

Household Items in the Folk Ritual Superstitions of the English, Russian, and Mari Languages

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Abstract—The purpose of the article is to compare folk ritual superstitions of the English, Russian, and Mari languages containing the names of the household goods. All superstitions were chosen using a continuous sampling method. The analysis was prepared using methods of comparison and statistics. All superstitions were divided into four big groups depending on the included lexical unit. Group one is 'House, parts of the house'. Group two is 'Kitchen appliances'. Group three is 'Bed, bedroom accessories'. Group four is 'Household goods'. The analysis has shown that the biggest number of superstitions with the names of household items is in the Russian language, the biggest group is Group 4 'Household Goods', the most spread units are 'mirror' and 'broom', the universal units are 'window', 'door', 'lock', 'table', 'spoon', 'knife', 'cradle', 'mirror', 'broom'.

Keywords—superstition, household items, the English language, the Russian language, the Mari language

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a proverb: 'My home is my castle'. People built houses and created household objects to organise their life. But dangers of the surrounding world made people give magic powers to different objects. It created superstitions.

Superstitions are verbalized units in the form of sentences which appeared a lot of years ago. The main function of them is to make predictions unexplained from the logical point of view [1]. Superstitions help to organise people's life. They prevent them from doing something wrong and give advice what they shall do to achieve something. So we can say that superstitions play protecting and intending functions as well.

In the course of the analysis all superstitions were divided into four parts according to the items included into them. The first group is connected with the house as a building and its parts. The second group deals with kitchen and its appliances. The third group describes bedroom accessories. And the fourth group includes different household items used on a daily basis.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The examples for comparison were taken from the collections of superstitions, descriptions of traditions and customs in books and in the Internet talking about such rites of passage as pregnancy, birth, wedding, and death. Some examples of Mari superstitions were taken from the field studies of the authors in the villages of the Mari El Republic. All superstitions were chosen using a continuous sampling method. To hold a study the authors used the following methods: systemization, grouping on the basis of some characteristics, comparative analysis, statistical processing.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The superstitions of the three languages were analyzed and divided into four groups. Below in Fig. 1 you can see a bar chart showing the number of superstitions in each group in every language. As we can see from the chart the biggest group is Group 4 'Household Goods' in general and in all three languages separately. The total number of English superstitions is 36, of Russian superstitions is 58, of Mari superstitions is 37.

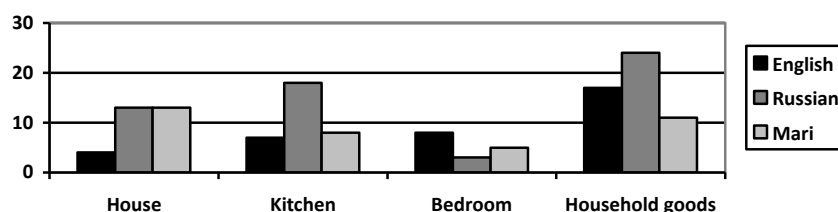


Figure 1. A statistical overview of superstitions

Now let us consider each group separately.

A. Group 1: House, Parts of the House

The group contains such lexical units as 'house', 'roof', 'door', 'threshold', 'window', 'lock', 'stairs', 'stove'.

House. People started to build houses to protect themselves from the dangers of the surrounding world. Russian and Mari people say that building a house leads to a death: *Омо дене портым чонет гын, колышо лектеи*. A lot of year ago there was a belief that the new house will be substantial only when the head of the family dies and becomes a house spirit. The person to die shall be the first to enter a new house. That is why there was an old tradition that the oldest in the family shall enter the house first. Other ways to avoid death were to hold there a wedding ceremony, to leave a cat or a cock, or to offer up a domestic animal as a sacrifice: *Здание строить кто намерен, тот должен стараться обновить его свадьбой, иначе есть убеждение, что хозяин дома умрет* 'A person who intends to build a house shall try to renew it with a wedding, or there is a belief that the housemaster will die', *Чтобы в новом доме никто не умер, на первую ночь в дом запирают петуха или кошку* 'In order nobody dies in the new house, a cock or a cat is locked there for the first night'. [2]

