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## On Objects and their Images: Some Principles of Semanticisation in Russian Riddles and Rituals

Every culture accords significance to objects, and consequently creates an overall ‘picture’ of these. By extension, one and the same object can have disparate meanings, which points to the distinctive ways in which a culture may semanticise the properties of this or that object. And the semiotic character of realia is often linked with their ‘physical’ properties in a mediated, rather than direct, way, so that this character *‘reflects the multiple links of an element with other signifying elements and the way in which the element fits into different cultural contexts’* [Tolstoy and Tolstaya 1998: 238]. One of the main analytical tasks facing scholars at the present time is to establish the principles and motifs according to which the ‘native’ properties of the object become transformed into culturally determined signifiers. This task is facilitated by the many studies that have been devoted to the ‘mythology’ of objects. From the time when ethnography came into existence as a discipline, scholars have attempted to go behind the materiality and instrumentality of objects and to see beyond this something of greater significance — the symbolic meanings of ob-

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jects, their essence in a deep sense, their connections with the spiritual world rather than with the material one.<sup>1</sup>

Given this general orientation, it is natural that the various scholarly works devoted to the semantic and symbolic functions of objects that have appeared over the past two to three decades have generally been concerned with describing the symbolic language applied to the world of objects. Such works have gone some way towards establishing the principles according to which objects are semanticised. But alongside successes, a whole series of problems has come to light. One of the most significant and obvious of these is the domination of study *in extenso*: that is to say, the search for meaning has above all been connected with the expansion of the field where the 'semantic' approach is adopted by scholars to appropriate and animate the world of objects.<sup>2</sup>

Taken to extremes, this tendency threatens to lead to the elision of what is 'material' in material objects, to a dangerous loss of contact with this. Attempts to tease out the symbolic language of objects and to determine this in isolation from its primary ('real') functions and properties often make the analytical structures in question esoteric, indeed metaphysical, in character, pointing to certain underlying tendencies to over-intellectualisation. The transformation of the material world into a set of symbols essentially dissolves objects, and deprives them of their primary function. The situation recalls, at its most pronounced, the poetic strivings of the Russian Symbolists at the beginning of the last century — compare the poet Osip Mandelstam's ironic comment: *'Russian Symbolists have arrogated to themselves all words, all images, and diverted them to a purely literary function. The situation that has resulted is very awkward — it turns out you can't walk anywhere, or get up, or sit down. You can't have your dinner at a table, because it's never just a table. You can't light a fire, because that'll turn out to mean something dreadful [...] All the household wares have gone on strike. The broom wants to go off to a witches' Sabbath, the pot won't cook anything any more, it wants to have absolute meaning (as though cooking weren't absolute meaning in the first place)'* (Mandelstam, 'On the Nature of the Word', quoted here from [Airapetyan 1991: 131], emphasis original).

As of the present time, Russian ethnographers and ethnolinguists have given most attention to two aspects of material objects, the *practical* (what things are made of and how they are made, their

<sup>1</sup> In this context one might cite the work of A. N. Afanasiev [the pioneering collector of the Russian folk tale — Editor], whose 1851 essay 'Religioznoe i yazycheskoe znachenie izby slavyan' [The Religious and Pagan Meaning of the Slavonic *Izba*] [Afanas'yev 1851] was perhaps one of the earliest attempts to investigate the mythology of 'ordinary' objects from the domestic setting.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. two collections of recent conference papers, [Veshch 1994]; [Chuzhaya veshch 1996].

utilitarian functions — in short, everything ‘material’ in the object), and the *symbolic* (semantics, ritual functions, the way things are understood in mythopoetic concepts). These two aspects of the object have until recently been treated in isolation, which is to say — if one bears in mind the unified perception of the world that characterised bearers of traditional culture themselves — in a not wholly satisfactory manner. To make explicit the link between the practical and the symbolic in the role of the object is, I consider, a means of moving towards a kind of question not really asked before: not *what* the object symbolises or means, but *how*, *when*, and *why* it symbolises this, in what manner it escapes from the bonds of its utilitarian function and becomes an organic part of the spiritual domain. It seems obvious that addressing the functions, material, form, texture, colour and proportions of objects — that is, everything that makes an object part of material culture and simultaneously appeals to human senses — is a way of working towards an answer to these questions.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in order that progress in analytical terms may be achieved, it is essential to consider, in particular, which physical, ‘native’ properties of objects, and in which circumstances, may attain signifying properties, and become the markers of the semantic field in question.<sup>2</sup> Here I should emphasise that in themselves objects have no semantic resonance (although they may become semanticised in the course of being manufactured, a topic that would deserve attention in its own right). The cultural meaning of things is formed once they are integrated into a specific cultural context, for example, a ritual, at which point symbolic meaning is assigned to this or that property of a thing. It seems probable that the teleology of the ritual itself lies at the bottom of the choice of properties that will carry a symbolic function. In ritual, an object is assigned solely the meaning and functions essential to that ritual. At most one or a few properties among the many that are ‘native’ to an object will become the basis for semanticisation. In other words, and as it may seem paradoxically, in every concrete ritual context the object will be, so to speak, ‘stripped down’, will become one-dimensional, flat; its semantic potential will be reduced to the minimum, to the aspects that do not contradict the purpose of the ritual itself. In this way, the semantics of the object are always characterised by situationality, by the fluidity of available meanings; it is the result of a kind of confrontation of something real, endowed with primary, ‘native’ properties, and a sign system of one kind or another.

