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CONTRASTING TWO KAZAKH PROVERBIAL CALLS TO ACTION: USING DISCOURSE ECOLOGIES TO UNDERSTAND PROVERB MEANING-MAKING

Abstract: Though of the same genre, two comparable proverbs from a given culture can operate in two distinct communicative spheres. Using an approach called discourse ecology, I explore the intertextual dynamics, semantics, and usage of two Kazakh proverbial calls to action. I consider the meaning and cultural background for each proverb. Based on searches of social media and a Kazakh corpus of news articles, I argue that one proverb operates in mass-media whereas the other is limited to use in interpersonal conversation and online chat forums. I conclude with considerations of the contrasting roles that the two comparable proverbs play in terms of representative and frame-aligning discourse for contemporary Kazakhs.

Keywords: Kazakh, discourse ecology, levels of discourse, corpus linguistics, national culture, mass-media

Two proverbs from the same society can operate in different spheres of circulation even if one encounters them on the same list. I will consider an example from Kazakhstan of two contrasting calls to action. One operates in the mass-media whereas the other is limited to private discussions or online chat sessions. They also vary in their intertextual relationships. I explore the two proverbs using an approach called *discourse ecologies* (Agar 1985; Shoaps 2009).

Kazakhs consider their proverbs as an entrustment from the ancestors. Kazakh scholars praise their proverbs as a prized resource for defining problems, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies (Arġınbayev 1996: 94; Ğabdullıyn 1996 [1958]: 5; Tabıldıyev 2001: 17-18). Teachers are expected not only to cover Kazakh proverbs as content, but to also use these same proverbs on a daily basis in their classes. The Kazakhstani government mandated instruction in Kazakh proverbs for all students (Kazakhstan 2004). They trusted this process to establish a

moral compass for the new nation - a means to getting people on the right track in terms of roles, relationships, and values. In part, this is the self-presentation of national culture (Herzfeld 2005) as it relates to proverbs. A discourse ecologies approach may help us gain a more nuanced understanding of contemporary proverb use in Kazakhstan.

At the outset, we will consider discourse ecologies as a methodology. Then, I will provide a brief summary of each proverb with variants. The discussion will include categorization, meaning, and related metaphorical themes.¹ Next, I will present information concerning internet usage for each proverb along with search results from work with the Kazakh corpus (Makhambetov 2013). Consideration will also be given as to whether anti-proverbs have emerged for the proverb in question. This will provide the content for the discussion of the discourse ecologies of the two proverbs.

Framework

I first came across the term *discourse ecologies* when reading Quayson's intriguing comparison of advertisements posted on taxis and billboards in the same general location of Accra. He argues that even though they are in the same context, they represent two distinct communicative milieus in terms of both content and intertextual connections (Quayson 2010). What captivated me was the thought that something comparable could be true of proverbs in the same proverb collection. You see two proverbs on the same page and assume that they are similar in some way, but perhaps they have different ecologies.

I will consider two other anthropologists' independently developed approaches. Considering both studies will provide the detail we need to utilize discourse ecology analysis with the proverbs in question.

Michael Agar published an article on institutional culture in which he draws from Foucault and Habermas in proposing "discourse ecologies" as a new approach (Agar 1985). He considers the multitude of research done at that time by such scholars as Gumperz and West comparing every day discourse with what occurs in institutional contexts, especially medical and legal settings. Agar attributes some of the dynamics of interaction between doctor and client to systemic factors of efficiency, econo-

my, time pressure, and background knowledge. Agar points out that these factors are outside of the control of both parties. Foucault's discussion of limitations on discourse (Foucault 1984 [1970]) informs much of what Agar presents in terms of set systemic processes of diagnosis, report, and directive. Finally, Agar utilizes Habermas (1979 [1976]) to describe opportunities that doctors have to work around these scripted institutional expectations.

More recently, Shoaps presented what she terms "communicative ecologies"² as an approach to get beyond an idea of context which she describes as too static (Shoaps 2009: 265). She shifts the focus to the discourse interaction. Elements that can be considered in this approach are lexical factors, grammar, participant frameworks, and genre. At the heart of her analysis is the contrast of two folk catholic rituals, *pixab'* (advice for those about to wed) and the Testament of Judas (an immoral approach to address community immorality). The focus is on how material and symbolic linguistic resources produce idealized "voices" with which ritual participants can either side or counter. Key influences include Bakhtin, Bauman, and Briggs (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Bauman 1977; Briggs 1992).

