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**CLASSIFICATION METHODS OF SUPERSTITIONS  
IN LINGUISTICS OF SMALL FOLKLORE FORMS<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

The article provides an analysis of the productivity of various methodologies for the classification of folk superstitions. Despite the variety of classification methods, this question still remains open in modern linguistics of small forms. Many of the proposed classifications (alphabetical, by degree of rationality, by ritual, by professional life, etc.) should be classified as artificial. Artificial classifications perform an important function - the systematization function of the analyzed material. But their disadvantage is that they are focused on secondary, non-essential features of the object of study. As analysis shows, some classification methods will partially take into account the essential features (structural-semantic, functional, structural-logical, thematic). At the same time, these methods do not reveal the laws of formation of superstitions, without the knowledge of which their scientifically substantiated classification is impossible. The author's classification method accepts based only on the essential features of structural-semiotic models, accepts that completely excludes the attribution of the same superstitions to different semantic-functional classes.

**Keywords**

Functional method – Thematic method – Structural-logical method – Structural-semantic method

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## Introduction

Any classification that claims theoretical significance should be based on signs reflecting the essence of the classified objects. Ideal classifications have heuristic potential, reveal new links between the already known objects, suggest the existence of previously unknown objects. The issue of a scientifically based classification methodology of superstitions carries not only practical but also great theoretical weight for the further study of minor folklore forms, the conceptual core of which is represented by a superstition. The classification should explain the way the superstition is arranged and the reason why it implements some of the prognostic functions. The analysis of the various classification methods will allow to determine their effectiveness in addressing this paramount task. The objective of this paper is to critically analyze the classification methods of superstitions and assess their scientific potential.

## Materials and Methods

The research material was publications that deal with the principles of the classification of superstitions, and the superstitions from the book by A.E. Burtsev and the dictionary "Slavic Antiquities" serve as the illustrative material. The paper uses the structural-semiotic method of analysis.

## Literature Review

On the issue of our interest, the literature pays much attention to the lexicographic processing of superstitions. The analysis of the structure of dictionaries allows us to judge the principles of their classification. The most common is alphabetic<sup>2</sup>. Genetic classification is less frequent<sup>3</sup>. There are also cases of combining several principles: alphabetical, thematic<sup>4</sup>. The theoretical studies offer systematization of superstitions on the structural-semantic<sup>5</sup>, functional<sup>6</sup>, structural-logical<sup>7</sup>, functional-ontological<sup>8</sup>, and structural-semiotic principles<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> A. E. Burtsev, *Narodnyy byt Velikogo Severa: yego nnavy, obychai predaniya, predskazaniya, predrassudki, pritchi, poslovietsy, prisloviya, pribautki, peregudki, pripevy, skazki, priskazki, pesni, skorogovorki, zagadki, schety, zagovory i zaklinaniya. Tom 2, Russian ethnography* (Moscow: Rodnaya strana, 2015); Philippa Waring, *A Dictionary of Omens and Superstitions, Edición: Revised ed.* (London: Souvenir Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Laurence Caracalla, *Aux origines des 100 superstitions qui hantent ou réjouissent notre quotidien* (Paris: Le Figaro, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Cosimo Campa, *Dictionnaire des superstitions et croyances populaires, Studyrama Perspectives 749* (Levallois-Perret: Studyrama, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> N. N. Ivanova, "Strukturno-semanticheskiye osobennosti i lingvokul'turnyy potentsial suyeveriy", PhD thesis (Veliky Novgorod: Pskov State Pedagogical University named after S.M. Kirov, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> M. A. Kul'kova, "Kognitivno-semanticheskoye prostranstvo suyeveriy [Cognitive-semantic space of superstitions]" (Doctoral thesis, Tatar State Humanitarian and Pedagogical University, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Alan Dundes, "Brown County Superstitions: The Structure of Superstition," *Midwest Folklore*, Vol: 11 num 1 (1961): 25–56; G.L. Permiakov, *Osnovy strukturnoy paremiologii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1988); Ye. Ye. Zav'yalova, "Primety kak fol'klornyy zhanr: opyt sistematzatsii [Superstitions as a folklore genre: the experience of systematization]," *Znaniye. Ponimaniye. Umeniye*, Vol: 2 (2013): 187–193.

<sup>8</sup> T. S. Sadova, "Narodnaya primeta kak tekst i problemy lingvistiki fol'klornogo teksta [Superstition as a text and problems of linguistics of folklore text]" (Doctoral thesis, Saint Petersburg State University, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> T. S. Sadova, "Narodnaya primeta kak tekst ...

## Results

Such a variety of lexicographic practices and theoretical approaches to substantiate classifications of superstitions suggest the need to comprehend the accumulated material. This will allow assessing the scientific potential of various methodological positions for deciding on the patterns of formation of superstitions and their reference to certain classes.

