

KEVIN J. MCKENNA

Bol'shoi slovar' russkikh poslovits/The Great Dictionary of Russian Proverbs. By V. M. Mokienko, T. G. Nikitina, and E. K. Nikolaeva. Moskva: OLMA Media Group, 2010. Pp. 1024.

The much-awaited final volume of a trio of paremiological dictionaries under the general editorship of V. M. Mokienko has now appeared. Two previous volumes in this series, *Bol'shoi slovar' russkikh pogovorok/The Great Dictionary of Russian Proverbial Expressions* and *Bol'shoi slovar' russkikh sravnenii/The Great Dictionary of Russian Comparisons* have already met with widespread critical acclaim in the two years since their publication in 2008. Rounding out the compilers of the volume under review are Professor Mokienko's colleagues T. G. Nikitina and E. K. Nikolaeva.

This is the first dictionary of its kind, breaking with the long-held tradition in Russian proverb dictionaries where listings are presented either according to a general thematic principle (as in V. I. Dal's *Poslovitsy russkogo naroda/Proverbs of the Russian People*, 1862, 1984) or in strictly alphabetical order. Mokienko, et. al's *Bol'shoi slovar'* adopts the practice of European proverb dictionaries which are arranged by the first major "key" word (usually a noun), reflecting the basic meaning or message of the pareme. As Professor Mokienko correctly notes in the *Preface* to his volume, this "keyword principle" fully demonstrates the circle of associative semantic connections in the colorful system of Russian proverbs as well as their striking variants. The sheer scope of this dictionary, which contains approximately 70,000 proverbs, roughly 7 times the number contained in Dal's "Proverbs of the Russian People," makes it the most complete collection of Russian proverbs ever published.

In the *Preface* to this ground-breaking volume, which opens with a bit of Russian folk wisdom – *Пословицы на рынке не купишь/You won't find proverbs in the marketplace* – Professor Mokienko traces the history and role of proverbs in Russian oral

and literary culture, beginning with Nestor's *Primary Chronicle* and moving across the centuries down to leading authors of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literature like Krylov, Pushkin, Griboedov, Gogol, and Solzhenitsyn. In addition to a survey of proverb use by Russia's greatest fiction writers, Mokienko provides an informative analysis of the history of changes in the very concept of the terms "poslovitsa/proverb" and "pogovorka/proverbial expression." In ancient Rus', for example, the term was broadly applied to any verbal agreement between individuals. One of the main characteristics dating from this early period of Russian culture was "a short, expressive saying, allegory, or maxim." Another characteristic feature dating from this time was the absence of a distinction made between the proverb and the proverbial expression. Over the centuries, however, a more distinct delineation in the two words has taken place. Vladimir Dal', for example, defined a proverb by the middle of the 19th century as a "brief parable, judgment or verdict or exhortation spoken in plain language with a stamp of folk character."

The *Great Dictionary of Russian Proverbs* treats both graphic as well as non-imagistic proverbs as linguistic units of a structural-semantic order. The latter are not categorized under the heading of proverbial expressions, but as proverbs. Mokienko explains in his *Preface* that proverbial expressions required a special type of lexicographic study and, therefore, were treated earlier by his editorial team (2008) in two special dictionaries of proverbial expressions and set comparisons. In this vein he also notes that in some instances readers will find listings that by necessity appear in more than one of the trio of proverb "thesauruses" compiled by him and his colleagues. In particular, this occurs when the proverb bears a comparative structure; for example, the following proverbs appear both in the *Large Dictionary of Russian Folk Comparisons* (2008) as well as in the current volume under review: *Duraku nauka chto rebyonku ogon'!* *Knowledge is to a fool as fire is to a child*; *V monastyre chto v lavke: vsyo za den'gi!* *It's the same at a monastery as it is at a store-shop: everything costs money.*

In his *Preface* to this volume Mokienko aptly devotes considerable attention to the many aspects of Russian national culture illustrated in the proverbs of the Russian people. As he

notes, he and his colleagues are not the first in a long line of Russian scholars to do so. First and foremost he cites the valuable work of I. Snegirev, whose *Russkie v svoikh poslovitsakh/The Russian People in their Proverbs* appeared more than a century-and-a-half ago. He also describes the contributions in this area of proverb studies by some of Russia's most famous philologists and ethnographers: F. I. Buslaev; A. A. Potebnaya; I. I. Sreznevskii; S. V. Maksimov; M. I. Mikhel'son; B. A. Larin; and V. V. Vinogradov. As examples of the multi-dimensional aspect of Russia's national culture illustrated by popular proverbs, Mokienko cites folk wisdom from the medieval age of peasants and craftsmen: *Plotnik bez topora chto izba bez ugla/A carpenter without his axe is like a peasant hut without a corner room; Vzyalsya za guzh, ne govori, chto ne dyuzh/Once you've taken on the yoke, don't say that you're not strong enough/[Finish what you start]; Kuy zhelezo, poka (pokole) goryacho/Strike while the iron is hot.*