<sup>1</sup> On the different aspects of the study of the object in anthropological perspective, see [Toporov 1995].

<sup>2</sup> On the principles of semanticisation see, for instance [Vinogradova 1994]; [Tolstaya 1994]; [Baiburin 1989]; [Toporkov 1989].

The signifying characteristics put into play by this situation, assuming that they are valid for a number of different objects, will generate a form of symbolic synonymy, which groups different objects together, and in turn generates secondary forms of classification, this time of an unstable and implicit kind. At the point when some signifier is activated in the ritual context, the objects associated with that signifier come together as an isofunctional series and can, if necessary, replace one another, without any difference to the final effect.

Yet, despite the apparent simplicity of the manner in which objects acquire symbolic meaning, the process still requires additional explanation. The areas I have in mind are, a) the explanation for the choice of an object as a ritual symbol of a particular kind (see [Toporkov 1989: 94]), i.e., why that particular object should be selected for a given ritual; and (which is still more important) b) why one particular property, or certain properties, of an object should be semanticised while others are ignored, even when it would seem that these others are also perfectly 'in tune' with the nature of the ritual. It is evident that the properties of a given object are arranged in a kind of hierarchy: some will come to the fore in a ritual context, and be turned into signifiers, while others are ignored, remain irrelevant, and do not attain cultural significance. As a preliminary, one might make the observation that the taxonomy of the properties of an object — its form, materials, texture, colour, proportions, weight, name, etc. — is probably determined not only by its place in this or that cultural context, but in the final analysis also by the extent to which these properties are graspable by the human sensory system [Toporov 1995: 28]. It is evident that the semanticisation of the object is connected with its *identification*, which in turn is founded on the properties that mark out an object, that make it 'remarkable'. It is therefore not surprising that rituals, given that the mobilisation of expressive resources is essential to their effects, should be accompanied by a heightened interest in those properties of an object that most powerfully stimulate the sensory system.

At this level, the riddle has much in common with ritual, since also central to the latter is selectivity in terms of the properties that are used to make an object mysterious/make it the subject of the riddle: some properties are assigned an identifying function, while others are simply ignored (carry no semantic load). What is more, the metaphorical character of the language of the riddle casts light on the mechanisms by which objects get turned into signifiers, and how, in turn, they become part of the metaphorical structure of the ritual.

Let me illustrate the contentions just set out by introducing two examples of the ritual functions assigned to one of the most semantically rich objects in East Slavonic tradition — *the besom broom*, which allows us to form a clear picture of how understanding the role

of the riddle can help us understand the role of semantic fields more broadly.

The first example concerns the rule forbidding pregnant women to step over a besom, which, if breached, would mean that the newborn had ‘bandy legs’ [Ivanov 1888: 38]. Evidently, in this particular context the most important signifier of the besom was considered its ‘banding’, the wrapping-round of the twigs of which it was made. This hypothesis is supported by a riddle<sup>1</sup> playing on similar characteristics: *Little Erofeiko is belted up tightly* [No. 3626], *Bound up, wrapped up, tied up, it jumps round the izba* [No. 3653]. Incidentally, the same motif (‘bandy legs’) is also connected with the rule forbidding a pregnant woman to step over a yoke [Ivanov 1888: 28], but here it is the yoke’s capacity to ‘bind together’ two buckets that is called into play. The same ‘unifying’ function of the yoke is emphasised in the evocation of it by the image of the *bridge* in the riddle: *Between two seas, over hills of flesh, lies a hump-backed bridge* [No. 3842].

