

## Linguistic Analysis of Fauna Images in the Ritual Superstitions of the English, Russian and Mari Languages

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**Abstract:** The objective of the study is to study superstitions with names of animals connected with rites of birth, wedding and death of three different languages: English, Russian and Mari. The research shows that superstitions containing names of fauna representatives are distributed as following: English 97 units, Russian 37 units and Mari 21 units. Superstitions devoted to rites of birth are presented by 12 units, wedding 51 units and death 88 units. In general 56 superstitions have positive meaning and 99 negative which is mostly connected with death prediction. The most popular animals are a dog (17 units in three languages) and a raven/crow (17 units in three languages as well), both revealing mostly negative meaning.

**Key words:** Superstitions, rites of passage, names of animals, superstitions, revealing

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### INTRODUCTION

Animals always play a very important role in lives of all folks. Relations of peoples with animals are reflected in folk texts: tales, legends, riddles, proverbs, sayings and of course, superstitions. In all three languages there is a great number of paroemiae with zoomorphic metaphor (Yakovleva *et al.*, 2015). The present study studies superstitions of three peoples speaking languages of different language families: English from Germanic group of the Indo-European family, Russian from Slavic group of the same family and Mari from the Uralic family. These three languages are languages of different structures and they present three different peoples with their own beliefs, traditions and rituals. The objective of the study is to compare these rituals represented in the superstitions.

Superstitions are the paroemiae which have a number of features such as: they are verbalized units in the form of sentences; their main function is a prognostic one; they appeared a lot of years ago and present the experience of the previous generations; they contain belief in something which cannot be explained with the help of logic and which is not proved by reasonable arguments (Fliginskikh, 2014a).

Traditions, customs and rituals always make a great part of everyday life of every folk. They cover all spheres: family, household, occupation, leisure time. But it is necessary to note that a lot of them are connected with rites of passage of a person from one state to another.

They are mainly pregnancy and birth, proposal and wedding, death and funerals. In his book "The Rites of Passage" Arnold van Gennep presents a classification of rites where he distinguishes four categories: sympathetic and contagious rites, dynamistic and animistic rites, rites which act directly and indirectly, positive and negative rites. Another classification of rites presented by Gennep (2004) is division of rites into rites of separation (preliminal rites), transition rites (liminal rites) and rites of incorporation (postliminal rites).

Rituals connected with these rites of passage determined the sequence of actions performed. The superstitions played an important role in these rituals having two main functions: preventive and prescriptive. On the one hand, they prohibited the performance of some actions preventing misfortunes. On the other hand, they give clear advice what to do to achieve what is desirable (Fliginskikh, 2014b).

Superstitions containing the names of animals are based on totemism, an ancient belief in a spiritual connection with an animal. From the earliest times people paid great attention to the surrounding nature, weather, plants and especially animals, their colour, quantity, appearance and mainly behaviour. People considered animals to be spirits of their ancestors their forefathers or their gods. That is why Mari people gave names to their children which were derivatives from the names of plants, animals and birds to save them from death (MARI).

All these facts force us study superstitions about animals to reveal their role in everyday life of folks and especially the rites of passage which were an integral part of social interaction.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

To start with, we would like to mention that superstitions are a sphere of research which is very interesting for the representatives of different sciences. For example, Sociology studies a concurrence between churches and superstition beliefs, the correlation between superstition and church attendance (Torgler, 2007), Economics studies superstition influence on the auctions in different economic environments (Ng *et al.*, 2010), psychology studies beliefs about superstition among different age and social groups such as university students (Sagone and Caroli, 2014), medicine studies superstitions connected with different parts of the body, like teething superstitions (Kapoor *et al.*, 2011).

The given linguistic research is based on the analysis of 95 superstitions in the English language, 36 in Russian and 20 in Mari. The number of superstitions is limited by the fact that we have selected only the superstitions containing the names of animals and connected with the rites of passage. For this purpose, we have used a method of continuous sampling in the following monolingual and multilingual dictionaries and books.

