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USING FOLK SIGNS IN TEACHING RUSSIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The paper provides a rationale for using texts of Russian folk signs in teaching Russian as a foreign language. Folk signs contain important linguistic and cultural data, which often leads to a more profound insight into the Russian culture and Russian traditional mentality. From these positions, it is possible to more deeply understand the essence of the phenomenon consisting in the coincidence of events in objective reality - this phenomenon is called "synchronicity". The purpose of this paper is to show that folk signs in Russian traditional culture may constitute a valuable source of linguistic and cultural information for the purposes of teaching Russian as a foreign language. Folk signs in Russian traditional culture appear as binomial semiotic models in which a directly perceived event, insignificant in nature, means an event of a different kind. It fulfills itself in the future, it is more important for a person and it is considered from the point of view of assessment ("for the better" or "for the worse"). Thus, folk signs give a person information about the future. Particular issues that are considered in connection with the noted problem of folk signs are as follows: their logical structure, symbolism, cultural semantics, vocabulary, and linguistic features. An in-depth study of folk signs has interdisciplinary significance. It allows us to penetrate the essence of the phenomenon called "synchronicity" and is currently of interest to quantum physics and philosophy.

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Keywords: Folk signs, Russian as a foreign language, didactics, vocabulary, grammar, culture.



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1. Introduction

An important task in the practice of teaching Russian as a foreign language is the search for new unorthodox texts that would evoke students' interest and provide ample material for mastering all aspects of the Russian language – grammar, vocabulary, and cultural information. Texts of folk signs are among such materials.

To date, these texts have been studied quite well, which additionally justifies their usage in the practice of teaching Russian as a Foreign Language (RFL): their semantics are defined, the relevant cultural contexts are described, and origins of many of them are revealed. This approach was implemented in the fundamental work of Zabylin (1880) “Russkij narod, ego obychai, obryady, predaniya, sueveriya i poeziya” (Russian people, their customs, rites, traditions, superstition and poetry). Cultural and comparative analysis of folk signs was also carried out in a recent work (Zdanovich, 2017). The linguistic features of Russian signs (their specific conceptual sphere, grammar, aesthetics, and functionality) are analyzed in a monograph (Harchenko & Tonkova 2008).

2. Problem Statement

In light of this, an important problem of the inner structure of signs is identified. On the one hand, it is connected with a more general topic of coincidence of events in physical reality (the topic of synchronicity). We believe that folk signs are capable of explaining much in this phenomenon, thus explaining their own nature. On the other hand, the understanding of the signs' inner structure allows an in-depth understanding of certain fragments of the traditional Russian culture and a more reliable study of the Russian language and Russian cultural mentality basing on those premises.

In this context, biographical facts of renowned figures from the Russian history may be interpreted in a new light. In particular, the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin was a very superstitious man who believed in all sorts of signs. During his wedding with Natalia Goncharova, Pushkin's wedding ring fell on the carpet, while the candle in his hand went out. This circumstance made Pushkin concerned, and he exclaimed, “Tous les mauvais augures!” (“Bad omen!”). Pushkin's friend Pavel Nashchokin gave him a mascot – a turquoise ring which is considered to be a protective amulet against a violent death. According to his second Konstantin Danzas, the poet forgot to take that ring with him when setting out for a fatal duet. If, on his way somewhere, Alexander Pushkin saw the crescent moon on the right side of the sky, he considered it a good sign, but if the moon appeared on the left side, the poet considered it to be a bad sign and gave in to worry.

3. Research Questions

The solution to the stated problem involves finding answers to several important questions, which, on the one hand, stimulate understanding of deep nature of folk signs, and on the other, define the course of work on this phenomenon in the context of teaching Russian as a foreign language. What is the logical structure of folk signs in the traditional Russian culture? What is the content of certain signs in certain contextual conditions? What are the conditions in which such coincidences took place? What is the cultural content of folk signs?

The answers to these questions are ultimately important in the situation of studying Russian as a foreign language.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to show that folk signs in Russian culture can constitute a valuable source of cultural information for the purposes of teaching Russian as a foreign language. Moreover, discussing cultural contexts of folk signs ensures a profound understanding of literary and biographical texts. Finally, engaging with folk signs in language teaching proves very productive as it allows students to become better acquainted with the Russian traditional culture and Russian national mentality.

5. Research Methods

Addressing the stated problem involves the use of a number of promising research methods essential for finding answers to the identified questions. Thus, the analytical method allows us to understand their logical structure, the nature of the relationship between events coinciding in signs. The method of semantic analysis is used to identify the content of certain folk signs. The method of cultural reconstruction allows us to recreate in more detail the cultural contexts in which folk signs are being considered. Finally, the method of linguistic analysis allows us to understand the linguistic features of folk signs, to explain possible deviations in this regard from the language norm.