My second example is more complex, since the integration of the *besom* into a ritual context is not so immediately obvious here. I have in mind the prohibition obtaining in Vladimir Province on burning a besom, ‘*or all the calves in the house will die*’ [AREM d. 65 l. 1], which points to a mysterious equivalence between *the calf* and *the besom*. While considering information from riddles does not directly point to the reasons for this equivalence, examining the metaphors in use there does lay bare a gradual, oblique process of identification between these two realia (which, one might think, had nothing in common).

Thus, if one looks at the metaphors with which calves are associated in riddles, one notes that the referent that they invoke is sometimes *the tongue*: *A damp calf lies in his underground stall* [No. 1534]. *In the izba under a bench lies a damp calf* [No. 1535]. *A damp calf looks out from his stall* [No. 1536]. [Answer:] — *The tongue*. It is well known that in various forms of paroemia, the *tongue* is metaphorically represented as a *hearth-brush*, as in the proverb, ‘*A woman’s tongue is a hearth-brush from hell*’ [Dal 1955: 271], and the riddle, *A pillar stands, and in the pillar a hearth-brush — the tongue*. In folktales about Baba Yaga, the Baba ‘*cleans out the fire with her tongue and not with a hearth-brush*’ [Vlasova 1998: 572]. The equivalence here between the *tongue* and *the hearth-brush* is part of a wider-ranging equivalence between *the mouth* and *the stove*, which is underlined by the perception of *the stove* devouring wood: *Near at hand bonny plump Matryona stands, she opens her gob and swallows a whole log* [No. 3332]. By extension, because of the ‘synonymy’ of

<sup>1</sup> The riddles cited here are drawn mostly from [Mitrofanova 1968].

the *tongue* and the *hearth-brush*, the *calf* can come also to signify the latter: *A damp little calf fell into an underground stall — The hearth-brush* [No. 3433]. Thus, the *hearth-brush* and the *calf* come to be in semantic affinity. And finally, the *hearth-brush*, because of the general association between *the brush* and *the broom* [SRNG 29: 202], and because of the shared action of *sweeping*, comes to be associated with the broom itself, and vice versa; hence the broom becomes party to some of the metaphors employed for the brush, including the calf.

It stands to reason that the model just outlined has hypothetical status, and is at most one of many possible models for the metaphorisation and semanticisation of the object. However, the important point here is that the riddle displays rich possibilities for the reconstruction of the process by which objects are transformed into signifiers, which are then integrated into the broader system of ritual and non-ritual symbolism. I should mention here that the ‘riddle’ image of the object is only partly connected with the ‘ritual’ image, because the language of words and the language of actions are not fully reducible one to the other. In this connection one should recall Roman Jakobson’s well-known comments (as restated also by Yury Lotman) about the non-separability of language and content: the content of any communication is also imbricated in the linguistic code, so that one is not reducible to the other [Lotman 2000: 159–60]. Depending on whether the object enters a ‘riddle’ context or a ritual one, its semantics also fluctuates. With reference to the riddle, one might say that not all the properties according to which the object is described will be invoked in ritual; and the same holds in reverse.

A final comment on the heuristic potential of the riddle: The riddle offers by means of the strategy of equivalence/identification a total classification of the world of objects, of its attributes and predicates, where everything is linked up with everything else, where everything sheds light on everything else, or, — to employ the specific terminology of linguistics — where almost every object that is the subject of the ritual (the referent) is, by being identified with its signifier, also identified with every other object. As an example, let us consider the riddle: *Behind the wall, the wall, is a lamb all made of bone* [No. 1506], where the same image (*the lamb all made of bone*) points to two different realia, at first sight totally unconnected — the *baby in the womb* and the *tooth*. However, ethnographic data indicate that the infant and teeth were indeed semantically connected (one has only to think of the belief that the infant’s first tooth was a sign that his mother had now become pregnant once more, or the practice of counting the infant’s teeth in order to calculate the number of pregnancies she would go through in the future [Baranov 2002: 19]). This in turn underlines that the metaphorical equivalence in the riddle just quoted is not fortuitous. One might cite in this connection

E. Kenges-Maranda's contention that *'the riddle and the solution to the riddle are intimately connected, and just so the different alternative solutions to one and the same riddle'* [Kenges-Maranda 1978: 252].

In the following section of this article, I will analyse the formation of the semantic and ritual functions of a number of utensils connected with the stove: *the pot-hook*,<sup>1</sup> *the stove-paddle*, *the poker*. Already superficially obvious is what they have in common — place of use and function — and this no doubt was one of the reasons for the partial overlap of their semantic fields in folklore and ritual.