Roof. In Mari tradition it was believed that the familiar spirits live on the roof. So the bride had to conciliate them: *Марлан толишо удыр и коксам налын порт леведыш умбак кудалтынаш, тидыже сурт шулышын кумылжым нолтымашым, поремдымашым, у вате толмо дене шукырак поянлык лиймашым ончыкта* 'A bride had to take one coin and throw to conciliate familiar spirits, so a bride brings more well-being and prosperity to the house'.

Door, windows, threshold. The threshold of the door, as well as windows had their own magical meaning. All of them were the entrances to the house and the exits at the same time. So they were like a border between the world of people and the world of spirits [3]. In the superstitions the doors and windows play two roles. On the one hand they were opened to give a free way. In Russian and Mari culture people opened windows and doors to facilitate the birth process: *Чтобы роды были легкими и быстрыми, в доме роженицы нужно открыть все форточки, Азам ыштымаш сайын эртыже манын, южо юмынпавышка пörтыштö да озанлыкыште чыла омсам почыктеныт*. In English culture opened doors and windows gave a free way to the spirit of a dying person: *If someone were thought to be approaching death, others in the house would open all the doors and windows*. In Russian culture doors and windows were closed when a deceased person was taken to the cemetery not to let a spirit to come back: *После выноса покойника в помещении должен был остаться хотя бы один человек, чтобы закрыть все окна*. On the other hand, windows and doors served as a border between the worlds and a place where the spirits live. In all three cultures a

groom carried the bride across the threshold to prevent her from coming into contact with the evil spirits. In Mari culture people put knives into the door-post to ward off the evil spirits; brides kissed the door-post or put a coin on the threshold for the door spirit *omsa ava* to be taken to a new family. Another Mari tradition is connected with children: if a child was often sick, it was 'sold' to somebody, and then was taken back through the window.

Lock. The lock also has two meanings: in the open and closed condition. In all three cultures the locks were opened to facilitate the labour of a woman. In Russian culture the open locks were put under a threshold; when the newlyweds stepped over the lock, it was closed and the key was thrown into the water. People thought that it will provide a happy life: *Под порог перед приходом молодых от венца кладут незапертые замки, а потом, когда те перешагнут, зацеливают их, ключ бросают в воду или в колодезь, чтобы мужу с женою жить согласно*.

Staircase. The unit 'staircase' is found only in two superstitions with opposite meanings. In English it is positive: *Stumbling up the stairs foretells the wedding*. In Russian it is negative: *Если упасть, сходя с лестницы – к скорой смерти* 'To fall from a staircase means fast death'.

Stove. The stove played a role of a protective charm. Russian and Mari people touched it when leaving a house before wedding and coming back from funerals: *После прихода с кладбища женщины смотрели в печь и касались ее ладонями*. The stove lid and chimney were closed not to let evil spirits or a spirit of a die person to enter the house: *Аралтыш семын суан йулам шуктымo годым конга туньыкым петыреныт* 'It was customary to close a stove chimney during wedding ceremonies with protective aims'.

B. Group 2: Kitchen Appliances

The group contains such lexical units as 'table', 'bench/chairs', 'tablecloth', 'glasses', 'kettle', 'plate/saucer', 'spoons', 'knives'.