Agar's and Shoaps's contexts of analysis are quite different. Still, I would argue that if we step back we can see similar patterns. Each explores the contrasts between more public scripted behaviors and an alternative, more private communicative option. The one that is offered more publicly serves as self-presentation. For example, when hospitals advertise, they emphasize their abilities to diagnose and treat. We will see if we see a similar relationship between the two Kazakh proverbs.

The Two Proverbs in Question

In my initial plan for this article, I was interested in working with Kazakh social media and the Kazakh corpus. Thus, I decided to work with two commonly known proverbs with comparable purposes rather than selecting two Kazakh proverbs from the same category based on one collection.

The "work" Proverb

A small group of Kazakh graduate students attending the Central Asian New Year (Nauruz) celebration in Los Angeles' Griffith Park suggested the first proverb. Upon hearing that I

specialize in Kazakh proverbs, they asked whether I was aware of this common Kazakh proverb:

Еңбек етсең емерсің.
Eñbek etseñ emersiy.
if you work, you will nurse.

Proverbs related to this one call upon maternal and agricultural symbolism:

Еңбек - адамның екенші анасы.
Eñbek – adamniñ ekenshi anası.
work – a person’s second mother.

Еңбек етпесең, елге өкпелеме, Егін екпесең, жерге өкпелеме.
Eñbek etpeseñ, elge ökpeleme, Egin ekpeseñ, jerge ökpeleme.
if you do not work, the people will take offense; if you don’t plant, the ground will take offense (Qaidar 2004: 284).

The proverb posits a causal relationship “if a, then b” that is seen as mirrored in nature. A stronger causal statement would have the logical structure “if not a, then not b” (Aasland 2009: 12-13). For example: “No pain, no gain” which Talant Aktanzhanov suggested as a cognate proverb to the Kazakh proverb in question. The Kazakh “work” proverb leaves the possibility open that someone could garner their food by means other than honest³ work.

The first proverb with its direct linkage of working and receiving sustenance is reminiscent of this Soviet era poster from the 1920’s that proclaims: With guns we will defeat the enemy, with hard work we will have bread. Everyone to work, comrades! (King 2016: 138).



One might argue that the concept of work presented in the “work” proverb is Soviet. The poster above could be considered as evidence of this link. However, this option actually cuts short our investigation and grants undue weight to this one poster. Rather than assume that the work proverb is Soviet in origin, it is better to explore earlier considerations of the importance of “work”.

Abai Kunanbayulı wrote during the classic period of Kazakh literature from the 1850’s to the beginning of the 20th century. Trained as an orator and leader, he was familiar with Turkish, Persian, Kazakh, Russian and Western literature. In his writings, he frequently quotes or adapts proverbs. Kazakhs consider him as their poet laureate based on his songs, poems, and essays (Paltore 2012). He was concerned about how the Kazakhs lived their lives, especially desiring that they avoid laziness. In his 29th

Word of his “Black Words” he critiques a proverb about angels and gold in this regard (Kunanbayuli 1918). He counted work among five worthy activities as presented in his song “ҒАЛЫМ ТАППАЙ МАҚТАНБА” [don’t brag about science without evidence]:

“Demanding goals, diligence, deep thought,
Contentment, and compassion - commit to memory
Five worthy actions, if I can persuade you.” (Kunanbayev 1994: 47)⁴

Internet Presence

A Google search using google.kz showed 3,660 hits for the “work” proverb. A number of these were for personal interest stories in the news media highlighting productive work in society. A YouTube search came up with twenty-seven similar news reports. The proverb lends itself to presenting work as productive and rewarding.

The corpus search did not turn up as much. The Oktöbe Gazette (Articles) had ten hits for (“if you work”), one for the proverb itself, and one for the well-known aphorism by Abai. The corpus is still in development and could be further expanded which would be a boon to future research.

I was also looking for adaptations that challenged the meaning of the original proverb. In societies that are more skeptical concerning the veracity of proverbs, adaptations of given proverbs emerge that serve as a critique to the original proverb. Wolfgang Mieder coined the term anti-proverbs to describe such occurrences (Mieder 1982). He and other scholars have documented anti-proverbs in a significant number and wide variety of cultural contexts. One such culture is Russia (Reznikov 2009, 2012) that has a centuries long relationship with the Kazakh people. I will follow Mieder’s definitions of variant (Mieder 2004: 5) and anti-proverb (Litovkina 2006: 2-3; Mieder 2004: 26). Modifications to existing proverbs that challenge or contradict the former proverbs are classified as anti-proverbs. Thus, the proverb “Адам қанаты - Ат” [a person’s wings – a horse] as part of a governmental posting should be considered as a variant of the traditional “Ер қанаты - Ат” [a man’s wings – horse] since there is no intent in formulating the variation to critique the traditional proverb.

