

DEATH OMENS IN THE SUPERSTITIONS OF THE ENGLISH, RUSSIAN, AND MARI LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Death and funerals are the last rite of passage in the life of every human being. Despite the philosophical attitude to death on the part of the old people, this rite means the end of life in this world and passing away to the unknown, undiscovered world. These two factors became the reasons why there are a lot of superstitions playing the role of death omens. The authors of the article compare superstitions predicting death in three languages: English, Russian and Mari. All the superstitions were divided into two semantic fields depending on the predicting object and the subject of death. Among all predicting factors it was possible to distinguish lexical-semantic groups naming objects in the first group, and naming subjects in the second group. The first field includes such lexical-semantic groups as 'Human body' 'Shoes, jewelry', 'House', 'Household appliances', 'Food', 'Inanimate nature', 'Animals', 'Birds', 'Insects', 'Reptiles and fish', 'Plants', 'Religious symbols', 'Funerals', 'Pathway', 'Numerals' The second field includes such lexical-semantic groups as 'Subject of action', 'Close unknown people', 'Close definite people', 'Definite people', 'Unknown people in general'. The biggest lexical-semantic group is 'Birds'. The research allowed distinguishing the universal and specific death omens for the three languages. Lexical-semantic groups Lexical-semantic group 'Insects' is specific for the English language. 'Pathway' and 'Human body' are specific for the Russian language. The universal death predicting omens for the three languages are cracking or sticking loaves of bread, disappearing or falling stars, howling dogs, birds flying into the house, black ravens, singing cuckoos, and sparrows.

Keywords: superstitions, death omens, rite of passage, the English language, the Russian language, the Mari language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Death and funerals are the last rite of passage in the life of every human being. Despite the philosophical attitude to death on the part of the old people, this rite means the end of life in this world and passing away to the unknown, undiscovered world. These two factors became the reasons why there are a lot of superstitions playing the role of death omens. On the one hand, it is the acceptance of something inevitable, and there are different factors predicting it. On the other hand, there are warning signs and signals.

Throughout time these factors and warnings became superstitions which appeared a lot of years ago and

combine the experience of previous generations. Superstitions present verbalized units in the form of sentences the main function of which is to make predictions unexplained from the logical point of view (Fliginskikh, 2014, p. 157). Superstitions are based on magic perception as a rule of life, i.e. the possibility of a person to control his/her destiny by performing some key rituals (Maple, 1972, p. 10). In case with death there are even instructions how to avoid death.

The presented linguistic analysis is based on 110 English, 80 Russian, and 40 Mari superstitions. The limited number of examples is explained by the limited field of research. To select the material for this purpose the authors carried out continuous sampling from the following monolingual and multilingual dictionaries and books describing customs and traditions of the folks, as well as interviews (quantitative research methods).

For the English superstitions: *Black Cats and April Fools* by H. Oliver, *Strange and Fascinating Superstitions* by Cl. De Lys, *The Encyclopedia of Superstitions* by R. Webster, *Multilanguage Dictionary of Superstitions and Omens* by D. Puccio, *The Story of the World's Most Notorious Superstition* by N. Lachenmeyer, *Superstitions: 1,013 of the World's Wackiest Myths, Fables & Old Wives Tales* by D.J. Murrell, *Oxford Dictionary of Superstitions* by I. Opie, M. Tatem, *Omens and Superstitions* by S.M. Brisher, *Superstitions of Victorian England* by E. Kouti, N. Harsa.

For the Russian superstitions: *Everyday life of a Noble Class of Pushkin Epoch. Omens and Superstitions* by E.V. Lavrentyeva, *Superstitions or Prejudices* by Yu.V. Shcheglova, *Multilanguage Dictionary of Superstitions and Omens* by D. Puccio, *Black Cat with an Empty Bucket. Folk Omens and Superstitions* by E.G. Lebedeva.

For the Mari superstitions: *Ethnography of the Mari People* by G.A. Sepeev, *Mari Mythology: Ethnographic Reference Book* by L.S. Toydybekova, *Studies in Cheremis: the Supernatural* by Th.A. Sebeok, Fr.J. Ingemann, Since the information about Mari superstitions is very limited and not properly presented in literature, the authors conducted field studies in the villages of the Mari El Republic questioning local residents (interviews as qualitative research methods).

