

UDMURT HEALING RITUALS. SEMANTIC MODELS OF THE ACTIONAL CODE

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse the actional code of the Udmurt healing rite, considered as a cultural text. The scientific novelty of the work lies in the fact that the ritual actions of the healing rite are classified into groups according to the particular method of achieving the goal involved, something which takes into account the semantics of its actional component. The proposed classification is based on the system developed by E. E. Levkiyevskaya in her study of Slavic protective amulets. As a result of the analysis, the author has identified the main semantic models manifested in the elementary semantic units and motifs. The semantic models under consideration are divided into three groups: the first group combines ritual actions aiming at establishing contact, the second one contains actions intended to have impact on the source of the disease; and the third encompasses actions aimed at giving a patient an invulnerability to the disease. The analysis of folklore and ethnographic material reveals that motifs of the semantic models belonging to the second group were the most widespread ones, something which is accounted for by the fact that the concept of the fight between two opposing forces underlies most Udmurt healing rituals that involve performing an incantation against the disease.

Keywords: Udmurt folk medicine; healing rite; actional code; semantic model; semantic motif, incantation.

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of studying the kinetic code of the Udmurt healing rite is in the fact that movement is one of the most important and most significant components of the ritual. The theoretical basis of the study is provided by works of representatives of the Moscow ethnolinguistic school (N. Tolstoy, S. Tolstaya, E. Levkiyevskaya) and the

works of leading scholars on the questions of semiotic systems in traditional culture (V. Toporov, A. Baiburin, T. Tsivyan).

Researchers note that the actional component of any ritual lies its logical and structural core (Tolstaya, 1996: 89) and will be older in its origin than the verbal component: verbal accompaniment often acts as a means of dubbing, a footnote or commentary, a kind of 'prosodic'; subsystem attached to the main nonverbal system (Toporov 2010: 22). The main sources of the study were archival materials from the manuscript collection of the Udmurt Institute of History, Language and Literature; the folklore and dialectological collections of the Institute of Udmurt Philology, Finno-Ugric Studies and Journalism of the Udmurt State University, as well as the author's field recordings collected in the early 21st century.

SEMANTIC MODELS AND MOTIFS

The set of kinetic elements that make up the Udmurt healing ritual is diverse. For the convenience of our analysis a certain classification will be required. Depending on who performs certain actions, the actional components of a healing ritual can be divided into two main groups: the actions of the verbal healer/charmer and the actions of the person being healed/patient (Stadnik 2000: 31). In cases where patients charm their medical conditions themselves, the kinetics of the healer coincides with the kinetics of the person being healed. This principle of classification allows us to categorise the ritual actions, but does not reveal their inner essence. The most appropriate classification for analysing the actional code is the system proposed by E. Levkieskaya (2002), which she developed while researching the semantics of protective amulets. For the convenience of classification, which is based on the means of achieving the goal, the researcher introduces the term *semantic model*, the embodiments of which are *semantic motifs* – “predicate units containing constant semantics, steadily recurring in texts and having forms of expression fixed in tradition” (Levkieskaya 2002: 11).

The analysis of the available folklore and ethnographic data shows that the ritual actions of the Udmurt healing rites can be divided into three groups. The first group is aimed at establishing and achieving contact; the second intends various effects on the source of the disease; and the third is focused on patients themselves: endowing them with those properties that will make them invulnerable to the disease.

The first group of ritual actions forms the semantic model **contact**, which contains four semantic motifs: **establishing contact**, **invitation**, **supplication**, and **sacrifice**. Within this group, a connection with the disease is established in order to exert further influence upon it, or, on the contrary, to avoid further negative consequences from contact.

One of the motifs of this group – **establishing contact** – is directly related to the spatial and temporal codes of the healing rite. This semantic motif includes any movement towards boundary places in the transitional or dark times of day. For example, the healer and the sick person approach the threshold, the entrance to the

cellar, the window, and come to each other after sunset, at midnight, before dawn. In this context, movement without locative and temporal parameters is deprived of its ritual status.