The most widespread signifier of *the pot-hook* (also known as the *rogach*, *rogatinka* [horned object], the *emka* [grab], *viloshnik* [fork]) is its *horned* shape. *What are those cow's horns in the izba?* [No. 3456]; *The long-horn isn't afraid of the fire, he jumps right in there* [No. 3458]; *It's got horns, but it's no bull* [No. 3460], and so on. The same zoomorphic code is at work in proverbs, as in one quoted by Vladimir Dal': *Of cattle we have but the pot hook and flail, of victuals the screech-owl and crow* [Dal 1984: 64]. In Southern Russian dialects, this 'horn' signifier was the semantic motivation for the usual name of the pot-hook — the *rogach*. And from the riddle, the *horned* character of the pot-hook was transferred to the ritual context, where it acquired persistent apotropaic connotations: the pot-hook being understood as an instrument for scaring off everything 'unknown', everything dangerous. In Vologda province, during the marriage ritual, the parents of the bridegroom would go out to meet the bride wearing their coats turned inside out and carrying a broom and a pot-hook, and her 'friend'<sup>2</sup> would say to her, *'Lass, beware of your new father and your new mother, just as you beware of these,'* pointing to the broom and the pot-hook [Edemsky 1899: 141]. In paroemiae the same motif is met with, as in *Either a pot of kasha, or a horned hook to bash 'er! With a pot-hook in her hand, a woman'll see off a bear* [Dal 1955: 100]. One might also note the verb *rogachit* — 'to squabble, quarrel' (Southern Russia, Olonetsk Province) [Dal 1955: 100]. In the birth rituals, the pot-hook would be placed with its horns towards the stove as a way of purging the forces of evil; when she left the *izba*, the woman giving birth would use it to lean on, like a stick [*Russkaya izba* 1999: 339]. During funerals, the pot-hook would be placed on the spot where the dead person had been lying to stop him or her coming back [Ibid.: 340]. In Orel and Tula Provinces, the pot-hook would be placed under the marriage bed 'to keep off the evil eye'. Among the Semeiskys of the Trans-Baikal region, a pot-hook would be waved at rain-clouds in order to 'scare off' hail [Belova 1999: 635].

<sup>1</sup> *ukhvat*: i.e. not a hook for hanging pots on, but a double-hooked pole for pulling pots out of a solid-fuel stove or hauling them round inside this. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> Friend: *druzhka*: the bride's companion during the marriage ritual (cf. the bridesmaid in modern British or American marriages). [Editor].

The idea of *horns* is also linked with fertility, as in the lexeme *komolyi*, which means both ‘hornless’ and ‘infertile’ [SRNG 14: 235]. In the South where, it will be remembered, the *horned* character of the pot-hook was the basis for its name (*rogach*), the placenta would be buried below the place where the pot-hook was kept, so that the new mother did not become *infertile* [Bubnov 1893: 263].

Another crucial signifier of the pot-hook in the riddle is connected with its primary function — to move around, ‘hook’ [lit., ‘grab’], pots in the stove. *To grab, haul, reach for* are widely used metaphors in the riddle: *The bullock has horns, his arms are short, he grabs for food, but always goes short himself* [No. 3456]; *It’s got horns, but it’s no bull, it hauls out pots, then goes off for a rest* [No. 3460], and so on. Similar verbs and motifs connected with them, such as *grabbing, hauling, taking* were also developed in the extra-linguistic sphere. For instance, in Vladimir Province, so that the house-spirit didn’t escape when the owner was absent, the stove would be jammed to with the pot-hook [Vlasova 1998: 142]. While match-making was going on, the match-maker, before asking about the bride’s availability, would touch the stove with a pair of pot-hooks she had tied together in order to ensure that the answer would be yes [*Russkaya izba* 1999: 339]. And when the bride’s veil was removed, a pot-hook would be used along with a stove-paddle [Ibid.].

Finally, the ‘horns’ of the pot-hook were, in riddles, to some extent associated with demonic forces: *No body, no soul, one leg and two horns* [No. 3463]; *Two horns and a tail drag along a black weevil* [No. 3454]; *A crooked buffoon [belmes]<sup>1</sup> crept under a cooking pot* [No. 3470]. The ‘demonic’ features of the pot-hook, and also its links with the stove, whose ambiguous semantics are well-known, was one of the reasons behind the emergence of corresponding views of this as the attribute of other-worldly powers: witches were believed to fly about on pot-hooks, and Christmastide mummers dressed as bulls and horses would carry pot-hooks (this practice was found all over Russia); on the morning after the wedding night, the wedding guests would smear themselves in soot and go round the village carrying pot-hooks, pokers, and spades; and so on.

