Semiotic Patterns of Superstitious Discourse (Comparative Research)

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Abstract: The taxonomy of omens is an essential feature of numerous linguistic researches of superstitious discourse. Classification principles suggested in these researches are based on superficial semantics. On deep level superstitious signs are formed by a few semiotic patterns. Their framework is filled with different cultural codes depending on time and society. A certain number of superstitious signs that belong to different types of rituals and different linguistic cultures and have different cultural codes and different functions may be reduced to one semiotic pattern. Classification by semiotic principle may be used to create a system of semiotic modeling of superstitious discourse as a naïve way of cognition.

Key words: Superstitious discourse • Semiotic pattern • Ambivalence of semiotic pattern • Matching of semiotic patterns

INTRODUCTION

The rite is one of the main objects which is studied by ethnography and anthropology. Scientists have been undertaking a lot of attempts to classify rituals [1]. The main disadvantage of the proposed system of classification was that the allocated rites could have a set of distinctive features by which they could be attributed to multiple classes. A. Van Gennep was the first to see the new principle of classification of rituals belonging to different types—the principle of rituals order. Order in which rituals follow one another is universal, it is characteristic for each culture irrespective of place and time. A. Van Gennep defined preliminar, liminar, postliminar rituals and called them the rituals of transition [1].

Each ritual may be divided into a certain complex of ritual actions. Major part of these actions is formalized in language, sanctified by tradition and turns into a code of religious canons mandatory to all the members of society. Code of religious canons banned by predominant religion transforms into the category of superstitions important not only to anthropology and ethnography but to several branches of linguistics: ethno linguistics, linguosemiotics, cognitive linguistics.

Classifications of superstitious signs in modern linguistic researches are based on three principles: thematic, functional and cultural code [2, 3]. Thematic classifications aggregate signs relating to a particular type of rite: wedding, initiation, calendar, etc. Functional classifications group signs by functions: instructional, prohibiting, warning, etc. Classifications based on cultural code allow defining zoomorphic omens as well as anthropomorphic, floristic or vegetal, etc. These types of classifications are evidently based either on superficial semantics or on correlation of sign with a certain type of ritual. It is also evident that all three qualifiers that allow attributing a superstitious sign to different classes may relate to the same sign.

We suppose that the system of superstitious signs is based on the semiotic principle. Data from mythology, ethnography, ethno linguistics and semiotics are especially valuable in reconstruction of semiotic patterns. For example, rocking an empty cradle means that soon it will be filled. In this omen there is a sign - “empty cradle”, ordered action with the sign - “rocking” and the result of the action - “the cradle will be filled”. In a commonplace interpretation it means the following: if a woman wants to become pregnant and to have a baby she should rock an empty cradle. The base of the omen is a semiotic opposition “empty / filled” that may be found in myths of many peoples of the world. Empty cradle is a cultural code, metaphoric rethinking of void. It may actualize in empty pail, empty wallet, etc.
Every society has its own set of orders regarding seed. The seed turns into the “egg of world” with two void and it also depends on a situation. An English omen, placenta containing male and female beings. Male being for example, orders not to rock an empty cradle Yurugu travels across the world in an ark made from a part of his placenta [6]. Mythological meaning of cosmic World Egg or Space Egg, The Hero-Creator and People came from is contained in many cosmogonic myths [5, p. 681]. In Hindu mythology the most widely mentioned version of the Creation of World is the idea of cosmic egg that floats in primeval waters. Creator Brahma came into being from the egg. He creates the Universe from the remains of the egg [7]. In Accadian cosmogonic poem Marduk the mail god of Babylonian pantheon was conceived by Hiya in the dwelling Abzu (Adzu in the Sumerian language means “personification of the element of primeval waters”) [8]. In some myths of Eastern Khanty it is told that a man came into being from saliva of Superior God Noumi-Toruma. Myths of Ancient Egypt tell that gods Tefnut and Shu came into being from saliva of Superior God Nouni-Toruma. Myths of Ancient Egypt tell that gods Tefnut and Shu came into being from saliva of the god Atum.