The semantic motif of **invitation** can be found in the verbal formulas of the healing rite *urt kuton* ('catching the soul *urt*'). The motif of **supplication** is realised while following certain rules of behaviour, for example, in order to propitiate certain spirits of infectious diseases and thereby avoid more serious consequences, one should not make noises, swear, or do dirty work (Panina 2013; 2016). Closely related to this motif is the motif of **sacrifice**, which involves the ritual feeding of hostile disease-spirits, dead ancestors, and the spirits of the surrounding space, which is a particular way of releasing the patient from the influence of the latter through propitiation and the ingratiating of their favour.

The second group of ritual actions is represented by four semantic models: **neutralisation of the disease**, **striking back the disease**, **expelling the disease**, and **destroying the disease**. Within the framework of the proposed classification, this group is the most extensive, since the majority of Udmurt healing rituals involving charms are based on the concept of the struggle between two opposing forces, both at the actional and the verbal levels.

The therapeutic rites of the semantic model **neutralisation of the disease** are aimed at giving the bearers of danger such a state (and properties), that does not allow them the opportunity to manifest their dangerous qualities (Levkievskaya 2002: 62). The mechanism of influence consists in modelling the behaviour of the disease with the help of magical means.

In the Udmurt healing rituals, this model is represented by the motif of **making the disease incapacitated**. For example, fire was cut over the burnt place with the help of special blue-coloured pebbles (*lyz köl'y*). The illocutionary purpose of this action is expressed at the verbal level:

Ta tyl kyd'yoke koshkyn ug bygaty no, solen no tylyaraez kyd'yoke medam völsky

This fire cannot go any further, let the patient's burn not spread further

(AFR 2009, village of Sep, Igrinsky district, UR)

The next model – **striking back the disease** – like the model of **neutralisation of the disease**, is not commonly found in Udmurt healing rites. This is explained by the desire not only to fight back or neutralise the disease, but also to get rid of it, once and for all. The main goal of the action series of these semantic models is to prevent the further spread of the disease, which is reflected in the motifs of **covering/closing the eyes of the disease** and **surrounding the disease**. For example, the first of them is realised in the following way – to remove the evil eye from the goslings, they are sprinkled with water, which all family members washed their faces with in the morning, with the words:

*Ta pozh, chylkyt övöl, med votsaloz, pytsaloz so ad'yamiles' s'inyosse, kudiz
l'ek uchkiz ta pichios shory*

This (water) is dirty, unclean, let it cover the eyes of those people who looked at these little ones with anger

(AFR, 2005, village of Ukan, Yarsky district, UR)

The second motif is found in the ritual for healing such skin disease as *lichen planus*: to prevent from spreading it further on the body, the affected place was circled with a silver coin (Mikheev 1926: 45).

The next two models – **destroying the disease** and **expelling the disease** – are the most drastic and most common ways of dealing with medical condition. The former combines ritual actions that symbolise the elimination of a person's painful condition through the elimination of the disease, such as *kuin' lul* ('three souls *lul*'). The key motif in the treatment of this childhood disease is the motif of **trampling it**: the healer steps lightly with their heel on the baby's chest and abdomen (AFR 2009, village of Sep, Igrinsky district, UR) or presses an old trampled shoe on their chest (FDA UdSU, Sayfutdinova T. 2000/01, Bashkortostan, Kushnarenkovsky district, village of Kanly, p. 10). This motif also appears in a ritual against the evil eye – the water remaining after certain ritual actions is poured into the lower corner of the doorway or onto the door hinges, and then the door is slammed shut with the words:

S'inus'emze tatchy pachkatis'ko

[I press the evil eye down here] (Nikolaeva 2011: 85).

In case of *panaris*, the inflamed finger is pressed with a table leg (FDA UdSU, Kulikova A. 2000/01, Zavyalovsky district, village of Bolshaya Venya, p. 14).