The purpose of the research is to make a classification of death predicting superstitions according to the lexical units included which form lexical-semantic groups and to analyze them. Such analysis could help to find superstitions and images universal for three languages under study and to distinguish the specific ones.

2. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The superstitions with the meaning of death omen were divided into two big groups – semantic fields consisting of lexical-semantic groups. The first field includes superstitions containing objects or factors for predicting death. The second group deals with superstitions where it is more important who will die – the subject of death.

2.1. Semantic Field 'Death Predicting Objects'

Lexical-semantic group 'Human body'. The group includes the parts of human body as lexical elements of the group: 'hair', 'feet', 'nails', 'tooth', 'noseband', 'hands'. There are superstitions of the Russian language and one example from the Mari one.

There are Russian superstitions connected with woman's hair: part in the hair, hair on the forehead, hair whorl on the forehead. All of them predict the death of this woman's husband: *The woman whose hair grows on the forehead is destined to be a widow* (RUS). Child's hair are mentioned in relation to baptismal ceremony: *If the wax with baby's hair sinks in the baptismal font, it will die soon* (RUS)

Russian forbidding superstition *You shall not sleep with your feet toward the door – it's how the dead person is carried away* (RUS) reminds of the funeral tradition to carry the deceased people away from the house with their feet forward.

Another death sign is *black spots under the nails* (RUS). This superstition is the very old one and was connected with symptoms of serious illnesses.

The tooth image is found in the dream description: *If there is a dream of the tooth fallen out, the death of the close people is coming* (RUS). In this superstition teeth symbolize the family or the close people. The loss of teeth means the loss of people in real life.

The Mari superstition is more a fortunetelling: *On the New Year's Day girls go out to the barn and stick their hands into a gap in the drying loft. The girl to whose hand it seems cold will die* (MARI). Here we can find the parallel between the cold hands and the cold corpse.

Lexical-semantic group 'Shoes, Jewelry'. The group includes the superstitions of the English and Russian language with lexical units meaning things for people to wear: 'slipper', 'earrings', or 'ring'. For example, *Don't look for the second slipper when you have put on the first. It means the death of close people* (RUS). The slippers shall always be put on together. It's bad when they are separate like when close people are not together.

Lexical-semantic group 'House'. Here are superstitions of the Russian language, one English example and one Mari example. The group combines the words 'house', 'windows', 'stairs', 'stove' as parts of the house, and 'logs' as materials for the house.

Many Russian superstitions are connected with building or rebuilding of the house. There is Russian belief that the new house shall be started with wedding or there will be the death. That is why building, repairing and board for building could mean death: *Don't start building a new house in the old age not to bring disasters* (RUS).

Other superstitions are connected with funerals. In order the dead person could not find the way back home, the coffin was taken away from the house through the window, or sometimes the logs were taken out for this purpose. That's why new windows or logs drawn away could predict death: *If you see a dream of the log drawn out of the wall, there will be a death* (RUS).

One more superstition has the word 'stairs': *If you fall from the stairs, it means quick death* (RUS). And it's not a surprise as falling from above could be dangerous for human health.

The Mari superstition includes the word 'stove': *To see the dream of the damaged stove means the death of the host* (MARI). The stove is the symbol of home. No stove means no host.

Lexical-semantic group 'Household appliances'. This group is big enough in relation to the number of lexical units and number of superstitions included. The lexical units are 'clock', 'candle', 'mirror', 'broom', 'picture', 'ironing board', 'bed', 'axe', 'sickle', 'table', 'linen', 'pillow', 'shot glass', 'forks', and 'spoons'. The superstitions of the group are present in one or two of the languages.

Common superstitions of the English and Russian languages includes lexical units 'clock', 'candle', and 'mirror'. Moreover, the superstitions themselves have similar meaning. For example, *If a clock which has not been working suddenly chimes, there will be a death in the family* (ENG) / *It's a bad omen if a clock which has not been working suddenly starts working or if it chimes during the wedding of the funerals* (RUS); *Dreaming of a black candle is another omen of death or illness and, if a candle flame turns blue, someone is about to die* (ENG) / *Blue candle flame is an omen of death or frost* (RUS); *If a mirror in the house falls and breaks by itself, someone in the house will die soon* (ENG) / *If a mirror breaks – death when it comes will have no denial* (RUS). Superstitions about the broken clock and blue flame are talking about something unusual, and something unusual was always considered as connected with another world. Mirror is thought to collect energy of people. The more there are pieces of mirror and the sharper they are, the more living energy from people it takes.

