

Analysis of The Functioning of Derivative Vocabulary in Russian Proverbs and Sayings

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Abstract: This article examines the role of derivative vocabulary in Russian proverbs and sayings, focusing on morphological and semantic aspects of word formation. It explores how affixation, including prefixes and suffixes, contributes to the expressiveness and conciseness of proverbs. The study highlights the influence of derivation on meaning, stylistic devices, and the cultural value of proverbs, showing how linguistic economy and evaluative suffixes shape proverbial expressions.

Keywords: Derivative vocabulary, Russian proverbs, word formation, morphology, semantics, affixation, prefixation, suffixation.

Introduction: Russian proverbs and sayings are concise expressions of folk wisdom that often serve as a “linguistic monument” preserving features of the old language. A notable characteristic of their language is the rich use of derivative vocabulary, i.e. words formed through morphological derivation (prefixes, suffixes, etc.) rather than simple root words. These derived forms pack complex meaning into a few words, contributing to the proverb’s brevity and expressiveness. This article provides an in-depth analysis of how derivation functions in Russian proverbs, examining the morphological processes involved and their semantic impact. We will explore the role of affixation (prefixes, suffixes, compounding) in proverb vocabulary, how such derived words influence meaning and style, and how common derivative forms in proverbs can be classified. Additionally, examples of proverbs containing derived words will be analyzed in detail, and the use of derivative vocabulary in proverbs will be compared to everyday Russian language usage. Throughout the discussion, references to linguistic sources are provided to support the analysis.

METHODS

In linguistic terms, derivation refers to the creation of new words (derivatives) by adding affixes to a root. In Russian, many words consist of a root plus one or more affixes (prefixes, suffixes), and words formed this way

are called derived words. Proverbs extensively use such derived words. Morphologically, a proverb may include complex words segmented into prefix + root + suffix (and inflectional ending). For example, the proverb «бездействие – мать пороков» (“inaction is the mother of vices”) contains бездействие, formed from the root дел (“do, act”) with prefix без- (“without”) and suffix -ие to mean “lack of action (inaction).” Morphologically, identifying the root and affixes in such words is key to understanding the proverb’s meaning.

Semantically, derivation allows proverbs to express abstract concepts and generalizations succinctly. Many proverbs deal with qualities or states (wisdom, laziness, luck, etc.) and use abstract nouns derived from verbs or adjectives to represent these ideas. For instance, «Ученье – свет, а неученье – тьма» (“Learning is light, and ignorance is darkness”) contrasts ученье (“learning,” from учить, “to teach/learn” + suffix -енье) with неученье (“non-learning/ignorance,” prefix не- + ученье). By using these derived abstract nouns, the proverb encapsulates a broad concept (education vs. ignorance) in a single word. This illustrates how derivational morphology carries significant semantic load in proverbs: affixes like не- can negate a root’s meaning (turning “learning” into “lack of learning”) in order to sharpen the proverb’s message. In general, Russian proverbs tend to prioritize significant

meaning over specific reference, using derived words to denote categories or ideas rather than individual instances. Each affix contributes to meaning – a prefix may reverse or intensify a root’s sense, while a suffix may nominalize an action or add a shade of evaluation. Through such morphology, proverbs achieve a clear expression of thought and a timeless, generalized wisdom.