For the English superstitions: Multilanguage Dictionary of Superstitions and Omens in 2013, The Encyclopedia of Superstitions by R. Webster in 2008, books Superstitions: 1,013 of the World's Wackiest Myths, Fables and Old Wives Tales by D.J. Murrell in 2008, 8,414 Strange and Fascinating Superstitions by Cl. De Lys in 2005, Black Cats and April Fools by H. Oliver in 2006.

For the Russian superstitions: Multilanguage Dictionary of Superstitions and Omens in 2013, books Everyday Life of a Noble Class of Pushkin Epoch by E.V. Lavrentyeva in 2006, Black Cat with an Empty Bucket: Folk Omens and Superstitions by E.G. Lebedeva in 2007 and Superstitions or prejudices? by Yu.V. Scsheglova in 2007.

For the Mari superstitions: books Studies in Cheremis: the Supernatural by Th.A. Sebeok, Fr.J. Ingemann in 1956 and Mari Mythology: Ethnographic Reference Book by L.S. Toidybekova in 2007.

Quantitative and statistical analysis was used to reveal the dominating animals to count the superstitions devoted to different rites of passage in the three languages and to assess positive and negative percentage of superstitions in general.

The structure of linguistic analysis of fauna images is based in the zoological classification of animals from to the Free Encyclopedia Wikipedia in 2016. According to this study, animals are divided into vertebrates (incl. birds, mammals, reptiles, fish), molluscs (incl. snails), arthropods (incl. insects and spiders), etc. Using this classification and taking into account the number of the corresponding examples we divided our analysis into three parts: superstitions with the names of mammals, reptiles and fish, superstitions with the names of birds and superstitions with the names of mollusks, insects and spiders.

Further, we present a detailed investigation of a role of different animals in the rites of passage in three languages and cultures represented in the corresponding superstitions.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Linguistic analysis of superstitions with the names of mammals, reptiles and fish:** The first animals we usually remember and name are always cats. Cats are the most wide-spread domestic animals and pets. We have found six examples of ritual superstitions in English, four in Russian and one in Mari.

People believe that cats have multiple lives. Cats are usually considered to be domestic goddesses, preservers of the hearth warding off bad fairies. That is why cats can bring good luck for people. Among the Russian superstitions we can find the following: you should lock a cat in the new house for the first night in order nobody will die there (RUS). At the same time cats, especially sneezing cats, can bring good luck to the newly married couples or at least brides: it is good luck if a cat sneezes the day before the wedding (ENG). If a cat sneezes next to the bride, the newly married will live happy life (RUS). In spite of the fact that black cats symbolize something bad in many cultures they can bring good luck to the lovers in the British one: it was lucky if you met a black cat when you were walking together (ENG).

But cats were always symbols of black magic at the same time, assistants of witches that is why there are superstitions devoted to their "negative nature". According to such beliefs cats can predict or cause death and steal lives: a cat could steal a baby's breath and cause its death (ENG). When a dead family member was laid out in the house prior to the funeral, cats were kept well away to prevent them jumping on to over the body. Either the spirit of the dead person would be endangered, or else the next person to see the body would die (ENG). When going to sea for fishing it is a bad luck to see a

drowned cat. It is better to come back home (RUS). If a cat leaves a house and never comes back it foretells death (MARI).

Another popular domestic animal and pet is a dog. There were found five ritual superstitions in English, six in Russian and six in Mari. Dogs are usually considered to be guardians of the houses. Despite this fact most superstitions about dogs are connected with death. The thing is about dog's howling which sounds very ominous and resembles the howl of a wolf: if a strange black dog is seen by those attending a funeral, another member of the family will die (ENG). A howling dog is associated with death, especially if it is at night. A dog howling three times followed by abrupt silence is supposed to indicate that a death has just taken place. The direction of the dog's tail points out where the dead person lies (ENG). If the dogs howl or burrow at night there will be a death in the house (RUS). Dogs, horses and cattle anticipated, foresaw their owner's death and showed it by howling, bleating, roaring, night stomp, unusual fear, anxiety, etc. (RUS). If the dog howls there will be a death in the village (MARI). If the dog howls looking upward there will be a death or a fire (MARI). Dogs can also bring bad luck to a newborn or a newly married couple: if a dog runs between the newly married couple it signifies bad luck to come (ENG). Dog's howling at the moment of child's birth is a bad omen: the child will be unlucky in future, could die or become a quack, a fortuneteller or a magician (MARI).