'Axe' and 'tableware' are common images for Russian and Mari. An axe is a symbol of battle and death ordered by a deity (Cirlot, 2001, p. 22). That is why in Russian it was bad *to bring axe into the house* (it predicts death – RUS). Mari people use axe symbol in the fortune-telling: its sound always predicted death: *If before midnight on Christmas Eve a person hears an ax, he will die* (MARI). In Russian knives and forks are connected with death only if they are crossed: *You shall not put knives and forks as a cross* (RUS). The same is about spoons and forks. Such cross reminds the image of St. Andrew's cross (the X-shaped cross), the tool of horrible torments. Mari supersrition is connected with fortune-telling as well: *On the Wednesday night before Easter a spoon for each person in the family is put at the window. Whoever's spoon falls off during the night will die within a year* (MARI).

In English superstitions predicting death we can find the images of 'falling picture', 'falling ironing board', and 'bed'. The picture falling shows there is no place in the world for someone: *If a family portrait falls, it's a sign of death* (ENG). The ironing board closes the future way for somebody: *An ironing board may draw death if it will suddenly fall and lap the open door* (ENG). As for the bed, *If three people take part in making up a bed there is sure to be a death in the house within the year* (ENG). Here we shall remember the saying: two is company, three is a crowd. And this superstition can be connected with marital fidelity as well.

Russian images connected with death are 'table', 'shot glass', and 'broom'. The table was a symbol of gatherings and communions. All important events happened at the table that is why it was bad to seat or sleep on it: *To seat at the table means the death of a close person* (RUS). 'Broken glass means the same as broken mirror: *Shot glass cracking during giving a toast symbolizes death* (RUS). The broom usually consists

of a lot of pieces showing a unity or a family. That is why the dream of its falling to pieces could mean separation because of death: *The dream about broom falling into pieces means the death of a close person* (RUS).

In Mari superstitions talking about death we can find the images of 'sickle' and 'linen'. The fortune-telling using the sickle shows the separation of a person from the others: *At the end of the harvest everyone throws his sickle behind him. Whoever's sickle falls far from the others will die* (MARI). As for the linen, here is an example of parallel: the end of work means the end of life: *If a person comes when the weaving of linen is being finished, he will die* (MARI).

Lexical-semantic group 'Food'. The lexical units of the group include 'bread/loaf of bread', 'coffee', 'oil', 'porridge'. All three languages are presented.

The common superstition for three languages is connected with bread cracking or sticking as such happening predicts deaths: *If five loaves of bread stick together while baking, there will be a funeral* (ENG) / *If the bread cracks during baking, it foresees guests or funerals* (RUS) / *If big cracks form on top of the bread as it bakes in the oven, someone in the family will die* (MARI). Bread was always the food of body and soul (Dictionary of symbolism, bread). Loaves are symbols of fecundity and perpetuation (Cirlot, 2001, p. 190). That is why cracks could be bad signs.

Specific superstitions for three languages contain different lexical units. For English it is 'coffee': *If the coffee grounds in the bottom of your cup form a straight line, expect a death soon* (ENG). This superstition includes the element of reading coffee grounds. For Russian it is 'oil': *It is a bad omen to spill oil at the table* (RUS). For Mari it is 'porridge': *If porridge boils while cooking, there will be some loss in the family* (MARI). The two last superstitions show people's inattention and inaccuracy which could lead to unpleasant consequences in the past.

Lexical-semantic group 'Inanimate nature'. The lexical units of this group are 'stars', 'rainbow', 'lightning', 'field/soil', 'wind'.

The common image of the falling or disappearing star in all three languages means death: future in Russian and just happened in Mari. Stars were often considered as released souls allowed beginning the ascent to heaven and peace: *A "star of destiny", a guiding star for each person disappears when the individual dies* (ENG) / *To see the falling star means quick death of you or your close people* (RUS) / *If a man sees a star falling from the sky, it means that somebody has died* (MARI).