As suggested by the size and scope of this impressive proverb dictionary, Mokienko observes that "its main goal is to provide readers with a complete collection of Russian proverbs, drawing from a majority of earlier proverb collections as well as from excerpts taken from works of fiction and publicistic writings, and nuggets of folk wisdom found in numerous dialect dictionaries and catalogs and the compilers' own recordings of live speech." He further describes the main criterion for selecting material as stemming from B. A. Larin's principle of lexicographic completeness. This principle assumes a full description of the entire body of Russian proverbs from ancient times down to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Or, as Mokienko writes in his *Preface*, "this is a thesaurus of Russian proverbs reflecting everyday life over the entire spectrum of time and space in the existence of the living Russian language."

Complementing the impressive scope of the *Great Dictionary of Russian Proverbs*, its editors have delivered the first major compilation of Russian proverbs organized according to a major keyword principle (a much smaller *Shkol'nyi slovar' zhivykh russkikh poslovits/Small Dictionary of Living Russian Proverbs*, edited by Mokienko appeared in 2002). As described in the *Preface*, members of the Petersburg phraseological seminar began creating a card index for the *Great Dictionary* as early as the

end of the 1960s and early 1970s. The result is a large volume of 70,000 proverbs that have been “passportized,” in Mokienco’s term, according to time and geographic region. This annotation includes an “explicit” description of the time and source describing the proverb entries over the centuries. For example, sources for older proverbs include P. K. Simoni’s *Starinnye sborniki russkikh poslovits, pogovorok, zagadok I proch XVII-XIX stoletii/Ancient Collections of Russian Proverbs, Proverbial Expressions, Riddles, etc. of the XVII-XIX Centuries*, 1897, as well as A. A. Barsov’s *Sobranie 2491 drevnikh rossiiskikh poslovits/A Collection of 2491 Ancient Russian Proverbs*, 1770. The latest collections of contemporary proverbs and dialect dictionaries are listed, as well. An examination of a few proverb entries (mentioned above) will reveal the annotated format of the *Great Dictionary of Russian Proverbs*, for example:

Vzyalsya za guzh—ne govori, chto ne dyuzh—Petr. gal. nach. XVIII v., 25; *Bogd.* 1741, 70; *Bars.* 1770, 17; *SIRYa XVIII v.* 7, 54; *DP* 1, 194; *DP* 2, 108; *D* 1, 406, 512; *D* 4 1, 194; *DP* 2, 108; *D* 1, 406, 512; *D.* 4, 387; *Mikh.* 1 102; *SOB.* 1956, 86; *Rybn.* 1961, 39; *Raz.* 1957, 43; *Bir.* 1960, 9; *Zhuk.* 1966, 78-79; *Sl. Akchim.* 1, 268; *Spir.* 1985, 161; *An.* 1988, 45; *Permyakov* 1988, 154; *Aleshchenko* 2008, 242-243.

[N.B.: the full, unabbreviated information appears at the end of the volume under the heading; *Spisok istochnikov/List of Sources*. For example: *Sbornik poslovits 6 Petrovskoi galerei nachalo XVIII veka*, 25; *Sobranie poslovits A. I. Bogdanova*, 1961, 65-118; 259-263; *Sobranie 2491 drevnikh rossikikh poslovits, sostavil A. A. Barsov* 1770, 17; *Slovar’ russkogo yazyka XVIII veka* 7, 54; *DP* = *Dal’*, V. I. *Poslovitsy russkogo yazyka*; *D* = *Tolkovyi slovar’ zhivoi russkogo yazyka*; *Mikhel’son* M. M., *Metkie I khoyachie slova. Sbornik russkikh i inostrannykh poslovits, izrechenii I vyrazhenii*, SPB., 1894; *Rybnikova* M. A. *Russkie poslovitsy i pogovorki*, 1961; *Razumov* A. A. *Mudroe slovo: russkie poslovitsy i pogovorki*, 1957; *Biryukov* V. P. *Krylatye slova na Urale*, 1960; *Zhukov* V. P. *Slovar’ russkikh poslovits i pogovorok*, 1966; *Slovar’ govora d. Akchim Krasnovisherskogo r-na Permskoi oblasti (Akhchinskii slovar’)*, 1984-2003; *Russkie poslovitsy i pogovorki*, pod. red. V. P. Anikina, 1988; E. I.