At the same time dog's howling helped young girls in their fortunetelling about their future husband: in special evenings Russian girls went to the fence in the yard and said "bark, bark, a dog, bark, a grey wolf". If the dogs bark nearby, her groom shall live somewhere near to her place (RUS).

Other domestic and wild mammal animals as well as reptiles and fish are not very popular for ritual superstitions connected with birth, wedding and death. We can find one or two examples in the Russian and English languages. White horse, lamb and carp could bring good luck to the lovers: it was lucky if you met a white horse when you were walking together (ENG). It is good luck for a bride to encounter a lamb on her trip to the church (ENG). Carp will give luck to the lovers (RUS). Bear, pig, hare, lizard, snakes, pike, bat, mole, mice and rats could bring bad luck or foretell death: it's bad luck for a bride to see a pig, hare or lizard run across the road (ENG). A snake is an omen of death (ENG). A viper on the threshold of the house is a sign of impending death of somebody from the house (ENG) a bat flying into a house is a harbinger of death or disaster (43, 64) (ENG) if a mole burrows under a washhouse or dairy, the mistress of the house will die within the year (ENG). A sudden influx of

Table 1: Superstitions with positive and negative meaning devoted to the rites of birth, wedding and death in the English, Russian and Mari languages, containing the name of mammals, reptiles and fish

Variables	English		Russian		Mari	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Birth	Wolf 1					Dog 1
Wedding	Cat 3	Pig 1	Cat 2	Dog 1		
	Dog 1	Hare 1	Carp 1			
	Horse 1	Lizard 1				
	Lamb 1					
	Bat 1					
Death		Cat 3	Cat 1	Cat 1		Dog 5
		Dog 4		Dog 5		Cat 1
		Snake 1		Bear 1		
		Viper 1		Mice 1		
		Bat 1		Pike 1		
		Mole 1				
		Rats 2				

rats or mice is an omen of death (ENG). A fortieth bear was called fatal in Rus. You can kill thirty nine bears without any scratches but the fortieth one will revenge for all (RUS). If mice are biting the clothes it is a death of the owner (RUS). If a pike dabbles and splashes a fisherman he will live a short life (RUS).

But the modern superstition about the bats can also foretell girl's future: if the girl sees a bat on Valentine's Day she will marry a baseball player (ENG). It is also interesting to note that a necklace made of wolf teeth was a good protection for kids (ENG). We suppose it was because in many cultures wolves were believed to be people's ancestors and a part of foundation myths. The results of this part of research are presented in Table 1.

We have studied 24 English superstitions, 14 Russian and 7 Mari with the names of mammals, reptiles and fish. From the Table 1, we can see that there are only two superstitions about birth: one in English with positive meaning and one in Mari with negative meaning. There are 14 superstitions about wedding. The most popular are positive in English. The Mari language has no superstitions of this kind. The greatest quantity of superstitions is devoted to death: 29 in total, among which 13 are in English, 10 are in Russian and 6 are in Mari. The most popular animal is a dog presented in 17 superstitions of the three languages, all of which except one having negative meaning. And a dog is the only mammal animal in the studied Mari superstitions.

**Linguistic analysis of superstitions with the names of birds:** There are a lot of ritual superstitions containing names of birds so we devoted a special section of analysis to them. The most common general superstitions say that a bird flying into the house or tapping at a window predicts death. People thought that the birds represented souls of their relatives coming to take somebody with them: if a bird flies into the house or taps

or pecks at a window it is a bad omen; auguring death within the year to someone living in the house (ENG). The bird believed to be "spirit of spirit" it is a soul inviting soul to join him, meaning death (ENG). If a bird flies into a house it is a death of somebody in the house (RUS).

Some folk superstitions about cocks and hens are connected with death (one unit in English and two in Russian): cock crowing at night is said to portend a death in the family (ENG). If the cocks are crowing at inappropriate time, it means death (RUS). But there are also Russian and Mari superstitions instructing how to escape the death: you should lock a cock in the new house for the first night in order nobody will die there (RUS). Meadow Mari have a ritual of sticking a cock or a hen in honour of a dead person for ransom in order he would not come to take alive people with him (MARI). As some other animals, cocks were used by the girls for fortunetelling: the girls put their rings on the floor, filling them with oats and then brought a cock. They sang a song about a beautiful girl waiting for a dear boyfriend. The owner of the ring the cock will pick from will have a husband to her liking and happy marriage (RUS).

