
SEMIOTIC PATTERN AND FUNCTIONS OF OMENS WITH THE CULTURAL EXPONENTS OF ‘BORDER’

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Abstract

Those superstitions, which are directly connected with the ceremony of transition, remain the least studied in terms of Semiotics and functioning. The article defines a semiotic model of such superstitions and their main functions, which represent the cognitive structure of superstitious mind. The contrastive analyses based on the data of three languages — English, Russian and French — shows that the majority of such superstitions that are formed according to the same semiotic pattern ‘border — positive or negative prediction’. Some omens demonstrate the combination of semiotic models; still all of them fulfil five main functions: apotropaic, assisting, attractive, producing and destructive.

Keywords: superstitious discourse, semiotic pattern, cultural code, function, omen

1. Introduction

The earliest stages of society development witnessed how the religious dominated the secular, that’s why the person’s changing one life period into the next one is always accompanied by the corresponding ceremonies, which have to provide at least the safe introduction into the new life period. The description of transitive ceremonies and interpretation of their symbolism can be found in many anthropological and ethnographical works [1-4]. However, in addition to their major aim each of these ceremonies can have its own goal: wedding ceremonies include fertility ceremonies, fortune-telling ceremonies, apotropaic ceremonies, etc. They are so deeply intertwined with the transitional ceremonies that sometimes it’s difficult to find out their nature specifics. According to A. van Gennep, the ceremonies of this kind included into the system of transitional ceremonies are the least studied from the functional point of view [5].

The relevance of the study of superstitions’ semiotic patterns, their cultural codes and functions is determined by the fact that they explain the cognitive structure of superstitious mind, motivating human behaviour in everyday life.

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The present article aims to detect superstitious omens of transitional ceremonies, to describe their semiotic model and functions in Russian, English and French linguistic cultures.

2. Method

The technique for determining the semiotic patterns of omens is presented in our earlier published article [6]. The superstitious signs for contrastive analysis are taken from English and French dictionaries [7-12] and from the ethno linguistic dictionary of Slavic antiquity [13].

3. The main part

Transition from one condition into another implies the presence of imagined or real border between these periods. Whatever its nature is, pagan communities had certain ceremonies conducted either before the border, on it or immediately after it. Transition and border are interrelated, inseparable entities, though different in their nature. We prefer the term 'border' because the notion 'transition' implies a physical action: stepping over, climbing over, swimming over, moving from one place to another, etc. Language data analysis of superstitious omens shows that changing one condition to another isn't always accompanied by physical actions.

Graphically a border can be shown as a straight or zigzag, though open, line and as several crossed lines. In Anthropology and Semiotics, the direct borderline complies with a balk or a landmark, a door, a window, gates, threshold and so on. The contour boundary complies with a circle and crossed lines comply with a crossroad. All types of border loci share one functional feature — the division of the space into 'native' and 'alien', 'sacral' and 'profane'.

In many omens the border locus corresponded to the direct line, is presented as a house entrance, windows, doors, crossroads, water obstacle, a bridge. A house door is opposed to a window, considering some signs. According to Slavic believes, dead non-Christians and self-murderers have to be carried out of the house through a window or additional embrasure in the wall. The same procedure is registered in a French omen: *il faut faire sortir le cadavre d'un enfant mort-né par la fenêtre et non par la porte, si non la mère n'accoucherait plus par la suite que d'enfants mort-nés*. The French believed that breaking this ritual caused much trouble for the house: the woman could give birth to dead children only.

A crossroad is thought to be a border with the beyond world. Undesired or dangerous objects were thrown away on it. It was the place to get rid of illnesses by burning or cutting the sick person's clothes, threads with the number of knots equal to the number of warts and abscesses, eggs or bread balls rolled on the sick body parts.

Crossing the water is the motive of many myths. Water is connected with the symbolic of passing the border between the beyond world and the living world in funeral ceremonies. Water symbolizes changing fate or social status in wedding ceremonies and changing one season into another in calendar ones [14, 15]. A bridge is isofunctional to the border locus. It connects and divides the living and beyond world. Passing the bridge is thought as crossing the border between the worlds and social statuses. Its image is most often met in wedding and funeral ritual poetry. The space under the bridge is considered 'evil' and dangerous because it's usually built above the marshes, bogs, ravines, rivers.