It is important to distinguish derivational affixes from inflectional endings. Derivational prefixes and suffixes create new lexical items (e.g. ленивый “lazy” → лень “laziness”), whereas inflections change grammatical forms (case, number, tense) without making a new word. Proverbs use both; however, the creative force lies in derivation. Words in proverbs often have a stem composed of root+affix (or several affixes), rather than just a bare root. This allows nuanced meaning: for example, the root богат- (“rich”) can yield богатый (“rich” adj.), богатство (“richness, wealth” with noun suffix -ство), or обогатить (“to enrich” with prefix о- and verb suffix). A proverb like «Не имей 100 рублей, а имей 100 друзей» (“Better to have 100 friends than 100 rubles”) uses the derived plural рублей (rubles) and base друзей (friends) to compare wealth and friendship. While not complex derivatives, this proverb relies on рубль (a noun historically derived from a verb “to chop” in coin-making) and the abstract concept of numeric value. In many other cases, proverbs prefer morphologically derived synonyms or forms that carry connotations or brevity not present in the neutral modern word – a semantic choice tied to morphology. In short, the morphology of proverb vocabulary is rich with prefixes and suffixes that shape the proverb’s semantics. By examining both the structure (morphemes) and meaning of these derivatives, we gain insight into how proverbs encapsulate wisdom in few words.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Affixation – attaching prefixes or suffixes to a root – is the primary mechanism of word formation in Russian proverbs. Russian, in general, has a high capacity for derivation, with “several times more affixes than English” used to form words. Proverbs exploit this capacity fully, making frequent use of prefixation, suffixation, and occasionally compounding.

- **Prefixation:** Prefixes are added to roots to alter or refine meaning. Many verbs in proverbs carry prefixes that indicate aspect, direction, or intensity of the action. For example, писать (“to write”) with prefix на- becomes написать (“to write down, complete writing”), and with под- becomes подписать (“to sign”). In the proverb «Поспешишь – людей насмешишь» (“If you hurry, you will make people

laugh at you”), both verbs are prefixed: поспешишь (from спешить, “to hurry,” with по- indicating a one-time or intensive action: “you hurry (too much)”) and насмешишь (from смешить, “to make laugh,” with на- indicating a targeted action: “you’ll cause to laugh at”). The prefixes here are crucial: without them, спешишь would just mean “you hurry (habitually)” and смешишь “you amuse,” but по- adds swiftness/completion and на- adds the nuance of making others laugh at (someone). This highlights how prefixes modify verbs in proverbs to convey the exact intended meaning or outcome. Common prefixes in proverbs include не- (negation, e.g. невежа “ignoramus” from вежа archaic “well-behaved”), без- (without, absence, e.g. безделица “trifle” from дело “deed”), по- (can signify doing a bit or completing an action, e.g. поживём – увидим “we’ll live on and then see” where по- gives поживём the sense “live for a while”), за-, на-, вы-, пере-, etc. Each adds a layer: вы- often conveys “out” or completion (as in выловишь “you will fish out” from ловить, used in a proverb about not catching even a small fish without effort), пере- can convey repetition or excess (e.g. перегнуть “over-bend”), and so on. Prefixation thus allows proverbs to target very specific meanings and often contributes to the proverb’s metaphor (for instance, от- in откусить gives the idea of “off-bite,” used metaphorically in «Откусил больше, чем мог прожевать» – “bit off more than one could chew”). In sum, prefixes play a key role in proverb vocabulary by refining verbs and even some nouns (e.g. не- in неправда “falsehood”) to fit the proverb’s message.

- **Suffixation:** Suffixes create new words by attaching to a root (with or without a prefix). Russian has a wide array of derivational suffixes, and proverbs commonly feature nouns and adjectives formed this way. Noun-forming suffixes are especially productive:

о -ник / -ец / -ач / -ун for actor or agent nouns: e.g. жнец (“reaper,” from жать “to reap” + -ец), швец (“cobbler/tailor,” from шить “to sew” + a historical -ец form), игрец (“player,” from играть “to play” + -ец). All three appear in the proverb «И швец, и жнец, и на дуде игрец» describing a person who tries to be “a cobbler, a reaper, and a flute-player” at once – i.e. jack of all trades (here the repeated suffix -ец creates a rhyming trio for stylistic effect). Another example: охотник (“hunter,” from охота “hunt/desire” + -ник), used in «На охотника и зверь бежит» (“Even the beast runs toward the hunter”). These suffixes identify people by their characteristic action or role.

