

ISCKMC 2020

International Scientific Congress «KNOWLEDGE, MAN AND CIVILIZATION»

RUSSIAN AND CHINESE SUPERSTITIONS: THE DIALOG OF TWO LINGUISTIC CULTURES

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Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic means of expressing superstitions in Russian and Chinese cultures. The main task was to find out Russian and Chinese verbal sayings containing superstitions and luck beliefs of different types and to analyze them in sense of their semantics, structure and functioning. The research was conducted on the basis of a written survey of 50 Russian and 27 Chinese students and the aim of the research was to identify the most popular omens and superstitions in Russian and Chinese cultures and to determine the level of respondent's "superstition". As a result, we obtained a corpus of 358 Russian and 185 Chinese superstitions, that can serve as the basis for creating a dictionary of modern superstitions. The comprehensive linguistic analysis of Russian and Chinese superstitions was made. We also used the data of the Russian National Corpus (ruscorpora.ru), defining dictionaries and the material of some other researchers. The results showed that superstitions in Russian and Chinese languages can be divided into 12 thematic groups, but within these groups the superstitious beliefs do not match or partially match: the keyword of an omen (for example, a mirror) may be the same, but the actions (events) associated with it are different in Russian and Chinese cultures; some of them have the same general message, but opposite beliefs and forecasts; some superstitions are presented only in one of the languages and have no analogues in the second one. The difference between Russian and Chinese superstitions can be explained by the influence of different cultural and lingvocultural factors.

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Keywords: Linguistic culture, superstitions, ambiguity, Russian, Chinese



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1. Introduction

In the modern world, where education plays an important role, people every day witness amazing scientific discoveries and new technologies. But regardless of education and social status, people still superstitiously continue to "sit down for a moment" before a long trip or "look in the mirror", when they return from a halfway. Moreover, many people, both young and old, often carry something with them that they believe brings them good luck and happiness. And, probably, even those who do not consider themselves a superstitious person, in case of seeing a broken mirror, he or she thinks that it is not good.

Studies of various linguistic and cultural concepts, types and traditions are very popular nowdays. Omens and superstitions are an integral part of the culture, they reveal the national and cultural features of the country. As stable language units, they reflect different fragments of the language worldview (Sadova, 2004). Superstitions are language units in the form of sentences with a predictive function that express luck beliefs in something supernatural. Superstitions contain an incomprehensible connection and have no logical explanation. An omen constitutes a remark of the people to some phenomenon. Usually, it is a phenomenon that is associated with the weather forecast. In contrast to the concept of superstition, the omen (e.g., a sign predicting weather events) can usually be explained from the point of view of logic (Fliginskikh, 2014).

The research of superstitions is conducted in various fields of the humanities: psychology (Rudski, 2003), sociology (Burger & Lynn, 2005), pedagogy (Saenko, 2005), philosophy (Shu, 2001), intercultural communication (Chen & Young, 2018, Spector et. al., 2004). Unfortunately, there are few studies devoted to the comparative analysis of linguistic means of expressing luck beliefs and superstitions in different languages. This work is intended to partially fill in this gap.

2. Problem Statement

The problem of symmetry and asymmetry of the superstitions in the compared languages is relevant and significant for theoretical understanding of the basic issues of cultural linguistics, as well as for intercultural communication, translation practice and teaching Russian as a foreign language. The research subject is the national-cultural features of the language means of expressing superstitions in Russian and Chinese linguistic cultures.

3. Research Questions

The following research questions are the most interesting in the framework of this problem:

1. What sayings and superstitions are the most frequent in Russian and Chinese nowdays? Which of them are actually used by native speakers?
2. What language means are used to denote superstitions in Russian and Chinese linguistic cultures? Do these means differ?
3. Do Russian and Chinese superstitions differ in their subject matter? What do the Chinese and Russians believe in? Who of them is more superstitious?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to find out, describe and analyze semantics, structure and functioning of most popular Russian superstitions, as well as to compare them with similar units in the Chinese language.

5. Research Methods

Russian and Chinese most frequent superstitions were revealed by using a survey method: 50 native Russian speakers and 27 native Chinese speakers were asked to answer the questions about their superstitions and luck beliefs and to rate their level of superstition on a scale from -2 (I do not believe in superstitions) to +2 (I am a very superstitious person). Besides, Russian native speakers also had to note familiar superstitions that were taken from the survey "Secrets of Russian superstitions" (Pankeev & Pankeeva, 2007) and Russian National Corpus (<http://www.ruscorpora.ru/>). These were 110 superstitions from different spheres of life: related to the fate of a person, family, school, money and weather events.

