

THE COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF THE SUPERSTITIONS CONNECTED WITH FUNERALS IN THE ENGLISH, RUSSIAN AND MARI LANGUAGES

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the superstitions in the English, Russian and Mari languages that are connected with funeral and burial traditions. Funerals play a very important role in traditions of every people as presenting the farewell ceremony to pay the last respects to the nearest and dearest people and send them to glory. In the course of the research and analysis all superstitions were divided into five semantic fields. The fields contain lexical-semantic groups. Semantic field 1 'The Day of Funerals' includes superstitions describing the day and the weather on the day of funerals. Semantic field 2 'General Instructions about the Funerals' gives general instructions for the funeral ceremony. The lexical-semantic groups are distinguished according to the people mentioned in the superstition. Semantic field 3 'Instructions Connected with the House' presents instructions that shall be followed in the house after the body of the deceased is taken away to the cemetery and when people come back into the house after the burial ceremony. Semantic field 4 'Instructions Connected with the Funeral Procession' includes instructions to those who participate in the funeral procession or come across the funeral procession. Semantic field 5 'Instructions Connected with Burial' gives the instructions what to do during the burial ceremony to provide happy life of the deceased in another world and protect him or her from the evil spirits, as well as to protect the living people from the deceased one. The analysis of superstitions of different languages helps to find the superstitions which are common to different languages under consideration and which do not have the analogues. It allows identifying features which are universal to different peoples and which are peculiar to make the people unique.

Keywords: superstitions, funerals, burial, the English language, the Russian language, the Mari language.

1 INTRODUCTION

Funerals are the last rite of passage in the life of all people. This rite means the end of life in this world and passing away to the unknown, undiscovered world. These two factors resulted in the creation of a big number of superstitions about funerals. On the one hand, such superstitions are aimed at commemorating

the deceased person. On the other hand, they give instructions how to protect the living people from the soul of a dead person.

Throughout time different factors and warnings became superstitions which appeared a lot of years ago and combine the experience of previous generations. Superstitions present verbalized units in the form of sentences the main function of which is to make predictions unexplained from the logical point of view (Fliginskikh, 2014, p. 157).

The presented linguistic analysis is the continuation of a series of articles about superstitions connected with death and funerals (Fliginskikh, 2018; Fliginskikh, 2018). These articles consequently consider the superstitions starting from death omens, which are followed by the preparation to the funerals and end with a funeral ceremony. To select the material for this purpose the authors carried out continuous sampling from the following monolingual and multilingual dictionaries and books describing customs and traditions of the folks, as well as interviews (quantitative research methods).

For the English superstitions: *Black Cats and April Fools* by H. Oliver, *Strange and Fascinating Superstitions* by Cl. De Lys, *The Encyclopedia of Superstitions* by R. Webster, *Multilanguage Dictionary of Superstitions and Omens* by D. Puccio, *The Story of the World's Most Notorious Superstition* by N. Lachenmeyer, *Superstitions: 1,013 of the World's Wackiest Myths, Fables & Old Wives Tales* by D.J. Murrell, *Oxford Dictionary of Superstitions* by I. Opie, M. Tatem, *Omens and Superstitions* by S.M. Brisher, *Superstitions of Victorian England* by E. Kouti, N. Harsa.

For the Russian superstitions: *Everyday life of a Noble Class of Pushkin Epoch. Omens and Superstitions* by E.V. Lavrentyeva, *Superstitions or Prejudices* by Yu.V. Shcheglova, *Multilanguage Dictionary of Superstitions and Omens* by D. Puccio, *Black Cat with an Empty Bucket. Folk Omens and Superstitions* by E.G. Lebedeva.

For the Mari superstitions: *Ethnography of the Mari People* by G.A. Sepeev, *Mari Mythology: Ethnographic Reference Book* by L.S. Toydybekova, *Studies in Cheremis: the Supernatural* by Th.A. Sebeok, Fr.J. Ingemann, Since the information about Mari superstitions is very limited and not properly presented in literature, the authors conducted field studies in the villages of the Mari El Republic questioning local residents (interviews as qualitative research methods).

The purpose of the research is to make a classification of superstitions under study which are distributed among semantic fields containing lexical-semantic groups and to analyze them. Such analysis could help to find superstitions and images universal for three languages under study and to distinguish the specific ones.

2 DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

All superstitions with the meaning of funeral ceremony were divided into five groups – semantic fields. The first group includes the description of the day of funerals. The other four groups give instructions at different moments of funeral ceremony.

2.1 Semantic Field ‘The Day of Funerals’

Semantic field ‘The Day of Funeral’ includes only one lexical-semantic group ‘Weather’ which is found in the Russian and English languages.

2.1.1 Lexical-Semantic Group ‘Weather’

The group includes the words related to the description of the day and the weather during the day of funerals: ‘good day’, ‘bright day’, ‘rain’, ‘thunder’.