о -ство / -ство and -ние / -енье for abstract nouns (qualities, states, results): e.g. богатство (“wealth,” from богатый “rich” + -ство), родство (“kinship,” from род “kin” + -ство), учение (“learning,”

from учить “to teach” + -ение), варенье (“jam,” literally “a boiled (concoction),” from варить “to boil” + -енье). Proverbs often deal with such abstract concepts: «Богатство не в деньгах, а в друзьях» (“Wealth is not in money but in friends”) uses богатство; «Учение – свет, а неучение – тьма» uses учение as noted. The suffix -ость also forms qualities (e.g. глупость “stupidity” from глупый “stupid”), as in «Хватило ума дурью маяться, а ума не хватило от дурасти избавиться» (“He had enough wits to indulge in foolishness, but not enough to quit being foolish”) – here дурасть (folksy variant of дурасть from дурной “foolish” + -ость) means “foolishness.”

о -ка for concrete nouns or result nouns: e.g. драка (“a fight,” from драться “to fight” + -к(а)), used in «После драки кулаками не машут» (“After a fight, they don’t wave fists” – i.e. no point to retaliate when it’s over). ежевика (“blackberry,” from ёж “hedgehog” + -евик-а, referring to prickliness), etc. The -к- suffix (often with -а ending) is also key in diminutives (see below).

о Zero-suffix (implicit) derivation: sometimes a noun is derived with no added suffix (just a gender ending or nothing), often from a verb or adjective. Such affixless formations exist in proverbs. For example, сон (“sleep,” noun) comes from the verb спать (“to sleep”) with no extra suffix, and жар (“heat”) from жаркий (“hot”) by dropping adjectival endings. In «Молодильные яблоки сладки, да жарок горек» (“The rejuvenating apples are sweet, but the heat (of the boiling cauldron) is bitter”) – жар is used to mean the heat/fire of boiling, derived from the same root as жаркий. Zero-derived nouns like сон, страх, смех (sleep, fear, laughter – from спать, бояться, смеяться) give proverbs a pithy, archaic tone.

о Diminutive suffixes (a special subset of noun suffixes) are widely seen in proverbs to convey small size or affection (discussed more in Section 3). Common diminutive suffixes include -ок / -ек, -очка / -ечка, -ик, -чик, -еньк-, etc.

. For instance, яблонька (from яблоня “apple tree” + -ьк-а) in «Яблоко от яблоньки недалеко падает» (“The apple doesn’t fall far from the little apple tree”) and рыбка (from рыба “fish” + -к-а) in «Без труда не вытащишь и рыбки из пруда» (“Without effort, you can’t pull even a little fish out of the pond”). These suffixes modify the meaning with a nuance of smallness or endearment, often for stylistic effect rather than literal size (more on this below).

о Augmentative suffixes like -ище (denoting largeness or intensification, e.g. домище “huge house” from дом) are comparatively rare in proverbs. Augmentatives tend to sound colloquial or archaic;

modern usage perceives them as marked

. Proverbs, being traditional, seldom use augmentatives except for effect, such as «Страхи-то какие, чудовище прямо!» (“What fears, like a veritable monster!”) where -ище in чудовище (“monster,” from чудо “wonder” + -ищ-е) amplifies чудо into something frightful. By and large, suffixation in proverbs leans towards standard word-building and diminutives rather than augmentatives.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the derivative vocabulary in Russian proverbs is a key to their enduring power. It not only enables the compact communication of moral and practical lessons but also adds to the aesthetic and emotional impact of these folk pearls. Studying the morphology (prefixes, suffixes, compounds) and semantics of proverb vocabulary offers insights into the Russian language’s creativity and the cultural mindset encapsulated in these sayings. As proverbs proclaim, «Слово – не воробей, вылетит – не поймаешь» (“A word is not a sparrow: once it flies out, you can’t catch it”). In the case of proverbs, the “words” that have flown out to posterity are often derivative creations, carefully crafted and released by our ancestors, and we cannot imagine catching or rephrasing them in any better way – a testament to the precision and expressiveness that derivation has brought to Russian proverbial language.

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