This motif is close to that of **crushing/grinding the disease**. A barley ear, on which the disease is transferred, is subsequently rubbed against the wall (Mikheev 1926: 48); to treat hernia in a child, the healer goes to an aspen tree before dawn and cracks an egg wrapped in dirty nappies against it.

In addition to the above motifs, the model under consideration also includes the motif of **cutting/cutting out the disease**, which prevails in the treatment of such medical conditions as tumour, boil of hernia: they can be circled with a kitchen knife (AFR, 2009, village of Sep, Igrinsky district, UR) or a veterinary knife (AFR, 2006, village of Sep, Igrinsky district, UR). In case of fright, the healer passes a knife and a knife-grinder over the heart area from top to bottom (FDA UdSU, Maksimova L. 1999/2000, Debessky district, village of Uyvay, pp. 31-32).

The next motif of this model is determined by the action of **stabbing/piercing**. Thus, to cure stye, stabbing movements were used to touch the sore spot with the tips of scissors (RA UIHLL, F. 762, N. 20, S. 14). The words of the charm were whispered on salted water or *kumyshka* (homemade vodka) with a piece of sugar. The charmer alternately blew, spat, and stirred it with the sharp ends of scissors. Before the patient drank it, the scissors were thrown with such force that their sharp ends

stayed stuck in the floor (Ilyina 1926: 64). This motif is echoed by the motif of **chopping the disease**.

The transfer of properties and qualities of the used attribute to the disease (in most cases the fundamental attribute is dryness) is concentrated in the motif of **drying the disease**, which is found in the ritual of treatment for a sty. An inflamed eye was touched with a dried barley grain (FDA UdSU, Korepanova T. 2003/04, Igrinsky district, village of Ludoshur, p. 6), or circled it with a coal (FDA UdSU, Lekomtseva A., 1998/99, Kezsky district, Kez, p. 8). Having touched a dry ray to the flame, they put it around an abscess, boil, or furuncle with the words:

Kötshe ke ta kös chag kuas'memyn, oz'y ik ta pös'ky med kuas'moz

[As this dry ray has dried up, so let the boil dry up]

(RA UIHLL, F. 199, S. 240).

The named series of motifs complements the motif of **burning the disease**, which is found in the treatment of various diseases. For example, a sty is circled with barley grains that are later thrown into a burning furnace (FDA UdSU, Lekomtseva A. 1998/99, Kez district, Kez, p. 8); in order to treat the evil eye, a pinch of salt is taken and circled three times over the patient's head counterclockwise, while reciting a charm, the salt is then thrown into the fire (FDA UdSU, Kryuchkova N. 1996/97, Kizner district, village of Kizner, p. 12–16); three matches are lit and alternately circled round the head of the jinxed child (FDA UdSU, Anfonova N. 1997/98, Alnashsky district, village of Piseevo, p. 23–24). The thread used for tying warts is thrown into the fire (AFR, 2008, village of Sep, Igrinsky district, UR); a child sick with *punykyl'* (literally 'dog's disease') was put into a warm stove, ordering the disease to bake/burn/disappear.

The semantic motif of **extinguishing the disease** is realised in healing rites for burns.

Hot coals were extinguished in water, then the burnt places were moistened with it (Mikheev 1926: 46–47). The burn was circled with the ring finger with the words:

In kiz'il'i, zor pil'em, kuke vu pytsis'pen'ez sutidy ke, soku mon s'otko sutny.

Ton - tyl, mon - vu, mon tone kyso

[Heavenly stars, rain clouds, when you burn ash from the bottom of the sea/river/lake, then I allow you to burn. You are fire, I am water, I will extinguish you] (FDA UdSU, Shocheva T. 2000/01, Malopurginsky district, village of Malaya Bodya, p. 8).

The final motif in the semantic model of **destroying the disease** is the motif of **rotting the disease**. In order to berid of warts, knots were tied corresponding to the number of warts the sufferer had, and the thread was then thrown into rainwater running down the gutter from the roof, buried in manure, in the ground, tossed into the cellar or under the bath shelf.