Table. The unit 'table' is found in the superstitions in all three languages which predict that a girl will stay unmarried. In Russian and Mari it is because of sitting at the corner of a table, in English it is because of sitting on the table: *Незамужней девушке нельзя садиться на угол стола, иначе останется в девках, Самырык енлан устел лукым ишнчаш ок йоро – кужу жап марлан лектын от керт, але вашке удырым от нал; Any engaged girl who sits on a table while talking to her boyfriend risks losing him*. In Russian tradition it is forbidden to sit on the table and to put there a pillow – it will bring death. The reason is because a dead person was put on the table. English and Russian superstition remind about the numeral 13: *If 13 people sit down at a table to eat, one of them will die before the year is over, 13 человек за столом предвещают покойника*. Russian superstitions about wedding say that the newlyweds shall sit on the same bench and not let anybody to take their

places: *Новобрачные не должны никому разрешать занимать свое место за столом, иначе новая семья вскоре распадется.*

Tablecloth. The unit 'tablecloth' is found only in the Russian superstitions about wedding. They give advice and notice how to get married: *Невеста за столом должна дернуть скатерть, чтобы другая девица поскорее вышла замуж* 'A bride sitting at the table shall pull a tablecloth in order another girl could marry as soon as possible', *Если после обеда гости уходят до того, как хозяйка скатерть со стола снимет, невесты в этом доме замуж не выйдут* 'If guests leave the house after a dinner before the mistress take a tablecloth away from the table, the girls in the house will not marry'. [4]

Kettle. The unit 'kettle' is found in one superstition of the Russian language: *Девушкам, которые ставят кипящий чайник носиком к стене, оставаться в веках* 'Girls who put a boiling kettle with a gooseneck to the wall will stay old maids'. In this case kettle's gooseneck plays the role of a phallic symbol. A girl turning it away from herself rejects the attention of young men.

Glass, plate. English and Russian superstitions include the units 'glasses' and 'plates' when they are talking about broken things at the wedding. It was believed that broken glass brings happiness in marriage: *Happiness and success in the marriage should be as plentiful as the shards of a broken glass*, *Если молодые хотя быть счастливыми, перед свадебным банкетом они должны выпить шампанского и разбить бокалы*. But the cracked wineglass meant death: *Если при произнесении тоста в руке треснула рюмка – знак смерти* 'A wineglass cracked when a person was proposing the toast was a symbol of death'.

Spoon. The unit 'spoon' is found in the superstitions about wedding and death. Two spoons in English and Russian culture predicted future wedding: *Two spoons accidentally placed on the same saucer mean that a wedding will shortly follow*, *Две ложки на тарелке – быть свадьбе*. In Russian there was a piece of advice to the newly married not to eat from the same spoon or they will be annoyed at each other: *Если муж и жена едят с одной ложки, то они будут недовольны друг другом*. Mari people had an Easter fortunetelling. They put spoons for each person in the family on the window. The person whose spoon has fallen will die within a year.

Knife. The unit 'knife' is found in the superstitions in all languages talking about protection. Knives were considered to have apotropaic powers as other metal objects: *Silver or iron amulets were once placed in a baby's crib and sometimes a knife was tied to the crib*. *Күнчык йымак шинчавочмо деч аралтыш семын пидме имым, крүчөкым, түрлүмө онгым, күзүм, сүзүм, товарым, чөгүм, но эн ончыч металл гыч ыштыме арверым, товарым але күзүм, ыштымент.*

C. Group 3: Bed, Bedroom Accessories

The group contains such lexical units as 'bed', 'cradle', 'pillow', 'patchwork quilt'.

Bed. The unit 'bed' is found only in one English superstition about death. It prevents from making a bed with the help of three people: *If three people take part in making up a bed there is sure to be a death in the house within the year*. In Mari superstition we have found one superstition describing the type of a bed which influences the next life of a dying person: *Айдеме тошакыште кием кола гын, вес туняште мамыкым шотлаш туналеи. Меж гыч ыштыме вакиштыме кола – меж пырчыш шотла. Тидлан кора, чон лекмыж деч ончыч кожгожыш ыштымент* 'If a person is dying on a feather bed, in the next life he will count feathers in it. If a person is dying on the flock bed, he will count hairs in it. That was the reason why the dying person was put on the straw bed'.

