

**TILTM 2020****Topical Issues of Linguistics and Teaching Methods in Business and Professional Communication****SIGNS AND SUPERSTITIONS ACROSS CULTURES:  
RUSSIAN, ENGLISH, AND FRENCH LINGUOCULTURAL  
TRADITIONS**

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*Abstract*

The ubiquitous presence of superstitious beliefs calls for an in-depth study of their cognitive foundations from a cross-cultural perspective. Potential drivers of human behaviour, superstitions are viewed in this paper as cultural constructs resulting from the complex nature of human experience and cognitive activity. This research aims to present unfounded beliefs as a cognitive phenomenon and to identify underlying conceptual mechanisms. With the use of a complex methodology including observation, hermeneutic and conceptual analysis, several most popular superstitious signs and beliefs in three cultures – Russian, English and French – are scrutinized in a bid to obtain a better understanding of the preferences different cultures demonstrate in selecting a focus in the conceptual framework of a superstition. The paper shows how choosing a different focal point is reflected in the interpretation of a superstition, consequently resulting in a different behavioural pattern. It is argued that adding a linguistic dimension to the research of superstitions makes it possible to demonstrate the role systemic linguistic differences play in creating a culture-specific superstitious worldview. Common and specific models of verbal and non-verbal superstitious behaviors are part of any national culture, and this “linguistic-behavioral” cluster can be classified as a cultural idiom whose exploration will be beneficial for practical purposes in foreign language teaching and will open new avenues in cross-cultural studies.

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## 1. Introduction

It would not be an exaggeration to state that in all cultures people try to conceptualize coincidences. Falsely linking cause to effect, they acknowledge commonly observed phenomena and events as foretelling signs; they invent specific rules of behavior in an attempt to avert misfortune or failure, or perhaps to attract good luck. It is largely admitted that even if people deny believing in omens, they still use hopeful or wishful speech, rituals, and other superstitious practices, defying any direct correlation with their educational background. There is abundant evidence that people's scientific knowledge does not rule out the possibility that they would follow superstitious patterns of behaviour (Lindeman & Aarnio, 2007). It is assumed that for numerous occupational groups, including highly intellectual ones (like medicine, astronautics, academic research, and others), the burden of responsibility and fear of failure take a toll on people making them genuinely apprehensive and thus pushing them towards the obscure realm of believing that random events occur for a purpose (Risen, 2016; Risen & Nussbaum, 2013).

The broadly accepted universality of folk signs, myths, and beliefs (Frazer, 1998; Lindeman & Aarnio, 2007; Vyse, 2014) makes the subject especially intriguing in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic perspectives. An in-depth consideration of this phenomenon through the lens of language and culture can prove beneficial both for understanding the conceptualization processes in forming beliefs and for practical purposes in foreign language teaching. Informed by evidence from three languages – Russian, English, and French – the article aims to reveal linguistic and cultural similarities and differences in the formation and interpretation of signs and superstitions. To this end, an overview of different scholarly approaches to the nature of superstitions and beliefs is followed by the discussion of the cognitive grounds for selecting a superstitious concept and versatility of their interpretation.

Etymologically, the Russian word for superstition – *suyeveriye* – means an empty, vain (*suye*) faith (*veriye*) (Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language, 2005), as opposed to a genuine faith. Erroneous beliefs built on insufficient and wrongly perceived information (Scheibe & Sarbin, 1965), superstitions are otherwise defined as “irrational belief that an object, action, or circumstance that is not logically related to a course of events influences the outcome” (Damisch et al., 2010, p. 1014). Contemporary psychological studies explain superstitious beliefs and behaviours by the fact that a person experiences various mental states, such as fear, misunderstanding of what is happening around, or dreams – anything that is too hard for our mind to grasp. Learning from experience is an evolutionally old practice of knowledge building – an intuitive rather than reasoned way of responding to environmental challenges (Epstein, 2010). Where no explanation of challenges is readily available, cognitive systems take on the responsibility for “filling in the gap” (Scheibe, & Sarbin, 1965, p. 147) – the cognitive effort of gauging the threat and inventing a “remedy” to hedge off the unknown. Besides, as humans live on expectations, uncertainty deprives them of confidence thus forcing them to empirically construct adaptive mechanisms (Epstein, 2010): people look out for signs and signals, assign meaning to them and introduce behavioural practices that are believed to protect humans against contingencies. Observance of rituals, ceremonies, and religious practices produces an illusion of increasing the predictability of the future and maintaining control over people's lives (Langer, 1975). Creating the illusion of control, these complex cognitive constructs are viewed as adaptive mechanisms capable of improving performance in skilled activities, thus playing an important role in human social life (Sierra et al., 2015; Vyse, 2014). As people are more vulnerable to