There is one Russian superstition: *If the day of funerals is good and bright, the deceased was a good person* (RUS). This superstition coincide clear sky with a pure soul without any sins.

English superstition symbolizing good personality of the deceased includes the word ‘rain’: *Rain meant that the deceased is mourned by the heaven, so he was a good person* (ENG).

Other English superstitions tell about heaven. Both rain and thunder are good omens as they are connected with the way to the heaven: rain means the start of the way, thunder signals its end: *If rain falls on a funeral procession, the deceased will go to heaven. Thunder at the end of a funeral ceremony is considered a good omen, because it means that the person's soul has reached heaven.* (ENG)

Other superstitions about the funerals contain the instructions for the nearest and dearest people of the deceased. They may be divided into 4 semantic fields according to their main topic.

2.2 Semantic Field 'General Instructions about the Funerals'

Semantic field 'General Instructions about the Funerals' includes superstitions connected with different groups of people, and they are distributed according to the people mentioned.

2.2.1 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Young Girl'

The group includes one Russian superstition: *It is necessary to give gifts during the funeral of the young girl* (RUS). In this case funerals are combined with one of the wedding rituals when a girl gives presents to the guests. For the same reason, the dead young girl is dressed like a bride (Fliginskikh, 2018b)

2.2.2 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Children'

English superstition coincides tears and water which may never dry off: *Never cry over a child's corpse for it will have no one to change its damp shroud* (ENG). This superstition prevents relatives from crying too much.

Mari superstition tells about the children of a deceased person. It gives the instructions what to do to leave happiness to them: *The children were carried over the body of the deceased person with the words: 'Leave your happiness to your daughters and your sons'* (MAR).

2.2.3 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Murdered Person'

If the person was killed, there is an English superstition which gives instructions how you could define a murderer: *If a person had a violent death, and one of the guests at the funerals is a killer, the wounds would open and start bleeding* (ENG).

2.2.4 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Vurgem Chiiyshe (Dressed Up As a Deceased)'

This group is named with Mari words as they have such phenomena as a person who puts on the clothes of a dead person and acts for him during the funerals. The surrounding people give him food and drinks, name with the name of the deceased and then bring him to the cemetery: *He goes back using the loop road in order to get rid of the role* (MAR). Such route is justified so as to hide the direct road back and embarrass the soul of a dead person.

2.2.5 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Funeral Participants'

Mari superstition mentions the number of people participating in the funerals: *The more people take part in the farewell ceremony of a deceased, the more convenient he will feel in the afterlife* (MAR). In the Russian variant of this superstition the number of people who commemorate the deceased person is important.

2.3 Semantic Field 'Instructions Connected with the House'

Semantic field 'Instructions Connected with the House' includes superstitions giving instructions what to do after the corps of a deceased person was carried out from the house and what to do after returning back from the cemetery. There are superstitions of the Russian and Mari languages. All these superstitions were aimed at protecting the living people from death.

2.3.1 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Parts of the House'

This group includes superstitions with the words 'window', 'door'.

Mari superstition is connected with fortune and happiness: *In some places as the coffin is carried out through the door, it is pulled back three times to keep it from taking away good fortune* (MAR). Doing it the people try to keep fortune and not let it go.

Russian superstition is connected with the soul of a deceased: *After the corps of the deceased was carried out from the house, at least one person shall stay inside to close all windows, doors, etc.* (RUS). It was done to keep the soul of a dead person from penetrating into the house and protect people in the house.

2.3.2 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Objects Connected with Fire'

This group includes superstitions with the words somehow connected with fire and heat: 'furnace', 'coals', 'ashes'.

Russian superstition gives an instruction for people coming back home from the cemetery: *After coming back from the funeral, women shall look at the furnace and touch it* (RUS). This superstition was used for all people, but especially for women as domestic goddesses. It is a remnant of an ancient act of purifying after contacting with death through fire which prevents from bringing death into the house.

Mari superstition gives instructions how to clear the house with the help of such objects: *A pot of glowing coals, a heated stone, or ashes are put over the place where the corpse has lain in the house* (MAR).

2.3.3 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Metal Objects'

This group has one superstition of the Mari language containing the words 'axe' and 'knife': *After the corps of a deceased person was carried out, to protect the house and people, they put an axe at the place the corps was laying and a knife near the door* (MAR). People think that metal objects, especially if they are sharp may help in protecting against the death.

2.3.4 Lexical-semantic group 'Animals'

This group deals with the words naming animal objects, in particular birds, such as 'hen', 'cock', 'egg'. It includes one Mari superstition which give instructions how to buy out your blood form the spirit of death: *After the corps was carried out into the yard, a hen or a cock was killed (or an egg was broken, depending on the age and the gender of a deceased). And a drop of blood was smeared on the forehead of the deceased* (MAR).