6. Findings

As a result, we found out 358 superstitions given by Russian respondents (106 of which were different), and 185 from native speakers of Chinese (58 of which were different). We revealed that common Russian superstitions can be divided into 12 thematic groups:

1. Superstitions concerning animals (e.g., "*Black cat crosses your road – bad luck*", "*Your cat licking and grooming itself – guests will come*", "*Killing a spider – bad omen*", "*To see a spider – to misfortune*", "*Birds are silent – there will be a thunderstorm*", "*Swallows fly low over the ground - to the rain*", "*The crow croaks – bad luck*", "*A bird knocks in the window – to good news*").
2. Superstitions related to household items (e.g., "*Broken mirror – bad omen*", "*Broken dishes – good luck*", "*If the fork falls, an evil woman will come, a spoon – just a woman, a knife – a man will come*", "*To drop a tableware – guests will come*").
3. Superstitions associated with a person (e.g., "*When you don't recognize a familiar person – he or she will become rich*", "*A woman on the ship – bad luck*", "*If the first person you meet in the morning on the street is a man – good luck, if it is a woman – bad luck*", "*Do not step over a sleeping or lying person – he or she won't grow up*").
4. Superstitious beliefs related to body parts (e.g., "*If you step on someone's foot – it is necessary for him or her to step on yours in response. Otherwise, you will quarrel!*", "*To cut your nails on Tuesdays – to get money*", "*If your left palm itches, you will get some money*", "*If your right palm itches, you will be beaten*", "*Ringing in the right ear – to the good news, in the left one - to bad news*", "*Don't cut the hair yourself*", "*If your cheeks are blushing – somebody is thinking about you*", "*If the tip of your nose itches – you will get drunk*", "*Don't show anything bad on your body surface (wounds, diseases, scratches) – bad omen*").

5. Superstitions related to family life (e.g., "If a boy is like his mother, and a daughter looks like her father – they will be happy", "Do not buy baby clothes and kid's stuff before the child's birth – bad luck", "An unmarried girl should not sit on the corner of the table – she will never get married").

6. Superstitions related to the house (e.g., "Moving to a new house or apartment, first you need to put a cat into there – good luck", "Don't say goodbye or kiss anybody through the threshold – to quarrel", "To whistle inside the house – to lose money").

7. Superstitions around plants (e.g., "To find a lilac with five petals – a wish will come true, with three petals – it will not come true", "Yellow flowers are the messengers of parting for lovers").

8. Food superstitions (e.g., "If you drop salt, you will have a quarrel at home", "If a woman uses too much salt while cooking, she is in love", "If you took a bite of bread from two pieces, it means that someone from your family is hungry").

9. Superstitions associated with a forthcoming trip (e.g., "Do not step on a road hatch, it leads to disaster", "To sew before the trip - bad luck", "To sit down for a moment before the trip is a good sign (to a safe trip)", "If you start a trip on Friday– do not expect anything good").

10. Superstitions related to educational activities (e.g., "If you leave an open textbook on the table before the exam, you will pass the exam poorly", "A nickel under the heel is a luck on the exam", "If you put the textbook before the exam under your pillow, you will pass the exam well, all the answers will come to your head").

11. Superstitions related to weather events (e.g., "Red sunset - to cold weather", "The sun sets in a cloud – it will rain next day", "Rain before the trip is a good sign").

12. Superstitions around numbers (e.g., "Don't travel in the 13-th wagon, in the 13-th place, don't buy 13 flowers. 13 is an unlucky number", "Friday the thirteenth is a bad day", "Never present an even number of flowers").

Chinese superstitions were divided into the same 12 thematic groups. Besides, a separate group of Chinese superstitions related to the New year was identified as far as the New year is very important for the Chinese people, and probably because of this, there is a large number of superstitions associated with this holiday in the Chinese culture.

Comparative analysis of the most frequent Chinese and Russian superstitions revealed that three of them coincide: 走路不可以踩井盖, 这样会不幸运 (Czou lu bu ke i caj czin gaj, chzhe yan huj bu sin yun) 'If you step on a road hatch, it leads to bad luck'; 扫地需从外往里扫, 否则会把财富扫出去 (Sao di syuj cun vaj van li sao, fou cze huj ba caj fu sao chu cyuj) 'When you sweep the house, don't sweep to the direction of the threshold, sweep from the threshold - otherwise you will sweep all the wealth out'; 碎的镜子不能再继续用 (Da suj de czin czy bu nen czaj czi syuj yun) 'Don't look in a broken mirror'.