6. Findings

The following aspects should be in the focus of attention when utilizing folk signs for RFL teaching purposes.

Logical structure

In the texts of folk signs, two events are presented: the first instance (A) is defined as what happened in a person's life, the second (B) is associated with the first one but is separated from it by a certain temporal gap. In general, folk signs are constructed as implications that read "if A, then B". However, syntactically, such implications can take different shapes. Thus, in the first example given below it is presented explicitly with the help of the conjunctions "if ... then ...". In the second example, such an implication is hidden and is restored semantically through the causal relationship between the two events described. At the same time, the allied ligaments between the corresponding parts of the signs are restored.

Cf.: If the hem of a girl's dress is often wet or muddy, then the husband will be a drunkard;

If you accidentally notice the light in your house, happiness awaits you.

It is noteworthy that the second part of the structure contains an event of fundamental significance for the receiving party. In terms of its evaluative function, this event can be either negative or positive; however, their negative evaluative semantics are more frequent. Signs serve as a kind of warning to a person regarding future developments in his/her own life and that of the loved ones (Berestnev & Boyko, 2019).

Symbolism

The unity of events A and B is defined as a special kind of sign in which A is the signifier that constitutes the expression plane of a given unity, while B is its signified, making up its content plane. Therefore, the text of a folk sign makes up an indissoluble whole. Cf.:

Horses neigh for good luck;

Ants in the house are for good luck.

In terms of its semiotic –not structural but semantic – aspect, the nature of folk signs is in most cases defined as *iconicity*. The signified of a folk sign can be linguistically “calculated” through the nature of the signifier available. So, in the first example, the neighing of horses can be considered as a metaphor for laughter, and laughter is a metonymic manifestation of something good and positive – the feature presented in the “signifier” part of the folk signs.

In the second example, the implicitly presented feature of multitude is significant. In the system of basic semantic oppositions, it correlates with a positive member of the opposition “good vs bad”, which determines the semantics of this omen.

Cultural dimension

The figurativeness of folk signs may reflect native Russian speakers’ specific world view and manifest itself in special cultural contexts. Cf.:

Seeing the domovoy foretells trouble or death;

If the coffin is too large for the dead body, a new death is to happen in the house.

The first example illustrates an explanation of the cultural role the *domovoy* (a male household spirit similar to the brownie) plays in the system of Russian linguistic and cultural worldviews, its protective function, its relations with the owners of the house, etc. In East Slavic mythology, the domovoy appears as an old grey man with a face covered in hair, often outwardly resembling the owner of the house.

The *domovoy* was believed to keep order in the house: there was a belief it would punish married women who broke social taboos such as leaving the house without properly covering the head. The health of livestock also depended on the domovoy’ s benevolence or hostility. Therefore, the members of the family tried to please it in every possible way: they would leave out treats for him in secluded places and use affectionate names when turning to it with requests. When moving to a new house, the members of the household persuaded the domovoy to move along with them, otherwise they would be in danger.

Usually this household spirit would live in the corner behind the stove where household rubbish had to be thrown so that the "domovoy would not abandon the house". According to some beliefs, the domovoy could turn into a cat, a dog, or a cow; sometimes into a snake, rat, or frog (Ivanov & Toporov, 1995).

In the second example, the cultural semantics of the coffin is significant. In the Russian folk worldview, a coffin was thought of as a kind of "home" in which a dead person lives "in the next world." It is no coincidence that the old Russian words for the *coffin* was *domovina* or *domovishche* – both derivatives of the word “dom” (house). The concept of home is also reinforced by the ancient custom of arranging a “grave-house” for the dead under a grave mound - a log-house surrounded by a fence-picket fence. In this regard, graveyards could be perceived as residences of the dead (Petruhin, 1995, 314)

Within such a cultural context, an excessive space in the coffin was perceived as the possibility of accepting or a kind of invitation of one of the living “to be a guest”.

Vocabulary and language features

In some cases, a reference to the texts of folk signs in teaching RFL requires a special morphological or word-formation analysis of the words included in them. Cf.: *A loaf of bread splitting in the oven foretells departure of one of semyan (a family member)*.

In this case, the grammatical form of the word *semyan* should be explained through its relation to the same-root modern word *semya* (family) and the obsolete *semyane* (family members).

7. Conclusion

All the previously obtained and most recent data regarding linguistic features of folk sing texts can be used in teaching Russian as a foreign language. Their investigation involves all aspects of students' linguistic thinking: the logic of the utterance, syntax, vocabulary, cultural-linguistic aspects, and the students' ability to interpret signs. Even more important is the fact that comprehension of all these aspects of the Russian language will occur in new and largely informal contexts of familiarizing students with Russian folk signs.

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