Of course, the pot-hook does not have a unique role in the examples cited here, and earlier in my discussion: other utensils associated with the stove, such as the poker, the hearth-brush, the spade, and the stove-paddle, are mentioned alongside. At first sight, this would seem to undermine the model of the transition of objects to symbolic status that I have set out, because these objects, although all connected with the stove and with fire, are to one or another degree

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<sup>1</sup> Now usually used in the set phrase, ‘Ni belmesa ne znayú’, roughly, ‘I don’t know a damn thing’ — here, a connection between foolishness and demonism is implied. [Editor].

different in terms of their construction and function. But one should bear in mind that each of these objects has its particular route to semanticisation and metaphorisation, which in turn can fuse them into a single governing image. So, for instance, the hearth-brush, which in some ritual situations is identical in function to the pot-hook, also appears as a universal attribute of the forces of evil, but thanks to a different chthonic signifier — its ‘hairiness’, which has a specially strong impact in riddles: take, for instance, *Hairy Mary drove all the lambs away* [No. 3447]; *We’ve a hairy guest in our golbets<sup>1</sup>* [No. 3443]; *A young lady came out from underground, shook out her hair, grabbed all the gold* [No. 3448]. For the hearth-brush’s link with the uncanny, note also this ‘homonymic’ riddle about the brush and the mouse — whose chthonic associations are ubiquitous: *In the hole, the hole, stands a young lady with a pole.*

And there is also one final trait, or rather function, that links the pot-hook with other stove utensils and unites them into one metaphorical chain. This is the hook’s ‘mediating’ function, and the ‘transportational’ function that is connected with this, i.e. the way that it connects the stove itself with the surrounding space, which two things are seen as opposed to each other in terms of the classic binary opposition ‘homely/strange’. In riddles about the pot-hook, the mediation/transport motif is often invoked: *She drove a bull into the yard, its horns are in the cow-shed, but its tail is in her hand* [No. 3757]; *I’ll take a horse by the mane and gallop into the flame* (the pot inside the pot-hook) [No. 3748], etc. The transportational function is also highlighted in the custom of riding astride on a pot-hook in situations where ‘rude’ behaviour is required. The metaphor of the horse is also associated with the stove-paddle, the hearth-brush, the poker, the shovel, but — and this should be stressed — it is only the case of the poker where the motif seems fundamental. Crucial to the play of significances here is the phonetics of the word *kočerga* itself, as will be discussed in more detail below.

*The stove-paddle* (*skvorodnik* [lit., skillet paddle], also known as the *blinnik* [pancake-maker], *emki* [grab], *pechalnik*, *chapelnik*, *kočerga* [poker]) carries out the same functions as the pot-hook: it is used to put pots in the oven and take them out again — in this case the usual object is the *skovoroda*, skillet. Significant in this context is the use of the same dialect term for both objects — the *emki* [grab]. The fact that both objects had the same function in real life ensured their synonymy in riddles, right down to complete identification in terms of the riddling metaphor: *I’ll take a horse by the mane and jump in the flames* (A pot-hook and pot, or a stove-paddle and skillet) [No. 3448, No. 3913]. The ‘horse’ theme is also found in ritual: at

<sup>1</sup> *golbets*: a kind of gap or cubby-hole between the stove and the shelves used for sleeping above [Dal 1955]. [Editor].

weddings, or during Christmastide divination rituals, participants would ride astride a frying-pan, acting the role of demons.

Continuing the theme of the connection between the image of the pot-hook and the stove-paddle, I should note that the motif of *grabbing* is also relevant to the latter. In the vocabulary of riddles, the stove-paddle and the pot-hook are an inseparable pair: *The crow flies into the bush, I grab her by the tail* [No. 3914]; *The magpie flies into the bush, Aleksei grabs her by the tail* [No. 3917]; *The magpie caws, she doesn't want to fly out of the bush, the owl screeches, and hauls her out* [No. 3919]. This motif is also played on in ritual: at weddings (as mentioned above), one act signifying the 'appropriation' of the bride was using the stove-paddle and the pot-grab to snatch off her veil.

In other situations, emphasis is placed on the 'inseparability' of the stove-paddle and the stove. This connection of motifs is evident in the ritual practised in Moscow Province when a cow was let out for the first time. The woman of the house would make the cow step over the stove-paddle, and recite: *'As the stove-paddle never leaves the stove, so may this cow never stray'* [Sokolova 1982: 16].