Neither in a search for the specific Kazakh “work” proverb nor when I put simply “Еңбек етпесең” [if you don’t work] into google.kz did I come across even one instance of an anti-proverb. A larger corpus may certainly have an anti-proverb.

The absence of any anti-proverbs is especially surprising given that Russian has a cognate proverb and an anti-proverb:

Кто не работает, тот не ест.
[he who does not work shall not eat.]

As Reznikov points out, this proverb is originally biblical (II Thessalonians 3:10) (Reznikov 2012: 241-2).

This particular Russian proverb also has an anti-proverb:

Кто не работает, тот ест.
[he who does not work shall eat.]

The “work” proverb has numerous related proverbs and can be connected to a long history of Kazakh thought on the topic. It lends itself to mass media messages about the merits of honest labor. This is attested to in literature, art, and the internet.

The Hound proverb

I asked two Kazakhstani colleagues, one from northern Kazakhstan and one from the south, to provide me with a short list of commonly used Kazakh proverbs. Since there is considerable linguistic and cultural difference between these regions of Kazakhstan, I was especially interested to see which proverbs would be on both their lists. They each attested to the frequent use of the following proverb:

заман тулкі болса тазы бол.
Zaman tulki bolsa tazi bol.
if (your) era is a fox, then be a hound.

Variant: заман тулкі болса таз боп шал
Zaman tuli bolsa taz bop shal.
if (your) era is a fox, then try to be a hound.

One of the first things one notices with this proverb is the central role of animals. There are numerous Kazakh animal stories about the fox and his encounters with other animals including lions, cranes, and snow leopards (Esmen 2000). In each case, the one creature pits their own strengths against the cunning of the fox.

Animal stories are considered to be the oldest forms of tales among the Kazakhs (Ġabdullıyn 1996 [1958]: 124).

Animal proverbs also deserve special consideration because their symbolism is culture-specific (Talebinejad 2005). Thus, I interviewed Gulnara Omarbekova to more closely determine the meaning of the proverb. In particular, I asked about replacing “hound” with “dog”. This contrast question (Spradley 1979: 155-73) was intended to tease out the distinctive meaning of the proverb. Omarbekova promptly replied that one could certainly not make that replacement. In Kazakh proverbs, dogs’ service is acknowledged but they are symbolically used to express deficiency. Take for example, “Иттің мойнына алтын қарғы тақсаң да, боқ жеуін қоймайды” [even if you put a gold collar on a dog, he won’t stop eating turds.] (Qaidar 2004: 347) In contrast, the “hound” proverb is classified as “human characteristics” because it encourages the listener to be fast and flexible like a hound (Omarbekova 2018). The one difficulty is that the type of action called for is unclear from this proverb on its own. The meaning ranges from just doing something to giving way to immorality and doing whatever it takes.

Internet Presence

The “hound” proverb has considerably less internet presence than the “work” proverb. A google.kz search came up with just seventy-eight hits and a YouTube search came up with zero. There were also no hits in the Kazakh corpus. What is significant is the contested status of the proverb on social media. Unlike in the case of the “work” proverb, I found an anti-proverb based on the “hound” proverb in my internet search (Jumbayev 2018 [1922]).

When situations are not a fit for the “work” proverb, then Kazakhs will use the fox proverb. However, some Kazakhs insist categorically that there should be no deviation from the standard of the “work” proverb. One Kazakh posted in response to the “hound” proverb, “Кай заманда омир сурсенде адал болган дурьской отирикши,ку болганнан” [regardless of the age in which one lives, it is always better to be honorable rather than deceptive or cunning] (VKontakte 2015). What followed were a number of others exhorting the original poster to be gentle and kind.

References to “communism” and “capitalism” that are common in Kazakh discussion of different eras are used to refer to the Soviet and post-Soviet eras respectively. In one education site the question about the meaning of the “hound” proverb was asked. One responder stressed the contrast between the two eras (Baribar 2015). During the first ten years after independence, Kazakhstanis depicted outsiders whether foreigners or those outside their respective region as “khitryi” [cunning] (Nazpary 2002: 127-30, 69-70). These same foreigners were bringing in “dikii capitalism” [wild capitalism] (Nazpary 2002: 2-3, 9). Kazakhstanis developed a cynicism that was not limited to foreigners, but rather assumed that Kazakhstanis who had wealth were involved in illegal activities (Nazpary 2002: 2, 81). It has been over twenty years since Kazakhstan’s independence, however the contrast between the era of communism and the cunning age of capitalism continues to color Kazakhstanis’ perspectives.