English superstitions connected with death contain the lexical unit 'rainbow'. Rainbows symbolized the bridge between the Earth and the Paradise. If there is such bridge, somebody is going to leave our world: *If a rainbow arched over a house, a death was to be in it soon, or some relation at a distance was to die* (ENG).

Russian superstition with lexical unit 'lightning' is talking about danger for a person. From ancient time it symbolizes punishment of humans by the gods from the skies (Dictionary of symbolism, lightning): *If lightning flashed and disappears in front of a person, it is a sign of quick death* (RUS). The superstition with lexical unit 'field' could have different preconditions talking about death: *To leave a part of field uncropped in spring means the death of the close person* (RUS). On the one hand, it could be created to frighten careless farmers to not leave the work done, or there would be no food for the family. On the other hand, uncropped field looks like simple soil where the deceased could be buried.

Mari superstition includes the image of wind: *If in the spring or summer the wind breaks and uproots many trees, life will be difficult for people and there will be many deaths* (MARI). Raging wind bringing a lot of damages, could bring death as well.

Lexical-semantic group 'Animals'. The group is popular for all three languages and contain such lexical units as 'dog', 'cat', 'livestock', 'mouse', 'rat', 'bat', 'mole'.

Among the beasts the most popular animal is a dog in death omens in three languages: there are different variations of the dogs howling which is death predicting: *A howling dog is associated with death, especially if it is at night* (ENG) / *If dogs howl or burrow at night, there will be death in the house* (RUS) / *If the dog rolls on the street, someone will die* (MARI). On the one hand dogs are animals which were first domesticated; they symbolize loyalty, act as guardians and considered to be 'man's best friends'. That is why they could feel death of people and especially death of their host (Dictionary of symbolism, dog). On the other hand, dogs accompanied the dead people on their 'night sea-crossing' from the world of the living to the world of the dead (Cirlot, 2001, p. 84).

Beside the dog, other domestic animals could feel and predict the death of the host: livestock in Russian and

a cat in Mari: *Dogs, horses, and other livestock felt, foresaw host's death and showed it by howling, bleating, roaring, stamping at night, unusual fearfulness* (RUS), *If a cat or a dog leaves the house and does not come back, it predicts death* (MARI).

But as for the cats, they were always a symbol of the black magic (especially black cats (Cirlot, 2001, p. 39), witches assistants, that is why there are superstitions revealing their 'evil nature'. According to such beliefs, cats can cause death and steal lives: *A cat could steal a baby's breath and cause its death* (ENG).

The image of rats and mice is connected with death as well. Rats were considered in association with infirmity and death and mice, in mediaeval symbolism, were associated with the devil (Cirlot, 2001, p. 271). It could be possibly connected with an old wife tale that souls of the dead live inside rats (Webster, 2009, p. 134). That's why any rats or mice appearance was a certain death omen: *Rats or mice leaving a house are also said to mean the death of an occupant* (ENG), *Mice chewing on clothing mean the death of its owner* (RUS).

The bat has strong associations with darkness and obscurity, as a creature of night. As it is visible at the critical period when day turns to night, it is supposed to have high relation to black magic and witchcraft and can pose as a symbol for terror, misfortune and even death being called Devil's bird (Dictionary of symbolism, bat; Folie, 1997, p. 353). That is why any meeting with the bat meant death: *A bat flying into a house is a harbinger of death or disaster* (ENG).

One more English superstition connected with death contains the image of 'mole' as the digged soil was compared with the grave) (Short Encyclopaedia of Symbols, mole): *If a mole burrows under a washhouse or dairy, the mistress of the house will die within the year* (ENG).

Lexical-semantic group 'Birds'. This group includes names of different birds: 'raven', 'crow', 'cuckoo', 'sparrow', 'dove', 'owl', 'cock', 'canary bird', 'magpie', 'starling', 'whippoorwill', 'robin', 'swan', 'peacock', 'seagull', 'rook', 'woodpecker', 'hen'.

People thought the birds were souls which cannot find sanctuary and feel free and calm, or the souls of the dead relatives who come back home to roam for a while or 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) / *If a bird flies into the house, somebody in this house will die* (RUS) / *If a bird lies inside through the window, somebody will die* (MARI).