Aleshenko. *Etnoyazykovaya kartina mira v tekstakh russkogo fol'klora*, 2008.]

Kuy zhelezo, poka (pokole)goryacho—*Bogd.* 1741, 90; *Sn.* 1848, 198; *DP* 2, 124; *DP* 2, 124; *D* 1, 384, 532; *Raz* 1957, 86; *Rybn.* 1961, 44, 117; *Spir.* 1985, 101; *An.* 1988, 155.

As an indication of the widespread applicability and interest of this new proverb dictionary, modern transformations and word play involving age-old proverbs are generously contained in the *Great Dictionary of Russian Proverbs*. To cite an example derived from the proverb entry cited above, we find the following anti-proverb, with the opening verb *kuy* changed to *khuy*, the vulgar noun form for penis or prick, whose entry below is followed by a brief explanation:

Xuy—zheleznyi, poka goryachii/A prick is iron/hard/good, so long as it is hot. Netsenz. Zharg. Shutl/[Uncensored. Jargon. Humorous.]

*Transformatsiya posl./[A transformation of the proverb] *Kuy zhelezo, poka goryacho (ZHELEZO)*.

One of the most striking features of the recently published *Great Dictionary of Russian Proverbs* relates to the wide-ranging inclusiveness of Russian proverb entries. Under the heading of *zhena/wife*, for example, one will find 407 entries over the course of 22 columns covering a total of 8 pages of text. The range of exhortations and advice pertaining to the behavior of a “proper” or “good” wife occupies a large number of these entries. For example:

Bei zhenu molotom, ona stanet zolotom/Beat your wife with a hammer, and she'll become gold. Volgogr. —SDGVO 1, 129.

Bei zhenu kak shubu, a lyubi kak dushu zolotom/Beat your wife like a fur coat, and love her like your soul. Psk. —SR 1, 215; SPPP, 2001, 130.

Bei zhenu k obedu, a k uzhinu opyat'/Beat your wife before lunch, and once again before dinner. Sn 1848, 12; CP 1, 215; SPP 2001, 130.

As noted in the first two of the above entries, Mokienko, et. al's system of “passportization” reflects whenever possible the region from which the proverb first originated. For example, the first entry above indicates the Volgograd area (Volgogr.) of

origin, while the proverb in the second entry originates from Pskov (Psk.). When an area of provenance cannot be determined, as in the third entry above, no geographic region will be noted.

While not quite as numerous as entries for “wife,” the number of proverbs falling under the heading of “husband” is nonetheless impressive: a total of 348 entries appearing on 18 columns over the course of 6 pages. Not surprisingly for a typically patriarchal society, proverbs falling under the heading of “husband” tend to be far less negative than those for “wife.”

Ty mne ne muzh, ya tebe ne zhena/You are not a husband to me, and I am not a wife to you. Perm.—Prok. 1988, 159.

Muzh p'yot, a zhena gorshki b'yot/The husband drinks, and the wife strikes (earthware) pots. Sn 1848, 236; DP 1, 293; Sob. 1956, 105; Raz, 1957, 183; An 1988, 187.

Muzh liubit zhenu zdorovuiu, [a] brat sestru--bogatuiiu/The husband loves a healthy wife, and the brother loves a rich sister. An 1988, 187; Versh 1, 96;5,252.

The sheer scope, structure and organization of the *Great Dictionary of Russian Proverbs* make it unquestionably the premier proverb dictionary in the Russian language, surpassing even V. I. Dal's famous nineteenth-century collection. Professor Mokienko and his fellow compilers are to be congratulated on a superb job, one that will not be surpassed for a long time to come, if ever. Its use for scholars and lovers of the Russian language alike make it a must purchase. Kudos on a brilliant and successful undertaking!

Kevin J. McKenna
 Department of German and Russian
 417 Waterman Building
 University of Vermont
 85 South Prospect Street
 Burlington, Vermont 05405
 USA
 Email: Kevin.McKenna@uvm.edu