

A Stitch in Time Saves Nine?

Gauging the Outworking of Mandatory Proverb Instruction on Current Kazakhstani College Students

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Introduction

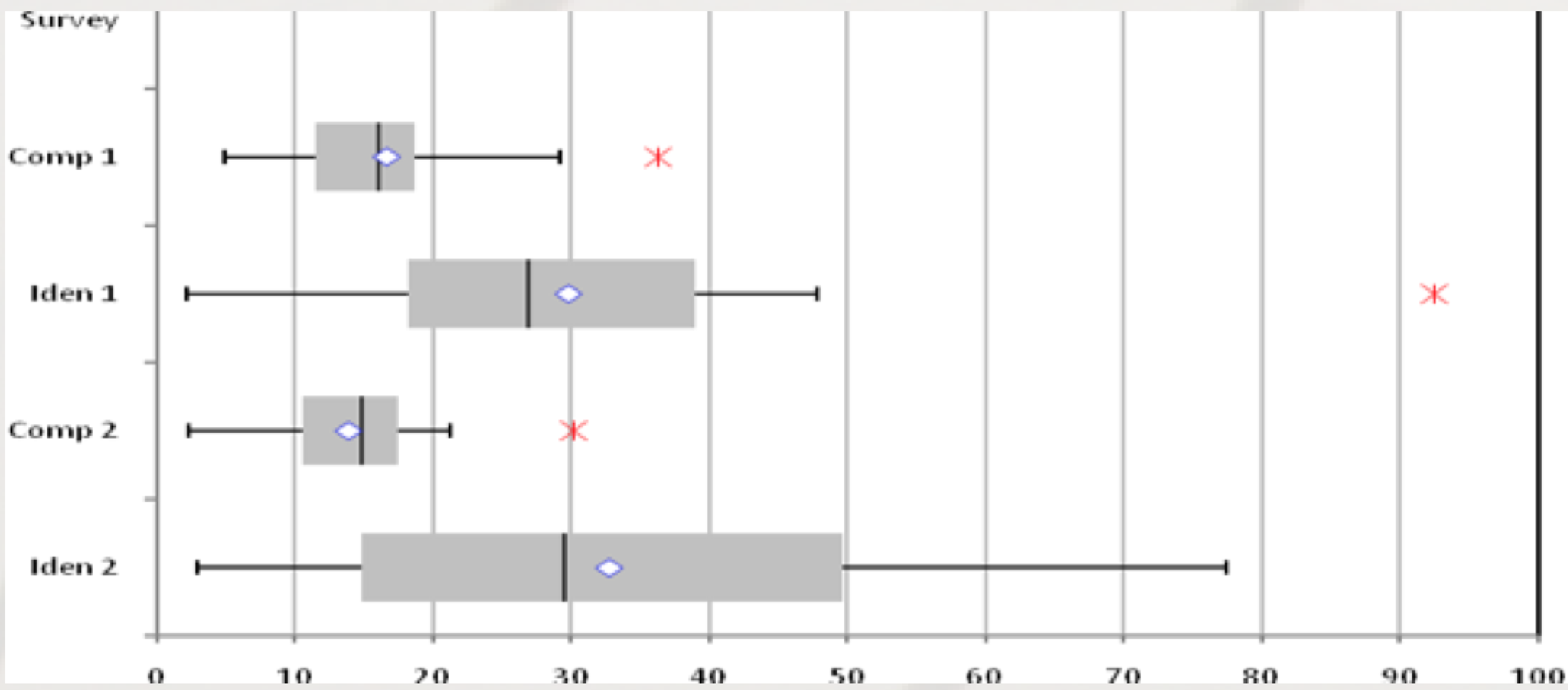
Imagine the headline: “A Stitch in Time Saves Nine: Los Angeles Students Required to Memorize 1000 English Proverbs to Aid Character Development”. It would never happen, would it?

Yet in Kazakhstan, this is exactly what the government has done. The Kazakhstani government declared Kazakh the national language and mandated proverb instruction in public schools (Kazakhstan 2004). As a result, Kazakh language is experiencing a tremendous revitalization and Kazakh linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1977) is on the rise.

In this project, I will explore how Kazakh-speaking college students use Kazakh proverbs to narrativize “community”. I will do this by evaluating their knowledge and use of Kazakh proverbs addressing such issues as nationalism/patriotism, unity, family, and ethnic identity. My cultural consultants are all students at Kazakh National Technical University (KNTU).

Results

My analysis of the survey data indicated that students had communicative competency, the ability to effectively adapt what they are saying based on shared guidelines for contextualizing the message (Hymes 2001). The standard deviations for the completion survey results gave a p-value of .85.



Survey Results in Quartiles

Students adapted proverbs concerning family and friends to their setting, but left other proverbs generally unchanged. However, one of the "unity" proverbs did provide the most significant performance: a traditional tale eliciting proverbs and a surprise ending, putting reliance on the mass collective in question.

Literature Review

The two lenses for analysis:

1. Folklorismus: "...distinction to be drawn between folk practices wholly belonging to their innermost life of the people or as something adopted or imposed for some understood or ulterior reason." (Newall 1987, 131).
2. Language revitalization: how speakers move from imitation to production in the process of reestablishing the language in question (Makihara 2005)

Three markers of authentic use and production: a. Variants (Mieder 2004, 5); b. "Anti-proverbs", proverbs with spin (Mieder 2004, 26); c. Adaptations beyond the traditional societal frame.

Whether we are taking a folkloristic or an anthropological approach, the grid is the same. When we examine discourse and see variation in syntax or application, we will consider this authentic production and evidence of agency; whenever we see replication of the standard syntax or application, we will judge it to be folklorismus or imitation. Besides utilizing this grid, I will also explore the limitations of this model to interpret the data collected.

Conclusions

Students offered up community with a small “c”, emphasizing the interpersonal over the national in their use of familiar proverbs. Interestingly, these were also the values stressed during the Soviet era by means of folklore (Kononenko 2011, 286).

How well did our two analytical lenses work? Folklorismus and language revitalization did give us tools for identifying linguistic change. At the same time, the most significant performance emerged as a result of faithfully following a traditional genre, thereby giving room for others to share their two cents.

This research establishes a baseline. In order to look at issues of societal change, a follow up project would need to be done.

Methodology

I selected four hundred Kazakh proverbs about "community" from three collections (Aqqoziyn 2007; Barjaqsıulı 1993/1923; Qaidar 2004). Then, I administered surveys to fifty-seven college students at KNTU in Almaty. I used proverb completion surveys in addition to the more customary proverb identification survey (Chlosta 1995).

Rather than having cultural consultants conceptualize about hypothetical situations, a long-time standard practice in proverb research (Herskovits 1950; Seitel 1999), I asked them to act out the given proverb. This technique was adapted from an ethnographic approach developed by Michael Agar to better understand the linguistic sub-culture of drug addicts in the U.S. (Agar 1969, 1975). Through this process the fellow students serve as jury, audience, and co-creators of the reenactment experience (Agar 1969).

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