## Discussion

In lexicographic practice, the alphabetic principle is simple and convenient. But the initial letter of the keyword can hardly tell us information on the superstition: its structure, semantics, function, class. The thematic classification makes it possible to abstract ourselves from verbal meanings of superstitions and group them according to their semantic feature. However, the choice of the latter is quite arbitrary and is determined by the researcher or originator in their own way. Clustering into topics, for example, superstitions about money, gifts, animals, etc., is dictated by the semantics of their chosen keywords. Superstitions can be grouped subject to their relation to a particular rite: superstitions about the wedding, childbirth, harvesting, etc. Some classifications are built on the relation of superstitions with professional communities: hunting, fishing, pastoral, etc. For example, *for a fine catch spit on the hook*. The words 'catch' and 'hook' can attribute the superstition to fishing, and the word 'spit', denoting ritual action - to the superstitions about spitting: *in order not to jinx good luck, spit over your left shoulder; to be always in the pocket, spit on the found coin*, etc. Following the procedure of choosing a keyword, the superstition '*to be always in pocket, spit on the found coin*' can be attributed to one about money, and the superstition '*in order not to jinx good luck, spit over your left shoulder*' - to one of luck. The disadvantage of the thematic classification is that superstitions can belong simultaneously to different classes. The combination of the principles of systematization (alphabetic plus thematic) does not bring anything new to the understanding of the nature of superstitions. Genetic classifications structure the material according to the origin of superstition. Such systematization is convenient when studying the history of superstitions genesis. However, it completely neglects their structural, semantic, logical, semiotic, and other features.

Any of these systematizations has the right to exist, as they are trying to bring superstitions in order. However, the question of the patterns of superstition formation and their classification remains open. This circumstance encourages linguists to search for new methods of analysis. In the theoretical aspect, the systematization proposed by E.E. Zavalova<sup>10</sup> is of great interest. Based on the fruitful idea of the two-component character of a superstition, E.E. Zavalova proposes to divide them into four groups: 1. natural phenomenon => natural phenomenon (the Moon turned red - wait for the wind); 2. natural phenomenon => everyday event (snow on the Day of the Protection of the Holy Virgin - wait for a lot of weddings this year); 3. everyday event => everyday event (spilled salt leads to a quarrel); 4. everyday event => natural phenomenon (the candle faded away - the weather will change). It additionally introduces such feature as "time" for superstitions about nature, which allows defining four subclasses in this class: long-term, short-term, fixed, and approximate. The forecast in the long-term superstitions (*three good rains in May will give bread for three years*) is for a considerable period of time; in the short-term ones (spiders work - the weather changes) - for a small period of time; the fixed superstitions (*a starry sky in the New Year bodes good harvest*) indicate the day, month, season, year; the approximate superstitions (*when it drips from the roofs, the hunter must get ready to hunt for rabbits*)

<sup>10</sup> Ye. Ye. Zav'yalova, "Primety kak fol'klorny zhanr..."

indicate the moment when it is necessary to do something. There is clearly a logical inconsistency: long-term and short-term superstitions are distinguished according to the forecast, while fixed and approximate ones - according to the event part. The second component of the superstitions (either forecast or event part) is neglected. The disadvantage of this classification is that the meanings derived from the semantics of the event and prognostic part (natural phenomenon => natural phenomenon, etc.) are too general. According to our observations, each of these groups has several semantic-functional classes of superstitions. Superstitions formed by differing structural-semiotic models are included in different semantic-functional classes.

The principle of the functional classification of superstitions based on the theory of speech acts is presented in the work by M.A. Kul'kova<sup>11</sup> and others. The author distinguishes classes of superstitions with the function of order, instructions, prohibition, cautions, and advice. But the superstition, depending on the context of use, can fall into different functional classes. For example, superstitions such as *the outburnt candle bodes the change of weather; the itching ears bode the rain* can be attributed to caution and the ban if the speaker intends to convey to the recipient information that the change of weather and rain are unfavorable to the harvest. They can be attributed to the advice, if we mean the favorable conditions for the harvest. The superstition '*if a woman first enters the house on Christmas, the women living there will be sick for a year*' can be interpreted as a ban on letting in someone else's woman on Christmas, and as advice not to let in someone else's woman on Christmas. This method has more several significant drawbacks. The speech act is considered as a superficial structure of the sentence. The theory of speech acts neither takes into account the hidden, deep structures of superstitions, nor explains the patterns of their formation, and completely ignores the prognostic aspect of superstitions. Distinguishing prognostic, cumulative, translational, regulatory and cognitive functions, as some M.A. Kulkova followers do is inefficient for classification, as these functions characterize absolutely all superstitions. Classification of superstitions on the structural-semantic principle<sup>12</sup> is partly based on the experience of logical classifications of proverbs and sayings by G.L. Permyakov: "what (who) is there, where/why it manifests" (crowns around the sun predict a good harvest); "What (who) has any sign — result" (Rough wind brings calm weather), etc. The study of superstitions on a structural-semantic level is one of the possible abstraction options from their verbal semantics. But the binary semantic structures of the models have a diffuse character. Based on them, it is impossible to determine which immanent signs of superstitions are involved in their formation, and what prognostic functions they implement in everyday and religious contexts.

