.

Readers should remember that it is a book about proverb research in Kazakhstan, not a collection of Kazakh proverbs, it is paremiology not paremiography. This book will obviously be of interest to all those who want to know how proverb scholarship is done in Central Asia, covering such topics as proverbs as important elements of national character, the use of proverbs in literature, proverbs being created and lost, teaching of proverbs, etc. I plan to use it in my teaching, both for lecture material but also assigning passages for my students to read.

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