Doves and pigeons can foretell death unless they do not predict for the married couple (three units in English and one in Russian): for a dove to coo in the doorway foretells a death (ENG). Pigeons alighting on the roof of a house bring death, unless it is a newly married couple's house in which case they may bring happiness (ENG). If a pigeon flies into the window, there will be fire or somebody will die (RUS). For girls, brides and married couples, doves bring good luck and happiness (five in English and one in Russian): it is good luck for a bride to encounter a dove on her trip to the church (ENG). Dove flying into the room of the girl means wedding (proposal) (RUS).

As contracted to the doves, black ravens and crows usually predict something bad in three languages (three units in English, four in Russian, seven in Mari). In traditional beliefs they were considered to be birds of ill omen and death in part because of the negative symbolism of their all-black plumage and the eating of carrion. They were also considered to be assistants of witches as black cats. That is why flight or croaking of ravens and crows are associated with troubles, grieves and death: if you kill a raven, you will call your death (ENG). Russian and Mari people even created a series of interpretation to understand the meaning of croaking: if crows are croaking on the roof there will be a death in the house (RUS). If the raven comes into the birch grove to croak there will be the death of a man or one of the livestock in the village (MARI).

But there are also positive English superstitions about ravens and crows which predict wedding, a lot of children and happy life for the whole country: when a girl hears a cock crow while thinking of her lover, it means she will be married soon (ENG). Three for a wedding, four birth (ENG). If ravens living in the tower fly away, the royal family will die and Great Britain will collapse (ENG).

As the raven's croak, owl's and eagle-owl's hooting sounds ominous. According to the beliefs it predicts death (two units in English and one in Russian): an owl hooting or screeching at night means the death of a newborn baby. It can also bring an unhappy life to a child (ENG). If an Eagle-Owl is hooting on the roof there will be death in the house (RUS). But in Russian tradition it also may predict birth: an owl is hooting near the house, expect a newborn (RUS).

Another death predictor is a sparrow a very popular bird around the world (two units in English, one in Russian, one in Mari): to catch a sparrow and keep it confined in a cage will bring death into the house where it is kept, striking either the father or mother (ENG). If a sparrow flies inside the house, there will be news about death (RUS). If a sparrow flies into a window, one of the relatives will die (MARI). At the same time a sparrow can be a fortune teller for the girls: if a girl sees a sparrow on a Valentine's Day she will marry a farmer and will live a happy life on the farm (ENG). If you dream about a sparrow you will have a love (RUS).

There are also two death predictors in the Russian and Mari cultures: if a woodpecker is dabbling the house, somebody will die in the family (RUS). If a tomtit flies into the window, one of the relatives will die (MARI).

For the English culture these birds can foretell the future of the girls: if a girl sees a woodpecker on a Valentine's Day she will never marry. If she sees a tomtit she will have a middle-class husband (ENG).

The most popular bird for fortune telling for all people in the three languages is a cuckoo (five units in English, two in Russian, three in Mari). It can predict luck in love, years until the wedding day, hair colour of the future spouse, year of live until death: if cuckoo's call is heard from the east it means luck in love (ENG). On hearing the first cuckoo, the hearer should take off their right shoe and would find a strand of hair. Its colour would be that of their future spouse (ENG). The number of notes sounded by the bird then indicated the number of years until death (RUS). By counting the number of times the cuckoo cries, a girl can tell the number of years that will elapse until her wedding day (MARI).

Mari mythology represents a single woman, a widow in the cuckoo's image. It was also a representative of a dead person. Mari people thought a soul comes from the

heavens to talk to its relatives. That is why hearing cuckoo in some situations means fast death: those looking down at the ground on hearing cuckoo it will be dead within the next 12 months (ENG). If to hear cuckooing on an empty stomach, it predicts death in the nearest future (RUS).