Obviously, all the above mentioned objects and constructions (the list can be continued) are cultural codes of the notion 'border locus' in superstitious discourse. It's a sign, forming the semiotic model 'border — positive/negative prediction'. To activate magic power of border discourse one should step over it (drive, swim or walk under it). Superstitious omens with such border cultural codes fulfil the following functions:

- assisting: if you hammer a nail into the threshold, a sick man will get rid of fever; *si l'on a de la fièvre, il faut sortir de chez soi par la fenêtre et puis entrer chez soi par la porte*; (Russian) for the woman in labour to give birth easier she should three or nine times step over the threshold;
- apotropaic: a dead man will not come back home if a coffin passes through the threshold with a pin stuck in it; (Russian) a marriage will be strong if the wedding procession crosses the river when returning from the church;
- accelerating: *quand un enfant va pour la première fois dans la maison (franchi la porte, le seuil), il faut lui donner un oeuf pour qu'il parle plutôt*; (Russian) the baby will start to walk faster if he is walked over the threshold;
- diligent: if a new-born baby boy is given to his godmother over the threshold he'll become a devoted head of the family;
- attractive: to make a girl fall in love one should make her step over the threshold under which a dried crow quill is dug (to make her wither from love to him like a quill withers);
- producing: many more calves will be born in the household if a new-born calf is carried through the door.

The assisting and apotropaic functions of a crossroad as a border locus are clearer presented in the French linguoculture than the same functions of a threshold: *pour se débarrasser des verrues, il faut mettre dans un papier autant de petites pierres et le jeter dans un chemin (à l'embranchement de deux chemins)*. In many France provinces villagers still throw out onto the crossroad ash from the burnt clothes of a dead person (or straw from their mattresses) believing that this way they protect themselves from *revenant* – returned from the beyond world. For the same reason people pour out water in the house of the dead believing that memory of the living world is gone with water. This is the symbol of the Styx river, the border between the world of living and the world of dead.

It's necessary to mention that the functions of border locus in Russian magic ceremonies could be exercised by such objects as house keys, an axe, male trousers, opened cellar, weaver's loom. Women had to step over them to ease the labour process. Russian omens also present other favourable magic objects which had to be stepped or driven over. They combine the function of transition from one condition to another and the function of concretization of expected positive effect: if a wedding procession drives on the bread (a loaf, a pan trough, a casing turned its fur outside, broken dishes shards), the newly-weds' life will be accompanied by wealth and success.

Bread, buns, pan trough in these superstitions are the symbols of wealth, happiness while a casing turned its fur outside and broken dishes shards symbolize fertility and affluence. Magic features of border locus are realized even when it's not being stepped over: if one lies on the threshold, backache is believed to be gone; illnesses will leave the house if an old broom is chopped on the threshold and burnt.

Border locus was also used in malicious magic: to awake conflicts, illnesses and unhappiness in the house one has to dig threads (empty eggs, rubbish, and stinging nettle) under the threshold. Tangled threads, rubbish, stinging nettle and empty eggs are the metaphors of miseries, bad luck, hardships, which are believed to be brought to the house, into the family from the outside by the threshold.

Locus functions are extrapolated onto the process of stepping over itself. Stepping over a healthy person is initially destructive: *si on enjambe par-dessus un petit enfant, il ne grandirait jamais*; if to step over a baby (a young person) he won't grow (will get seriously ill, suffer from incontinence). One can step over a sick person: *pour se débarrasser des douleurs de reins il faut faire passer sur son dos une femme enceinte*; to save the child from the evil eye (epilepsy, backache) the mother (the first or the last child in the family) have to step over him. Stepping over harmful objects was also forbidden. For example: if to step over an old broom (old straw shoes, tangled threads, ash) it will cause conflicts and illnesses in the family; if a pregnant woman steps over a rope (thread, stick, twiglets) the child will be dead born. Compare: if a girl steps over a lying broom then she will get pregnant before marriage. Women, especially pregnant, were considered to be harmful objects as well: if a woman (a pregnant woman) steps over the fishing net (rod and other fishing facilities) there won't be any yield.

It's forbidden to greet each other, to say goodbye, to shake hands, pass objects, talk, etc. when standing on the opposite sides of the threshold — not to attract troubles. In some cases, a ritual fire exercised the function of a border locus. Jumping over it girls believed that they would change their status by getting married very soon. Compare: *pour se marier plus vite, il faut sauter par-dessus les feux la nuit de la Saint-Jean*. The French omen is an absolute semantic analogue of the Russian omen.

The semiotic model 'border — positive/negative prediction' can include signs of other semiotic models: to cure the child of consternation one should make him stand in the doorway, drill a hole on his height level, put there some

cut hair and nails of the child and cover the hole with an asp stake. Here three semiotic models are combined: 'border – positive prediction', 'part – positive prediction', 'circle – positive prediction'. Part isn't always marked negatively. Human hair and nails are analogically connected with body and replace it. The part (a sick person's hair or an animal's hair) accepts the person's illness and is placed into a drilled hole (the symbol of circle). The circle (closed border line) isolates, separates illness from the person while the doorway (a direct border line) brings the person from the sick condition into the healthy one. It's impossible to define here which of the semiotic models dominates. Most likely they're equal.