T.S. Sadova offers modified but already known classifications according to functional, ontological and thematic features<sup>13</sup>. Based on a functional feature, superstitions are classified into informative and informative-pragmatic. Informative superstitions are deprived of a pragmatic function, and informative-pragmatic superstitions are divided into advising, prohibiting, commanding, and others. Based on an ontological feature, there are reference (objective) and non-reference (non-objective, superstitious) superstitions. In turn, reference superstitions are divided according to their thematic principle into phenological (about the periodic connection of natural phenomena), astronomical, agronomical, professional and labor, etc. We have previously outlined the main drawbacks of the functional and thematic classification principles. Regarding the ontological principle, it

<sup>11</sup> A. Kul'kova, "Kognitivno-semanticheskoye prostranstvo suyeveryiy..."

<sup>12</sup> N. N. Ivanova, "Strukturno-semanticheskiye osobennosti..."

<sup>13</sup> S. Sadova, "Narodnaya primeta kak tekst..."

should be noted that the division of superstitions into objective and superstitious reflect the rational point of view of modern man. One should always remember that superstition is a product of mythological thinking, for which all superstitions as objective. According to G.L. Permiakov, there is only one structural-logical class of superstitions - superstitions with a causal relationship<sup>14</sup>. Unfortunately, G.L. Permiakov does not provide a detailed description of the register of prognostic functions, which makes impossible attribution of a superstition to a class. A. Dundis believes that cause-and-effect relations are typical not for all superstitions. The event part and the forecast of many superstitions are connected, in his opinion, by temporary relationships<sup>15</sup>. We do not share this point of view, as there are no superstitions with a temporary relationship in its pure form. The main provisions of the structural-semiotic classification method of superstitions were described in our previous article<sup>16</sup>. The theoretical premises of this method were the works by C. Levi-Strauss, R. Barth, G. Lakoff, L. Hjelmslev, Viach. Vs. Ivanov, G.L. Permiakov and other famous scientists in the field of structural linguistics and semiotics<sup>17</sup>.

A superstition is a complex language sign consisting of two parts: the signifier and signified. The function of the signifier is implemented by the event part of the superstition, and the function of the signified one - by the predictive part. The event part always contains the cultural code that is implemented in a certain binary semantic opposition, as well as the prognostic part of the superstitions. Binary oppositions are an essential part of the structural-semiotic methodology. The semantic features of the opposition, which are actualized in the superstition, are no longer divisible and constitute a structural-semiotic model that serves as the basis for numerous superstitions. The absolute sign of belonging to one semantic-functional class will be the complete coincidence of their structural-semiotic models. If the structural-semiotic models of superstitions do not fully coincide, the basis of their belonging to the same semantic-functional class is the identity of the signified and the isofunctionality of the signifiers. In other cases, superstitions form other semantic-functional classes. Let us consider a few superstitions from the book by A.E. Burtsev<sup>18</sup>: “spitting into fire causes bubbles in the tongue; do not spit into the fire to avoid the bubbles in your tongue”. These are verbal variants of the same meaningful invariant: *If you spit into the fire, you will have the bubbles in your tongue*. According to the theory of speech acts, these superstitions belong to different functional classes, since the first superstition implements an informative function, and the second one - prohibitive. In terms of the structural-semiotic methodology, these superstitions belong to one semantic-functional class. Let us clarify our thought. Any superstition, following the structural principle of the analysis, can be decomposed into parts: event and prognostic. In the event part (meaning) we select the cultural code “fire”. The cultural code “fire” is implemented in the binary semantic opposition “sacral: profane”. Superstitions actualize the semantic sign “sacral” since the fire has always referred to sacral objects. Action with a sacred object, spitting, is prohibited, punishable. The sign of “blisters (pimples) in the tongue” is characterized by the binary opposition “to get sick: be cured”. In

<sup>14</sup> G. L. Permiakov, Osnovy strukturnoy paremiologii...

<sup>15</sup> Alan Dundes, “Brown County Superstitions...”

<sup>16</sup> V. N. Strausov et al., “Strukturno-semioticheskiy metod analiza i klassifikatsii narodnykh primet”, Vestnik Pyatigorskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta, Vol: 2 num 2 (2018): 140–146.