Cradle. The unit 'cradle' is found in all three languages. These superstitions are connected with rocking an empty cradle, but they have different meaning in different languages. In English rocking a cradle most often means one more child in the family: *If you rock an empty cradle, you will rock a new baby into it soon*. In Russian rocking a cradle means death of an unborn baby: it is as if you are rocking another baby instead: *Пустую колыбель нельзя качать*. In the Russian and Mari languages rocking a cradle means baby's crying because people usually rock a cradle when a baby is crying: *Не качайте пустую коляску или колыбель – ребенок будет плохо спать, Яра шепкам рүниаш ок лий – аза шорташ туналеи*. [5]

Pillow. The unit 'pillow' in the Russian language was already described in Group 2: to put a pillow on the table means the death of a close person. Pillow is found in the superstitions of all languages as an object under which different protecting objects, such as knives, scissors, axes, etc. were put. In Mari culture the pillow was used to put under feet of a married couple. It could bring them a happy soft life: *Коваше олмеш южо вере купчыкым кучылтыныт: шонент пырля ылышаш умырышты куштылго лийже*.

Patchwork quilt. The unit 'patchwork quilt' is found only in the English language. The superstitions are talking about finishing a quilt. If it is not finished, the girl will not marry. We suppose that the case here is about girl's housewife qualities. If she can finish a quilt, she will be a good housewife and will have a good dowry: *If a patchwork quilt is begun in any house, the daughters will not marry until it is finished*.

D. Group 4: Household Goods

The group contains such lexical units as ‘mirror’, ‘clock’, ‘broom’, ‘towel’, ‘ironing board’, ‘shoulder-yoke’, ‘team poles’.

Mirror. One of the most wide-spread units of this group is ‘mirror’. It is found in superstitions of different rites of passage in three languages, but usually has a negative meaning. The mirror was always considered as an object reflecting the formal reality of the visible world on the one hand and the other worlds on the other hand. It serves a border between this real world and the world of spirits [3]. This was why the mirror was given magic powers and used in fortunetelling. The usage of mirror was forbidden for the babies under one year old. In Russian and Mari it was because a baby could be afraid and will not speak in the future: *Зеркало убрали подальше от младенцев, чтобы не испугались и немymi не остались, Йочалан идалык теммешкыже воштончышышко ончаш йӱрен огыл*. In English mirror can stop baby’s growth or bring death: *A child under one year shall not see itself in a looking-glass, lest its growth be stunted by having its reflection caught and held in the mirror*. Looking into the mirror can bring different consequences depending on the partner: *If a couple first catch sight of each other in a mirror, they will have a happy marriage, Не смотрите в зеркало вместе с подругой – полюбите одного и того же человека* ‘Do not look into the mirror together with you friend, or you will love the same man’. One of the most popular superstitions is closing mirrors when there is a dead body in the house. It was done to prevent the spirit of a died person to get lost in the mirror world and to protect the alive people: *It was custom to cover mirrors with dark cloth following a death to protect those living in the house from the spirit of the deceased, Зеркала закрывают, когда в доме покойник, чтобы душа не заблудилась, Портышто улио чурий ончышым, моло тыгай арвер влакым петырат*. The mirror can also predict the death. It is usually a cracked or a broken mirror: *If a mirror in the house falls and breaks by itself, someone in the house will die soon, Коли зеркало лопнуло – от смерти не отвертись*.

Broom. Another wide-spread unit is ‘broom’. The broom handle is a phallic symbol which received its meaning relating to witches: *If a single woman steps over a broom handle, she will bear a bastard child*. The brush of the broom consisted of twigs and shrubs had a meaning of the family – being together, so falling into pieces means death: *Если приснится, что рассыпался веник – к смерти близкого человека*. In all languages broom also played a protective function as it was given magic powers. On the one hand, the broom was used for sweeping or even lashing with it to protect from spirits (Russian and Mari): *Для избавления ребенка от ночного крика его водят по дому, обметая новой метлой* ‘To free a baby from a night crying it is brought around the house and swept with a new broom’, *Аралтыш семын самырык мужырым вынык дене лупшыныт* ‘The newly married were lashed with a broom on