In contrast to the cunning capitalists, Kazakhs have a long history of presenting themselves and being represented as a “gentle” people emphasizing their nomadic heritage (Kudaibergenova 2013: 843). Kazibek Bi in the 17th century made a statement about the Kazakhs to the ruler Tzewang Rabtan, who was the Zünghars’ lead commander in their attack on the Kazakhs (Attwood 2004). The statement starts out “Qazaq degen mal baqqan elmiz...” [We, the Kazakhs, are a sheep-herding people...]. The statement is both factual and indexical. It uses one of their societal roles as a metaphor for their gentleness. Kazibek Bi continues to describe the Kazakhs going from metaphors to direct statements about their ability to live peaceably and in harmony with others. Although the contemporary fit of this traditional saying has been challenged (Qayratulı 2011), it continues to be referenced by individuals and institutions as the quintessential description of Kazakh identity.

The “hound” proverb is connected to animal stories that are prized as the oldest stories among the Kazakhs. For Kazakhs the characteristics of being fast and flexible are things people should emulate. The proverb shows neither the internet nor press media presence of the proverb addressing “work”. Whether online or in person the proverb is used as part of interpersonal communication. Compared to the other proverb reception of the “hound” proverb is considerably more contested. This is likely for two

reasons: 1. Ambiguity of the type(s) of action being called for; 2. Proximity of the “hound” to the “fox” which triggers the concept of “cunning”, a key term in Kazakh’s description of others as compared to themselves.

Analysis

Tradition provides the resources for understanding experience and addressing societal and personal issues. Roger Abraham’s asserts that proverbs colorfully represent both recurrent situations and methods of recourse for the given society (Abrahams 1971). The work of adapting and applying proverbs to current situations is an example of what Elliott Oring calls “cultural reproduction” and presents as the process and production of tradition (Oring 2012).

Another way to explore the use of proverbs would be as levels of discourse. Johnston in his excellent discussion of societal movements delineates three levels of text/discourse: representative discourse, frame aligning discourse (Snow 1986), and general discourse. The first set are those texts which the societal movement considers seminal, the second are those produced by leaders and intellectuals to get buy in to the movement’s ideals from the general public, and the third is what happens in everyday discourse (Johnston 2002). Some Kazakh proverbs are treated as seminal discourse. These proverbs stand uncontested and are employed to delineate national character. The “work” proverb seems to enjoy such status. Then, there would be other Kazakh proverbs with more contested status. Some may find them quite fitting whereas other individuals reject the proverb outright. The “hound” proverb could be considered as frame aligning discourse. In societies with a higher incidence of anti-proverbs, proverb would be understood generally as frame aligning resources.

The “work” proverb posits a causal relationship that encourages hope that (honest) work will pay off. As such, it serves to provide something to which the general public can give ascent. Swineheart presented this in an analysis of discourse in Norway as a “mass-mediated chronotope” (2008). Going back to Agar’s work, this proverb would express the institutional perspective. On the other hand, the proverb calling the listener to be a hound relating to a crafty age is a piece of personal advice directly ad-

addressing the nuances of contemporary life. It is a workaround for situations where the standard reliance on work is not enough. It provides a line of reasoning to which individuals and groups can align themselves (Agha 2007: 96-103).

Conclusion

This inquiry marks an initial attempt to consider differing discourse ecologies amongst the overall set of Kazakh proverbs. The proverb revival that Kazakhstan has undergone offers Kazakhs resources to situate themselves. As I have demonstrated in the case of proverbial calls to act, this leads to the contrasting use of two proverbs with distinct discourse ecologies. In comparing the two proverbs, we have seen that there are two distinct discursive contexts, mass media and private discourse. On the one hand, there is the ongoing need to be assured of the promise of one's work. The "work" proverb provides a propositional/causal position with which the general public may align through mass media. The "work" proverb posits a generalized hope in productivity paying off while leaving open that there may be more than one way to get one's bread. On the other hand, there is an accompanying necessity of understanding the times in which one lives. These are not mutually exclusive positions; individuals need not give ascent to one position in public and the alternative in private. Still, some Kazakhs reject the "hound" advice categorically. Such a position is most likely shaped because the theme sources are colored by historical experiences and perspectives. Meaning-making does not happen in a vacuum thus the need to consider a discourse ecologies approach to proverb research focusing on intertextual relationships, semantics, circulation, and usage of proverbs.

Notes

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² Shoap's article uses both terms "communicative" and "discourse" extensively, so I am describing her focus as "discourse ecology". Also the author did not raise an issue with my using this term for her approach (Shoaps 2018).

³ I slipped in the adjective "honest" here. Kazakhs also consider work to be virtuous or honest (Kazakh *adaı*).

⁴ Thanks to Talant Aktanzhanov for his assistance in translating this section of Abai's song.

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