

# HOW DO UDMURTS ADDRESS THEIR GOD(S)?

## OBSERVATION ABOUT THE LANGUAGE OF TRADITIONAL PRAYERS-INCANTATIONS

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**Abstract.** This article relies on a long-term fieldwork experience: Eva Toulouze has attended Udmurt animistic ceremonies in Bashkortostan over a period of ten years and has collected there the uttered prayers. These prayers are the corpus upon which our linguistic reflections are articulated. The language of the prayers represents a particular register of the Udmurt language. They are deeply dialectal, and while today they are mostly transmitted through writing and the magic aspect is less emphasised, they belong to the oral tradition of incantations. In this article, we comment upon some of the peculiarities of these prayers. We explore the multiplicity of ways that the Udmurts formulate their requests to the deities: the different use of verbs

and especially the sophisticated syntactical constructions. We are also interested by analysing the peculiar use of possessive markers, revealing that in the Udmurt worldview, the deity to which these prayers are addressed is all-encompassing: the happiness that the Udmurt ask for is the deity's happiness, as is the rain and the insects against which they ask protection. It is the first time that these phenomena have drawn scientific attention and have been commented on.

**Key words:** Udmurt religion, prayers, addresses to deities, possessive markers, expression of requests

## INTRODUCTION

This article is centred on verbal ways of addressing Udmurt traditional deities in their contemporary prayers within their traditional practice. It is a rare treat: Udmurt ethnic prayers are very much alive but have scarcely been investigated so far. They have been commented on from the musicological point of view, but not really from the linguistic. The ways the Udmurt formulate their requests reveal a lot about their understanding of the world, which is the same world in which we live, within a globalised space and with high technology. The verbs they chose, the very formulas they use to ask favours, the way they assign possession of wealth and harm reveal an original way of understanding man's relations with deities that is not commented on so far even in linguists' translations.

The Udmurt are a community living in central Russia, east of the Volga and west of the Urals. Their core territory lies in a complex region where different ethnic groups have coexisted for centuries: communities speaking Finno-Ugric languages and initially practicing animist cults, generally evangelised after 1552; Turkic language speaking communities, mainly Muslim, that were at the head of an Empire before its collapse in 1552; and the dominant ethnic group today, the Russians, who are Orthodox and who gradually settled over the last millennium. This conglomerate of different languages and cultures is composed of groups whose ethnicity has been consolidated in the last centuries. While state-building nations such as

the Tatars and Russians have a rooted awareness of their ethnic identity, other groups are more fluid. Among the Finno-Ugric communities, the Mari and the Mordvinians, as well as the northernmost Komi, are divided along language lines: depending on the dialect, different written languages have been created which have their own peculiarities<sup>1</sup>. The Udmurt are the only group to have developed a single identity, relying on the fact that their dialects are in general intercomprehensible, in spite of clear differences especially in the lexical field: both versions, Northern with Russian loanwords and Southern with Tatar loanwords, have been integrated into the literary language (for example apple – *jablok / ulmo*; cucumber – *ogrech / kiyar*; street – *ul'cha / uram*, etc.). These cultural evolutions have been possible because of the early policies of the Soviet State, which fixed ethnicities and assigned territories to the most relevant.

Although the majority of the Udmurt has been converted, and forcefully so, to Orthodox Christianity mainly during the 18th century (Luppov 1999 [1899], Kappeler 1982, Zahidullin 1997), the traditional Udmurt religion did not totally disappear. On the one hand, depending on the actual pressure of the new religion, the older practice in many places merged with the newest and led to syncretism that still exists; on the other hand, some villages, unwilling to live in the new imposed conditions, migrated to more tolerant regions. In the core Udmurt regions, encompassed today within the Udmurt Republic, there are very few villages in which the traditional religious practice still dominates. The most remarkable is the village of Kuzebayevo (Alnashi district), where the population has been Christianised only recently and which pursues their traditional practice, with collective ceremonies along clan lines (the population is divided into three clans who each have their collective ceremonies, in which all participate). Not far from this village, another village is very well known for its dedication to ancestral ceremonies. Varkled-Bodya is situated in Tatarstan (Aгрыз district) and the population itself acknowledges that they have been spared by a Tatar elite that has allowed them to follow their uses without impediment. The inhabitants of this village are aware that their

ancestors migrated from the Udmurt core territory in search of an undisturbed place.

The regions where they sought sanctuary, often by whole villages, were situated to the east and were inhabited by Muslims, even further than today's Tatarstan. They generally settled beyond the River Kama, renting and finally buying land (Makarov 1915, Nikitina 2016, Toulouze and Anisimov 2020). In the new conditions they continued their own religious practice, doing so through history to the present day. This means that today there is a widespread practice of traditional ceremonies that are naturally accompanied by addresses to the deities.

## THE UDMURT CEREMONIES

We have information about Udmurt traditional ceremonies thanks to elder scholars – linguists, folklorists, ethnographers, explorers – both from Russia and beyond, mainly from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Finnish and Hungarian scholars (the first of which were in fact encompassed within the Russian Empire) had their own particular reasons to investigate these communities as language kinship led them to seek the origin of their language, and thus of their identity through their easternmost language kin (Sadikov, Hafeez 2010, 2015). As they were looking to ancestral language roots, they collected the most archaic samples available, i.e. folklore or ritual texts known for their archaisms.

