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Why Do(n't) We Believe in Omens?

The attitude to omens in modern culture may be characterised as ambivalent. Many of our contemporaries say that they do not believe in them, but act on some of them 'just in case': *I have an ambivalent attitude to omens: I don't really believe in them, but some of them do make me anxious* [Agrainel 2005]; *nobody believes in them, but everyone behaves as if they do* (AFW¹, f., c.25); *I don't believe in it, but it helps!* [Luceel 2006]. Acting on omens is often regarded as a bit of fun, or something that is not really necessary, and they are usually only followed when this does not require much time and energy.

Int.: Do you believe in omens? — [short pause] H'm... I'd say I believe more in prophetic dreams, but not really in omens. Well, perhaps I have a few superstitions... that is, I sometimes follow them, don't I? But... I don't believe that they come true. —

Int.: Why so? — Just for fun, I don't know. [...] That is, I always go into the metro through gate seven or five. I like those numbers, I don't go through the others. —

Int.: Do you always do that? — Yes, yes. Yes. — **Int.:** And you stand and wait till you can? — As a rule they're clear, but I do usually go through seven or five, and think that it's a good sign. Of course I will go

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¹ AFW stands for 'author's fieldwork'; the sex and age of the informant are indicated.

through other numbers, I won't stand and wait if there's a long queue, but if there isn't one, then I'll go through number five or number seven (AFW, f., 27).

In some cases the role of omens in regulating people's behaviour increases. In the interview fragment below a woman who works as a saleswoman-advisor in a furniture store is comparing her present job with what she did before. She used to work in accounts and had a fixed salary, whereas now her earnings depend directly on how much she sells. In her new work she cannot choose her best plan of action relying only on rational assumptions:

Well, I can tell you about how I trade. This is the very first time in my life when I've been engaged in buying and selling, and I've realised that there's no logic to it! Not at all, it's completely illogical. I was wondering what it depended on. I'm trying to increase sales, see? So I think, and... I study the client, and, you know, what's its name... [...] I can usually get a feel for anything in life, but I couldn't get a feel for this at all. And I still can't do for myself... that is, I can't find anything to get a grip on inside myself, catch it by the tail, if you see what I mean (AFW, f., 47).

She says that now she trusts to intuition and omens to do with sales, whereas when she worked in accounts she took no notice of them in her professional activity.

A belief in magic and omens becomes more acute in situations where there is risk [Mullen 1972: 66–72; Vyse 1997; Malinowski 1926 and others]. Tatiana Shchepanskaya has observed that 'fear and risk, stories about dangerous situations and omens themselves are more to the fore when someone is a novice or learning his profession, and they often form part of the rituals of induction into the job. Experienced specialists take risk and danger calmly and often sceptically' [Shchepanskaya 2006: 425]. Indeed, many omens are learnt during the training period, although a more significant role is played by the ritual practices that mark the stages of the novice's progress towards becoming a fully-fledged professional. However, the opposite can also be observed. In the course of his work a person is sometimes confronted by the insufficiency of his own knowledge and abilities, and becomes more cautious both on the practical and metaphysical level, becoming encrusted with 'traditions' and 'superstitions'. For example:

I never shave before I leave, and I tell everyone at home to take the rubbish out or sweep the floor while I'm away. You get like that over the years; a young driver's attitude is different. And when you realise that your friend, who left ten minutes earlier, is lying in his cabin with his load all over the road, it makes you think... [Dvadtsat tysyach].

Unfortunate events give rise to new omens, or change people's attitudes to old ones, making their observance compulsory instead of optional:

We have a tradition at EMERCOM now of always having a toast to a safe take-off and soft landing. You don't have to drink if you don't want to, but you must clink glasses with the rest. Once the lads forgot to pour out the regulation 50 ml, and the plane started to fall to bits seven kilometres up. A loading door three by four metres had fallen off. [...] After that no one's ever taken off without a flask on board [Vandenko 2005].

Colin Campbell explains this 'half-belief in superstition' in modern culture through a philosophy of 'instrumental activism', which assumes an optimistic and active attitude to life. Belief in omens contradicts the scientific view of the world and is frowned upon, but at the same time in situations where a person is powerless to influence the outcome, any activity, even 'ritual' activity, is preferable to inaction [Campbell 1996]. This explanation does not appear entirely adequate, as omens are followed not only in critical situations. Thus, in the interview fragment cited at the beginning of the article regarding the choice of gate, it is a matter of travelling in the metro, an activity which my informant undertakes almost every day.

