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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH, GERMAN AND OSSETIAN FORMULAS OF BLESSINGS AND CURSES

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Abstract

The paper presents some results of a comparative study of English, German and Ossetian stable formulas of blessings and curses performed based on modern approaches to the analysis of language units. The magic formulas of blessings and curses are known to have appeared in the early stages of linguoculture development. They reflect the most ancient archetypes of ethnic communities and represent a rather significant fragment of the corresponding concept spheres. The study focuses on two main aspects of the problem. The first aspect concerns structural features of magical formulas. The comparative analysis of the material showed that grammatically the formulas of blessings are not quite homogeneous, however, the mechanism of verbalization of blessings and curses typically implies an appeal to some supernatural force with a request to perform the desired actions, or to arrange so that these actions could be committed by some kind of intermediary, which can be either the addressee of the message or a third party. This is fundamentally important, since blessings and curses are directly related to the ideas of ethnic groups about good and evil, and boon and harm. The study determined the objects and means of positive or negative impact on the recipient's blessings. It is shown that blessings may concern almost any significant area of human life, and the associative series of blessings projections include the most diverse areas of the corresponding semiospheres. In this context, they can be considered one of the key factors to integrate the conceptual sphere of the community.

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1. Introduction

While studying the specificity of the national worldview, modern linguistics pay great attention to the study of phraseological units, proverbs, sayings and other types of linguistic expressions that are largely capable of preserving nationally marked cultural meanings and act as peculiar "knowledge formats" (Kubryakova, 2004; Boldyrev, 2006). These statements include stable formulas of blessings for good and evil, which reflect the most ancient archetypes of ethnic linguistic consciousness, cultural stereotypes, and moral and ethical norms and values. They constitute a rather significant fragment of the semiosphere of the linguocultural community. This fact determines the relevance of their research in line with modern cognitive linguistics, both in the context of activity and in terms of comparing several diverse systems of languages.

2. Problem Statement

Linguists, folklorists, and cultural researchers have repeatedly considered the important role that these statements perform in social interaction, and their ethnocultural and linguistic specifics. Linguistics traditionally treats various ways of formulation of blessings and curses in terms of the study of optative, which some researchers interpreted as either a grammatical category of desired modality, or as a functional semantic category represented by units of different levels of the language system (Cordy, 2009; Zorina, 2012). The considered optative statements perform an invocative-stimulating function in speech and exhibit an explicitly pragmatic orientation (Zhrebilo, 2016). In this regard, they were actively studied in the framework of the activity approach in linguistics, which is based on the ideas of J. Austin and J. Searle. In terms of the theory of speech acts, blessing was described in details as an independent speech act with illocutionary force distinct from representatives and directives (as cited in Gusarenko, 2005; Bach, 2006). Rannikh (1994) proposed to consider statements of blessings as a field with cliché blessings in its center and optatives in the periphery, which focus their content on a specific recipient at a certain point in time and non-standard forms of expression. The authors explore the communicative function of blessings and indicate their key role in interpersonal speech communication. Formanovskaya (2011) interprets them as a concept that underlies speech etiquette. Mekeko (2001) analyzes the specifics of the speech etiquette of the thematic group "Blessings" comparing their functioning in English and Russian languages. Another version of the comparative analysis performed on the material of the Kabardino-Circassian and Russian languages was the study by Kremshokalova (2012). She uses the concept of speech genres developed by M.M. Bakhtin and considers that "complex patterns of discursive space of the text, its situational local-temporal components are reflected in blessings and curses" (Kremshokalova, 2012, par. 4). Based on the aforesaid, it seems relevant to conduct a contrastive analysis of algorithms used to construct blessings and curses and their underlying association vectors using the material of several non-closely related languages. The novelty of the study is due to the fact that the Ossetian material has not yet been comprehensively and comparatively studied.

3. Research Questions

Firstly, we will try to find out whether curses and blessings are different in terms of a specific "mechanism", a procedure for translating the meaning inherent in the above formulas; secondly, we will reveal whether there are discrepancies between the languages in question; thirdly, we will identify the concept association vectors used in statements of this type.

4. Purpose of the Study

The study aims to reveal ethnospecific and universal features in the use of optatives with positive and negative semantics in the compared languages, and to identify the elements of different cultural codes used to verbalize blessings and curses that reflect the peculiarities of the national worldview.