Thus, we are well informed about Udmurt religious practice before the revolution, for we have descriptions and even photographs of huge “pagan” ceremonies. However, the 1917 revolution put an end to this flow of scholarly information. Russia became a closed area, and no foreign scholar was allowed within. Moreover, religion became if not exactly prohibited, then a suspicious matter and religious practice became dangerous, which led to a discontinuation of the massive religious ceremonies as at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

During the Soviet period religious ceremonies partly faded away, but not entirely. Instead they were sustained by the elder generation,

while younger age groups were fully submitted to atheist campaigns and to the ideological weight of Soviet institutions. In the zones not touched by Orthodoxy, the practice continued, with phenomena of adaptation to a less favourable environment. Some ceremonies were renounced. Others were maintained, especially in places where the sacrificial priests were strong personalities. Since 1988, a revitalisation movement has occurred in the eastern zones, beyond the Kama, where the traditions were still very much alive, and today practically all villages have their ceremonies. Some of them were never discontinued, others stopped for some years or some decades. However, today, each village has its ceremony.

What is an Udmurt ceremony? It is a gathering of the village population to pray. The aim of the ceremony is to guarantee the well-being of the village community. These are the ideas developed in the verbal part of the ritual, the prayer, *kuris'kon*, addressed to the deity/deities. Why have we included in the title an alternative plural? It is well known that animistic agrarian religions are not monotheistic. They have a pantheon, to which we must add an infinity of different powerful beings, spirits that permeate the natural environment. This is a general statement, and indeed it corresponds to recent research in folkloristics (i.e. Vladykina 2021); earlier records of Udmurt prayers well reflect this plurality (Pervukhin 1888 III: 9, 10, 13, 15 etc.). However, the Udmurt are surrounded by monotheistic religions, both Christianity and Islam, and these have influenced their way of thinking. Thus, in the addresses we call prayers/incantations, the main addressee is Inmar-Kylchin. This phrase has two elements, and both are theonyms: Inmar is the supreme god, god of the highest spheres, and is also, translated into Udmurt, the name of the Christian god. Kylchin is more complicated to analyse. Clearly, it is a contracted form of another god's name, Kyldys'in, who in Udmurt mythology was particularly close to humans. At the same time, this word is the same that is used, mainly in a Christian context, for angel. When reading these texts, we have the feeling that they are generally addressed to one person: the address uses the second person singular, *ton* in Udmurt, and only very seldom *ti*, the plural form. So we have the impression that

*kylchin* is like an avatar of Inmar. We shall not decide here whether two gods are addressed or only one, which explains the alternative in the title. Let us only mention that in older prayers, such as those collected by Perhukhin and published in 1888 (Pervukhin 1888 III), in some places the addresses are limited to two deities clearly named: Inmar and Kyldys'in (Pervukhin III: 4, 7).

The village priest(s) is/are in charge of it, along with a team of assistants who take care of all the practical and spiritual aspects of the ceremony: having a sacrificial animal, fetching wood and water to boil the meat and the porridge, utter the prayer(s), offering the porridge to the gathered villagers and bringing it back to those who did not make it to the ceremony (see Toulouze, Niglas 2014). In places where ceremonies have never been discontinued, the ritual is more complex than in places where it has been revitalised recently.

The research team led by Eva Toulouze (including local Udmurt colleagues, Udmurts from Udmurtia, Estonians) has been investigating this religious practice for several years, and one of the project's goals is to study in depth the magic words of the Udmurt ceremonies and to publicise them. We started working in this area in 2013, with the agreement of the local community leaders. Our practice is the following: we first meet the sacrificial priest(s) to explain the aim of our presence and obtain their agreement to our being there and filming. This agreement has never been refused, on the contrary, the sacrificial priests have welcomed our initiative and we have always been met with friendly regard. When we were able to edit our material, we have shown the rushes to the sacrificial priests and recorded their reactions.

We must point out that Liivo Niglas's way of filming thoroughly differs from what our partners are accustomed to. They know how television journalists work. In the field, the journalists are the bosses and give instructions on what to do and what to repeat. As a visual anthropologist, Liivo has totally different principles: he never interferes with the ceremonies, never stages anything and only records what happens without disturbing the ordinary proceedings with his presence. His non-disruptive behaviour is certainly one of the reasons why we have been so well accepted in all villages (Toulouze, Niglas 2019, 2020).

After some years, in which we have gathered materials from different ceremonies, we made a first choice of ceremonies in order to have the material edited and presented to the local communities and to the general public. The corpus we rely on is composed of 111 prayers collected from 1770 to 2020 in the Eastern Udmurt regions. The main problem was for Liivo, who does not speak Udmurt, to have precise information about the spoken words, in order to make editing choices. He did this in cooperation with local Udmurt scholar Ranus Sadikov. This led to the achievement of four films, reflecting a whole cycle of ceremonies and focusing on the same characters, the team from Malaya Balzyuga, led by young sacrificial priest Fridman Kabipyanov (Niglas 2019).