The semantic model of **expelling the disease** is represented by a wide range of actions aimed at expelling the disease not only from the patient's body, but also from this world. Depending on the locus, time, and method of expulsion, the following motifs are found within this model – **expelling the disease to the other world, returning the disease to its sender, expelling the disease to an external object or to an impossible future, scaring the disease away, and expelling the disease by spitting or crossing, with smoke or water.**

At the action level, the motif of **expelling the disease to the other world** is represented, for example, in calendar rites of exorcising evil spirits / illnesses. This motif is often realised in healing rites: an aspen tree, which was used to treat sprains in horses, was carried outside the village around midnight. Barley grains, on which the disease is transferred, are thrown outside the gate (FDA UdsU, Baimurzina S. 1993/94, Malopurginsky district, village of Aksakshur, pp. 18-20) or thrown over the shoulder (Kelmakov 1981: 42). In traditional culture, environment is known to be characterised by apocentricity: a human being is the initial point of reference. By throwing grains over the shoulder, a person also frees themselves from the disease by sending it outside their world.

The motif of **expelling the disease to the other world** is directly related to the motif of **returning the disease to its sender**. It is commonly found in rites against jinx and evil eye, in which the main role is given to water as it is believed to pass information. Thus, in the case of the evil eye, one first washes the windows on the street side, the handles of the front door and/or gates, then, having soaked one's hands with this water, pass them over the sick child's chest (Minniyakhmetova 2003: 60), head and abdomen, after which the water is splashed out of the door (FDA UdsU, Nabieva V. 2000/01, Bashkortostan, Kaltasinsky district, village of Kachak, p. 2) to return the evil eye to its senders. The washing of the abovementioned objects is also not accidental. Being border zones between this and the other world, they are, first of all, subject to negative influence.

The motif of **expelling the disease to an external object** is realised by the following actions: barley grains were brought to the inflamed eye (Kelmakov 1981: 42) or passed around the sore place (FA UdsU, FE-1975, Mozhginsky district, village of Starye Yuberi, N. 5, S. 18) or an ear (Mikheev 1926: 48); a styne was touched with a finger first, then with a dry twig (FA UdsU, Nagovitsyna I. 2002/03, Balezinsky district, village of Lyuk, p. 22). Warts are symbolically transferred to a thread (knots are tied on the thread, the total number of which corresponds to the number of warts). A child suffering from *punykyl'* (literally 'dog's disease') was dragged through a huge ring-shaped bread roll, which was later put around the dog's neck, supposedly passing the disease onto it. It was believed that if the dog died, the child would recover (FDA UdsU, Ivanova V. 2000/01, Kez district, village of Ludyag, pp. 15–17).

The most widespread motif of Udmurt healing rites is that of **expelling the disease to an impossible future**. It is mainly realised by the formulas of the impossible, which are common in Udmurt charms. They express the idea that evil spirits are not able to meet the conditions set by the charmer. With their help the disease is sent away to the distant future, which is believed to never come. For instance, the burnt place is circled with a coal:

Kuke dzazeg tölpuzys' tyl potiz ke, soku med sutis'kod. T'fu!

[When fire appears from the goose's wind egg, then let the burnt place ache. Ptui!] (Napolskikh 1997).

One of the ways of warding off diseases and evil spirits comes in the motif of **scaring the disease away**. When someone was ill, Udmurts used to hit the walls with a freshly cut rowan stick (RA UIHLL, F. 187, S. 142); fever was scared away by shooting from a gun; a stye was shown mildly obscene gesture *kukish* (the 'fig' sign) (AFR, 2008, village of Sep, Igrinsky district, UR). A 'fig' sign is also commonly used for protective purposes: it is believed that when meeting a sorcerer, this gesture may protect people from the jinx. The evil spirits known as *peri* can be scared off by showing one's genitals or a bare bottom (Shutova, Kapitonov, Kirillova *et al.* 2009: 206). At the verbal level, the motif of **scaring the disease away** is expressed by various kinds of threats, swear words and obscene language.