The combination of semiotic models in the French superstitious discourse is no less recurrent than in Russian. Here are some examples: *pour se protéger contre l'aiguillette, il faut frotter avec de la graisse de loup les jambages de la porte par laquelle la jeune mariée doit passer pour se rendre au lit nuptial; afin de préserver les bestiaux des maléfices des sorciers, il faut les assembler dans un carrefour et les enfumer avec des herbes cueillis l'année précédente.*

Both omens implement the apotropaic function. The first omen uses two semiotic signs: *la graisse de loup* ('wolf's fat') and *les jambages de la porte* ('door case'). Wolf's fat was used to grease the door case. A woman had to pass through this door at her first marriage night. This ritual was considered to keep the man from impotence. Greasing the door case can be treated from the erotic point of view and classed as a sympathetic ritual (same to the same). Nevertheless, to obtain the features of the greased door a woman had to pass through it, to overcome the border locus. Finally, it transits her from one condition into another and protects the spouses from impotence.

The second omen the protective function of the cover is implemented by smoke from the burnt last year grass and a crossroad implements the border locus function. Cultural codes 'smoke', 'wolf fat', 'crossroad', 'door' are changeable. Semiotic patterns 'cover — positive prediction' and 'border — positive prediction' remain unchangeable.

One of the most widely spread mythic and poetic symbols is a circle and its thereomorphic images such as a snake, a fish, a dragon, famous in mythology under one term Ouroboros [16-18]. It divides the space into 'own' (inside the circle) and 'alien' (outside the circle). Into 'sacred' and 'profane'. Circle is not only the form of very ancient buildings, including nomadic tents and marquees. According to archaeologists, the form of pagan temples was also round. It's known that settlements, towns, towers were surrounded by deep circle shaped ditches serving as natural protection from the enemy.

A square form or tetragon was equal to circle in its functions. Mythic and poetic tradition brings square in correlation with male and circle with female. For example, in the English and Russian culture the gender of an expected baby can be foretold by means of a ring and its movements in the air. If the ring is moving around the circle — a girl will be born, if it goes straight from side to side — a boy: *If the ring swings in an oval or circular motion the baby will be a girl. If the ring swings in a straight line the baby will be a boy.* A square also

served as a model for praying buildings (a pagoda, a church, a pyramid, the square form of an altar). Nevertheless its sacred meaning isn't met so often and clearly as that of a circle [18, 19].

Anthropologists and ethno linguists suppose that circle, square and triangle are the exponents of a border which has and indirect closed line or a round shape. Such sciences as Semiotics, Anthropology, Mythology and occult practice consider circle as an independent sacred symbol but it logically fits in the semiotic model of superstitious discourse 'border — positive/negative prediction'.

The correlation of circle and border notions is most distinctly seen in the procedures of walking round the house, settlements, cultivated areas, cattle placement places, in ploughing round houses, sown territories etc. in tying threads or a belt round the sick person, in drawing the circle and in creeping into different places. Here are some examples of superstitious omens meaning the mentioned rituals:

- a) drawing the circle: *pour qu'un accouchement se passe bien, il faut répandre du sel autour du lit de la future mère*; to cure skin defects (birthmarks, warts) as well as ruptures one should pass a copper coin round the damaged place;
- b) tying around the body or around damaged place: a red ribbon should be placed on a child who has been sick to keep the illness from returning; (Russian) a new-born's life will be long and safe if one interweaves him with a long thread;
- c) creeping into different places: for the labour to be easy and quick the woman has to squeeze under the threads stretched on the down part of the loom (through a hoop, a horse collar, under the stair case). In the French and English omens walking under the staircase brings trouble. Compare: *passer sous une échelle porterait malheur*; it is bad luck to walk under a ladder. We suppose that these omens imply negative prediction because the prohibition was meant for healthy people.
- d) walking or plowing around objects: *pour écarter les chenilles et autres vermines, il faut tourner trois fois, seul et le soir, autour du jardin, en chantant: "Escargots, mulots, renardeaux, sortez, sortez de mes haricots"*; to save fields and crops from hailstones they should be walked or plowed around; to get rid of a mole in the garden, one should jump on the poker around the garden three times on the Maundy Thursday.