Although the stove-paddle, like other utensils connected with the stove, displays apotropaic properties in ritual, there is nothing in the riddle to indicate why these should be attributed to it, whether in terms of standard verbs (*run, pull, drag, screech*), nor in terms of standard images (*cat, horse, drake, nightingale, screech-owl, (cher-nets)*). It is natural to assume that the stove-paddle's connection with the stove contributed to the way that it was semanticised, and also its external appearance. Vladimir Dal, discussing the interpretation of names, cites the formulaic saying, *I'll find a reason: I'll grab the stove-paddle*, and comments that the stove-paddle is *'the peasant-woman's favourite weapon'* [Dal 1955: 200]. And in actual fact, cases of the ritual employment of the stove-paddle to fend off the evil eye are well-known. So, in Novgorod Province, the midwife would carry a stove-paddle when she took a woman giving birth out to the bath-house [Zelenin 1914: 753]; in Novgorod Province a woman giving birth would keep a stove-paddle alongside the bed, and what is more, the paddle could not be used for its customary purpose again until the woman had paid three visits to the bath-house [AREM d. 890 l. 100]. The 'fending-off' functions of the stove-paddle made it a fixture in Christmastide divination rituals at the crossroads: the girls taking part would wave around a stove-paddle and recite formulae to avert the evil eye, and so on.

At the same time, because of its relative 'neutrality' in terms of visible properties — its lack of horns, sharpness, and so on — the stove-paddle 'loses out' as a protective force compared with the pot-hook. It is also likely that the relative semantic 'poverty' of the stove-paddle

was to some extent determined by its external ‘inexpressiveness’, albeit not in terms of one other important characteristic — its name. For some time already, scholars have argued that the name of an object can — as the result of putative etymological links — become the basis of its semantics. So far as the stove-paddle is concerned, the association between its name (*skovoroda*) and the verb *vorotit* (to fend off) has acted as a prop to apotropaic associations. For instance, the connection is played out in the ritual of ‘averting’ hail, which went with a chant: ‘*Pot-hook, see off the hail, poker, chase off the hail, stove-paddle, avert-paddle (skovorodnik-otvorotnik), avert the hail*’ [Belova 1999: 635].

Thus, the name of a thing can sometimes predetermine its function in the extra-linguistic domain of a ritual as well. Anagrammatic riddles continue the play of sounds and semantics, form and content.<sup>1</sup> Here we confront a situation where the words of the solution to a riddle, atomised into different sound fragments, generate new images, which in turn can facilitate the integration of that object into the metaphorical worlds of the ritual. Hence, magpies, crows, cats, horses (*soroka, vorona, kotik, kon*) become widespread images of the stove-paddle, because similarity of certain sounds (v, k, s, o) generates an association of meaning.

*The poker (kocherga, dergach [poker], ozheg [fire-stick], klyuka, kryuk [hook])* is credited with extremely wide mythopoetic significance. The very name *kocherga* easily slides over to different kinds of stove utensil — it was used for pot-hooks and stove-paddles as well. In riddles, an important identifying, and hence culturally significant, feature of the poker was its *crooked* appearance. *The crooked dog (bitch), crooked horse, hunch-backed old woman, hunch-back dad, crooked tsaritsa* — all of these are frequent images for the poker. But, curiously, the rituals in which the poker was used differ from the riddles in terms of this signifier. In the ritual context, crookedness either has no place at all, or only a secondary one, pointing to its marginality as a quality. This is all the more surprising given that a considerable role is played by the crookedness of other objects. For example, in the case of the *yoke*, its ‘hunch-backed’ or ‘crooked’ character is an important descriptive feature that gets transferred over to ritual without hesitation. Thus, pregnant women were forbidden to step over a yoke, and the godfather had to bring water for a child’s christening without using a yoke — and in both cases the motivation for the rule was that the child should not grow up a hunchback or ‘*be bowed by crookedness*’ [Zelenin 1916: 1146].

With reference to the poker in ritual, it is not crookedness as such

<sup>1</sup> On anagrams in riddles and on the relationship of semantic and phonetic links, see [Toporov 1999].

