

Binary oppositions as a way of representing the Slavic culture (in the context of the Russian proverbs)

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Abstract. The article deals with the binary oppositions used in Russian proverbs as lingo-cultural phenomenon that reflects the specific (mythological) conceptualization of the world, inherent in Slavic language cultural community. Author underlines the idea that through the oppositions, entrenched national and cultural connotations in Russian proverbs, a relationship between two semiotic systems, i.e. language and culture, is implemented. Based on performed study, author argues that the binary oppositions, reflecting the specific worldview of the native-speaking people in the era of early Christianity, associated with dualistic thinking of Slavic people, are based on religious and ideological opposition of positive and negative connotations, and go back to the general and the main contraposition of "sacred (positive) and mundane (negative)".

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Introduction

In modern linguistics, both foreign [1-4] and native [5-7], considerable attention is paid to the language, as one of the national-specific phenomenon, accumulating and transmitting from generation to generation the cultural experience, traditions, worldview of the native-speaking people, and the system of moral values. The ways of implementing mental-cultural fund of the nation in the language became recently especially important field of linguistic science. In this regard the phraseology is of paramount importance.

Fixed phrases represent particular national language material, which, on the one hand, allows one to discover the essence of language and linguistic phenomena through the prism of cultural and historical experience of the native-speaking people. On the other hand, fixed phrases are one of the ways of the national worldview perception, enabling linguists to ascertain worldview features through the comprehension of semantic and value orientation, enshrined in the language, as well as to specify cultural and national identity of the people and reconstruct cultural archetypes, retained their importance in the prescriptive and value system of contemporary culture [8], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13], [14].

The most structurally organized and semantically ambiguous fixed phrases, namely, proverbs, which are a kind of "mental" mirror of the Russian culture, provide plenty of opportunity for the study of popular culture characters. They are perceived as a manifestation of the people's ideology, national intelligence, national life, and national character, making extremely important and interesting part of the national culture.

The present article deals with binary oppositions used in Russian proverbs as lingo-cultural phenomenon that reflects the mental and cultural peculiarities of the Russian people. As known, one of the characteristic features of the natural tendency of the human's mind is the polarization of items, attributes, phenomena, and concepts. This important property of mental activity, i.e. the ability to distinguish, finds verbal expression in proverbs in form of opposition of verbal images, contrasting in their nature, revealing the contradictory essence of concerned image, the incompatibility of various aspects of the object or phenomenon, as well as the objects and phenomena themselves.

Polarization of objects and attributes, phenomena and situations, captured in proverbs, is based on the value concepts of society about what is good and what is bad. Many binary oppositions presented in the Russian proverbs are peculiar "relics" of the mythological outlook, which is inherent to Slavic language cultural community. They carried a symbolic meaning and had a dual nature: their innermost meaning was hidden in the "outward" sense. Symbolic schematization of reality was due to the specificity of the early Christian thinking, and was invoked by "the attempts of ancient man to see throughout the temporal and perishable the symbols and signs of the eternal, timeless, spiritual, divine" [15: 370]. Duality in thinking of a Slavic human, inherent to a syncretism of ancient era, is associated with his beliefs about the existence of two worlds (the higher, divine, heavenly, "eternal"; and the lower, earthly, "temporary"), has embodied in general and the main opposition of "sacred (positive) and worldly (negative)". This main opposition was realized in a series of more specific oppositions: right – left, white – black, light – dark, sweet – bitter, light

– heavy, us – them, close – far, good – evil, etc. that are correlated with the concepts of heaven – earth, top – down, holiness – wickedness, virtue – vice, good – evil, truth – lie, Christianity – unorthodoxy, and thus based on religious and ideological opposition of positive and negative connotations. Oppositions of each pair actualized not so much denotative senses, as evaluative components, and became a kind of articles of extremely positive and extremely negative assessment. *Bright, white, sweet, us (our), light, and right* were associated with righteous, holy, divine, and the true principality; all that was associated with these words received a positive connotation. *Dark, black, evil, bitter, heavy, and they (their)* were associated with all unrighteous and ungodly, with all that was "sinful", "reprobate" "untrue" and therefore had a negative evaluation.