superstitions in times of anxiety, rites and rituals are primarily concerned with such mileposts in human life as marriage, illness, childbirth, and death. It is assumed that human ability to find ways to adapt to environmental challenges is due to plasticity of our mind (Piette, 2013; Bobillon, 2017), which is consistent with the theory that superstitious signs, texts, and rituals function as models of protective communication designed to neutralize the cognitive constructs of superstition and prejudice generated by fear of the unknown (Astafurova & Olyanich, 2019). Thus “cognitive relaxation” (Piette, 2013, p. 9) is achieved through automatic execution of superstitious actions. Recent studies in neuroscience supporting the theories that religious beliefs and superstition fulfil an adaptive cognitive function and are, therefore, biologically based (Sapolsky, 2014), echo Pinker’s (2002) idea that in spite of cultural variability of familiar categories of behavior (signs and superstitions among them), “the deeper mechanisms of mental computations that generate them may be universal and innate” (p. 39).

Once the initial cognitive job of ‘coining’ a superstition is done, our cognitive system protects itself by severing the links to the origins of those beliefs (Bobillon, 2017), and our memory preserves and transmits beliefs through socialization. To do so, the experiential system needs to encode information (Epstein, 2010). Apart from such cognitive mechanisms as memories of observed phenomena, their more ‘palpable’ representations come in the form of mental pictures associated with familiar objects and behavioural patterns. These models are always ultimately oriented towards core cultural values transmitted through generations. Superstitions enter the minds of people from an early age as part of societal values : “We are not born knocking on wood; we learn to do so” (Vyse, 2014, p. 73). When a French mother tells her child that bread should not be placed “upside-down” (on ne pose pas le pain sur le dos car cela porterait malheur), this behaviour pattern is taken on faith without checking the possible consequences of breaking the rule – because “doubt comes after faith” (Wittgenstein, 1994). Thus, superstitions and beliefs are seen as an unconscious prejudice that perpetuate as a result of reiteration without comprehension shaped into a culturally transmitted behavioural habit. Of particular importance is the fact that superstitious behaviour goes beyond intellectual control (Mandal, 2018).

## **2. Problem Statement**

A psychologically puzzling phenomenon, superstitious beliefs are widely studied in many fields of knowledge – anthropology, psychology, cognitive science, semiotics, linguistics, neuroscience, etc.; however, the cultural-linguistic aspects of irrational beliefs have not received much explicit attention so far. Meanwhile, cognitive explanation of beliefs presents a challenge because, in spite of the fact that superstitions rest on category mistakes and ontological confusions in all cultures, there must be a reason why even within the same conceptual domain they are often formed on different cognitive grounds and enjoy such diverse interpretations, cross- and inter-culturally.

## **3. Research Questions**

Given that in many cultures most superstitious beliefs are formed around common concepts, the central question of this study is which part of cognitive information within a chosen frame (or scenario) is

involved in this formation in each case. What role the language system may play in creating superstitious beliefs is another question to be answered.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to investigate the cognitive foundations of superstitions and account for differences in their interpretations in three cultures. The paper also aims to explore the defining role of the linguistic dimension in culture-specific interpretations of signs and to prove that signs and superstitions comprise a significant, value-laden part of linguo-cultural background indispensable in the study of a foreign language.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The empirical data drawn on three linguo-cultural spaces were scrutinized using the methods of observation, comparison, and interpretation. Concepts underpinning superstitions were analysed through the lens of cognitive perspectives, which provides for a better understanding of the preferences of different cultures in selecting a focus of a superstition. Native speakers of corresponding languages were polled to verify the abundant web-sourced information.

#### **6. Findings**

Pervasive in our cognitive life, superstitions are spanning cultures. Superstitious behaviours are manifested in physical actions (such as knocking on wood or spitting), accompanying freely formulated utterances (Rus: “a man is to come” if a knife falls down) or idiomatic incantations (Rus: ни пуха ни пера, Engl: break a leg, Fr: merde to wish good luck), or combinations of verbal and behavioural elements (Rus: saying “let’s sit down for the road” – and doing so before setting out on a long journey). In terms of their cultural affiliation, there are indeed superstitions unique to specific cultures – such as touching the red pompon on top of a sailor’s hat for luck in the French culture (Toucher le pompon rouge d’un marin – succès), or not whistling indoors for fear of losing money in Russia. However, shared cultural values account for a great deal of common superstitious folkways in the three cultures under study. Apart from being centred around important events in human life, as was mentioned above, socially (and culturally) shared superstitions also draw on the same conceptual domains – human body, animals, plants, household items, numbers, colours, etc. One can venture a guess that the choice of stimuli triggering superstitious behaviour is defined by their relevance to human life, their recurrence and noticeability: indeed, the likelihood of forming superstitious beliefs about cats or spiders is higher than doing so about squirrels or elk whose presence in a person’s daily life is much less observable.