## THE TEXTS

We noticed that the sacrificial priests were eager to have texts to rely on. This gave us the idea of gathering the texts that we have collected. The situation with the texts is the following

Traditionally, the magic strength of the text was thoroughly connected with the way of transmitting it. The apprentice sacrificial priest had to attend ceremonies and to listen to the addresses to the deities, until the text was engraved in his memory in a process that was called ‘stealing a prayer’. The informants were very clear, the text should not be learnt, it had to remain by itself in the head of the praying priest: ‘the text of the sacrifice must not be learnt, only stolen. For him to learn [a priest] took with him a child. The latter, putting it in his ear, learnt. One must not just learn’ (Sadikov 2019: 242)<sup>2</sup>. However, this transmission method no longer functions. In the Soviet period, the younger boys could not attend ceremonies, the day of which, Friday, was a working or school day. The opportunities of acquiring a prayer were thus limited. So when the time came, at the end of the 1980s, when State policy ceased to be hostile to religious ceremonies, the elder sacrificial priests published their prayers and the transmission format became written. And so it is now.

We do not think the difference is so significant. While the instrument for learning has indeed changed, the learning is nevertheless happening. The younger sacrificial priests rely on written text during ceremonies to feel comfortable. However, reading is but a different way to memorise the text. After some time, they become familiar with the text, with its stylistic peculiarities, and they become more and more independent from the paper. And when they achieve this, they may start to improvise, to change the order of the formulas, and even to add new items.

However, while usually in village ceremonies the priests have managed to have a text to recite, they may face difficulties on particular occasions. We have seen Aribashevo priest Aleksey Garayev using a collection of prayers made in Udmurtia in order to pray at a housewarming ceremony. We were saddened by this use of prayers that originate in a totally different region. In addition, Kizganbashevo priest Timerhan Apsalikov showed us the same book (Vladykin, Vinogradov 2011) and acknowledged that he used it in particular cases. These examples convinced us that a collection of local prayers would be welcomed by the sacrificial priests, and so we endeavour to make it.

What is the nature of these texts? There are ongoing discussions among scholars of different disciplines. Ethnographers from Bashkiria call them ‘prayers’, in Russian *molitva*, while folklorists from Udmurtia see them as incantations *zaklinaniye*. In this discussion, we’ll point out arguments in favour of both positions. What supports the interpretation of the verbal dimension of ceremonies as incantation is the presence of magic that is implied by the requirement to ‘steal’ the text. While the satisfaction of the people’s requests is indeed a prerogative of the deities, but in order to call their attention on the addressee more than ordinary words are required. We have no doubt that the original perception of *kuris’kon* by the Eastern Udmurt was one of a magic text. In favour of the other thesis, that they are just prayers, is the fact that this interpretation corresponds to the understanding of local people. At the same time, the word used for it in Russian, *molitva*, may well be felt by people who live in a Russian environment (such as in Udmurtia, unlike



Bashkiria) to refer to Christian prayers and so be unfit to express the realities of Udmurt 'pagan' prayers.

We may add a remark about another possible evolution, which may explain subtle changes in perceptions and approaches: although magic has not disappeared at all from the Udmurt rural landscape, we may suppose that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, magic thinking is not unchallenged in the Udmurt worldview. What were certainly, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even later on until the middle of that century, magic words and closer to the genre of incantation, may have been evolving. Today they may be felt exclusively to be a genre closer to prayer, as in other religions, Orthodoxy or Islam, where the magic dimension has been overthrown by mere address to the deity. This comment is an element of debate in the ongoing friendly discussion between the authors, who have publicly used the term incantation, and Ranus Sadikov, who insists on their being merely prayers (Sadikov 2011, Sadikov, Toulouze 2019). We suppose that the reason for this difference in interpretation may be explained by these thoughts.

We mentioned that in improvising, sacrificial priests may add some items. This last aspect has triggered some discussions among the priests themselves. The need to include new requests and new concerns has long been felt. In a conversation with Evgeniy Adullin, one of the most important sacrificial priests of Tatyshly district, and with the organiser of his collective ceremonies, Farhulla Garifanov, this concern emerged (FWM 2015), i.e. are they allowed to add something to the prayer text? They even asked Eva, who was participating to their conversation, and who, of course, did not interfere.

Actually, this genre has been sensitive to change in the general context and has reflected them all along: older texts asked the deities to help pay taxes to the tsar, or requested success for their kolkhoz. Of course, we have no idea how these changes were made and with what procedure: probably when the time did not allow the previous text to be convincingly uttered. But as during the soviet times these questions were not investigated, we have no clue.