The opposition of *white – black* is widespread in Russian proverbs. Originally, concept of black and white and their visual-sensory perception evolved in the opposition of *light (white) – dark (black)*. In Russian proverbs this pair expresses contraposition of visual sensations, as well as is a means of emphasizing the contrast of external form and internal content. External (material, earthly, low) is determined by the adjective *black*, expressing the meaning of "dirty, soiled" and having a negative connotative sense, while internal (spiritual, high, unearthly) is determined by adjective *white*, meaning "pure, spotless", and therefore bringing joy and satisfaction, being positive: *Snoot is black, but the soul is white; Dress is black, but the conscience is white; Work is black, but the money is white*. Sometimes a reverse situation is emphasized: contrast between the attractive appearance (+) and the bad spirit (-): *A white faced may hide a black soul (Eng. version: a fair face may hide a foul heart); World is white, though people are black; Shirt is white, though soul is black, etc.* Deceitful outer man (pleasant, beautiful, *white* faced, dressed in clean *white* shirt, etc.) hides an inner secret, a true sense, the essence: his soul is sinful, vile, vicious, hypocritical, i.e. is *black*.

It is assumed that the concept of white evolved by comparing light and darkness as the two contrasting elements of the visible world. Ancient people had a great respect for the holy fire and light; all that was associated with them, was covered with a halo of sanctity. Though, the light was holy not only because it is God's gift. Light is sort of living divine being. Divinities of fire and light held a prominent place in pagan beliefs of the Slavs. As the soul and life, so the private aspects of life, such as hunger, thirst, desire, love, joy, and anger were perceived by people and expressed in the language by fire. Light, as a symbol of something better, as a generalization

of something desired, always was opposed to darkness, as something worse and hostile. The opposition of light and darkness, transferred onto Russian ground from biblical monuments of Byzantine literature, was also religious and symbolic: light was associated with Christianity, the new doctrine and everything related to it; darkness was correlated with the paganism, unorthodoxy and ungodliness. Their contrast was even more stressed by correlation of the conjoining words: *white light* (the teaching that spiritually perfects the human, purifies him, gives a human a state of spiritual purity and holiness) and the *black darkness* (non-Christian doctrine, or ungodliness, leading to a state soullessness, wickedness, and depravity). This made it possible to judge white color aesthetically: white color as light (having a glow effect), bright due to its constant opposition to black (dark), could naturally initiate joyful, optimistic mood, symbolize the light, the life-affirming beginning.

In many expressions substantiations of *black* and *white* are used with the semantics of "good" and "bad": *He will make black out of white (or white out of black); One cannot make white out of black; Black does not stick to white, etc.* Most likely, the symbolism of black and white clothing is meant in the following proverb: *White is for wedding, black is for grief*: white dress is a symbol of joy and happiness, while black clothing is a symbol of grief, sorrow, and despondence.

Opposition of *sweet – bitter* comes laden with imprint of ancient ideas about the dual nature of the world. Sacralization of semantics of these words is also seen in the connotations associated with the correlative notions of good, holiness, goodness, truth (it is "good") and, accordingly, of wickedness, vice, and evil (it is "bad") [16: 49].

In accordance with the norms of Christian morality, human spiritual development is inseparable from the acquisition of true knowledge, the knowledge of divine truth. It is achieved through pains, suffering, self-torture, though brings good, perfecting a human spiritually; therefore: *Eat bitter and you will come at sweet; Bitter work brings sweet bread (fruit)*. The image of the fruit (sweet or bitter) symbolized the spiritual essence of a human: its purity, holiness, obedience to God, innocence, and, conversely, depravity, sinfulness. The disclosure of the symbolic content of the proverb *Root of knowledge is bitter, but its fruit is sweet* is based on the antithesis root – fruit, bitter – sweet (earth – sky, bottom – top).