5. Research Methods

To achieve these goals, the research employs methods of structural, semantic, contrastive, pragmatic and cognitive-discursive analysis.

6. Findings

It is well known that blessings and curses, along with other fideistical texts, are directly related to the phenomenon of unconventional perception of a sign, which is the main psychological and semiotic mechanism that creates the very possibility of using language in the so-called magic or spellcasting function. According to the researchers, this function can be considered as one of the options to implement a more general invoking and stimulating function of speech, which just assumes that the word is treated as a magic power (Mechkovskaya, 1998). Since all definitions of the concept of "magic" invariably indicate that magical practices always imply belief in supernatural forces and the ability of a person to control the world around him with the help of these forces, a magical action, in addition to other attributes, implies a verbal action; a spell is a request or requirement addressed to supernatural forces. In our opinion, this explains the specificity of algorithms used to verbalize curses and blessings, which will be considered in the analysis of practical material. The main part of the examples used in this study was collected by continuous sampling from authoritative lexicographic sources (Binovich, 1995; Guriev; 2013; Guriev. 2015; Dzabity, 2003; Kunin, 2011). The collected material contains a total of 278 British, 224 German and 968 Ossetian phraseological units. It should be noted that the number of curses in English (180) and German (145) languages predominantly exceeds the number of blessings, which completely agrees with the well-known idea of the prevalence of verbalizations of negative concepts. However, the Ossetian material shows an opposite pattern: the number of curse formulas (194) is quite comparable with that in English and German languages, while the number of blessings is several times higher than the number of curses. It is clear that these differences are not accidental, but they reflect the historical conditions of the life of these ethnic communities.

As a result of the catastrophic defeat of the Tatar-Mongols in the XIII century the Alans, ancestors of the Ossetians, largely lost their statehood and written language. In these circumstances, when no

documented public and private law (in contrast to the situation in England and Germany), curses and goodwill could function as a rather important hypostasis *Æзъдаг* the law, code of conduct, regulator of social and interpersonal relations orally passed down through the generations. The preservation of a large nominative number of magical formulas in the Ossetian language is now quite explicable. It is known that the use of the Ossetian language has reduced so much that the Ossetian language is attributed to the 2500 endangered languages of the world in the Atlas of Endangered Languages, published by UNESCO, (Moseley, 2010). In fact, the spheres of active functioning of the Ossetian language are reduced to two main types of social interaction. First, it is a purely domestic, interpersonal communication at a rather primitive level that take place in a minority of ethnically homogeneous families. Secondly, it is communication on a larger scale at public events related to specific Ossetian customs, such as weddings, holidays or funerals. In this case, during the rituals provided for by *Æзъдаг*, blessings are an indispensable attribute of speeches, which induces the Ossetians, who speak their native language, to show their natural eloquence within their language competencies. This causes this paradoxical discrepancy in the proportions of the nominative number of curses and blessings in the Ossetian language. As for the specific algorithm of verbalization of curses and blessings, ways of conveying a communicative meaning inherent in the considered formulas, and similar features and discrepancies between the studied languages, the analysis revealed the following patterns. First, the algorithm for implementation and manifestation of the content-intention of the considered formulas showed no noticeable differences between blessings and curses within the languages, and between the studied languages, which obviously allows us to relate the revealed algorithm of projecting the illocutionary force of blessings and curses to language universals. Our observations show that the procedure of verbalization of curses and blessings in all three languages implies in the overwhelming majority of cases the appeal to a certain supernatural force, expressed either in the form of a full-fledged imperative structure, or in a "truncated" elliptical form that can be illustrated through the curse "Ill luck to you!" At the same time, the opportunity, the right and the willingness of the addressee (supernatural or, possibly, natural, but controlled by supernatural power) to perform such actions are not questioned. The curses and blessings analyzed are formed by the following algorithms.

1. Appeal to supernatural power (often unnamed) to induce it to perform an action for the good or to the

detriment of the speaker himself. Damnations: *Strike me blind!*; *Gott strafe mich!* (Punish me god); *Додой мæ къона!* (Trouble in my house! (expression of regret, repentance)). Blessings: *Bless my soul!*; *Gott bewahre!*; *Фыдбылызæй мæ бахиз!* (Become a barrier between me and misfortune!).