It should be noted that in most cases the pronunciation of incantation was followed by a threefold spitting, in other words, realising the motif of **expelling the disease by spitting**. Its semantics also changes depending on whom it is directed at, whether at the disease-spirit or the patient. Thus, if the spit is directed at the evil spirit, the action symbolises forced removal:

S'iis'ez-uyis'ez s'alas'ko: t'fu, t'fu, t'fu!"

[On the one who eats-drinks (the sick person), I spit: ptui, ptui, ptui!] (Munkácsi 1952: 152–153).

If the spit is directed at the patient, then it is believed to provide the patient with protective properties.

The motif of **expelling the disease by crossing (making the sign of the cross)** has the semantics of expelling the disease, on the one hand, and on the other hand, of creating an obstacle. In healing rituals, the act of crossing first of all implies expelling the disease, as it is considered to result from the negative influence of the forces of evil. In protective rites, by contrast, the semantics of an obstacle comes to the fore: there is an acute need to protect people from potential danger. The semantics of securing goes back to the universal symbolism of the cross (Levkievskaya 1999: 260). In mythopoetic and religious systems, the cross is presented as the most ancient sign of a sacred character, as a symbol of fire, sun and eternal life. In modern society it is a symbol of Christian faith. In Udmurt healing rites, the act of crossing is not always performed according to the canons of the Orthodox Church. For example, a stye is crossed with the ring finger (FDA UdSU, Dryakhlova N. 1997/98, Mozhginsky district, village of Nizhnie Kvatchi, pp. 12–13) or with a fig sign (FDA UdSU, Komarova L. 2002/03, Zavyalovsky district, village of Verkhniye Zhenvey, p. 18–19). When treating the evil eye, water is crossed with a knife, which is then sprinkled on the baby (Nikolaeva 2011: 85). In the case of a strain or dislocation, the healer first crosses

the bench with a needle and scissors, and then the sore place (FA UdSU, FE-1975, Mozhginsky district, village of Vuzh Yubera, vol. 5, fol. 17).

The motif of **expelling the disease with smoke** is found both in protection and healing rites. Smoking is a universal magical act. In Udmurt ethnomedicine, the smudging ritual was mainly used to cure fright, the evil eye, and jinx. The disease was expelled by pungent smoke. The main attributes were objects of high semiotic status, such as juniper branches, Maundy Thursday salt, and incense. In addition, cobwebs, a wasps' nest, or the hair/fur of the supposed offender were set alight.

One of the common motifs in healing rites is the motif of **expelling the disease with water**. Thus, when the evil eye was suspected, a child was washed with clean water. This method of treatment was limited to the action only and did not require any verbal charms. The symbolism of this action is determined by the semantics of water which is based on - firstly by its natural properties (freshness, transparency, ability to cleanse, wash away) and, secondly by mythological ideas about its connection with the other world. Water is believed to *wash away* the disease, *carry it away*, *separate it* from the sick person. A jinxed child is sprinkled three times with clean water, saying:

Gord, töd'y, s'öd kysyem murtyoslen uchkemzyles' s'inkyl'izes ul'l'as'ko

[I expel the evil look of red-haired, blond-haired, dark-haired people]

(FA UdSU, FE-1991, Yarsky district, N. 1, S. 21).

Objects with sacral or high semiotic status enhance the purifying properties of water. An icon and/or the table corners were rinsed with water and then sick child's hands and face were washed with it (RA UIHLL, F. 742, N. 6, S. 5). The evil eye and fright are washed away with water kept underground for twelve days (FA UdSU, FE-1993, Kezsky district, village of Gya, N. 3, p. 39).

The last group of ritual actions is embodied in the semantic model of **apotropaisation** (giving the patient properties that make them invulnerable to the disease). It unites actions which are aimed at giving the patient special properties that will make them immune to the disease. The vector of the action is directed not at the disease, but at the patient themselves.