Every Russian clearly understands the common sense of the proverb: *Talk is like honey, but doings are like wormwood*, which is based on the opposition of the "external" (talk) and "internal"

(doings). The essence of this proverb is revealed thanks to the antithetic members of the pair *honey – wormwood*, correlating with the opposition adjectives *sweet* (positive) – *bitter* (negative) (Compare: *sweet mouths - bitter heart*). Wormwood as bitter grower is a symbol of grief, sorrow, and has a negative evaluation; honey has long symbolized the delight, beauty, bliss, wisdom, satisfaction, and has positive connotations.

Opposition of *us – them*, widespread in Russian proverbs, which is one of the oldest in the human community, is based on religious and ideological opposition of positive and negative connotations. There was perceived as something unknown, terrible, coming from outside as the war in the image of a monster (their army, not ours). In the pre-Christian period the pantheon in large social associations could include both *friendly (our)* gods and *foe (their)* gods. This is explained by the integration process of diverse tribal gods. In one word, there was the inclusion of non-Slavic gods into the Slavic people's pantheon that led to the opposition of *us (our) – them (their)* in the context of ethnicity (their nation is not our nation). Ethnical content of this opposition persisted for a long time and was filled with a specific sense, relevant to a particular era: *When in their monastery, don't embark your rule* (Eng. version: *When in Rome, do as the Romans do; or whose region, his religion*); *Their is profitable, while our goes with a swing*; *Their trouble is a laughter, our trouble is a sin*; *our home scratches where one itches, their home does the opposite*; *Our horse is treated by flap, their horse - by stick, etc.* From the standpoint of social interpretation of this opposition, its first term (*our*) means belonging to a particular social group, whereas the second term (*their*) means belonging mainly to other particular social group, which, however, somehow correlates with the first group.

Our is someone who is close to you, like an alter ego, always one particular person. *Their* is contrasted to personality and someone else; *their* is a mass, crowd, nonhumans, some monster, a miracle (their people are outlanders). Throughout the Old Russian period, *their* remains unaware and intimidating, causing distrust; thus: *On the wrong (their) side even a child is an enemy*; *Another's (their) soul is the darkness*; *Another's (their) soul is a dense forest*; *You cannot worn into someone's (their) confidence*. In this regard, becomes clear the semantics of the following proverbs: *Our eye is a nice pal, their eye is an enemy*; *Our eye is a diamond, their eye is a glass*: (Eng. version: a man sees best with his own eyes), i.e. our eye (care) is reliable and hard as a diamond, whereas someone other's eye is unreliable a fragile as a glass. *Their* is something that

does not belong to us. In this sense, *their* may refer to the country, feelings, faith, people, etc.: *Our (favorite) country is a mother, their country is a stepmother*; *Our dogs gnaw, their dogs bark*; *Our sorrow is more valuable than their joy*; *Our bread is sweeter than their roll*, etc. Over time, hostility towards others changed to curiosity and interest in nations and people living nearby.

Thus, the study performed suggests the following conclusions:

1. Proverbs are national specific language units enabling us to perceive the peculiarity of the national culture, national thinking and interpreting the world.

2. Binary oppositions in Russian proverbs are one way to represent the Slavic culture; they are special cultural and notional means of expressing people's ideology, reflecting the specific (mythological) view of the world, inherent in Slavic language cultural community.

3. Relationship between cultural and historical experience of the nation is realized through Russian proverbs containing the oppositions of *white – black, sweet – bitter, us(our) – them (their)* that have enshrined national and cultural connotations.

4. Binary oppositions of *white – black, sweet – bitter, us(our) – them (their)*, reflecting the specific worldview of the native-speaking people in the era of early Christianity, associated with dualistic thinking of Slavic people, are based on religious and ideological opposition of positive and negative connotations, and go back to the general and the main contraposition of "sacred (positive) and mundane (negative)", having other semantic and stylistic disguise.

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