

In Honorem



Grigorij L'vovič Permiakov (1919-1983)

A Biographical Mini-Sketch

If there were something like a paremiological Walk of Fame, Russian paremiologist G.L. Permiakov would definitely be one of those to be honored by an eternal star: without a doubt, he was one of the most important paremiologists ever. In fact, he can be called the founder of structural and semiotic paremiology, who provided the paremiological world with important insights into the semiotic character of proverbs, and who suggested innovative ways to describe proverbial meaning in such a way that they were useful for practical purposes of proverb classification, too. Moreover, he embedded his paremiological ideas into

a *General Theory of Cliches* (1970), and complemented them by empirical studies on what he termed a paremiological minimum, i.e., those proverbs, which can be regarded to be (more or less) generally known within a given culture. Permyakov was born in 1919 in the Siberian town of Perm¹. In 1937, he entered the Philological of the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature and History (MIFLI), where he studied until 1941. Due to Russia's involvement in World War II, he did not finish his university studies, but went to active service in August of that year. It is to this time that his change of name goes back, his original name being "German" [Герман], a Jewish name with German origin, which he changed to "Permyakov", referring back to "Permyak", i.e., an inhabitant of the Siberian town Perm¹. After having been severely wounded and discharged in 1944 (he was treated, among others, by famous Russian neuropsychologist Lurija), he completed his studies at Kazakhstan University and then worked in Alma-Ata (today: Almaty) in local broadcasting and journalism until 1953. As a consequence of his war injuries, he had to resign from professional journalism and concentrate on working at home. Thus, at the end of the 1950s, he turned to the field of folklore, initially as a translator and editor of various folklore collections, containing folklore from Asian, African and Oceanic origin (in German translations). In the mid-1960s, his plan arose to compile and edit a collection of proverbs from various Oriental cultures. In this context, his interest increasingly shifted to theoretical issues of folklore, mainly motivated by practical needs to arrange the planned edition. In fact, the lack of a satisfying classification system led Permyakov deeply into theoretical issues, concentrating on structural and semiotic aspects of the proverb's nature.

His two major proverb collections from 1968 (*Избранные пословицы и поговорки народов востока* [*Selected Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings of Oriental Peoples*]) and 1979 (*Пословицы и поговорки народов востока* [*Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings of Oriental Peoples*]) result from this occupation. Both collections contain theoretical introductions, which provide detailed descriptions and explanations of his theoretical approach: more importantly, both differ significantly in their orientation, due to theoretical changes over the time. Permyakov's 1972 edition of a collection of trickster stories (*Проделки хитрецов*) deserves mention too here, again introduced by a theoretical introduction, revealing structural basics of this genre. In addition to his own writings, Permyakov played an important role in establishing structural paremiology in Russia, as can be seen from his two edited books *Паремнологический сборник* (1975) and *Паремнологические исследования* (1984), containing relevant Russian and international publications.

Permyakov's own theoretical oeuvre comprises "only" ca. 400 pages, his international reception outside of Russia having been largely shaped by translations into English and German¹. In contrast to translations available in German (at least those after 1983), the English translations are based on Permyakov's earlier texts only; these are obsolete from a theoretical perspective, since they have been significantly modified and elaborated upon later, either by Permyakov himself, or by scholars following his tracks. Yet, although references to these early works cannot be but of predominantly historical value, these translations have largely shaped Permyakov's international reception in the English speaking world, and caused either caused lack of understanding, or given rise to unjustified critique.

In any case, although the times of classical structuralism are over today, Permyakov's work continues to offer many ideas which have not yet been fully appreciated, and which deserve to be further elaborated upon, be that in their original form, or based on contemporary developments, owing much to Permyakov's inspiring ideas.

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¹ For a full bibliography of Permyakov's works, which does not, of course, contain posthumous re-publications as his 1988 book *Ключевые структурные представления*, see: Grzybek, P. (1984). Bibliographie der Arbeiten G. L. Permyakova. In: Grzybek, P. (ed.), *Semiotische Studien zum Sprichwort, Simple Forms Reconsidered I*. Tübingen: Narr, 203-214. [Special Issue of *Koeliken Gakle - Arts Semiotics, An International Journal of Semiotics*, 7, 3/4].