Cross-cultural superstitions are more likely to be shared by more closely interconnected national communities. Not surprisingly, such superstitions often have a common origin, like in the case of the unlucky number “13” for the better part of the western world. Meanwhile, although numerical superstitions occupy a well-established niche across the world, they differ among cultures, quite often for linguistic reasons. For example, in Japan, the unlucky number is “9” (it sounds like words denoting torture and suffering), in China, it is “4” (consonant with the word death), in Italy – “17” (the Roman numeral XVII

can be converted into the anagram “VIXI”, which in Latin translates as “my life is over). Thus the cognitive mechanisms of this superstition – cognateness of either audio or graphic shape in these examples – appear to be totally different owing to a linguistic dimension, even though they originate in the same domain (numbers).

The involvement of the cognitive-linguistic machinery in forming some culture-specific superstitions (or signs as less judgemental beliefs shown below) becomes evident where a language system offers an extra dimension for interpretation. For example, with every noun assigned a gender in the Russian language, the interpretation of a sign or event of superstitious nature may depend on the gender of the word denoting the subject involved. Cf. (Rus): if either a spoon or a fork falls, a female guest is believed to come (both spoon and fork are nouns of feminine gender), but if a knife (masculine) falls, a man is expected to show up. The English are familiar with this folk sign too, but, with no grammatical gender assigned to nouns in the language, the cognitive basis for forecasted consequences of dropping a piece of cutlery remains unclear: Knife falls, gentleman calls;/ Fork falls, lady calls;/ Spoon falls, baby calls. One can only surmise that the knife is conceptualized as a weapon – hence a ‘male’ association, and a spoon as the safest item of silverware is associated with a child. French has gender for nouns but dropping a piece of silver gets rather inconsistent interpretations: either according to grammatical gender, un couteau (masculine), c’est un homme; une cuillère, c’est une femme (feminine)); or, according to evidence from native speakers, none at all – just an unexpected visit (visite imprévue) for a dropped knife.

The examples above demonstrate the role of linguistic factors in the formation of superstitious concepts. Language gives shape to beliefs, too, making it possible to articulate apprehensions and expectations and transmit them in various forms from one generation to the next (Bobillon, 2017). Thus, superstitious beliefs are often verbalized in rhymed forms, which makes them easily remembered. Cf.: (Rus) Собачий вой–на вечный покой; (Eng) See a pin and pick it up, all the day you’ll have good luck. /See a pin and leave it lay, you will have bad luck all day. Or: Mend your clothes upon your back, sure you are to come to wrack. In terms of their structural organization, verbally expressed superstitions maintain a certain logical make-up, the left part containing a description of a phenomenon not controlled by a person, and the right part indicating future situations – if also uncontrollable, but nevertheless capable of influencing the person’s physical and emotional life (Yokoyama, 2002). Whatever verbal or behavioural forms they take, they are ingrained in every national culture.

There is a curious connection between the information presented and its interpretation. It is assumed that a great deal of existing unrecognized statistical dependencies become applicable only when the interpreter has a mechanism that “intelligently” connects observation with action using the existing code or creating one’s own (Haig & Dennett, 2017). This fact explains the variability of interpretations of superstitions. Interpretations of many superstitions and signs vary not only among cultures, but within one culture; there is also a significant chronological variation of interpretations (see Roud 2006). Here I will focus only on two ‘animalistic’ examples to demonstrate the versatility of cognitive grounds for forming superstitions and variability of interpretations of events forecast by identical stimuli.

Spider. The spider seems to be the most popular arachnid in the three cultures, but the interpretations of seeing it differ widely. While in the Russian folklore tradition it should not be harmed simply because “it brings a letter”, the English and the French avoid killing spiders for many more reasons. Apart from

promising a letter to an English home too (Eng.: If a spider hangs over your head, you will get a letter), it can bring about good luck, good news and guests in both English and French cultures. Cf.: Eng.: Seeing a spider run across a wall is another sign of good luck. Fr.: Si une araignée monte à son fil, le tout vous annonce que vous aurez de bonnes nouvelles prochainement. Eng.: If a spider builds its web across your door, you can expect company. Fr.: Un visiteur viendra sous peu lorsque vous trouverez une toile dans l'embrasure de la porte. Only the English would not step on it for fear of spoiling the weather (If you step on a spider, you'll bring on rain); in both English and French killing a spider may cause serious trouble (Eng.: Kill a spider, bad luck yours will be. Fr.: Il ne faut pas tuer une araignée puisque cela porte malheur). The French have a whole set of interpretations depending on the time of sighting a spider: Araignées du matin, chagrin; araignées du midi, profit; araignées du soir, espoir (Morning spiders are for grief, noon spiders are for profit, evening spiders are for hope). The spider is thought of as a money-spinner too (If a spider crawls into your pocket/ across your palm, you will soon come into money)– but only in English.