This model in the Udmurt tradition is represented by two motifs. The first one is the motif of **simulating the situation of symbolic rebirth**. It is based on the belief that the sick person is born again and returns in a new, healthy state, achieving a status which protects them from the further impact of the disease. An infant suffering from *punykyl'* (literally 'dog's disease') was placed into a warm stove (RA UIHLL, F. 199, S. 240). If a child cried incessantly, he/she was put on an old worn-out undershirt and pulled through a split aspen branch, and then changed into clean underwear (FDA UdSU, Zlobina V. 2002/03, Uvinsky district, village of Bolshoy Zhuzhges, p. 16). A sick baby was also pulled through a huge ring-shaped roll, which was baked specially for the healing rite (FDA UdSU, Markova F. 1992/93, Malopurginsky district, village of Aksakshur, p. 12). In the northern districts of Udmurtia, a frail child with stunted growth was put onto a litter, then their new godparents *brought them back* into this

world with a *new* status – as a healthy child. The sick baby was *sold* to a stranger or neighbour or to someone whose children have excellent health.

The other motif of this model is aimed at **simulating the state of patient's invulnerability**. The main tool in achieving this goal is the word. Thus, the healer whispers an incantation over water, which is then sprinkled on the patient and given them to drink. It is believed that the magical power of the verbal charms can be transferred to the water, or any other object, therefore the property of invulnerability encoded in the incantation can be transferred to the patient as well. Washing with holy water is considered to be one of the surest ways to protect a sick person from the subsequent negative effects of the evil eye.

The proposed classification must remain conditional, because one and the same action will have a wide range of symbolic meanings. The semantics of each ritual action will depend, for example, on the situational context and on whom it is directed at. If it is directed at a sick person, then it is aimed at making them invulnerable to a medical condition, if it is directed at a disease, then at expelling and destroying the illness. Thus, for example, the ritual of smudging can be considered both as a peculiar way of expelling the disease with pungent smoke and as a way of protecting a patient by means of ritual purification; a healer can spit on a patient in order to make them *unappealing* for the disease and to avert evil (disease, evil eye, jinx), but spitting is at the same time one of the most widespread ways of expelling the disease. The expelling and apotropaic functions of ritual actions are often inseparable in the context of a healing process.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis of the actional code of Udmurt healing rites in accordance with the relevant way of achieving the goal has allowed us to identify a number of basic semantic models of Udmurt healing rites, which can be conditionally divided into three groups. The first group comprises actions which belong to the semantic model **contact**, the second group – **neutralisation of the disease, striking back the disease, repelling/expelling the disease, destroying the disease**, and the third group – **apotropaisation**. The motifs of the semantic models of the second group are the most widespread, which is due to the fact that the majority of Udmurt healing rituals of charming diseases away are based on the concept of the struggle between two opposing forces, which is most often represented by the *pellaskis'* (healer) on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by the disease-spirit / otherworldly forces. Although the division into models and motifs helps to identify elementary semantic units of the folklore text, it does not give a complete picture: one and the same healing rite is quite often presented as a complex of complementary motifs, which contributes to increasing the sacral level of the whole text. It is also important to note that the meaning of the ritual action is closely connected with all the components of the rite: symbols belonging to different ritual paradigms (and thus having a different plan of

expression) are often synonymous in terms of content, repeating simultaneously the same meaning in different ways.

NOTES

AFR – author’s field recordings

F. – file

FA UdSU – Folklore archive of the Institute of Udmurt Philology, Finno-Ugric Studies and Journalism of Udmurt State University

FDA UdSU – Folklore and dialectological archive of the Institute of Udmurt Philology, Finno-Ugric Studies and Journalism of the Udmurt State University

FE – folklore expedition

N – notebook

p. – page

RA UIHLL – Research Archive of Udmurt Institute of History, Language and Literature of the Udmurt Federal Research Centre, Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences

S. – sheet

UR – Udmurt Republic

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BIO

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