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FORTUNE-TELLING IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE AS AN OBJECT IN TEACHING RUSSIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The paper shows the prospects of using descriptions of folk divination in Russian fiction for the purposes of teaching Russian as a foreign language. Divination episodes contain important linguistic and cultural data, which often leads to a more profound insight into the message of a literary text and better comprehension of the author's individual style. The purpose of this paper is to show that divinations described in Russian literature can constitute a valuable source of linguistic and cultural information for the purposes of teaching Russian as a foreign language. Engaging with literary texts in language teaching proves very productive as it allows students to become better acquainted with the writer's individual style. Fortune-telling in Russian traditional culture is a ritual aimed at interacting with otherworldly forces in order to obtain information about the future. Under these conditions, cultural characteristics constitute a particular problem, within the framework of which national fortune-telling in general and the conditions for understanding texts in which their descriptions are contained are comprehended. Such, in particular, are space, time, place of fortune-telling, its attributes, etc. Profound analysis of traditional fortune-telling in the texts of Russian classical literature opens new avenues for mastering various aspects of learning Russian as a foreign language. Most important is the focus on linguistic and cultural dimensions, within which fortune-telling texts provide an effective incentive for understanding Russian traditional culture.

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Keywords: Fortune-telling, divinations, Russian literature, didactics, Russian as a foreign language.



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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to show that divinations described in Russian literature can constitute a valuable source of linguistic and cultural information for the purposes of teaching Russian as a foreign language. Moreover, discussing cultural contexts of fortune-telling ensures a profound understanding of a literary text and its specific imagery. Finally, engaging with literary texts in language teaching proves very productive as it allows students to become better acquainted with the writer's individual style. In particular, fortune-telling described in the works of V.A. Zhukovsky (*Svetlana*), A.S. Pushkin (*Eugene Onegin*), N.V. Gogol (*The Night Before Christmas*), and L.N. Tolstoy (*War and Peace*) come useful for advanced-level students in their developing a deeper understanding of these texts.

Fortune-telling in Russian traditional culture is a ritual aimed at interacting with otherworldly forces in order to obtain information about the future (Book of oracles. Prophecies of Pythias and Sybils, 2002). In North Russian fortune-telling, there were special enchanting formulas in which a person directly turned to the personifications of such evil forces with a request for help. Cf. : “*Fiends an demons, imps and devils, come here to tell fortunes!*” or “*Forest goblins, swamp imps, and nasty sprites – all devils come here, tell me: what is my destiny?*” (Vinogradova, 1995, p. 127). For the mention of evil spirits, fortune-telling was condemned by the Orthodox Church and was considered unclean and sinful. However, they were extremely widespread among common people; they are still popular today.

2. Problem Statement

In this context, a specific issue is the cultural framework for apprehending fortune-telling practices and the conditions for understanding the texts containing descriptions of such practices – space, time, place, attributes of fortune-telling, etc. These circumstances provide insight into the essence of fortune-telling as a universal phenomenon of human culture and into the cognitive conditions under which fortune-telling developed. More generally, popular fortune-telling sheds light on the more general problem of synchronistic coincidences, since they constitute a typological variation of this phenomenon (Berestnev & Boyko, 2019). Thus, addressing the problem of folk fortune-telling actually opens an avenue to a broader field of research of synchronistic coincidences in objective reality, which is a research area of interdisciplinary significance.

3. Research Questions

The solution to the stated problem involves finding answers to several important questions, which, on the one hand, stimulate clarification of the nature of folk fortune-telling, and on the other, define the course of work on this phenomenon in the context of teaching Russian as a foreign language. What cultural meaning is contained in the descriptions of folk fortune-telling in Russian literary texts? What are the cultural conditions in which folk divination took place? What is the cultural potential of phraseological units for understanding Russian culture in the course of studying Russian as a foreign language?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to show that divinations described in Russian literature can constitute a valuable source of linguistic and cultural information for the purposes of teaching Russian as a foreign language. Moreover, discussing cultural contexts of fortune-telling ensures a profound understanding of a literary text and its specific imagery. Finally, engaging with literary texts in language teaching proves very productive as it allows students to become better acquainted with the writer's individual style. In particular, fortune-telling described in the works of V.A. Zhukovsky (Svetlana), A.S. Pushkin (Eugene Onegin), N.V. Gogol (The Night Before Christmas), and L.N. Tolstoy (War and Peace) come useful for advanced-level students in their developing a deeper understanding of these texts.