2. Direct appeal to the second person that the actions of the addressee himself would bring benefit or harm. Curses: *Go to blazes!*; *Scher dich zum Teufel!*; *Уастырджийы зæрдæ макуы ссар!* (May you never find the heart of Uastyrdzhi, the heavenly patron of men and travelers!). Blessings: *Keep well!*; *Na guten Appetit!*, *Дзул æмæ мыд куыд фидауыны, ахæм цард фæкæнут!* (I bless you (newlyweds) get along as bread and honey do! – the Ossetians believe that these products match well).

3. Appeal to a higher force in order to induce it to allow, to command or arrange so that a third person or other (including supernatural) force performs an action for the good or to the detriment of the second or third person. Curses: *Bad scan to him!*; *Hol dich der Teufel* (Damn you!); *Сæйæд æмæ йын хос ма уæд!* (Let him be seriously ill, when he will have no medicine!). Blessings: *May heavens bless him!*;

Alles Gute!; *Уазæг макуы аздаæхæд дæ хæдзары къæсæрæй!* (Let the guest never turn away from the threshold of your house! – For Ossetians, the guest is a messenger of God, a sign that God favors you, which makes the guest an almost sacred person).

4. Appeal to the second person to prompt him to perform (or arrange so that the action is performed) for the benefit or harm of a third party. Curses: Damn him!; *Geh mir aus den Augen* (Get out of my sight!); *Хæйрæджыты амæттаг фæуæд!* (Let him be in the power of devils!). Blessings: May his shadow never grow less!; *Dein Wort in Gottes Ohr!* (Your words in God's ears); *Фыдбылызæй фæдзæхст фæуæнт!* (Let, by agreement with the higher forces, they will be rid of evil! – the word *фыдбылыз* syncretically denotes evil in any form).

Thus, the algorithms for verbalization of curses and blessings show the deepest archetypes, which largely determine the specificity of the ethnos mentality. They are of scientific interest as a valid material to highlight the value system of linguocultures, because the concepts externalized through these language units involve both valuable concepts and those subject to condemnation. With this regard, we found it important to compare the vectors of association of good and evil in English, German and Ossetian phraseological units. Our approach to the analysis of the characteristics of the association of various incarnations of good and evil in these linguocultural communities is to define which cultural code nominations are reflected in the considered magic formulas. This maximally generalized technique has been successfully verified, and it focuses on the basic conceptualization algorithm of concepts (Dzutseva, 2017).

It should be clarified that in the analysis we did not distinguish between curses and blessings since, according to our observations, the same cultural codes could be involved in both types of magic formulas. In addition, there are numerous cases when a blessing formula conveyed the meaning of a curse and vice versa. Thus, the English formula *The best of British luck to you!* means a wish for failure, which cardinally contradicts the semantics of the surface structure of the text given. Our material contains a wide variety of blessings for good or evil conveyed through the following cultural codes.

1. Anthropomorphic code is most frequently used in health-related wishes, and it is realized through a) medical subcode: *A plague on it!*; *Dass du die Kranke kriegst!*; *Тар низæй фæсæй!*; b) somatic subcode: *Damn your eyes!*; *May you stand strong on your feet!*; *Hals und Bein bruch* (Break your leg and neck is a wish based on the opposition between what is being said and what is meant); *Йемынæ дæ гуыбыны!* (Cholera in your stomach); c) existential subcode: *Long live ...!*; *Leben Sie so wohl als auch!* (Both live the same way as before is a wish to live as well as they live now); *Дæ кæстæртæ цæринаг уæнт!*; d) social-status subcode (the considered formulas employ professional and other terms indicating a person's position in society: *Doctor! Cure thyself!*; *Der Henker hole!* (Let a headsman take you is a wish for a speedy death); *Лæг æгуыстæй нæ фидауы, æмæ куыстæй амондджын у!* (A person should not be unemployed, and may you be happy with your work)

2. Mythological code is actively used in the studied statements containing a request addressed to a higher power, to protect a certain person or, on the contrary, to punish him: *God forbid!*; *Gott bewahre!*; *Æфсатийы фæсæй хайджын у!* (Let Æfsati (the patron saint of livestock) bestow you!)

3. Spacial-temporal code is represented in the considered clichés: *Curse the day he was born!*; *Guten Rutch ins Neue Jahr!* (Happy New Year); *Сæдæ азы сæрты ахиз!* (Live longer than one hundred years).