These cosmogonic and relevant anthropogonic myths of the people from different continents (America, Africa, Indian subcontinent) in different parts of the world (East, Middle East, West), separated by the oceans show the extent of similarity between the archaic concepts of the origin of the world. They invariably contain an idea of moisture as fog, rain, primeval waters, World Ocean, placenta. The origin of a man differs in different myths-people came into being from parts of a body of superior god, from saliva of god, from the world egg.

Let us now consider Norse, Celtic and Slavic cosmogonic mythology. German-Scandinavian myths tell that Aurgelmir came into being from ice in which the heat engendered life. Aurgelmir was killed by gods and from the parts of his body Earth and Sky were created [9]. Kvasir is one of the gods of Norse mythology who taught the people wisdom came into being from saliva of gods after Aesir-Vanir war [4, p. 631].

Celtic mythology has one noticeable object. Gauls possessed the charm egg that has a sacral value for them. N.S. Shirokova supposes that “serpentine egg” of Druids is somehow similar to cosmic egg of Ancient Indian mythology because “serpentine egg” with golden load flows against the current and does not sink [10].

Of all the Slavs deities Rod until recently has remained the most mysterious and less studied. For a long time he was considered equal with goblins [11, pp. 67-70]. Perhaps following the accepted tradition V.V. Ivanov and V.N. Toporov did not include him into the pantheon of...
superior gods of the Eastern Slavs. They mentioned that in Ancient Russian lists of pagan gods Rod and Rozhanitsa usually follow the main gods. According to them Rod “is a personification of a family, the unity of successors of one predecessor, gathering of successors” [5, p. 358].

Academician B.A. Rybakov was the first Russian ethnographer who doubted the interpretation of Rod in the pantheon of gods of Eastern Slavs. Commentary to Gospel in manuscript of XV-XVI century is to his mind the key to understand the real role of Rod in the pantheon of gods of the Eastern Slavs. Basing on this commentary the historian K.N. Bestuzhev-Rymin and later B.A. Rybakov made a conclusion that Rod for Slavs is the creator of all the matter in the world. Commentary mentions that Rod sits on the air and drops from the sky some piles for babies to be born on the Earth. The most likely as B.A. Rybakov believes that the world “piles” means “raindrops” [12, p. 278].

Analyzing the set of the Old Russian words with the root “rod” (family) “родичи” (relatives), “rozhdat” (give birth), “природа” (nature), “урожай” (harvest), “родник” (spring), “радия” (lightning), “родие” (pomegranate), “родрий” (red), “рдеть” (show red) and others, B.A. Rybakov relates Rod to “all-embracing deity of the universe with all its worlds: the upper, heavenly, from which the rain and lightning come, middle world of nature and birth and lower world with its “fire relationship” [12, p. 280]. The same conclusion may be done from the linguistic research of O.N. Trubachev and V.I. Abaev. Ancient Slavs’ “rod” (family) as O.N. Trubachev considers is the new usage (metathesis) of Indo-European morpheme ard-art that means “origin”, “high”, “big” [13, pp. 152-153]. In the Ossetian language “ard” initially meant “the god to swear” but “ard” as V.I. Abaev notes is the most important religious concept of all Iranian world [14, pp. 154-155].

We are not intending to dispute the Rod role in the pantheon of gods of the Eastern Slavs with historians and ethnographers. The most important for us is the fact that Rod may be considered as the superior god of the Eastern Slavs and the way he promotes an origin on Earth: by rain.

It’s worth mentioning that according to the Bible Adam was created from clay and water and Christ blended clay with saliva and healed a blind. It is accepted that Christian ritual of christening in a font with water originates from christening of Christ in Jordan River. Not only has the water washed off the sin. When a man dips into water the Holy Ghost secretly comes down on a man and he unites with God. Dipping in water or douching as an act of moral cleansing was practiced by many people before Christ. Christened by water gets protection of Pantocrator from evil, vice, sin.