The biggest quantity of superstitions is about ravens and crows. As it is known, these are different species of birds, but in people's beliefs their images are mixed and closely bound. Thus, the image of a raven is more fatal. Both the crow and the raven are generally negative symbols. They appear as messengers, 'talking birds' and are often companions to the dead (Dictionary of symbolism, raven). They were also considered witches' assistants, as black cats. That is why ravens' flying and croaking was connected with troubles, grief, and death (Glukhov, 2012, p. 283): *If the raven sits on the roof of the house and croak, somebody will die in this 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).

As raven's croaking, owl or eagle owl's hooting sound ominous. According to the beliefs, it predicts death: *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 hoots sitting on the roof, somebody will die in the house* (RUS) / *If an owl hoots in the village in the spring, someone in the village will die* (MARI).

Another death prophet is a sparrow. Its image is found in superstitions of the three languages: *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 into the house, there will be news about death* (RUS) / *If a sparrow flies inside through the window, one of the relatives will die* (MARI).

One of the most popular birds for fortune telling in all three languages is a cuckoo: *If you embrace a tree on which cuckoo is singing, you can tell how many more years you will live by counting the number of times the bird cuckoos* (MARI). In Russian and Mari mythology the image of a cuckoo is connected with the female principle and presents a lonely woman or a widow as well. Sometimes a cuckoo represents a human soul. Mari people thought that the soul comes from the heaven to talk to their relatives (Toydybekova, 2007, p. 131). That is why hearing cuckoo meant death: *Those looking down at the ground on hearing cuckoo it will be dead within the next twelve months* (ENG) / *If you hear cuckoo on an empty stomach, it foretells a quick death* (Rus).

In spite of the fact that a dove is a symbol of the paradise and the heavenly spirit, it can predict death a

symbol of soul of the deceased: *For a dove to coo in the doorway foretells a death* (ENG) / *If a dove flies inside through the window, there will be fire or somebody will die* (RUS).

Some superstitions about cocks and hens are connected with death as well: *Cock crowing at night is said to portend a death in the family* (ENG) / *If cocks crow in the village at the wrong time, there will be a death* (RUS). But there are superstitions in the Russian and Mari languages giving instructions how to avoid death: *In order nobody dies in the new house, a cock shall be locked inside for the first night* (RUS). Mari have a ritual of cock or hen sticking in honor of the dead person as a ransom in order he/she will not come to take somebody from the alive with him/her (MARI).

Lexical unit 'woodpecker' is found in one Russian superstition: *If a woodpecker dabbled a house, somebody in the family will die* (RUS).

All the rest lexical units are included into English superstitions. Magpies, as ravens, present the symbol of the souls of the deceased that is why to see them means 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). Peacocks are often considered bad omens. Its feathers are called 'devil's eyes' (Folie, 1997, p. 358). So they can bring death: *The cry of a peacock immediately under a window bodes the death of someone within* (ENG). Other death foretellers are robin (*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)), whippoorwill (*When a whippoorwill calls near a house, it is generally regarded as an omen of death* (ENG)), seagull (*If you are a sailor, seagulls squawking around your house foretell your death* (ENG)), rook (*If the rooks vacated their nests, there would soon be a death in the family* (ENG)), starling (*If a starling settles in a particular house or building it is taken as a prophecy of death for one of the occupants* (ENG)), canary bird (*If a strange canary bird flies into your home, it is a sign of death in the family* (ENG)), single bird (*A single swan seen on a lake or elsewhere was believed a precursor of death* (ENG)).

Lexical-semantic group 'Insects'. The group includes the lexical units naming insects, in particular 'fly', 'bluebottle', 'louse', 'moth', 'spider', 'beetle', 'bee', 'caterpillar', 'cricket'.

Common superstitions for English and Russian are about flies and bluebottles. Flies always symbolized agony, evil, world plague (Lebedeva, 2007, p. 477) and flies not sleeping in winter were a bad sign: *Flies coming into house out of the usual season can mean death* (ENG) / *The fly flying in winter in the house can bring death* (RUS).