They solved the question four years later when the sacrificial priests of their group of villages met and updated the text of their

prayer, including excerpts from another priest, Anatoliy Galikhanov's, prayer. Galikhanov, the most prestigious of the new generation of priests, also started by reading his text. But now he composes newer and newer texts, and he is quite bold in his innovations. While usually the people are aware only of their own tradition, and do not know what their neighbours do, new conditions have shattered their isolation. For example, in 2008, the general ceremony of the Eastern Udmurt, *Elen vös'*, which had been forgotten since the 1920s except in the three villages where it rotated, was successfully revitalised. Once a year, the active sacrificial priests meet and pray together in Kirga (Kuyeda district, Perm kray), Staryy Varyash (Yanaul district, Bashkortostan) and Altayevo (Burayevo district, Bashkortostan). There, each of the sacrificial priests (one per district) utters his prayer so that everybody hears it. So the Tatyshly priest have had the opportunity to hear Galikhanov's text and its innovations. Generally, in a collective ceremony, at least in Tatyshly district, all the priests utter their prayers together, so that the texts are not easily identified or even heard, except when the leading priest interrupts the text to utter *Omin*, the equivalent of 'Amen', and everyone says the word and bows. We have seen the same system as in *Elen vös'* at Bol'shekachakovo's *Badzh'yn vös'*, where representatives of four villages gather (Toulouze, Vallikivi 2021).

In Asavka village, the sacrificial priest Vladimir Galiev, who has also inherited his prayer through paper, was disturbed that it presented a great deal of requests, without insisting on thanks. He proposed some changes to his village's elder, who accepted them.

Another event that shattered the isolation was the publishing of our recordings in 2019. We had for some years been recording ceremonies and finally delivered a DVD pack with four edited ceremonies attended by the same team and we gave these packs to both the teams concerned and to other sacrificial priests and helpers. In this way they discovered what their neighbours were up to.

In spite of innovations, our collection of prayers/incantations reveals that much has remained quite stable, for example, formulas, metaphors, linguistic means of expression. In this article, we will concentrate on some of them as they reveal on the one hand the way

the Udmurt think and on the other hand, the aesthetic dimension of the formulas. We hope that the abundance of examples, taken from our collected corpus (lately published in Sadikov, Toulouze 2023) will reveal the richness and diversity of these addresses to the deities.

We decided to draw attention in this article to the characteristic features in the language peculiar to these incantations, some of them even intriguing. The first is a review of the verbs used to ask for benefits, the second is the use of possessive suffixes in the requests, and finally the extremely varied syntactic forms of the verbal syntagms. We must observe that the language used is of course dialectal Udmurt. In Bashkortostan, the Udmurt speak peripheral southern Udmurt subdialects. Therefore, there will be lexical and phonetical differences with Udmurt standard language, which may explain some particular and unknown forms.

At the same time, through the example we aim to give some understanding of the kinds of request the Udmurt ask their gods to grant them. The texts considered come from a wide corpus of prayers collected throughout the years in the eastern part of the Udmurt area. Some were collected at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, we have no oral recordings of these, as well as of those recorded during the Soviet period. But we have oral recordings of all those uttered in the ceremonies we have attended.

## LEXICAL COMMENTARY: A REVIEW OF THE VERBS USED TO REQUEST BENEFITS

### MAIN VERBS

The main verbs are the ones meaning ‘give’ and ‘protect’, which are meant in their direct meaning, as given by a dictionary:

**s’otyny** ‘to give’

**saklany** ‘to protect’

While those verbs are very frequent, and we shall meet them all along this article in different examples, they are not the only ones:

some other verbs are also quite frequent, as they are frequent in general language.

The first is **bas'tynny**, 'to take, to hold'.

**Burd ylad karysa bas'ty (S-T 110)**

*Making under your wing, take (us)*

**Kabyl karysa bas'ty (S-T 33)**

*Blessing (it) take [the sacrifice]*

This last expression is very frequent.

The context in which this verb mainly appears is in a gerundial expression: *bas'tynny* + a gerundive form, often with the verb *karyny*, to make. Here the verb *karyny*, the next to be commented upon, is wider than its ordinary meaning, at least under its gerundive form.

Thus, another important verb, also used to ask for something, is the verb *karyny* (to make). The idea here is to transform something into some other thing, or at least to ensure some quality to what is requested:

**Ulonex dzh'ech kar (S-T 84)**

*Make our life good*

**Busy tyros achid kar (S-T 18)**

*Make yourself the field full*

**Dzhuon vuosses, s'ion turym"yosses cheskyt kar (S-T 18)**

*Make the drinking water, the eating herbs tasty*

## OTHER VERBS

Of course, these verbs do not complete the list of the possible verbs used to request something, and many verbs are very concrete and appropriate to particular requests:

**voz'many** 'to pasture'

**Pudoosty dzhech vozhma (S-T 84)**

*Pasture well the livestock*

**kis'matyny** 'to mature', 'to allow maturing'

**Yumes kis'maty (S-T 165)**

*Let our cereals mature*

**Vordis'kytyny** 'to give birth', 'to allow to be born'

**Vordis'konoosse shudo burdo vordis'kyty (S-T 109)**

*To those who are supposed to be born, give the happiness to be born*

**Viz'mynyz vodris'kyty val (S-T 83)**

*With intelligence let them be born*

**daltytyny** 'to ripen'

**Kiz'em-paltkem dzhuosyz zarni vyzhyen vyzhyat-ysa daltyty (S-T 17)**

*Let the cereals we have sown and widespread with golden roots ripen*

**beryktyny** 'to return', 'to give back'

**Ponem zhuges'zes s'uen-s'ursen berykty val<sup>3</sup>**

*The offerings put by them, give them back by hundreds and thousands*

There are also two other verbs, two very common verbs which are used in a special sense, with an almost non-semantic meaning, almost as auxiliary verbs allowing formation of fixed expressions in gerundive clauses, which are very frequent in ordinary Udmurt: they are the verbs *ulyny* (to live), and *mynyni* (to go). A third verb may appear, but seldom, in the same position, *kyll'yny* (to lie). These forms appear in constructions on which we shall comment later.

**Achid az'inlyk'yoste s'otysa ul (S-T 109)**

*Yourself giving a future live [= give (us) a future]*

**S'ekyt töl-zoryosydles' saklasa ul val (S-T 90)**

*From heavy winds and rains protecting us live [= protect us from...]*

Actually, in ordinary Udmurt there are such constructions, less complicated, which are not connected with requests, the aim of which is also only very slightly semanticised:

**Mözmysa ug uly**

*I did not live being sad*

**Shundy pishtisa ule**

*The sun lives shining*

However, this does not seem to be the case with the verb *mynyny* 'to go':

**Shunyt ki vylad bas'tysa myn (S-T 58)**

*In your warm hand taking (us) go*

**Mil'es'tym vuttymteosyz achid vuttysa myn, (S-T 58)**

*What we could not achieve, yourself being able to go [= do yourself what we were not able to do (for lack of time)]*

**Pel'pum kapchilyk'yoste s'otysa myn val, (S-T 103)**

*To our shoulders giving lightness go.*

**Cheredles'-churedles' achid saklasa myn val (S-T 130)**

*From illnesses and diseases please go protecting us [= please protect us from...]*

Here we are quite far from the direct meaning of the verb 'to go'.

## SYNTACTIC COMMENTARY: A REVIEW OF THE CONSTRUCTIONS USED WITH THESE VERBS

Moreover, there is an uncommon syntactic richness in the constructions used to ask for benefits, from the simplest to the more complex. The forms used take into account expressions of more or less politeness.

### SIMPLE IMPERATIVE

In ordinary life, a requirement is usually expressed by the simple use of the imperative. Udmurt is not a language that has developed a complex system of polite alternatives. Clearly the simple imperative is not as brutal as it is, for example, in French. We are not surprised thence to find the imperative in addresses to the deities: *vay* (give), *s'ot* (give), *sakla* (protect)

**Tazalyk s'ot (S-T 165)**

*Give health*

**N'an'mes s'ot (S-T 165)**

*Give (us) our bread*

**N'ebyt inty s'oty (S-T 85)**

*Give (us) a soft place*

**Yözorles' sakla (S-T 84)**

*Protect (us, the harvest) from hail*

**Kalykly shudo ulyny s'ot (S-T 85)**

*give the people to live happily*

**Mil'am kolkhozmyly uzrymyny s'ot (S-T 85)**

*Give our kolkhoz to become rich*

Here we must comment about the absence, in most cases, of a pronoun or a complement indicating the beneficiary of the gifts. In some cases, a dative noun or pronoun specify, but usually it seems not necessary to the Udmurt praying priest. In other cases, the pronoun is redundant and is clearly there for euphonic or prosody reasons.

## SOFTENED IMPERATIVE

There are means to soften the possible brutality of the imperative form, in general particles: *vay-ay*, *vay-ka*. These are, especially the second, close to Russian use.

However, it is more idiomatic and politer to add the particle *val* to the imperative form. We call it a particle, but there are other homonymous forms that should not be mixed up with this one. The form *val* can be: 1. A substantive, meaning 'horse'. 2. A verbal form, meaning 'was'. Clearly, it is neither. It is a semantic instrument transforming the imperative into a kind of optative. It does not change the meaning of the verb, but rather its pragmatics: *vay val* / *s'ot val*, *ud-a s'oty* (would you not give?).

It is difficult to give an equivalent in English. The more polite English expressions encompass conditional forms, which will have equivalents much closer to them than *val*. Here, in order to show this softening particle, we just add "please".

Some examples:

**Mar ke malpazy, soe s'ot val (S-T 84)**

*Whatever they think, (please) give it*

**S'in az' saz'yoste s'ot val (S-T 83)**

*(Please) give clearness in front of (our / the) eyes.*

**Tyledles'-puedles' sakla val (S-T 159)**

*From fires, from conflagrations (please) protect (us)*



**Pejmyt korkaedles', zhk'yyo kortedles' sakla val (S-T 158)**

*From dark houses, from iron chains (please) protect (us)*

**S'iyo shuis', bas'to shuis', kas murt"yosles' sakla val (S-T 73)**

*From evil hostile (people) who say 'I'll eat you', 'I'll take you', (please) protect (us).*

**Alama cher"yosles' sakla val (S-T 72)**

*From evil diseases (please) protect (us).*

**Kiyad-pydad bas'ty val (S-T 73)**

*(Please) take (us, our prayers) into your hands and feet*

All of these forms are widespread.