Mythological thinking of ancient people endow moisture (in the form of rain, snow, fog) sacral meaning. It is the substance capable of giving birth to universe, gods, people and protect them from hostile Chaos and everyday problems. Moisture excluding hail has two immanent functions: productive and apotropaic. But productive function in pagan thinking gets wide interpretation: it is capable of transferring to a man other positive features—happiness, health, success, wealth. The same functions are attributed to saliva that according to other myths was the fundamental principle of anthropogenesis:

- Spit on a new bat before using it for the first time to make it lucky;
- If you make a wish while throwing a coin into a well or fountain, the wish will come true;
- Avant de mettre un navire à l’eau, il faut l’asperger d’eau de mer;
- Avant de mettre un navire à l’eau, il faut casser une bouteille de champagne contre la coque;
- Pour assurer une bonne pêche, il faut cracher sur des filets.
- Pour déjouer les maléfices, il faut cracher sur le soulier de son pied droit avant de le chausser;
- Pour conjurer les maléfices, il faut cracher trois fois sur la poitrine;

Rus:

- Spit on an egg for an embryo to appear;
- If a loving couple finds themselves in a rain they marry soon;
- If the is a snow in the day of wedding a couple is happy and wealthy;
- To avoid misfortune spit three times (spit over a left shoulder);
- Throw a coin in a water body to come back again;
- Spit on a fish hook to have a good fishing.

Apotropaic function of saliva is obviously dominating in the Russian superstitious signs:

- If somebody has stepped over fishing rod or fishing tackle spit three times to avoid misfortune;
Spit on a hand (on a thumb of right hand, on a the wrong side of a hem) and spread it over the face to avoid evil eye;
To protect livestock from a curse spit on cow (goat, sheep) head and wipe it with wrong side of a shirt.

In English and French linguistic culture productive function of saliva is the most vividly expressed regarding the concepts of success, happiness. The guarantee of success and happiness is verbalized and apotropaic function is implied. In the Russian linguistic culture the meaning of spit combines two superposed fundamentals—divine and demonic:

- If a toad spits into a man's eye he will become blind;
- If a witch licks off in a midnight a dew on windows and spits it into a pot a cow will stop giving milk.

It was considered that it was possible to transfer health to a sick man and also to transfer one's sickness to a healthy person. But more often if people want to heal themselves they spit into a mouth of fish, toad and crow.

Some Russian superstitious omens combine different semiotic patterns: it is necessary to spit exactly on a right hand finger (right-positive forecast) + spit (covering-favorable forecast); if somebody has stepped over the net (cross-negative forecast) it is necessary to spit on it (covering-positive forecast). In a latter case negative forecast is neutralized by a positive one. Analogous combination of patterns is characteristic for French signs: one should spit exactly on a boot on right leg (spit + right).

The Russian sign of throwing a coin into water may be connected with Slavs ritual to make gifts to Mokosh. But Mokosh cannot be compared in significance with Rod that as we have already mentioned was thought as the creator of the Universe and a man. Throwing a coin into water a pagan thought that his desire will come true due to a magic of moisture that is under the power of Rod.

Anointing oil (Chrism) should also be mentioned in this context. Anointing is regarded as one of the seven ordinances both of Orthodox and Catholic Church and is a spiritual healing of physical illnesses and an absolution. Anointing oil is used also in consecration of king by sacred unction. Anointing with oil or myrrh is a symbol of giving a man superior gifts of the Holy Ghost necessary to govern. It is obvious that in these Christian rites there remain the signs of ancient beliefs in a power of sacral moisture. The same may be said about the ritual of perfusion of houses, new buildings, people, etc. to protect them from the evil spirit. These rituals are practiced both by the Orthodox and Catholic Church.

We are intended to think that semiotic pattern “covering (water, rain, snow, saliva)-favorable/unfavorable forecast” is a primary model meaning that it reflects the origin of human race. It is the one on the other primary semiotic patterns of superstitious discourse “void-unfavorable forecast”, “fullness-favorable forecast”. Moisture that covers some substance promotes originating of life and at the same time protects it from negative impact of external environment.