Common superstitions for English and Mari include the lexical unit 'louse' which were the signs of illness and poverty (Short Encyclopaedia of Symbols, louse): *To find at least one louse on your body was an unmistakable sign of death* (ENG) / *A person catches a louse on a sick person and lays the louse on ashes sprinkled on the floor. If the louse crawls toward the door, the sick person will die; if the louse crawls toward the holy corner, he will recover* (MARI).

All the other lexical units were found in the examples of the English language. Beetles were called deathwatches so they could predict death (Webster, 2009, p. 90): *If the black beetle is crawling on the shoes or the lying person, it is a sign of death* (ENG). Bees meant immortality (Lebedeva, 2007, p. 480) that is why bees on the dead branch is a bad omen: *If a swarm of bees seats on the dead branch, its new owner will not a long life* (ENG). Moth is a Bible symbol of filthiness and extermination (Short Encyclopaedia of Symbols, moth): *A white moth is an omen of death* (ENG). Caterpillar, like a worm is a sign of death and decomposition (Short Encyclopaedia of Symbols, caterpillar). Besides, butterflies are considered to be the souls of the deceased, they have become a symbol for rebirth and resurrection (Dictionary of symbolism, caterpillar), so caterpillars come to people who are going to pass through this process: *If a caterpillar circles around someone's finger it augurs their imminent death* (ENG). Crickets symbolize hearthside and homeliness (Lebedeva, 2007, p. 484) that is why it is a bad omen if they leave the house: *Crickets chirping or leaving a house where they have been for a while can foretell death* (ENG). Ability and readiness to kill makes the spider a symbol of death and destruction. Granting and taking life away, it symbolizes life temporality and susceptibility in the teeth of death (Short Encyclopaedia of Symbols, spider): *If a big black spider comes into the house it is a sure sign of death*.

Lexical-semantic group 'Reptiles and fish'. The group includes examples from the English and Russian languages and such lexical units as 'snake', 'viper', and 'pike'.

Snakes can represent death, destruction, evil, a penetrating legless essence, and/or poison (Dictionary of symbolism, serpent) that is why they predict death: *A snake is an omen of death* (ENG).

As for the pike, it is believed that on the pike's forehead there is a picture of cross and lance pierced the crucified Jesus Christ, so the oike is a negative image: *If a pike splashes and spatters a fisherman, he will live a short life* (RUS).

Lexical-semantic group 'Plants'. Lexical units of this group are *cebe* 'garden', 'tree', 'flower', and different species like 'hawthorn', 'willow', 'rowan-tree', 'birch', 'oak', 'linden', 'hemp', and 'beans'.

The analyzed examples show that unusual phenomema connected with plants was considered a prejudice: *If the pot flower starts to bloom in winter, but it shall do in summer, there will be a death in the family* (RUS) / *If the tree died, people thought that the person who had planted it would die as well* (MARI).

Some Russian and Mari superstitions name specific trees. They are connected with planting and especially cutting trees: *A person planting a willow is preparing shovel (for his own burial)* (RUS) / *If you cut an oak, a man will die, if you cut a linden, a woman will die.*

One of the English superstition has the lexical unit 'beans': *The omen of certain death of one of the family members was to find white broad beans, as well as white bean plant* (ENG). Beans were connected with witches (Dictionary of symbolism, beans), and in ancient time it was forbidden to eat them as they were considered to hide the souls of the deceased. White flowers were commonly used at funerals, so white colour was associated with death.

Mari superstitions with lexical unit 'hemp' contain the element of analogy – sinking hemp means dying person: *If a bundle of hemp sinks to the bottom as hemp is being taken out of the water, someone in the family will die* (MARI).

Lexical-semantic group 'Religious symbols'. This group is a characteristic for English and Russian peoples as Catholic and Orthodox believers while Mari people were Pagans.

English superstitions include images connected with the church as a building, such as 'rattling church door', 'striking clock', 'sound of two bells'. All of them are definite death predictions: *If a church door rattles unusually, it is said that by the end of the week a corpse will be passing through it* (ENG).

Russian superstitions have such lexical units as 'icon' and 'cross'. It is usually believed that the cross protects its owners from evil, for example, *It is dangerous to swim without a cross. You may become a mermaid's victim* (RUS).