2.3.5 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Cleaning'

This group is connected with washing something to get rid of the spirit of death. The superstitions contain such verbs as 'to wash', 'to clean'.

Some superstitions tell about washing the house: *After the corpse is taken from the house, it has been thoroughly cleaned* (RUS, MAR).

Other superstitions deal with washing people's hands and faces: *After returning from the cemetery before going inside the house all the participants of the funeral profession washed their hands and sometimes face* (RUS). *After returning from the cemetery it is forbidden to go to the yard without washing hands and rubbing them with ashes near the gate* (MAR).

All these superstitions show the importance of clearing and washing to protect the house and people.

2.4 Semantic Field 'Instructions Connected with the Funeral Procession'

Semantic field 'Instructions Connected with the Funeral Procession' includes superstitions giving instructions for the funeral procession. These instructions are related to both the participants of the procession and people they meet. So we can distinguish two lexical-semantic groups.

2.4.1 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Instructions for the Participants of the Procession'

This group includes superstitions giving instructions on how to choose the road for the procession and how the participants shall walk.

English superstition advises not to use a new road when going to the cemetery. The new road may mean the new death: *If they carry the coffin along a new road, bad luck may follow a family* (ENG).

English and Mari superstitions give instructions to the participants on how they shall walk. Usually it shall be calm, slow and without any additional movements which may attract a new death: *People of the Western Wales thought that coffin carriers shall walk in a dignified manner* (ENG). *Those taking part in the funeral procession must not look around* (MAR). If people are in a hurry, it seems that they are looking for a new death.

One more important note is *to carry the coffin clockwise as the sun goes* (ENG). Such route symbolizes the life of a person starting from sunrise and finishing with sunset.

2.4.2 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Instructions for People Who Meet the Procession'

This group includes superstitions giving instructions for people who may meet the funeral procession. It is interesting that the attitude to the procession is different among different folks.

In Scotland and England it was a *bad luck* to meet accidentally a funeral procession, while in Russia it was a *good luck*. At the same time a Russian superstition warns: *Do not cross the road before the procession* (RUS). The reason is you may take all the illnesses of a deceased person.

Another bad luck tradition was connected with observing the funeral procession through windows and doors: British people *went outside the house* while Mari people *closed and covered the windows*. As for Russian superstition, it pays special attention to the fact that *people shall not sleep when the funeral procession is*

passing their house, or the soul of the deceased person may take the soul of a sleeping person with it (RUS). SO the sleeping people shall be awoken. All this was done not to follow the death.

2.5 Semantic Field 'Instructions Connected with Burial'

Semantic field 'Instructions Connected with Burial' includes superstitions giving instructions for the funeral procession. These instructions are related to both the participants of the procession and people they meet. So we can distinguish two lexical-semantic groups.

2.5.1 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Instructions for a Well-being of a Deceased'

These superstitions give instructions on what people shall do to provide good life of a deceased in another world.

First of all, Russian and Mari people throw coins into the grave before putting the coffin in order the dead person could to buy out the place for burial in another world: *Before putting the coffin into the grave, it is necessary to throw a coin into it* (RUS, MAR).

Both English and Mari people buried dead people with their head to the west and their feet to the east. English people thought that *it will be easier for a deceased to stand up on the Judgement Day* (ENG). Mari people thought that *it will help him to find a way to the forefathers* (MAR).

Mari people *let the coffin down into the grave with the help of two towels or pieces of cloth*. It will prevent the soul of the deceased from falling down while crossing the river of the dead (MAR).

Another English and Mari tradition is to make sounds during the burial process. English people *clanged a bell during funerals* (ENG). *Mari musicians went round the grave after burial playing music* (MAR). All this was done to keep to evil spirits far from the grave.

2.5.2 Lexical-Semantic Group 'Instructions for a Well-being of the Alive People'

The living people also get the instructions how to protect themselves from the souls of the deceased people.

Russian superstition says that *you need to throw a handful of soil into the grave in order not to be afraid of the deceased* (RUS). If you do not do it, the soul of a dead person will find your blind spot and will scare you.

English and Mari superstitions advise *to touch the corps*. It will help to avoid the deceased haunting their dreams (ENG), or he would not take happiness with him but leave it to them (MARI).

3 CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of superstitions connected with the funeral ceremony of the English, Russian, and Mari languages has shown the following results:

1. There are not that many superstitions in this group (in total 42 for three languages) which is explained by the very limited and specific field of research (compare with superstitions containing death omens – 230 for three languages (Fliginskikh, 2018a, 323)).
2. Semantic field 'The Day of Funerals' is not presented in the Mari language as Mari people pay more attention to other spheres. Semantic field 'Instructions Connected with the House' is not presented in the English language as English people were more connected with the life outside the house.
3. There is only one universal superstition for the three languages which is connected with observing the funeral processions through windows and doors.

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