Many superstitious signs relates to another Indo-European cosmogonic myth according to which the origin of life in the Universe is the “World Egg”. Eggshell of the “World Egg” served only as protection from hostile cosmos. But in omens it is interchangeable with the Egg and actualizes the following functions:

**Productive:** Farmers take with them an egg on the field in early spring to get a rich crop in the following year; chickens will lay if given ground egg shells; eggs carried around in a woman’s bonnet will provide the best pullets; eggs placed in a man’s hat for safekeeping will all produce roosters; un oeuf dans les fondations d’une maison assure la prospérité des occupants; casser un oeuf occidentiellement serait porteur de bonnes nouvelles; Rus.: cereals sprout speedily if an egg is rolled over the ground before sowing (thrown up); rye grows high if eggshell is thrown up in the field before sowing; hens lay eggs better if fed with eggshell;

**Apotropaic:** a baby visited by you for the first time will have good luck if you hold a fresh egg in front of it; burn egg shells so you don’t have any trouble; a hen’s egg which is too small to bother with cooking can be tossed on the roof of your house to “appease the witches,” pour déjouer le maléfice, il faut frapper trois fois sur la coque des oeufs, que l’on vient de manger; Rus.: egg laid by black hen protects a herd from wolves; if a pregnant woman carries raw egg with her there will be no miscarriage; to avoid thunderclap one should hang eggshell in an attic (scatter it in four corners of a house).

Defective eggs (without yolk, with two yolks, without eggshell, etc.), eggs laid in unfavorable days (on Christmas Eve, on Christmas Day, on Annunciation Day) according to Slavs tradition had to be either destroyed or used with destructive purpose:
Landlord will have a misfortune if defective egg is put near his dwelling; a cow will stop giving milk if defective egg is buried in its droppings; to break an engagement one should spill eggshell of defective egg in front of a wedding procession.

In French and English linguistic cultures axiology of defective egg is also negative:

- If an egg happens not to have the egg yolk, it is a sign of serious misfortune;
- If it has a dark spot inside it is a sign of misfortune or bad luck;
- Un œuf contenant deux jaunes serait un présage de mort; des œufs sans jaune sont maléfiques.

Eggshell of a normal egg in French and English signs as opposed to Russian ones may be an instrument of evil. That is why it is never left intact:

- Burn egg shells so you don’t have any trouble;
- After you eat a boiled egg, you should always crush up the shells, otherwise, evil spirits-and even witches! - could sail the seven seas in the shell cups and sink entire fleets with their sorcery and magic;
- Il faut briser la coque des œufs, que l’on a mangés, afin de ne pas offrir à ses ennemis un moyen de maléfice.

We are intended to consider images of moisture and egg (eggshell) in omens that relate to different cosmogenic myths as allomorphic cultural codes on the same semiotic pattern “covering – favorable/unfavorable forecast”. Moisture that covers some substance gives it life and at the same time protects it; and egg white (moisture) covers the yolk and promotes origin of life in it. The only difference is that moisture as opposed to an egg white has no protection-an eggshell.

The idea of covering is also actualized in a wedding ritual “showering of the newlyweds”. The newlyweds leaving the church are showered with money, sweets, grain to be always in easy circumstances:

Le riz, les confettis et autres pétals éloignent les mauvais esprits des jeunes époux.

Rus.: If bride and bridegroom are showered with grains or money they will always be in easy circumstances.

This ritual relates to a primary semiotic pattern “covering (rain, snow, saliva)-favorable forecast” independently of the fact that in a primary pattern a cultural code “moisture” is being actualized. Grain, money and other not less significant symbols of prosperity in a wedding ceremony are isofunctional to sacral moisture. It is worth mentioning that these things are not only thrown underfoot but also thrown up to cover heads of the newlyweds. Even such low important things as confetti get both a productive function (give wealth) and an apotropaic function (protect from poverty). The most vivid correlation between moisture and other cultural codes may be traced in the Russian superstitions.