Lexical-semantic group 'Funerals' exists in the three languages. Here are such lexical units as 'funerals' 'corpse', 'coffin', 'soil and new panels' (as for the new coffin), and 'deceased'.

Both English and Russian superstitions are talking about the corpse of the dead. There are a lot of variations, but all the examples say that *If a corpse remains supple it is waiting for the next member of the family to join it.* The corpse shall be usually stiff. If it is not, something is wrong. One more common superstition includes the image of a pregnant woman for whom it was forbidden to go to the funerals: *A pregnant woman should not attend funerals, otherwise she could harm her baby* (ENG) / *A pregnant woman should not funerals and wear funereal garments not to invite disaster* (RUS).

Russian and Mari superstitions are connected with dreams. The predictions of death are soil and new panels: *If you dream of soil and new panels, you will bury somebody in the near future* (RUS), as well as the deceased in the wedding procession: *If you dream of the deceased who come to the alive person within the wedding procession, he will die in the near future* (MARI). Soil and new panel remind of a new coffin and a grave. It is believed that the souls of the deceased appear in the dreams to call somebody to another world, or they feel their quick death.

English superstitions foreseeing death are connected with meeting a funeral and laying the coffin. It is believed that such actions may the death come quicker: *If a person lies down into the coffin when he is alive, he anticipates his death* (ENG).

Lexical-semantic group 'Pathway'. This group exists only in the Russian language as a road or a pathway symbolizes life journey and the path for the soul to another world (Short Encyclopaedia of Symbols, pathway): *If the pathway appears for a sick person in a state of delirium, he will die soon* (RUS). Another superstition is an example of contagious magic, when you need contact influence somebody: *If you follow in somebody's footsteps, one from his family will die soon* (RUS). People say that by following the footsteps you can take somebody's energy.

Lexical-semantic group 'Numerals'. The numeral found in the superstitions of the English and Russian languages include 'three', 'thirteen', and 'forty'.

Numerals 'three' is one of the sacred numerals for many peoples. The power of 'three' is universal and is the tripartite nature of the world as heaven, earth and waters; it is man as body, soul and spirit; birth, life and death; beginning, middle, end; three time parallels: past, present, future (Dictionary of symbolism, three). That is why there are a lot of superstitions with numeral 'three' predicting death, for example, *If three people are photographed together, the one in the middle will die first*. During the ruling of the first knyazh of the Christian Rus Vladimir people started to light three candles at the funerals to lighten the path to another world for the deceased (Osipov, 1998, p. 276). So candles or other light in the quantity of three is always connected with death: *Three candles burning on a table are said to predict a funeral, but some people believe it means there will be a wedding soon* (ENG) / *Three candles burning in the room predict death* (RUS). It is surprising but in the English languages there were found a lot of examples with numeral 'three' predicting death: *Three seagulls flying together, directly overhead, are a warning of death soon to come. Unexplained knocking at the door, window, sick person's bed, or anywhere else in the house foretells death*

In ancient times numeral 'twelve' meant perfection and completeness, while numeral 'thirteen' was connected with the beginning of something new and unknown. It is symbolic of death and birth, of beginning afresh (Cirlot, 2001, p.234). Besides, the Lords Supper included thirteen people at the table, which made the numeral more negative, that is why it is called devil's dozen: *If thirteen people sit down at a table to eat, one of them will die before the year is over* (ENG) / *If thirteen people gather at a table, one of them will die soon* (RUS). Friday the thirteen is considered to be a fatal day. It is Friday which is an unlucky day, as Jesus Christ was crucified on Friday. And the numeral 'thirteen' intensifies such meaning: *You shall not wear black clothes on Friday the 13th, otherwise the member of the family will die*.

The religious implications of the numeral 'forty' are extensive. In Christianity, there are forty days of Lent, from Christ's forty days in the wilderness; forty days of resurrection, from Easter to Ascension. In the Old Testament, there are forty days of Moses on Mt. Sinai, and forty days of Elijah in hiding (Dictionary of symbolism, forty). As we can see, numeral 'forty' plays the role of a finishing one. In Russian there is superstition with the image of the fortieth bear which can finish the career of a hunter: *The fortieth bear is called fatal in Russia. You can kill thirty nine bears without any scratch, but the fortieth will avenge for all of them* (RUS).