that is subject to symbolic interpretation, but the cultural (mythological) associations of this, detached from any concrete objects. In other words, this is symbolisation ‘squared’, as it were.<sup>1</sup> In this connection, it is worth noting that the word *crooked* has persistent demonic connotations, as in the proverb *There are no lame or crooked men among the saints*, or the belief in Vladimir Province that *‘if a man is lame or crooked, he will not inherit the Kingdom of God’* [AREM d. 30 l 30]. Another indication of the negative connotations of the crookedness of the poker is the use of the term *kocherga* for illnesses that are connected with ‘distortion’: epilepsy, or *rodimchik*, as the folk term was [SRNG 15: 126]. In traditional culture, as S. M. Tolstaya has noted, ‘crooked’ signifies first and foremost ‘unclean’, otherworldly, dangerous [Tolstaya 1998: 220]. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the poker should become an attribute of supernatural powers when it moves into the conceptual and ritual sphere. Thus, in Western Russian spring incantations, [*zaklichki*], one of the most frequent motifs is as follows: *‘Spring has arrived on a crooked poker (or horse, or shuttle)’* [Ibid.: 226]. In the ritual of ‘Seeing off the *rusalka*’,<sup>2</sup> the *rusalka* was played by a girl with her hair let down riding a poker and with a hearth-brush slung across her shoulder. The *chulikuny* (demons) of Archangel Province were recognisable by the pokers they carried, and that they used to bury any children found wandering the streets at night [Vlasova 1998: 562]. One might compare the proverb: *neither God’s candle nor the devil’s poker* [SRNG 23: 74]. Further, on the negative connotations of the poker, one can point to various linguistic formulae linking the poker with humans, or to be more exact, their legs, for instance *kochergi* (legs), *kocherga* (a ‘lame’ person) [Ibid.]. In folk tales, Baba Yaga’s legs have the functions of a poker — *‘she pokes around in the coals with her legs’* [Vlasova 1998: 572].

The motive of *burial/collection* that crops up in ideas about the poker is, of course, related to its real-life function (burying coals in the stove and digging them out). This function was the basis for the metaphorical chain in the riddle, *The black loon<sup>3</sup> sped over the field and gathered up all the gold, but was never sated* [No. 3481]. This motif was further developed in ritual. In the marriage ritual known as *burying the bridegroom* girls would go out outside with the poker and dig away at the snow with it, building up heaps of snow by the houses where local lads were living [Ruszkaya izba 1999: 216]. In the Volga areas, girls would ride on pokers round the villages where their bridegrooms were living [Traditsionnye obryady 1985: 23]; beyond lake Onega, girls would try to persuade the lads they had chosen to

<sup>1</sup> On the links between the ‘native’ properties of a real phenomenon and its characteristics in semantic terms, see [Tolstoy and Tolstaya 1998].

<sup>2</sup> *Rusalka*: a water-nymph; they had a reputation for seducing and then drowning men. [Editor].

<sup>3</sup> i.e. the ornithological kind, the Great Northern Diver. [Editor].

marry then by circling their houses three times at dawn carrying a skillet and poker [Kuznetsova, Loginov 2002: 28]. In Southern Russia, women and girls would chant, during the ploughing ritual, words meant to scare off cattle plague: *'We will burn you with fire, bury you with the poker, sweep you away with the hearth-brush, stamp you down like ash'* [Vlasova 1998: 263]. In Vologda Province, the ritual for getting rid of cockroaches was for the woman of the house to ride round the dwelling astride the poker wearing only her shift and carrying the hearth-brush, and to chant, *'I bury and sweep away all the cockroaches we don't need, let's send them off to make their fortune'* [Ibid.: 67].

The motif of *digging up, dispersing, driving away* is also a very important part of riddles about the poker: *The field is full of chestnut horses, up jumps a blue one and drives them all away* [No. 3473]. *The pen is full of fair ewes, the wolf jumps up and drives them all away* [No. 3471]. In ritual practice, the verb *drive away*, and the practical link between the poker and the fire — the stove (i.e. its role of dispersing the coals) — no doubt facilitated the attribution to the poker of an 'aversion of the evil eye' function. Thus, before divination rituals were carried out, the poker was beaten on the tie-beam<sup>1</sup> of the roof to drive away the forces of evil, and it would be used to trace a magic circle, inside which participants could consider themselves protected from hostile powers [Vinogradova 2000: 331]. In Kostroma Province, a woman giving birth would hold the poker in her right hand as she walked to the bath-house, to keep off the evil eye [AREM d. 606 l. 1]. In Polesye, a poker would be put above the cradle at night, and signs of the cross made with it on doors and windows, to keep away any spirits that might harm children [Vinogradova 2000: 304]. In Tula Province, peasants would take a poker in their hands and make signs with it on the threshing floor in order to protect the sheaves of corn from the wood demon [Belova 1999: 636]. In the Russian North, the wood demon would be threatened with a *'poker in the teeth'* to frighten him and keep him away [Ibid.], and in Southern Russia, a poker would be placed under the marriage bed to keep harm away [Sumtsov 1881: 191].