There are superstitions that coincide only partially. In other words, the keywords (key objects) in Russian and Chinese superstitious beliefs can be the same, but the actions associated with them are different. For example, in Russian, *breaking a mirror leads to a failure*, whereas in Chinese, they say 镜子不能对着床 (Czin czy bu nen duj chzhe chuan) 'Don't hang a mirror right in front of the bed.' In some sentences, the same event has a different forecast (warning) in Russian and Chinese cultures. For

example, in Russian, *Broken dishes – good luck*, but in the Chinese language they say: 摔碎盘子, 寓意不好 (*Shuaj suj pan' czy yuj i bu hao*) 'Broken dishes – bad luck'.

The analysis also revealed that some Russian common superstitions have no equivalents in Chinese culture. For example, the saying "*A knife/spoon falling from the table – a man/woman will come*", exists only in Russian. Knives and spoons are not used as common cutlery in China, they are not popular in the Chinese linguistic worldview, so there are no superstitions associated with these two subjects in Chinese culture.

The most popular Russian superstitions encountered in the responses of more than 20 % of the participants are presented in Table 01. The most popular Chinese superstitions are presented in Table 02.

Table 1. The most popular Russian superstitions

Nº	Superstition	Frequency of occurrence (in the responses of 50 respondents)	% of the total number of participants
1	If black cat crosses your road – bad luck.	40	80
2	If you drop salt you will have a quarrel in a house.	22	44
3	An unmarried girl should not sit at the corner of a table – she will not marry.	15	30
4	You need to sit down for a minute before a long journey if you want to have a safe trip	14	28
5	Do not whistle in the house – there will be no money.	11	22
6	To meet a woman with an empty bucket – bad luck.	11	22
7	If you have left something at home and you need to come back to take it, look at yourself in the mirror as a trick to deceive an evil sign.	11	22
8	Breaking a mirror brings troubles.	10	20
9	Do not kill a spider – misfortune will happen.	10	20
10	Do not eat from a knife – you will get angry	10	20

Table 2. The most frequent modern Chinese signs

Nº	Superstition	Frequency of occurrence (in the responses of 27 respondents)	% of the total number of participants
1	不能把筷子插在米饭上。 (Bu nen ba kua jazy cha czaj mi fan' shan.) Do not put sticks in the rice. 左眼跳财, 右眼跳灾。	14	52
2	(Czo yan' tyao caj, yu yan' tyao czaj.) The left eyelid itches – good luck, the right – bad luck. 正月里不能理发。	13	48
3	(Chzhen yue li bu nen li fa.) Do not get a haircut in the first month of the lunar calendar. 镜子不能对着床。	10	37
4	(Czin czj bu nen duj chzhe chuan.) Do not hang a mirror directly in front of the bed. 在房间里不能打伞, 会长不高。	9	33
5	(Czaj fan czyan' li bu nen da san', huj chzhan bu gao.) Do not open an umbrella in the house, or you will not grow up anymore.	9	33

	吃梨的时候不能分着吃，意为“分离”。 6 (Chi li de shi hou bu nen fen' chzhe chi, i vej fen' li.) Cutting the pear leads to parting. 上排牙掉了扔房间角，下排牙掉了扔房顶。 7 (Shan paj ya dyao le zhen fan czyan' czya, sya paj ya dyao le zhen fan din.) If your upper tooth fell out, you need to throw it on the corner of the house, if the lower – in the roof of the house. 数字8是发财的意思。 8 (Shu czy ba shi fa caj de i sy.) Number 8 – good luck. 数字4不吉利，谐音死。 9 (Shu czy sy bu czi li, se in' sy.) Number 4 means death. It's the unlucky number 走路不可以踩井盖，这样会不幸运。 10 (Tszou lu bu ke i tsai tszin gai chzhe ian khui bu sin iun.) Do not step on a hatch on the road – it brings troubles. 不能送别人钟表，谐音“送终”。 11 (Bu nen sun be zhen chzhun biao se in sun chzhun.) Giving a watch as a present leads to death.	8	30
		8	30
		7	26
		7	26
		7	26
		7	26

Superstitions related to weather events are not so popular and diverse in both languages. Comparative analysis of our results with the data from Vladimir Dal's Dictionary (Boduena-de-Kurtene, 1909) and the research of other scientists (Pankeev & Pankeeva, 2007) shows that in modern Russian the number of superstitious beliefs has begun to significantly prevail over the number of omens related to weather phenomenon. We tend to explain this difference by the fact that now, in the 21st century, people rely not on observations of nature when predicting certain weather events, but on the media, forecasts of forecasters. Meanwhile common superstitions and superstitious beliefs remain an important part of the linguistic culture, their frequency in the language does not decrease.