2.2. Semantic Field 'Death Subjects'

Semantic field 'Death Subjects' divides superstitions consequently according to the subjects of death. There could be the person performing the action, his close people or some people in general.

Lexical-semantic group 'Subject of action'. There are a lot of superstition forbidding some actions which can lead to the death or cautioning the person who performs this actions. So the person can decide him/herself to perform or not to perform such actions. Such superstitions are connected with different spheres of people's life and exist in all three languages: *If you fall from the stairs, it means quick death* (ENG) / *You shall not sleep with your feet toward the door – it's how the dead person is carried away* (RUS) / *On the New Year's Day girls go out to the barn and stick their hands into a gap in the drying loft. The girl to whose hand it seems cold will die* (MARI)

Lexical-semantic group 'Close unknown people'. There are a lot of superstitions predicting the death of close people, members of the family, blood relatives. They do not name the definite person, but just inform about the close setting: *If a clock which has not been working suddenly chimes, there will be a death in the family* (ENG) / *If there is a dream of the tooth fallen out, the death of the close people is coming* (RUS) / *On the Wednesday night before Easter a spoon for each person in the family is put at the window. Whoever's spoon falls off during the night will die within a year* (MARI)

Lexical-semantic group 'Close definite people'. Close definite people can include definite member of the family: spouses, parents, or children.

Spouse: It is believed that the wife in a home will die if the pigeon's house is pulled down (ENG) / *To cut the birth in the dream means the death of wife of daughter* (MARI). In the Russian language there are several superstition predicting the death of husband and the fate of a widow. All of them are connected with woman's hair: *If the woman after washing her hair discovers that the part in the hair has shifted to another place, she will become a widow* (RUS).

Parents: 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)

Children: To cut the birth in the dream means the death of wife of daughter (MARI)

Lexical-semantic group 'Definite people'. Superstition of this group predict the death of some definite people.

Host of the house: There are superstition predicting the death of the host or the hostess of the particular house: If a mole burrows under a washhouse or dairy, the mistress of the house will die within the year (ENG) / *If somebody wants to build a house, it is necessary to have wedding there, or there is a prejudice that the host will die* (RUS) / *To see the dream of the damaged stove means the death of the host* (MARI)

Unborn baby: There are a lot forbidding supersitiotns for a pregnant woman which caution not to perform any action which can do harm to the unborn baby: *A pregnant woman shall not spin not to make a running knot for a baby* (ENG) / *A pregnant woman shall not step over the yield of earth (radish, beetroot, potato, etc.) or misbirth may happen* (RUS) / *A pregnant woman shall not step over a rope or the umbilical cord will turn round the baby's neck* (MARI).

Newborn/ baby/ child: *An owl hooting or screeching at night means the death of a newborn baby* (ENG) / *If the wax with baby's hair sinks in the baptismal font, it will die soon* (RUS).

Unmarried girls: *The unmarried gorgs were alerted that if they visit three funerals in succession, they need to visit wedding or next funerals will be their own* (ENG).

Bridal couple: *If the wedding dress is torn on the wedding day, the marriage will end with one spouse dying* (ENG) / *If during the church wedding ceremony the crown falls, the person above whom the crown was will die soon* (RUS).

Lexical-semantic group 'Unknown people in general'. This group of superstition tells about the death which is going to happen in general when the dying person is undisclosed: *Picture falling off the wall for no apparent reason might foretell a coming death* (ENG) / *If the noseband is itching, somebody will die* (RUS) / *If a man sees a star falling from the sky, it means that somebody has died* (MARI).

3. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of superstitions predicting death of the English, Russian, and Mari languages has shown the following results:

1. The biggest lexical-semantic group of superstitions predicting death is 'Birds' due to the number of examples in all three languages, especially in English (31).
2. Lexical-semantic groups 'Pathway' and 'Himan body' (except one example in Mari) are specific for the Russian language. Lexical-semantic group 'Insects' (except one example in Russian and one in Mari) is specific for the English language.
3. The universal death predicting omens for the three languages are cracking or sticking loaves of bread, disappearing or falling stars, howling dogs, birds flying into the house, black ravens, singing cuckoos, and sparrows.

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