the backs with the aim to protect and give fertility’. The exception is sweeping the feet of unmarried people. It will not let them marry in the future as it is like sweeping marriage away from them: *If anyone sweeping a room and accidentally passing the broom across your feet, it is a sign if single, you will not be married that year, Нельзя обметать ноги незамужних и неженатых, а то не вступят в брак*. On the other hand, the broom was taken or thrown away to give away something: the evil eye, deathbed agony, rubbish: *Чтобы избавить ребенка от сглаза, его старую одежду выбрасывают вместе со старым веником в окно* ‘To free a baby from the evil eye, its old cloth is thrown away together with an old broom through the window’, *Колышым сурт гыч лукмеке, шукым уштво выныкым шук ден пырля кудалтеныт* ‘After taken a deceased away from the house, a broom was thrown together with rubbish’.

Clock. The unit ‘clock’ is found in the English and Russian superstitions and predicts death. Clock is a symbol of some amount of time given for life. On the one hand, the clock in the house is stopped if somebody has died. On the other hand, if the clock started to work unexpectedly it can bring death: *If a clock which has not been working suddenly chimes, there will be a death in the family, Если часы не остановились сами после смерти человека, то их надо остановить*.

Towel. The unit ‘towel’ is found in Russian and Mari superstitions connected with marriage. In old times it was used for different purposes. On the one hand, the hands of a bride and a groom were tied up together as a symbol of a long and true love. The towel was spread out under feet as a symbol of a long and happy life. On the other hand, a groom took a bride into his house holding a towel tied around her hands. It is a survival of times past when the brides were taken without their wish. Another meaning of the towel is connected with family spirits. A groom took a bride into his house both holding a towel not to bring hostile spirits of a bride’s family: *Марлан толишо удыр каче суртыш солыкым кучен пурен. Тиде теве мо дене кылдалтын: марлан мийме ялыш сурт водыжым нагаяш огыл, вее тыге шоненыт: кок сурт водыж-влак келен огытыл*. A bride hung new towels in her new house to blandish the spirits’ of groom’s family: *Полотенца в доме мужа выполняли роль задабривания духов-предков его семьи, покровителей рода мужа*.

Ironing board. Lexical unit ‘ironing board’ in the English language predicted death: *An ironing board may draw death if it will suddenly fall and lap the open door*.

Shoulder-yoke, team poles. Lexical units ‘shoulder-yoke’ and ‘team poles’ in the Mari language are found in the superstition about pregnancy. They forbid a pregnant woman to step over them or it will bring different body defects to a future baby: *Торта гоч вончаш лудыныт - тидлан верчын сугыр йоча шочын кертын* ‘Pregnant women were afraid to step over a team poles as it could lead to a birth of a humpback baby’. Here we can see

an influence of a sympathetic magic which means that some things can lead to something similar.

IV. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the English, Russian, and Mari folk ritual superstitions containing lexical units connected with the topic of household items has the following conclusions:

1) the biggest number of superstitions containing the names of household items is in the Russian language (58), comparing with English (36) and Mari (37);

2) the biggest group according to the number of examples contained is Group 4 'Household Goods' in general and in all three languages separately;

3) the most spread units in three languages together are 'mirror' (16 times) and 'broom' (15 times);

4) the units 'mirror' and 'broom' are most spread in English and Russian as well, while the most spread unit in Mari is 'door';

5) the universal units for three languages are 'window', 'door', 'lock', 'table', 'spoon', 'knife', 'cradle', 'mirror', 'broom', and the units 'knife' and 'mirror' have the same meaning in all three languages;

6) there are unique units for different languages; for English: 'patchwork quilt' and 'ironing board', for Russian: 'tablecloth' and 'kettle', for Mari: 'shoulder-yoke' and 'team poles'.

So we can conclude that the household items played a great role in the life of English, Russian, and Mari people not only from everyday life's point of view, but also from the magical point of view. A big number of superstitions containing the names of the household items prove it.

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