A bit less distinctly the correlation between circle and border notions is observed in using the round shaped objects or objects with a hole in them (a ring, a belt, a necklace, Adder stone, a key hole, a tree hollow). These are to protect from evil forces and in medical practice. For example: amber beads, worn as a necklace, can protect against illness or cure colds; *pour éviter le nouement de l'aiguillette, il faut pisser dans le trou de la serrure de l'église, où l'on a épousé*; (Russian) to avoid miscarriage one should wear a ring during pregnancy.

In our opinion, the cultural code 'horse shoe', which is a rather recurrent constituent of superstitious omens in the Russian, English and French linguocultures, is also an exponent of a circle and therefore of a border. Modern horseshoes have a shape of a broken oval. Yet archaeological dig argue that they used to have the shape of a closed disk or oval and covered the whole hoof of the animal. As examples we can remember hyppo sandals, mule sandals, barefoot sandals, designed by Romans to protect from horse, mules and bulls hoofs, and — Mongolian horseshoes. Most often, the cultural code 'horseshoe' in superstitious omens actualizes two functions: bare sandals?

- protecting from evil forces: a houseshoe hung in the bedroom will keep nightmares away; *le fer-à-cheval cloué sur la porte pointes vers le haut protège du diable*; (Russian) a horse shoe, nailed to the door or above the window will protect the house from the evil forces;
- attractive: house shoe, hung above the doorway, will bring good luck to a home; *trouver un fer-à-cheval sur le chemin porte bonheur*; (Russian) if you find a horseshoe on the road it'll bring luck.

The semiotic model 'circle — positive/negative prediction' can be combined with other semiotic models producing cumulative objects: *pour guérir un homme (un animal) il faut prendre son cheveu (son poil), le mettre dans un trou du chêne et emboucher ce trou avec un coin*; if the bride and the bridegroom are tied with a towel before the wedding their marriage will be strong. The French omen demonstrates how the assistive function is combined with the models 'part — positive prediction' and 'circle — positive prediction'. The exponent of the part is *un cheveu* (un poil) 'a hair (an animal hair)', while the exponent of a circle is *un trou du chêne* 'an oak hollow'. The Russian omen combines the models 'circle — positive prediction' and 'cover — positive prediction'. The exponent of a circle is the ritual of tying the young couple and the exponent of a cover is the towel.

Omens with the model 'circle — positive/negative prediction' implement various functions. The most recurrent of them are:

- apotropaic: to protect oneself from the evil forces, witches, walking dead, one should draw a circle on the ground with a knife (with a scythe, an axe), a piece of chalk, a red cloth, etc.: evil spirits can't harm you when you stand inside a circle; wearing a belt protects the wearer from witches; *afin que le travail soit plus heureux, il faut tourner trois fois autour d'une charrue, tenant en main du pain, de l'avoine et de la lumière*; to protect the house fowl from evil forces one should hang a stone with a natural hole on the rope (bast) in the hen-house (in the yard).
- attractive: *nouer une ficelle en rond et la conserver sur soi attire la chance; les pièces de monnaie avec un trou dans le milieu portent chance*; to prevent hens from running away and to make them lay eggs in their master's yard they should feed in a hoop on Christmas.
- assistive: a red ribbon (thread) should be placed on a child who has been sick to keep the illness from returning; passing a sick person through a natural hole in a stone (tree) will cure him of ailments; *pour être guéri, il*

faut hocher la tête trois fois dans une armoire ou dans un trou qui est proche des autels; afin de garantir toute l'année du mal de tête et du mal de reins, il faut faire trois tours autour du feu de la Saint-Jean; to ease the labour the woman has to be walked around the table ; to cure the sick person he should be led around the tree (one can also make a circle with a hand around the ill place).

Omens with a producing function are very rarely met, mostly in the Russian lingual culture: to prevent the cattle from losing milking abilities one should milk the cow (a sheep, a goat) through the ring (a bracelet, a round bun, a stone with a hole in it) on Saint George (Yuriy) Day; to get pregnant one should walk around the oak tree three times; to make the fowl (less often cattle) fertile one should hang an Adder stone (a stone with a natural hole in it) in the hen-house (cow-shed, sheep-fold). Compare with English: barren women passed through a hole in a stone (tree) will find themselves fertile.

Omens using the circle exponents can imply the destructive function: it is bad luck to walk under a ladder; *il ne faut jamais jeter vos vieilles ceinture, un sorcier pourrait l'utiliser pour vous jeter les maléfices*; (Russian) if one twiddles another one's hat in the hands its owner will suffer a headache. Round movements (turning, walking around, drawing a circle) are typical of evil forces. It's dangerous for life to cross such circles.