<sup>17</sup> R. Barth, Sistema Mody: Stat'i po semiotike kul'tur (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo imeni Sabashnikovykh, 2003); L. Hjelmslev, Essais linguistiques (Copenhagen: Nordisk Sprog-og Kultur-Jorlag, 1959); V.V. Ivanov and V. N. Toporov, “Ivanyanskiye yazykovyye modeliruyushchiye semioticheskiye sistemy. (Drevniy period)” (Moscow: Nauka, 1965); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Claude Lévi-Strauss, Anthropologie structurale (Paris: Plon, 1958); G.L. Permiakov, Osnovy strukturnoy paremiologii...

<sup>18</sup> A. E. Burtsev, Narodnyy byt Velikogo Severa...

the context of these superstitions, the sign of “getting sick” will be relevant, as bubbles will appear in the tongue. The semantic signs “sacred”, “spit”, “get sick” are invariants, further indivisible and form the semiotic structure “sacred + spit = get sick”. It is identical for both superstitions. The sign of “getting sick” in the semiotic structure is not an accident, but the result of what happened is in the event part, in the signifier. This feature, as well as the semantic features of the signifier (“sacral”, “spit”), indicates that the analyzers will belong to only one semantic and functional subclass - the contagious. In turn, it is an integral part of the destructive semantic-functional class (causing harm to someone or yourself, evil eye, illness, etc.). The pragmatic function is not valid for structural-semiotic methodology. The structural-semiotic models the superstitions are based on are of paramount importance thereto. Therefore, superstitions with different pragmatic functions, but with the same structural and semiotic models will be included in one subclass or class.

The fire could both bring the disease and heal too. For example, *to heal a child, burn his shirt in the Kupala fire*. Following the procedure of structural analysis, we decompose a superstition to reveal its invariant semantic features. The cultural code “Kupala Fire” meaning sacred fire, performs a purification function. Consequently, it actualizes two signs: the “sacral” in the opposition of “sacral : profane” and the “purifying” in the opposition “purifying : infecting”. The code “shirt” acted as a substitute for the skin, a human twin. Burning a shirt refers to the ritual acts. Not just a shirt is burnt but a twin stranger of a person together with his/her illness. This code is implemented in the opposition “burn : save”. The signified is implemented in the already known opposition “get well : get sick” but with the actualization of the sign “get well”. The pattern of its actualization is provided by the signs “sacred + purifying + burn” meaning the superstitions. The semiotic model is represented by the structure “sacral + purifying + burn = recover”. The superstition is a part of a medical, curative semantic and functional class. We gave this example in order to emphasize once again that the semantic features of the models do not exist in isolation. They are interconnected. *The person gets well when his shirt, his twin, is burnt in a purifying sacral fire*. The signs of “get well” or “get sick” of the signifier are updated with a certain set of semantic signs in the signifier.

The components of the structural-semiotic models correlate with the concepts of mental structures that provide modeling of reality and regulation of human behavior. The consciousness of a modern man most often does not catch the link between the signs of the signifier and the signified of superstitions, because, for example, the words “sacred”, “spitting” in their modern semantic structures do not even contain a hint of a disease. We do not understand how one can get sick if spitting into the fire, because we do not have specific information “hidden” in the sign. In the mental structures of the mythological consciousness, this link was routine, customary. The man realized that fire is a sacred object and believed that spitting into it would cause illness. Therefore, the link between the concepts of the mental model “sacred + spit = sick” was natural for them. We should note another significant feature of the classification based on structural and semiotic principles - it’s heuristic potential. For example: 1. the *left* eye itches - leads to cry; 2. the *right* eye itches - leads to fun; 3. stars are *dull* - wait for a bad weather; 4. stars are *clear* - wait for a calm weather; etc. The first sign is opposed to the second by semantic opposition “right: left” of the signifier and by semantic opposition “cry: have fun” of the signified. In the third and fourth superstitions, the signifier differs in opposition “dull: clear”, and the signified differs in opposition “bad weather: calm weather”. This means that if there are superstitions that form according to the structural-semiotic models of “left (eye) = tears”, “dull (stars) = bad weather”, then there is a high probability that there should be superstitions opposed to them in the models “right (eye) = fun”, “clear (stars) = calm weather”.

## Conclusions

Among all the classification methods of superstitions, the structural-semiotic method has the greatest scientific potential. The scientific significance of the structural-semiotic method is that it relies on the essential features, the deep models of their formation, takes into account the relationship between the semantic features of the signifier and the signified when defining semantic-functional classes, has a heuristic potential, an important criterion of natural classifications. It has a direct relation to cognitive linguistics. Comparing the structural-semiotic models of semantic-functional classes of superstitions allows us to reconstruct the mental structure of the mythological consciousness. This technique offers great opportunities for cross-cultural research. A comparative study of superstitions based on the material of various languages will reveal the ethnocultural features of structural-semiotic models, semantic-functional classes and the originality of the mythological thinking of other peoples.

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