The society has always needed extra protection and help from divine and demonic forces. The idea of covering may be extrapolated on other objects included in rituals. Natural covering: hair (fur, fell) and beard are also such objects. They have immanent apotropaic function-protection from cold. In addition they are endowed with mythical productive and apotropaic functions.

It’s worth mentioning that in Slavs tradition these signs relate to the cult of mythological Veles (Volos)-the god of livestock. With adoption of Christianity in Russia the cult of Veles had been relatively easy replaced by the cult of Saint Vlasii the patron of livestock due to similarity of names. But the cult of St. Vlasii has inherited a number of features of pagan worship of Veles.

In the West European mythology in particular Greek and Roman Pan and Faunus relate to Veles. Both have chthonic features and are patrons of fauna. In Catholicism Saint Blaise is a patron of livestock. But more probably superstitious signs with anthropomorphic code in the French and English languages relate not only to the cults of Pan and Faunus but also to the cults of Vodan and Odin-superior gods of German and Scandinavian tribes.

Fur, Fell: Both signs belong to beast, demonic world. They are symbols of wealth, fertility and realize the following in superstitious signs:

Productive Function: People could be wrapped in the skin of a freshly-killed sheep in an attempt to cure an adder bite; wearing a muskrat skin, fur inside in, on the chest is a charm to cure asthma; wrap a baby in fur before you dress it for the first time so it will have curly hair; pour guérir les verrues, il faut les frotter avec de la bourre trouvée fortuitement dans un chemin; pour guérir toute sorte de maladie, il faut envelopper le malade dans la laine; Rus.: the newlyweds should be covered with sheepskin at first night to have children in a family;
the bride going to wedding should put a piece of fur in a right boot for sheep and cows to propagate; children going round carol-singing should be set on sheep skin for sheep to propagate; a newborn should be laid before and after christening in a fur sack; 

**Apotropaic:** A strip of sheepskin on a horse's collar was once used as a prevention against the evil eye; pour déjouer les maléfices, il faut planter sur la porte de la maison une peau de loup; pour éloigner le mauvais sort, il faut toucher de la peau de singe; Rus.: the house should be fumigated with bear fur to protect from a brownie; a piece of fur being carried with somebody protests him from curse; a bee hive should be tied round at the bottom with white wool to protect it from ants.

In a second Russian sign with productive function two different semiotic patterns are used: “covering-favorable forecast” and “right-favorable forecast”.

Still fur (hair) may be an instrument of curse in Russian omens:

- To embroil the newly married couple a dog and cat fur should be put in nuptial bed; 
- To curse a dwelling and its landlord a piece of fell (hair, bristle) should be put under the oven.

In the first case fur is thought of as a part of a beast. It retains all the features of it that may be extrapolated on the other object. Extrapolation of a dog temper on a man and a cat temper on a woman provokes a conflict in a family. In this sign the pattern “covering-negative forecast” includes the other semiotic pattern “part/ the whole-negative/ positive forecast”.

In the second sign the same zoomorphic cultural code of covering is used. But a fur is put under the oven to deteriorate its positive features. The sign is formed according to the semiotic pattern “covering-negative forecast”.

**Hair:** Cultural codes this object is used in may have anthropomorphic and zoomorphic character. They were respected as a source of vital forces, wealth and happiness not only by the Eastern Slavs. On Christmastide Russian girls told fortune in Russian bath about future husband: if somebody touches her with invisible bare hand (paw) the husband will be poor and if the hand (paw) is covered with hair the husband will be rich. In superstitious omens productive and apotropaic functions are attributed to hair: 

**Productive:** Eating a hair from a horse's forelock - cure for worms; placing three hairs from a donkey's shoulders in a muslin bag worn around the neck - cure for whooping cough or measles; si une femme met deux ou trois cheveux dans l'ourlet de la robe de mariée, qu'elle est en train de coudre, elle se mariera dans l'année; Rus.: if the first egg laid by a young hen is rolled three times over the hair of the oldest son the hen will lay many eggs; if on the so-called Youriev Day women in a field jerk each other by hair there will be a good rye harvest.