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 distinguish, among the general conditions of folk fortune-telling, the cultural circumstances relevant to their implementation. The method of semiotic analysis is used to identify the significance of certain cultural circumstances in which folk divination is carried out. Etymological analysis is employed to restore the form and meaning of obsolete words used in spellcasting incantations that accompanied the fortune-telling process. The method of cultural reconstruction allows you to recreate in more detail the cultural contexts in which fortunetelling was practiced.

6. Findings

Descriptions of fortune-telling provide a plethora of information regarding cultural traditions in Russia and contexts in which such divinations were performed.

6.1. Place of divination

Usually, “unclean” places would be chosen for divination, where fortune-telling supposedly should work best. They include non-residential premises – a bathhouse, a barn, a cellar, an attic, a canopy, or a cemetery – any site in the periphery of a cultural space. Divination is also associated with cultural objects semiotically representing the border between “that” and “this” worlds – such as the stove, threshold, corner of the house, fence, gate, crossroads, boundaries, places near the water, ice holes, wells, etc. (Vinogradova 1995, p. 128). In this cultural context, for example, “going out of the gate” meant moving to another, more effective space for fortune-telling. So, in the following excerpt, the place of divination is the bathhouse – a supposedly unclean and dangerous place after sunset. Cf.:

Taking her nurse's fond advice,

For fortune-telling they prepare

And in the bathhouse, in a trice

A table's readied for the pair (...)

(A.Pushkin. Eugene Onegin. Tr. by A. S. Kline)

The danger of fortune-telling in the bath is enhanced by the image of the *bannik* living in it. *Bannik* is a mythical male creature with long hair, covered with dirt and leaves from a *venik* (a fragrant bundle of leafy birch or oak tree twigs to pump the steam in the bath). Sometimes presented as a dog, cat, or white hare, *bannik* harms those who come to the bathhouse after sunset: it scares or even strangles them; however, it can also protect them from other demonic creatures (Budovskaya, 1995).

6.2. Time of fortune-telling

Most fortune-telling was timed to Svyatky¹. This period was believed to have the strongest connection with the “other world”; however, divinations could be also performed on St. George's Day, Easter, Trinity, or on the Ivan Kupala day. The best time of day for fortune-telling was from dusk to dawn – in the evening, at midnight, or in the early morning. Cf.:

Настали святки. То-то радость!

Гадает ветреная младость,

Которой ничего не жаль...

(А.С. Пушкин. Евгений Онегин).

Christmas comes, joys unfold,

The fortunes of the young are told;

For careless youth's without regret.

(A.Pushkin. Eugene Onegin. Tr. by A. S. Kline)².

In the first example, the fortune-telling time is indicated by the initial phrase “Svyatky comes”. Winter Svyatky in Russia (December 25 - January 6) is a festival of pagan origins, during which a series of magical rituals were performed, whose purpose was to increase future harvest, fertility, and family well-being. Therefore, Svyatky was the time to find out about future spouses (especially for girls). It was a noisy and cheerful time, especially for the youth who had the most fun (Lotman, 1983).

The second example concerns an important holiday for Orthodox Christians – the Baptism of the Lord, or Epiphany (celebrated on January 19). The eve of this holiday was considered especially sacred: on Epiphany eve both the blessing of the water and fortune-telling took place.

¹ The Russian analogue of the festival season called Christmastide, or Yuletide – *translator's note*.

² Cf.: Now is the eve of Saint Silvester;

Maiden till morn is forbidden to rest her.

(J.C.Mandel. The Eve of Saint Silvester . After Svetlana by V.A. Zhukovsky).

Exclusively for the purposes of this study: In unlocalized versions, the words “Christmas” and “Saint Silvester eve ” should be replaced with “Svyatky” and “Christmas eve” respectively to avoid confusion with the days of traditional fortune-telling – translator's note.

Another version:

Svyatky comes, joys unfold,

The fortunes of the young are told;

For careless youth's without regret... (A.Pushkin. Eugene Onegin)

Cf.: Now is the eve of Svyatky; Maiden till morn is forbidden to rest her (Svetlana by V.A. Zhukovsky).