## THE EXPRESSION OF INVITATION: LET ... (BE)

### Med + FUT

This is not a very common construction in prayers, but in our corpus we have found it used several times and with several different verbs, therefore we cannot ignore it. The verb is in the future form, in the third person either singular or plural.

**Pudoos taza lusa med ulozy (S-T 91)**

*Let our livestock live being healthy*

**Vyl' luono ken"yoslen shumpotyssa ulonzy med luoz (S-T 91)**

*Let our future new daughters-in-law have a joyful life (a life rejoicing)*

**Dz"es' kalyk"yosly med luozy (S-T 35)**

*Let there be for good people.*

Among them, there are two combinations which are more frequent: with the existence verb, *lunyi*, for for example in the two above-mentioned examples. Another, more interesting verb is very often used, the verb *gozhtyny* meaning ‘writing’. The combination *med gozhtoz*, ‘let it be written, prescribed’, is frequent enough, showing thus the relevance for Udmurts of fate and predestination:

**Shumpotysa kuris’kyny med gozhtoz (S-T 80)**

*Let it be written that we shall pray with joy*

**Anaenyz-ataenyz tazalyken, tatulyken ulyny med gozhtoz (S-T 152)**

*Let it be written that one shall live with one’s mother and father in health and harmony*

**oktyny kaltany med gozhtoz (S-T 81)**

*Let it be written that we shall reap and harvest*

**Kuz’yli kad’ kyl’l’yny med gozhtoz (S-T 83)**

*Let it be written that we shall live like ants*

**Tyloburdoos kad’ chirdysa kyl’l’yny med gozhtoz (S-T 83)**

*Let it be written that we shall live singing like birds*

**N’an’ykayyos daltysa, dzh’uen kyl’l’yny med gozhtoz (S-T 83)**

*Let it be written that we shall live growing little breads, with cereals*

**Tazalyken-baylyken shumpotysa kyl’l’yny med gozhtoz (S-T 158)**

*Let it be written that we shall live in health and wealth, rejoicing*

We may notice that in almost all these examples the verb expressing the wish is *kyl’l’yny*, which is a dialectal form for the verb meaning ‘to remain’, ‘to stay’, which fundamentally expresses prolonged being and thus is the equivalent to an existence verb.

## THE CONDITIONAL

But the most widespread construction is undoubtedly the use of the conditional phrase. We must observe that these constructions imply the use of the conditional conjunction *ke*, 'if'. Usually, it is positioned at the end of the phrase. Here, however, statistically, it mainly occupies the place before the verb, which means the penultimate place in the phrase. In general, the position of *ke* is right at the end of the phrase, and we have also here a couple of examples that follow this pattern. However, we may suggest that while in ordinary conditional sentences *ke* is at the end of the phrase, in situations where the conditional is not interpreted as a proper case in which a condition is set, but as a euphemism for a request, the position is changed. The conditional form is particularly used with the two most frequent verbs in the *kuris'kon:s'otyny* 'to give' on the one hand, and the verb *saklany / chaklany*<sup>4</sup> 'to protect' on the other. Let us present some examples of the first verb:

**Chumol'yo vözy chumol'yo ke s'otysaled (S-T 81)**

*Would you give (us) heap near heap*

**Shunyt-n'ebyt zor'yoste ke s'otysaled (S-T 83)**

*Would you give (us) warm and soft rains*

**Kapchi ez'el'yost ke s'otysaled (S-T 83)**

*Would you give (us) light fates / deaths*

**Tyr tolez' kad' tazalykde ke s'otysaled (S-T 70)**

*Would you give (us) your health like a full moon*

**Tyr shundy kad' baylykde ke s'otysaled (S-T 70)**

*Would you give (us) your wealth like a full sun*

**Tulys vu kad' tazalyk ke s'otysaled (S-T 72)**

*Would you give (us) health like spring water*

**Tazalykde -baylykde s'otysalyd ke (S-T 98)**

*Would you give (us) your health and your wealth*

**Dyshmon"yosly erik ke öy s'otysaled (S-T 82)**

*Would you not give freedom to our enemies*

And, with the verb 'to protect':

**vylis'-vetlis' s'ekyt zor"yosydles' saklasaled ke (S-T 72)**

*Would you protect (us, the harvest) from your heavy rains that move above.*

**N'ukedles'-gopedles' ke saklasaled (S-T 82)**

*Would you protect (us) from your pits and your hollows*

**Alama zor"yosydles' ke saklasaled (S-T 129)**

*Would you protect (us) from your bad rains*

**S'ekyt zor"yosles' saklasalyd ke (S-T 73)**

*Would you protect (us) from heavy rains*

**"S'iyo" shuis'les', "bas'to" shuis'les'ke saklasaled (S-T 82)**

*Would you protect (us) from those who say 'I'll eat (you)', 'I'll take (you)'*

**Pejmyt korkaosles' ke saklasaled (S-T 82)**

*Would you protect (us) from dark houses*

**Dzh'ylo purt"yosles' ke saklasaled (S-T 82-83)**

*Would you protect (us) from sharp knives*

However, while the most widespread examples use the two above-mentioned verbs, it is to be found also with other verbs, firstly with the verb meaning 'to do', 'to make', but also with semantically very diverse verbs, illustrating the diversity of the demands to the deities:

**Vyle dis'ano ke karysaled (S-T 71)**

*Would you make (us) (something) to put on*

**Kytkon dzh'yro ke karysaled<sup>5</sup>**

*Would you make the harness sharp*

**Vordono tyloburdoosyz taza voz'yalyd ke (S-T 109)**

*Would you grow the birds to be grown healthy*

**Kiz'em-pal'kkem n'an'akayyosyz dzh'es'kin ke kis'matysaled (S-T 71)**

*Would you mature well our sowed and beaten little breads*

**Kon'don-dzh'uges'mes s'uen-s'ursen ke beryktysaled (S-T 95)**

*Would you give (us) back our money and sacrificial alms by hundreds and thousands*

**Uan' bendeoste ogkad' adzh'ysaled ke (S-T 83)**

*Would you watch all your people, equally*

**Koshkis'se shumpotysa ke kelyasaled (S-T 83)**

*Would you see off the one who goes away with joy*

**Pyris'se shumpotysa ke pumitasaled' (S-T 83)**

*Would you receive the one who enters with joy*

In addition, the conditional mode is also used in more complex formulas. They use some verbs as auxiliaries, and complete them with gerund forms, which are very widely used in Udmurt in a multiplicity of contexts. Let us have a look, starting from the verbs used as auxiliaries, the first of these being *ulyny*, 'to live':

**Vordono ad'amiooste tazalyken, baylyken vordysa ulysalyd ke (S-T 108-109)**

*Would you live growing the people to be grown in health and wealth*

**Dyshmon”yosles’ chaklasa ulysalyd ke (S-T 108)**

*Would you live protecting us from (our) enemies*

**S’ekyt zor”yosles’ chaklasa ulysalyd ke (S-T 109)**

*Would you live protecting (us) from heavy rains*

**Kiz’em-pal’kkem yuosyz udal’tytysa ulysalyd ke (S-T 109)**

*Would you live reaping the sowed and beaten cereals*

**“s’iyo” shuis’, “yuo” shuis’, “bas’to” shuis’  
dyshmon”yosles’ chaklasa ulysalyd ke (S-T 108)**

*Would you live protecting (us) from enemies who say ‘I’ll eat (you)’, ‘I’ll drink (you)’, ‘I’ll take (you)’*

Another verb which often occupies this auxiliary position is the verb ‘to go’, *mynyny*:

**Pel’pum kapchilyk”yoste ach’id s’otsa ke mynsaled (S-T 55)**

*Would you go giving yourself lightness to (our) shoulders*

**N’ebyt zor”yoste ach’id s’otsa ke mynsaled (S-T 55)**

*Would you go giving yourself soft rains*

**Musho vuen ulny ach’id s’otsa ke mynsaled (S-T 56)**

*Would you go giving yourself to live with honeyed water*

**Azbar tyr tchözh-dzh’azh’egen gurlashysa ulon s’otsa ke mynsalyd (S-T 56)**

*Would you go giving a life with a full yard of cooing ducks and geese*

**Kökyyn sabi kyl’l’e, kökyyn sabi kad’ ulyny s’otsa ke mynsaled (S-T 57)**

*The child lies in his cradle, would you go giving (us) to live like a lying child in its cradle*

**Yshtek chesk"t vuoste turymn'oste ach'id s'otsa ke mynsaled (S-T 110)**

*Would you go giving yourself your tasty water and herbs*

**Kyryn vetlis' pudooslen pyd ulazy shynyt, n'ebyt tury"yos dzhuzhasa mynsalzy ke (S-T 91)**

*Under the feet of the livestock, which goes out soft herbs would they go growing*

**Kyl dzh'angyshon"yosles' ach'id saklasa ke mynsaled (S-T 57)**

*Would you go protecting (us) yourself from mistakes of the tongue*

## COMPLEX CONDITIONAL PHRASES

As with the imperative, conditional sentences may also be completed with the form *val*, which turns the demand into a softer request and expresses the deepest respect towards the deity. As in the case of the imperative we conditionally translate it here with 'please':

**Uapum vuon dyr"ya dzh'ech malpan"yosty dzh'ech kalykedly s'otysa ulysaled ke val<sup>6</sup> (S-T 53)**

*When the time comes to go, would you please live giving good thoughts to good people*

**Uzhan nunal"yoste s'otysa ulysaled ke val (S-T 53)**

*Would you please live giving (us) working days*

**Kuzpalenyz tatulyk ulon"yoste s'otysa ulysaled ke val (S-T 54)**

*Would you please live giving lives of harmony with the couple*

**Az'lapalan uzhan nunal"yosyn kapchilykde s'otysa ulysaled ke val (S-T 90)**

*Would you please live giving your lightness in the working days to come*

## MORPHOLOGICAL COMMENT: INTERESTING USE OF POSSESSIVE SUFFIXES

While studying and translating our corpus, we stumbled upon an interesting phenomenon, which is not reflected in any literature nor in any existing translations into Russian.