We measured the rate of participants' superstition asking them to choose their position on the scale from -2 (I do not believe in superstitions) to +2 (I am a very superstitious person). The results show that in China people think that they are superstitious (the median value of $Me=1$). Russian people note that they do not believe or believe only in very few (1-2) superstitions (the median value of $Me=0$). We can claim that Chinese are more superstitious than Russians.

The analysis of our research shows that in Russian and Chinese languages there are various linguistic means that can be used to express superstitious beliefs. Different parts of speech can transmit the lexical meaning and semantics of the sentences with superstitions: nouns related to the outside world (threshold, hatch, mirror, etc.); verbs that are related to everyday life; adjectives ("left" and "right" - for Russian; in Chinese, in addition to 左 (tszo) 'left' and 右 (iu) 'right' there are adjectives 黑色 (khei se) 'black' and 红色(khun se), 上 (shan) 'upper' and 下 (sia) 'lower'); numerals (numbers 13, 3 and 5 in Russian superstitions; 4, 6 and 8 in Chinese culture). Besides, Russian and Chinese linguistic cultures have the opposite attitude to even and odd numbers. Russian people prefer odd numbers (except for the number 13), and in China, on the contrary, they prefer even numbers); adverbs that act as the circumstances of time: *in the morning, in the evening*. Russian people also use adverbs that reflect the seasons of the year *in summer and in winter*, while Chinese use part of the day 上午 (shan u) '*in the morning*' and 下午 (sia u) '*in the afternoon*'. In addition, some Russian superstitions contain participles

(for example, *broken* in the phrases *broken mirror* and *broken dishes*). There is no such part of speech in Chinese.

When creating superstitions on the lexical and semantic level, both Russians and Chinese often replace one word with another, including a synonym or an antonym. Sometimes Russian superstitions are created on the basis of the phenomenon of homonymy, and Chinese superstitions – on the basis of a special phenomenon of the language – 谐音 (se in).

At the syntactic level, in both languages, superstitions can be expressed using consequence clauses and condition clauses using the conjunction *if* and *如果* (*zhu go*) in the meaning of "if" in Chinese. Both in Russian and in Chinese, the reference to generalized investigations is implemented by using nouns with generalized meaning. The phrases *good sign* and *bad sign* are also used. A specific consequence can be expressed using the preposition «to» with a word that has a specific meaning, as well as using verbs that indicate specific events (for example, *to trouble*; *will not marry*). Superstitions and omens in both languages can find their verbal expression in sentences containing bans, warnings, forecast, and advices.

All signs, both in Russian and in Chinese, somehow contain four components of the situation – who (the subject), the event (what does/ what happened), the time (when) and the place (where). They can be expressed using various linguistic means and are represented in the text of the saying both explicitly and implicitly.

7. Conclusion

Superstitions and omens are very popular in our everyday life. They are an integral part of culture. They reflect the national character of the people and their worldview. Superstitions have their own linguistic and cultural specifics (Sternin, 2011). Knowledge of superstitions and omens and the language means of expressing them help us to learn more about the traditions and culture of the country.

In the course of the study, the popular Russian and Chinese superstitions were examined, and for the first time a comparative linguistic analysis was given. The results show that there is a large number of omens and superstitions in both Russian and Chinese cultures. They help people to expand their language worldview. The result shows that, in general, Russian young people have a negative attitude to superstitions, while Chinese people have a positive attitude to them. In other words, Russians are less superstitious than Chinese.

The analysis of the material showed that popular omens and superstitions in Russian and Chinese languages do not coincide or partially coincide. Similarities and differences in superstitions are determined by the national traditions in Russian and Chinese cultures.

Further research can be continued on the material of other linguistic cultures. It is promising to compare the superstitions found in other languages, as well as to compare the superstitions and omens used by people from different social groups.

Acknowledgments

The study is supported by the research grant No18-00-00640 “Linguistic information processing under ambiguity: activation and competition of variants” from the Russian Foundation for Basic Research.

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