As for storks they are usually connected with the birth of a child. "The stork came" is an every-day English expression to announce a new arrival in the family. That is why it is a very good luck to see a stork or if it nests on the roof of the house: if a couple see a stork they are sure to conceive a child and in the event that a woman sees to storks she will shortly be pregnant (ENG). If a stork nests on the roof, the house will get happiness, wealth and new children in the family (RUS). All the other superstitions with the names of birds are the examples from the British culture. They are presented only in the English language with the exception of a nightingale: if a nightingale is singing at the moment of birth, a child will pursue a musical career (RUS).

In different rhymes, the number of magpies can predict the gender of a future baby, wedding or even death: three for a girl. Four for a boy or three for a wedding. And four for death (ENG). As ravens and crows magpies represents souls of dead people that is why their view can be interpreted as a sign of future death: if a magpie were to sit on a roof or fly repeatedly around a house making its chattering sound it meant the imminent death of a family member (ENG).

Peacock's feathers can bring bad luck in all spheres (five units in English): a child will never be born in a house where peacock feathers are kept (ENG). Having a peacock feather in the house means that any unmarried female is destined to be an old maid (ENG). The cry of a peacock immediately under a window bodes the death of someone within (ENG).

Other bad omen meaning "no children" is a swallow: if a woman accidentally treads on swallow's eggs lying on the ground, she will be barren (ENG).

If to summarize, other birds-death omens are a whippoorwill (two units), a robin (four units), a canary, a starling, a single swan, a seagull for a sailor and a rook (two units): when a whippoorwill calls near a house it is generally regarded as an omen of death (ENG). A robin is believed to tap three times at the window of the room in which a person is about to shuffle off this mortal coil and should one be seen perching on the top of a house while singing its plaintive song it is a sure sign that a baby in the house will die (ENG). If a strange canary bird flies into your home, it is a sign of death in the family (ENG). If a starling settles in a particular house or building it is taken as a prophecy of death for one of the occupants (ENG). A single swan seen on a lake or elsewhere was believed a

precursor of death (ENG). If you are a sailor, seagulls squawking around your house foretell your death (ENG). If the rooks vacated their nests there would soon be a death in the family (ENG).

On the other hand, there are birds predicting future marriage life and a husband for the girls on the Valentine's Day. They are a whippoorwill, a robin, a wryneck, a thrush, an oatmeal, a goldfinch, a bluebird, a cross-beak, a peacock: if several calls of a whippoorwill follow in succession it indicates no husband at all (ENG). If the girl sees a robin she will marry a crime fighter or a sailor (ENG). If the girl sees a wryneck she will never marry (ENG). If the girl sees a thrush she will marry a priest (ENG). If the girl sees oatmeal she will marry a sailor (ENG). If the girl sees a goldfinch she will marry a very rich man (ENG). If the girl sees a bluebird she will marry a happy man but live a poor life (ENG). If the girl sees a cross-beak she will be constantly quarrelling with her husband (ENG). If a woman sees a peacock as she enters a park she will marry a handsome man (ENG). The results of this part of research are presented in Table 2.

We have studied 65 English superstitions, 20 Russian and 13 Mari with the names of birds. There are 9 superstitions about birth, 32 about wedding and 54 about death. Wedding superstitions are mostly positive and death superstitions are mostly negative in all languages. The most popular animal is a raven/crow presented in 17 superstitions of the three languages, most of which having negative meaning.

**Linguistic analysis of superstitions with the names of molluscs, spiders and insects:** Snails, spiders and ladybirds (2 units in English) were used for fortune telling. They could predict a number of children, name of a future husband, the direction of his house or if a man is dead or alive: if a lady bird landed on your hand or you picked one up it would fly off toward your lover (ENG). A snail placed in a plate of flour would trace the name of a future lover as it moved about (ENG). A spider was placed into the pot with convex slippery walls for a night. If a spider can get out, a person in mind is alive and will come back (ENG). Spiders, butterflies and black cockroaches mean happiness and wedding: A spider in a bride's wedding dress brings good luck to her (ENG). If a butterfly flies into the house, somebody will marry in the near future (ENG). Black cockroaches foretell happiness and near wedding (RUS). On the contrary, flies, moths and caterpillars predict death: bluebottles, a type of blowfly, were said to bring fever or death to a person on whom they landed (ENG). A white moth or a snake is an omen of death (ENG). If a caterpillar circles around someone's finger it augurs their imminent death (ENG). A fly flying inside the house in the winter predicts death (RUS). The results of this part of research are presented in Table 3.