Udmurt is partly an agglutinative language, as Finnish and Hungarian are, and it can express possession through a suffix paradigm. Besides expressing possession, the possessive suffixes may also be used for other semantic uses, often, for example, for expressing definitude, as Udmurt is a language that has no articles.

But here, the use of the second person suffix cannot be confused with the wish to present something as determined. Or more precisely, it adds a definite aspect indeed, but in identifying the gift in relating it to God. God gives, or acts on something that belongs to him. In fact, in the previous sentences, we had already some samples of this use, which is reflected in our translation:

**S'ekyt töl-zor"yosydles' saklasa ul val (S-T 90)**

*Protect us from **your** heavy winds and rains ...*

**Shumpotysalmy, shudde-burde s'otsa myn val (S-T 23)**

*We would rejoice, if you would give us **your** happiness and joy*

We may thus understand that, in addresses to god/to the deities, his will is the central element, and all which is concerned with the requests, belongs to him and is subject to his will, both the good (for people) and the bad, the illnesses, the sorrows. We think that it is a small sign that reveals a whole worldview and opens the understanding of the power of the highest forces.

Let us examine further examples to confirm this usage, starting from requests for good things:



**Tazalykde s'otysa kyl'l'y val (S-T 70)**

*Would you lie giving us **your** health*

**S'iyny-yuyny shydde-n'an'de s'ot (S-T 159)**

*Give (us) **your** happiness and bread to eat and drink*

**Kapch'ilykde s'otysa ulysaled ke val (S-T 90)**

*Would you live giving (us) **your** lightness*

**Chechyen-muen ulyny shudde-burde s'otysalyd ke (S-T 98)**

*To live with honey and mead **your** happiness and joy would you give (us)*

**Tazalyk no shudde-burde s'ot (S-T 165)**

*Health and your **your** happiness and joy give(us).*

But god is also the source of other phenomena, unpleasant for mankind. The Udmurt ask their god for protection against those bad things of which he is the origin. This allows us to understand that man is not at the centre of god's intentions, he is much wider and man is not his main concern. Therefore, man has to ask god's help against god's own creation.

**Cherde-churde vu ullan' pottysa lez'ysaled ke (S-T 82)**

*Would you send **your** illnesses and diseases downriver*

**"S'iyo" shuis'edles' "bas'to" shuis'edles' sakla (S-T 158)**

*Protect (us) from **your** one who says 'I'll eat (you)', 'I'll take (you)'*

**S'ekyt zor"yosydles' ke saklasale (S-T 82)**

*From **your** heavy rains would you protect (us)*

**Töledles'-periedles' sakla val (S-T 97)**

*Please protect (us) from **your** wind, **your** whirlwind*

**Nymyredles'-kibiedles' sakla val (S-T 97)**

*Please protect (us) from **your** worms and insects*

**Tyledles'-puedles' sakla val (S-T 97)**

*Please protect (us) from **your** fires and conflagrations*

## CONCLUSION

Although the older layer of archaisms is gradually disappearing from the texts and new requests are introduced by sacrificial priests who care about the new needs of the villagers, Udmurt prayers have maintained a rich level of linguistic expression. The aim of this article was to start a reflection on this particular language, which is strongly codified, so that even today's productions follow its pattern. We have identified different levels of peculiarity: first the lexical level, concentrating on verbs, which reveals what is the main aim of the contemporary Udmurt addresses to their deities. There are certainly other peculiarities on which we could have insisted, for example metaphors and comparisons, which we shall explore in future. We have also concentrated on the richness of the syntactical expression of the Udmurt requests, which use very diverse structures that exist in the language. Finally, we have developed the beginning of a reflection on the use of the possessive suffixes in an unusual way, which explains that it has been ignored within the Russian translations that have been made to date.

This is only the beginning of a linguistic and content analysis that will be pursued.

## SOURCES

Sadikov, Toulouze 2023 = S-T

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Moksha and Erzya for the Mordvinians, Zyryan and Permyak for the Komi, fot the Mari Meadow Mari and Hill Mari.

<sup>2</sup> From the author's fieldwork in 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Asavka prayers promising a sacrifice and offering a sacrifice, 2016. Authors' fieldwork

<sup>4</sup> This form is generally used in the standardised literary language, but it does not appear in these dialectal texts.

<sup>5</sup> Asavka prayers promising a sacrifice and offering a sacrifice, 2016. Authors' fieldwork.

<sup>6</sup> Similar sentences are found also with different verbal constructions: the simple conditional (*Uapum vuon dyr"ya dzh'ech malpan"yosty dzh'ech kalykedly s'otysa ulysaled ke*) or the softened imperative (*Uapum vuon dyr"ya dzh'ech malpan"yosty dzh'ech kalykedly s'ot val*).

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