4. Natural code is quite often found in the considered statements: *Wish you at the bottom of the sea!*; *Da soll doch gleiche in heiliges Donnerwetter hinterdrein fahren!* (*Let a holy hurricane follow you* – The word hurricane was not chosen by chance as the thunderstorm is considered one of the most terrible cataclysms for the ancient man; *Зæй дæ фæлласæд!* One of the subcodes of the natural culture code is the geographical subcode, which is most clearly represented in toponyms: *Wish you at Jericho!*; *leben wie Gott in Frankreich* (live like God in France); *Нæ уарзон Ирыстон фæрнæйдзаг уæд!* (May our beloved Iriston be full of happiness).

5. Zoomorphic code is used in the following statements: *May you match like a dog and a cat!*; *hol's der Geier* (*Let a vulture take him* shows a wish for death to another person as vultures eat carrion); *Дæ фырт арсæй домбайдæр цы суа, ахæм амонд дæ уæд!* (May your son be stronger than a lion/bear).

The presented material does not cover all the variety of codes and subcodes of the culture of the languages studied, from which well-wishers and those who curse get their associations. However, it is enough to demonstrate the potential of blessings and curses. The analysis showed that the structural formulas of blessings can be quite diverse, but the fundamental principle of verbalization of blessings and curses is quite stereotypical. As a rule, it provides an appeal to supernatural power represented by God or other mythological characters that have unlimited power over people and natural forces. This power, according to the speaker, is able to perform the desired actions or makes the addressee or the third person mentioned in the statement perform them. The fact that there are no significant differences in the construction of the formulas in all the studied languages indicates the universal nature of the wish fulfillment algorithm. The formulas of curses in terms of the degree of motivation of their content show that magic formulas of the English and German linguocultural communities have lost their magical illocutive power and now they are only formally connected with the sacred spheres of human existence. These speech acts show a tendency to turn into purely interjection speech acts.

This particularly concerns English and German curses since they are more concise and emotionally charged. At the same time, Ossetians believe that curses not only retain the emotional charge, but also affect the listener as neuro-linguistic programming. To date, Ossetians are still afraid of curses and regard them as a psychological (and even energetic) attack that could seriously harm the cursed. In this context, a frequently used expression *Ма мæ фелгъутæд!* that means *I wish he/she had not cursed me!* is quite representative. It should be noted that belief in the mystical power of blessings, even among Ossetians, is much weaker today. In the foreseeable future, it is likely that the overwhelming majority of existing curses will function exclusively as interjectional formulas, the purpose of which is to discharge negative energy irrespective of the semantics of the surface structure. This tendency can be observed for blessings, but the process of “erasing” and “weathering” of the original meaning is much slower.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of the collected English, German, and Ossetian curses and blessings has shown that in most cases they are based on the following communicative models: a) appeal to supernatural power, which can be associated with God or some nameless but powerful forces in order to induce its action for the benefit or detriment of both the speaker and the third person to give vent to emotions; b) appeal directly to the second person so that the deeds of the addressee bring harm or benefit to him; c) appeal to the second

person, who must act as an agent of deeds that bring harm or benefit to the third person. These communicative models of verbalization of curses and blessings are found to involve all aspects of real and unreal, which are reflected in the language through various cultural codes. These codes frame the perception of reality and define certain vectors of associations through which the speaker can realize his communicative intention. The study showed that blessings and curses are most clearly represented by the anthropomorphic code. Its implementation involves medical, somatic, existential, and social-status subcodes, which are used to express blessings regarding good or bad health and even life of the addressee. The use of the components of the mythological code results in a direct association with supernatural powers that are expressed in the blessing. According to the addressee, these codes are able to affect everything that happens to the person. Spatial and temporal codes form the coordinate system in which the person exists, and natural and zoomorphic codes establish a connection between the person and the outside world. Semantic projections of the curses in all three languages include such negative phenomena as: the most dangerous, deadly diseases; the impact of the supernatural (hostile) world on the people cursed; harm caused by forces of nature and adverse weather conditions. When formulating blessings, the semantic vectors of the projections employ similar cultural codes, but they involve positive phenomena that are useful and highly desirable for each person.

Thus, blessings and curses are directly related to the system of spiritual values of the ethnic community and may concern almost all spheres of human life, and the associative flow of projections of blessings include various fields of the conceptsphere of the ethnic community. The analysis of the algorithm for realization of communicative intent in the considered formulas did not reveal significant differences either between good blessings and curses within languages, or between the studied languages, which, in our opinion, indicates its universality.

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