Although only a small fraction of the plethora of “spider” signs and superstitions is considered here, it is apparent that interpretations vary widely; nevertheless, the spider receives a kind treatment across the three cultures in question. The description of the arachnid’s essential encyclopaedic physical and functional features contains negatively connotated words (underlined): a predatory arachnid with eight legs, two poison fangs, [...]; they spin silk to make cocoons for eggs or traps for prey (WordNet 3.1). However, the positive associations in the structure of the concept of spider appear to be more important for creating a suitable image for a superstition: spiders are famous for their hard-working character, which probably accounts for the positive associations it evokes outweighing the negative ones. The image of a spider bringing home a letter or a guest could be linked to the cobweb – a component evoking the idea of catching somebody or something. On the whole, the common cognitive emotional grounds ensure a predominantly (not exclusively) positive image of the arachnid in the superstitious framework in three cultures. Interestingly, in other cultural contexts spiders do not enjoy such a positive reputation. Awareness of the cultural and linguistic specifics is an important part of communicative competence.

Magpie. Another popular animal in the realm of signs and superstitions is the magpie. Its description as a “(n) long-tailed black-and-white crow that utters a raucous chattering call” (WordNet 3.1) is appended with: “(n) scavenger” (someone who collects things that have been discarded by others); chatterer, babbler, chatterbox, magpie (an obnoxious and foolish and loquacious talker) (WordNet 3.1). The latter feature is confirmed in French (“personne bavarde” – Larousse.fr). In the Russian folklore tradition, the magpie is also characterised by talkativeness – consequently, it can bring news and forecast arrival of guests. On the whole, Russians treat the magpie as quite an innocent, if irritating, bird; they spotlight the noises it makes as the main component of the concept. In English and French superstitions, the magpie is conceptualized as a portent of misfortune: seeing a lone magpie is a bad omen (Si vous voyez une pie c’est du malheur. The English “magpie” superstition takes the form of a nursery rhyme: One for sorrow, / Two for mirth, / Three for a wedding, / And four for death). There is also a special ritual on seeing a single magpie in English: to prevent bad luck one should greet it with utmost politeness and ask after his wife (“Good morning general / captain; 'Good morning Mr Magpie, how is your lady wife today”). It could be inferred that the English and French perception of the magpie in their superstitious worldview rests on the fact that these birds mate

for life – a peripheral component in the structure of the concept not taken into account in Russian. Thus, different cognitive foci at the point of developing a superstition result in different predictions as well as behavioural and communicative practices in Russian and English / French traditions. The attitude to the bird as a source of danger in the English culture finds confirmation in the collective nouns for magpies: not only “a tittering”, but also “a mischief” and even “a murder of magpies. The components of the conceptual structure (i.e. “scavenger”) not activated in the superstitious paradigm feature in other folklore genres which are beyond the scope of this study.

Interestingly, native speakers of all the three cultures under study evidence that at times they jokingly use the phraseology of superstitions (i.e. “magpie” greetings or “spider” rhymes cited above) in communication. Awareness of such cultural contexts attest to the cultural belonging or linguo-cultural proficiency of the speaker, therefore, there is no denying that exposure to this segment of national cultural lore should be beneficial for foreign language learners.

## 7. Conclusion

As cognitive, psychological, and social phenomena, superstitious beliefs are not the product of a particular culture but ubiquitous mental representations of people’s fears and expectations. The conducted research shows that, when contextualized in particular cultural systems, signs and superstitions expose a high degree of commonality in their cognitive mechanisms, on the one hand, and a considerable lack of consistency in interpretation ensuing different behavioural and linguistic patterns, on the other. Cognitive substantiation for forming a superstition should be sought in the subject’s recurring, noticeable qualities and relevance to human life. Drawing on the same conceptual domains, Russian, English, and French cultures most often choose similar or identical subjects for creating their superstitious worldview but focus their cognitive attention differently. These foci capture cultural value orientations. Exploring signs and superstitions through a linguistic lens makes it possible to show how language gets involved in shaping culturally specific superstitious practices, systemic language differences being one of the factors.

The phenomenon of superstition as a product of human cognitive activity calls for a deeper insight into the aspects of cross-cultural communication. The above-described and similar models of verbal and non-verbal superstitious behavior are part of any national culture, and therefore this “linguistic-behavioral” cluster can be classified as a cultural idiom. Superstitions have a great potential to be explored as memes anchored in our consciousness as cultural values (Blackmore, 1999) and regarded within the “Us vs Others” dichotomy. Lack of linguistic and cultural knowledge or awkward performance of superstitious behaviour could be compared to inability to speak a language idiomatically. Focus on the value system here is also a pragmatic consideration for the purposes of enhancing cross-cultural communication and foreign language teaching.

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