Table 2: Superstitions with positive and negative meaning devoted to the rites of birth, wedding and death in the English, Russian and Mari languages, containing the name of birds

Variables	English		Russian		Mari	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Birth	Crow 1 Magpie 2	Owl 1 Peacock 1 Swallow 1	Owl 1 Nightingale 1			Crow 1
Wedding	Dove 5 Crow 2 Sparrow 1 Tomtit 1 Cuckoo 3 Stork 2 Magpie 1 Peacock 1 Robin 1 Thrush 1 Oatmeal 1 Goldfinch 1 Bluebird 1	Woodpecker 1 Peacock 2 Whippoorwill 1 Wryneck 1 Cross-beak 1	Cock 1 Dove 1 Sparrow 1 Stork 1		Cuckoo 1	
Death	Cuckoo 1	Cock 1 Dove 3 Crow 3 Owl 1 Sparrow 2 Cuckoo 1 Magpie 4 Peacock 2 Whippoorwill 2 Robin 4 Canary 1 Starling 1 Swan 1 Seagull 1 Rook 2	Cock 1 Cuckoo 1	Cock 1 Hen 1 Dove 1 Crow 4 Eagle-Owl 1 Sparrow 1 Woodpecker 1 Cuckoo 1	Cock, hen 1 Cuckoo 1	Crow 6 Sparrow 1 Tomtit 1 Cuckoo 1

Table 3: Superstitions with positive and negative meaning devoted to the rites of birth, wedding and death in the English, Russian and Mari languages, containing the name of mollusks, spiders and insects

Variables	English		Russian		Mari	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Birth	Ladybird 1					
Wedding	Snail 1 Spider 1 Ladybird 1 Butterfly 1		Black Cockroach 1			
Death		Bluebottle 1 White Moth 1 Caterpillar 1	Spider 1			
				Fly 1		

We have studied 8 English superstitions and 3 Russian with the names of mollusks, spiders and insects. There are no examples in the Mari language of this kind. There is one positive superstition about birth in English, 5 about wedding and 5 about death. Wedding superstitions are all positive and death superstitions are mostly negative in the two languages.

The results of the research show that the superstitions containing names of fauna representatives are most popular in the English language 97 units. Russian and Mari examples are much more limited (37 and 21 units correspondingly).

Superstitions devoted to rites of birth are presented by 12 units, wedding 51 units and death 88 units in the three languages. They are distributed among the languages in the following number. Superstitions about

birth: English 8 units, Russian 2 units, Mari 3 units; superstitions about wedding: English 41 units, Russian 9 units, Mari 1 unit; superstitions about death: English 48 units, Russian 26 units, Mari 17 units.

In general 56 examined superstitions in three languages have positive meaning and 99 negative which is mostly connected with fear of death and death prediction. Negative meaning is predominant in all three languages. We have 38 positive vs. 59 negative superstitions in English, 14 vs. 23 in Russia and 4 vs. 17 in Mari.

The most popular animals are a dog (17 units in three languages) and a raven/crow (17 units in three languages as well), both having mostly negative meaning. To demonstrate the results of the research we want to present the following Table 4.

Table 4: Quantity of superstitions with positive and negative meaning devoted to the rites of birth, wedding and death in the English, Russian and Mari languages

Rites	English		Russian		Mari	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Birth	5	3	2	-	-	2
Wedding	31	10	9	-	1	-
Death	1	45	4	21	2	15

Table 4 shows that superstitions with names of animals have both positive and negative meaning. Superstitions devoted to rites of birth have mostly positive meaning in English, only positive meaning in Russian but negative meaning in Mari. Superstitions devoted to rites of wedding have mostly positive meaning in English and only positive meaning in Russian and Mari. Superstitions about death have predominant negative meaning in all three languages.

### CONCLUSION

So, we can say that existence of animal images in superstitions can help to show the relations of the folks to these animals their understanding of nature and help researchers to reveal and interpret their way of life, beliefs and rituals.

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