**Apotropaic:** If you wear a black stallion's hair from his tail on your wrist you'll be protected from witches; don't cut the baby's hair before its first birthday, or the baby will be very sickly; un poil de chien dans votre poche vous protégera contre les démons; pour éviter les maléfices, il faut porter sur soi les crins de quelque bête; Rus.: navel of a newborn should be tied up with coarse thread twisted with mother’s hair for a baby to be healthy.

In the first sign an element of later Christian rite is used “to roll three times”: an odd number that is related to the Holy Trinity obtains positive semiotics in Christianity. Youriev Day-is the one of the Orthodox festivals devoted to Saint George (Yuegori, Youri) the Victorious (Pobedonosets). In Slavs pagan mythology Yegori Vehsnii (The Spring Yegori), Yegori Tyopli (Warm Yegori) is related to Youriev Day. There are known the other names of this festival: Skotii Day (The Day of Livestock), Yarila Velikii (Yarila the Great), Omnykanie Zemli (The Unlocking of the Earth) because farm works started from that day and livestock went to grazing lands. In the last sign three cultural codes of covering (coarse thread (thread + saliva), hair) are combined in one semiotic pattern “covering-favorable forecast”.

**Beard:** Metonymically the beard is connected with hair; it is isofunctional with woman's hair (plait) and also symbolizes abundance, plurality. Before the decree of Peter the First that charged tax for beard for the lower estate and prohibited beard for higher estates beards were protected as a sacred thing. According to the Old Believer code a beard is the image and likeness of God. As the image and likeness of God it was attributed the main functions of covering: 

**Productive: you’ll have a lucky life if your beard is bushy;** Rus.: a sewer should have a big and bushy beard for a harvest to be rich;
Apotropaic: it’s bad luck to cut your beard; Rus.: if a beard cut by force is put in a coffin with dead man he is accepted in the next world.

- When superstitious French women hear the thunder they ask Saint Beard (Sainte Barbe) about protection:
- Sainte Barbe et Sainte Fleure
- Implorez notre Seigneur
- Partout où cette prière se dira
- Jamais tonnère ne tombera.

Breton fishermen consider numbers 1, 4, 7 unlucky because they have no “beard”. They differ from the other numbers (2, 8, 9, 3, 5, 6) with rounded base and resemble the curl of a beard. To make numbers 1, 4, 7 lucky Bretons add curls at the base of these numbers in writing. A ship with a number written in such a way is considered happy and fishing in a day with happy numbers is believed to give rich catch:

- Pour conjurer le mauvais sort il faut ajouter “la barbe” à la racine des chiffres 1, 4, 7.

To touch somebody's beard (especially dark) means happiness:

- Toucher la barbe d’un homme porterait bonheur surtout si la barbe est exclusivement brune.

To protect the house from thunder French people put on the roof a plant called Joubarbe. The name is the inversion of the word Barbejou that means “the beard of Jupiter” [15].

CONCLUSION

In the quoted superstitious signs different cultural codes are present; the list of them is not comprehensive. Despite the difference in cultural codes and attributing the omens to different linguistic cultures and different rites all are formed by the same semiotic pattern, called here “covering-favorable/ unfavorable forecast”. Ambivalence of semiotic patterns is not permanent. More often is realized a positive forecast. Actualization of negative forecast is connected either with disjunction of cultural codes (defective and normal eggs, detachment of an eggshell into an individual sacral object), or with appeal to the forces of the lowest level of religious system (spit of a toad, spit of a witch). In some signs there is a combination of cultural codes and semiotic patterns that cause the increase of entropy in superstitious discourse.

The proposed classification principle allows reconstructing the system of semiotic patterns of superstitious discourse. But the value of this classification is not explained by the fact that all superstitious signs may be reduced to a few cognition models of pagan consciousness. Comparing the axiology of pagan semiotic patterns and their cultural codes with axiology of the same signs and their cultural codes on the lexical and phraseological levels of modern languages allows giving ground estimation of the level of superstitiousness of modern collective consciousness.

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