We also suppose that one of the cultural exponents of 'border' notion is a cross. According to anthropologists, it symbolizes both life and death [18, 19]. Semantics of a cross is present in Russian, English and French name of a crossroad. Compare: *croisement de routes, carrefour* and crossing, crossroad. *Croisement* is formed from the verb *croiser* 'to cross, to fold crosswise', a *carrefour* comes from a Latin word *quadrifurcus* 'something which has four branches'. Four lines coming out of one point into opposite directions make a cross. *Crossing* comes from a Latin form *crux* 'cross', a crossroad is similar to the French form *croisement de routes* in formation and semantics. A crossroad, as we have discussed above, actualizes the border notion. Besides a cross in action is present in ritual procedures of changing house, crossing the obstacles, climbing over, stepping over, jumping over fires etc.: *si on enjambe par-dessus un enfant, il ne grandirait jamais*; if to step over a person he won't grow more; if a person steps over the unnaturally fallen tree he'll lose his way. The cross (as an acting guarding totem) is used to cross people, buildings in order to make an obstacle for the illness, evil forces. The superstitious omens in the analyzed cultures present the cross (also acting) in the five following functions:

- apotropaic: before slicing a new loaf of bread, make the sign of the cross on it; crossing the fingers will ward off evil; *quatre croix placées aux quatre angles d'un lit éloignent pendant la nuit les lutins et les follets; pour prévenir les visites du lutin, il faut croiser les jambes au lit*; (Russian) to prevent epizooty one should draw a cross on the gates (the door); to protect the cattle from malefice and evil eye one should throw an axe over it crosswise;

- producing: for the family to be wealthy one should strew seeds onto the table making the shapes of a circle and a cross before the New Year dinner; this bone has a cross shape;
- assisting: *pour arrêter un saignement, il faut mettre deux brins d'herbe en croix sur la blessure; si on souffre de maux d'estomac, il faut placer deux couteaux en croix sur votre ventre;* (Russian) to ease the labour the husband has to step over the woman in labour.
- attractive: crossing two matches by chance implies that joy and happiness await you; *pour empêcher des poules de s'éloigner de la maison, il faut faire le matin une croix à la cheminée;* (Russian) to bring back the lost cow one should place three rowan tree crosses on the crossroad and move back from them not looking where to go.
- destructive: don't step on a crack on a sidewalk or walkway, step on a crack will break your mother's back; to cross two forks accidentally is a sign that slander will be spread about you; *deux fûts de paille ou des petits morceaux de bois placés en croix sur votre passage semble toujours d'un funeste présage;* (Russian) if to greet each other or say good bye standing on the opposite sides of the door threshold you'll lose luck.

Many omens combine the signs of several semiotic models: it's good luck to find a four-leaf clover; knock three times on wood after mentioning good fortune so evil spirits won't ruin it; *trèfle à 4 feuilles apporte la chance aux joueurs; pour guérir les personnes malades de la colique, il faut les faire passer par un écheveau de fil;* (Russian) knock on the wood three times if you want to have luck; a husband should step over the belt on the floor to ease the labour.

In the French omen the cultural code *trèfle à 4 feuilles* combines the sign of semiotic model 'even number – positive prediction' and the sign of semiotic model 'border – positive prediction', as four leaves of clover make a cross, one of the border exponents. In the English omen a similar cultural code is present: a four-leaf clover. The signs of semiotic models 'odd number – positive prediction' and 'a cross – positive prediction' cumulate in the Russian omen. Positive features of uneven number '3' in the Christian religion are connected with the Holy Trinity: God-Father, God-Son and God-Spirit while a tree is associated with the cross Jesus Christ was crucified on.

4. Conclusions

Superstitious omens with such cultural codes as *a bridge, a river, a door, a threshold, a window, a circle, a ring, a belt, a crossroad, a cross, stepping over* and others symbolize the border and hence are formed according to one semiotic pattern: 'border — positive/negative prediction'.

Superstitious omens with these cultural exponents of a border mostly implement five functions: apotropaic, assisting, attractive, producing and destructive. Apotropaic and assisting functions are most representative. The producing function is less recurrent in the English and French linguocultures than in the Russian one. Presence of the destructive function is connected with

the lower level of the religious system, thus with the beyond evil forces activity. Cumulative omens combine cultural codes of semiotic models: ‘border — positive/negative prediction’, ‘cover — positive/negative prediction’, ‘even/odd number — positive/negative prediction’.

Certainly, the list of cultural exponents of a border can be enlarged. The variety of cultural codes forms and omens functions depends on historical patterns of their development and peculiarities of the religious systems in every society. Semiotic modelling lets reduce this variety to the final set of universal cognitive structures, which make the base of superstitious mind.

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