One could proliferate examples, but it is already evident that the poker is associated with an ambiguous semantics, including both *appropriation/burial* and *scaring away*. This semantics is founded on the primary utilitarian functions of *burial/digging up* of the coals, as is confirmed by the emphasis on these in riddles as well. The apotropaic properties of the poker, like those of other kinds of stove utensil, are also strengthened by its links with the stove and with fire (as has already been discussed earlier in this article).

<sup>1</sup> Lit. 'mother-beam' (*matitsa*). [Editor].

Finally, the most basic metaphor of relevance to the poker should not be omitted: this is the *horse* and the ‘transportational’ functions related to this. One may assume that the heightened activity, mobility, constant ‘thrashing about’ of the poker as it moves in and out of the stove are relevant here. For instance: *Long Makar galloped over the snowdrifts* [No. 3485]; *I poke and poke again into the golden dish, I thrust into it, and then I haul back* [No. 3475]; *A tsaritsa rides, flashing glares from side to side* [No. 3486]. In the vocabulary of riddles, the verbs *climb, chase, go, jump, gallop* have central place, and these are at the root of the metaphorisation of the poker, which sometimes appears in the image of a *cow, dog, cat, crow*, etc., but most often in the image of the *horse*.

The metaphor of the *horse* for the poker needs special commentary, bearing in mind that it is not limited to riddles, but is also integrated into rituals. Central here is the custom of riding astride a poker in situations where it is important to emphasise ‘strangeness’ in order to drive away the forces of evil or to limit their powers. Thus, in Southern Russia, a pregnant woman would be harnessed to a plough during the ploughing ritual, and girls would gallop alongside on pokers in order to drive away ‘cattle plague’ [Zelenin 1914: 586]. On Maundy Thursday, the women of the house would ride round their yards on pokers as protection against the evil eye [Russkaya izba 1999: 217]; in the Volga regions on the same day, the man of the house would ride on a poker three times round the vegetable garden, the izba, and the fields with the words, ‘*Mole, mole, stay in your hole, or else it’ll come to pass, you’ll get a poker in the arse*’ [Traditsionnye obryady 1985: 51]. ‘*In order to scare the rusalki<sup>1</sup> away, girls would ride up to them on pokers*’ [Belova 1999: 636]; as mentioned above, in the ritual of ‘seeing off the *rusalki*’ current in the Volga region, a girl with her hair let loose and riding a poker, with a stove brush over her shoulder, would represent the *rusalka* [Ibid.] And so on.

The examples introduced here from ritual practice appear at first sight to explain the reasons for the frequency with which the horse and the poker are used as equivalents to each other in riddles (and in addition, the outward resemblance of the poker to a horse was of some significance). However, if one looks more closely at riddles, it emerges that part of the reason for the equivalence is also traceable to phonetics: the lexeme *horse (kon)* in the riddle is anagrammatically integrated with the lexeme *poker (kocherga)* in the solution — as in the riddle *Chernyi kon prygaet v ogon* (the black horse leaps in the fire) [No. 3479], where the word *ko-cher-ga* is encoded in the acoustic sequence.<sup>2</sup> It would be tempting to conclude that we have

<sup>1</sup> rusalka: water spirit.

<sup>2</sup> On anagrams in Russian riddles see [Toporov 1999].

a situation here where phonetics generates new types of semantic link, and acts as a basic text-building principle — that is, where the poker is identified with the horse in the riddle by means of the anagram and is introduced from there into the metaphorical chain of the ritual. But it would probably be safer to assume that phonetics and semantics have complementary roles, that the one reinforces the other, and that this process of mutual reinforcement is so persistent and far-reaching that the association with the horse transfers itself also to different utensils — the pot-hook, the hearth-brush, the stove-paddle, the shovel — which are close in terms of their function and sphere of action to the poker, but which (apart at least from *skovorodnik*, on which see above) have no phonetic link with the word *kon*. In this way, a synonymic and isofunctional series of stove utensil objects is set up, and transformed into a symbolic category, as a result of their ‘transportational’ properties.

The cases that I have analysed here where things are credited with symbolic meanings point, I think, at the very least to the complex nature of this process: although some rules are evident in the semanticisation of the ‘native’ properties of objects, all the same, much in this process appears arbitrary. In this respect, study of the riddle is of benefit, since it on the one hand points to some of the ways in which the transformation into symbols may work, while on the other providing a safeguard against possible attempts to turn the semantic procedure into a predictable and straightforward process — an algorithm, as it were.

### Abbreviations

- AREM — Archive of the Russian Ethnographical Museum, f. 7, op. 1.  
 SRNG — *Slovar russkikh narodnykh govorov* [Russian Dialect Dictionary]. Leningrad and Moscow, 1965 – (and continuing).

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