

KEVIN J. MCKENNA

*Shkol'nyi slovar' zhivvykh russkikh poslovits.* By V. M. Mokienko, et. al. St. Petersburg: "Neva" Publishing House, 2002. Pp. 350.

While this new volume of Russian proverbs claims to be intended for high-school and college students, its rich compendium of over 700 actively-used proverbs and proverbial expressions will appeal to a much wider audience of specialists as well.

Its principal compiler, Valerii Mokienko, brings a richly-earned reputation to this undertaking as the leading Russian expert in this field. In his highly informative preface to the volume, Mokienko underlines the particular authoritativeness of proverbs in Russian literary culture, ranging from the legendary monk Nestor in the eleventh century to masterpieces of later-medieval Russian literature and, finally, to literary classics of the 19-20th centuries. He also cites the changing interest in proverb study from a nineteenth-century inclination to define the "spirit of the people" to more recent interests pertaining to linguistics and the mechanics of Russian language study.

The Preface also provides an interesting history of previous collections of Russian proverbs, culminating in the famous work of V. I. Dal's two-volume compendium of more than 30,000 proverbs divided into 179 topical categories. To distinguish between proverbs and proverbial expressions, Mokienko borrows from Dal's model describing the former as a "short parable or judgment, a verdict or teaching uttered as a locution and circulated under the stamp of the folk," while the proverbial expression is "a circuitous expression, figurative speech, a simple allegory, locution, or manner of expression, but without a lesson, judgment or conclusion...it is only the first half of a proverb." According to Mokienko, the compilers of this dictionary view the term "proverb" traditionally as a "complete metaphoric or non-metaphoric saying, having an edifying thought and characterized by a separate rhythmic and phonetic organization."

As the primary objectives of this volume, the Preface cites the following: a description of the meaning and possible usages of proverbs in a text; an explanation of possible variations of

proverb meaning as well as typical situations in which they may be used; and, finally, providing “background” information of their cultural-historic properties. The main criteria for selecting the proverbs in this volume are their appearance in the literary works of 19th-20th century Russian writers as well as their continued use in other fiction and publicistic writing. The total card catalogue of St. Petersburg University listing more than 500,000 entries provided the basis for this dictionary. A frequency survey for the proverbs was conducted among high school and college students. Mokienko notes that the present volume differs from other collections in its orientation towards college age students and proverb citations appearing in Russian literary and publicistic works.

This dictionary is organized according to the principle of the first “pivotal” word in a proverb citation (noun, adjective, verb). A contextual description is given for each proverb with references to various well-known works from Russian literature. Situational use and meanings are provided and, when possible, etymological information as well. Particularly helpful is occasional information identifying the first appearance of given proverbs in the Russian language as well as multiple citations from 19th-20th-century literary classics. By way of example, the following slightly abbreviated entry (showing one of five citations from 19th-20th century Russian literature), «ПЕРВЫЙ БЛИН КОМОМ» [English equivalent.: “If at first you don’t succeed, try again,” literally, “The first pancake always comes out like a ball”] reflects the informative format utilized in Mokienko’s collection:

#### БЛИН

ПЕРВЫЙ БЛИН <ВСЕГДА> КОМОМ. Первая попытка обычно бывает неудачной.

Пословица сформировалась на основе чисто бытовых наблюдений: первый блин часто бывает неудачным, плохо снимается со сковороды, если она плохо прогрета, получается комом, а не лепешкой.

Зачем я его съел? допрашивал сам себя Топтыгин.— Меня Лев предупреждал: делай знатные дела, от бездельных же стерегись! А я с первого же шага, чижей глотать вздумал! Ну, да ничего! Первый блин всегда комом! (М. Салтыков-Щедрин. *Мебель на воеводстве*).

[PANCAKE

THE FIRST PANCAKE <ALWAYS> COMES OUT LIKE A BALL. *If at first you don't succeed, try again.*

This proverb has been formed purely on the basis of everyday observations: the first pancake often turns out unsuccessfully; it comes out of the frying pan badly if it was not heated properly, becoming lump-like rather than like a small cake.

Why did I eat it?--Toptygin asked himself.-- Leo warned me: do noble deeds, and beware of idle things! And from the first moment, I took it into my head to gobble up the whole thing. Ok, what of it! If at first you don't succeed, try again. (M. Saltykov-Shchedrin, *The Bear and the Military Governor*.)]

Reflecting the new era into which Russia has entered, Mokienko includes citations from previously unpublished writers like Vladimir Nabokov and others. Readers typically will find four-five examples cited from 19th-20th century Russian classics to depict the wide use of a given proverb. As indicated in the proverb cited above, the explanatory passage that follows each entry provides very helpful information to native and non-native readers alike regarding the meaning and application of a given proverb. One might wish, however, that the compilers had included additional information as to the century of origin for each proverb.

This volume is to be highly recommended for anyone interested in the history and usage of Russian proverbs, particularly those appearing in Russian literary classics of the past two centuries. Its informative arrangement, reasonable price and durability

will make it a welcome addition to any reference library as well as to any student of the Russian language.

Kevin J. McKenna  
Department of German and Russian  
Waterman Building  
University of Vermont  
Burlington, Vermont 05405  
USA  
E-mail: [Kevin.McKenna@uvm.edu](mailto:Kevin.McKenna@uvm.edu)