6.3. The purpose of fortune-telling

Almost all fortune-telling was associated with obtaining answers to the most important questions concerning life, health, and death of a person and his/her family members; a large group of rituals concerns fortune-telling related to marriage (as a rule, mostly girls engaged in marriage-predicting rituals).

6.4. Methods of divination.

In the Russian cultural tradition, methods of divination are very diverse, but they all come down to the fact that in a fortune-telling act a person receives more or less realistic signs of future events, to be yet decoded (see Vinogradova, 1995). For example, they used to learn about their future by eavesdropping conversations; the name of the first man a girl met was to become the name of her future groom. Here is how Tatyana Larina is trying to learn about her future husband in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Cf.:

*Чу... снег хрустит... прохожий; дева
К нему на цыпочках летит
И голосок ее звучит
Нежней свирельного напева:
Как ваше имя? Смотрит он
И отвечает: Агафон
(А.С. Пушкин. Евгений Онегин).*

The crunch of snow... someone goes by;
She rushes to him, on tiptoe,
Her voice tender, sweet and low,
Like a reed-pipe, pure, her sigh:
'What is your name?' He moves on,
His rustic answer: 'Agafon'.
(A. Pushkin. *Eugene Onegin*. Tr. by A. S. Kline)

According to Lotman (1983), this excerpt from *Eugene Onegin* shows Pushkin's ironic attitude to fortune-telling. The ironic effect is created by the incongruity of the romantic imagery of the beginning of this scene and the male name typical for a commoner, which is incompatible with Tatyana's expectations and her social status.

There were special rituals of fortune-telling – melted wax was poured into a bowl of water, and the shape it took was used to judge the future; mirrors were placed against each other in an attempt to see the future in them; different objects (a shoe or a sickle) were thrown back over the head to see how they fell and thus foretell the future. Cf.:

*Раз в крещенский вечерок
Девушки гадали:
За ворота баимачок,
Сняв с ноги, бросали*

(*B.A. Жуковский. Светлана*).

Now is the eve of Saint Silvester;
Maiden till morn is forbidden to rest her.
Woe to the sceptic! Woe to the scorner!
She will be punished by magical spell.
Slippers must now be flung in the corner
Ladels and spoons thrown into the well.

(J.C.Mandel. *The Eve of Saint Silvester*. After *Svetlana* by V.A. Zhukovsky)³.

V.A. Zhukovsky's ballad *Svetlana* contains the description of once the most common method of fortune-telling in Russia, the one with a shoe or a felt boot. Going out of the gate (beyond the borders of her own cultural space), a girl took off her felt boot from her left foot and threw it back over her head. Where the toe of the boot pointed, her future husband was believed to live.

6.5. Language nominations in fortune-telling

In his poem *Svetlana* V.A. Zhukovsky describes a specific girls' fortune-telling ritual of snow-tossing: it was called "sneg pololy". This nomination refers to the custom of tossing snow with rings placed in it. A piece of canvas, a girl's skirt or any container was used for the ceremony; the girl whose ring dropped out first was the first to marry. This action was called "polot' sneg", "polot' kolechko" (to toss snow", to toss a ring"). The Russian word "polot'" is the derivative of "palat'" – "to toss". In the Russian North, the girls performing this action would be chanting, with their eyes closed: "Polyu, poluy (1st person singular, present tense of "polot'") white snow on a dog's footprint. Where the dog starts barking, my husband-to be lives there" (Vinogradova, 1995, p. 129).

7. Conclusion

Thus, profound analysis of traditional fortune-telling in the texts of Russian classical literature opens new avenues for mastering various aspects of learning Russian as a foreign language. Most important is the focus on linguistic and cultural dimensions, within which fortune-telling texts provide an effective incentive for understanding Russian traditional culture. Besides, it is a way to comprehend the author's individual style and his/her affinity for Russian folk culture.

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³ Exclusively for the purposes of this study: In an unlocalized version, "the eve of Saint Silvester" should be replaced with "Christmas eve", as the original has it. It will allow the reader to avoid confusion with days of traditional fortune-telling. – *translator's note*.

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