Omens serve not only to regulate people's behaviour in risky or indeterminate situations, but also to convey significant norms and symbols, and likewise for communications within the community. In the example quoted, the choice of one of the gates is not random: 'seven' has a consistent positive connotation in modern culture, and the choice of five was explained by my informant by the fact that when she was at university the woman in the cloakroom used to give them tickets that were multiples of five when they were going to sit their exams, so that they would get a mark of five.¹

Many omens connected with smoking amongst young people (mostly girls) predict their relationships with the opposite sex. If a cigarette 'does an arrow',² it means that someone is in love; if someone drops her cigarette, it means that her boyfriend is going to drop her; if a hole is burnt in the paper of a cigarette, *the hole is a window through which someone will steal your boyfriend* (AFW, f., 19); if two girls light up from the same cigarette, *there will be one fortune for the two of them — they'll steal each other's boyfriends* (AFW, f., 18) and so on. Together with other stereotypical expressions and forms of behaviour, the omens 'create the conditions for expressing or at least privately acknowledging one's romantic longings [...] and play a consolidating

¹ Five in the Russian university system is the equivalent of a first-class mark. [Trans.]

² 'To do an arrow' (*idti strelochkoj*) is an expression used about a cigarette that burns down one side faster than the other. [Editor].

role in the girls' group, uniting them not only through common experience, but also through a common system of conventions (a system that not everyone has access to)' [Shchepanskaya 2006: 6–7]. Some omens require the participation of the other girls to interpret them or avert the predicted evil. Thus if a cigarette 'does an arrow', the girl has to guess the names of three boys and assign each to one of her fingers, then ask her friend to choose a finger in order to find out which boy is in love with her. If a girl has dropped her cigarette, then everyone present has to take a drag on it in order to neutralise the bad omen. Some children's omens also require collective participation, for example:

If two people say the same word at the same time, whichever is quicker has to say 'When will my wish come true?', and the other has to name the day and hour when it will (AFW, f., 19); If you step on a manhole cover you're going to quarrel with someone, and to prevent this someone has to hit them three times on the back (AFW, f., 15).

Omens which have more to do with real or symbolic communication within the group than with a choice of behavioural strategy in an uncertain situation are more varied. They include many personal omens which have come about 'by chance', and which are regarded more as a game than as reliable observations. The next interview fragment concerns the magic and omens practised in hitch-hiking:

A lot of people, as far as I know, but more out of boredom than for any other reason, draw all kinds of spells and magical symbols on the road, and so on, and so forth. [...] **Int.:** What do they draw? — You can draw an arrow pointing in the direction you want to go. Then you can draw a circle round it and stand in the circle. And so on. There are lots of different ways. You can even draw a car in the sand at the side of the road, and someone hitch-hiking, and then rub him out and draw him sitting in the car. — **Int.:** In other words, everyone has their own drawings? — Everyone has their own, I've seen lots of them. [...] It's a sort of game people play. That is, you can play it seriously, or just for fun. Lots of people play it for fun. (AFW, m., 31).

Omens thus have definite psychological and symbolic functions in modern culture: in particular, they help people to make decisions in cases where rational modes of behaviour are insufficient. But while they serve as supplements and alternatives to rational behaviour, they also stand in contradiction to it. Omens are commonly regarded as implicative utterances asserting a connexion between two events between which the relationship is not evident to the speaker.¹ What,

¹ As explained by the actor Boris Lvovich when taking part in a radio broadcast devoted to "superstitions", omens... cannot be explained. [...] An omen is something handed down from generation to generation.

for instance, is the connexion between low-flying swallows and the coming weather (*when swallows fly close to the ground, it's going to rain*) or spilt salt and personal relations (*if you spill the salt you will have a quarrel*)?¹ The assertion of a relationship of cause and effect between the components of the utterance, or a reference to expert opinion (*this is not superstition, this is what the doctors say; this is not superstition, it's psychology* etc.) may be an argument in favour of a particular utterance's not being an omen. For example, one of the students of the St Petersburg State Academy of Theatrical Arts Faculty of Puppetry does not regard the prohibition against bringing a mirror on stage as a superstition, but explains it by the fact that the mirror might distract the actor: *A mirror, if it is a real mirror, must not be brought on stage. But this is not a superstition. — Int.: Why not? — Because, the idea is, you look at yourself, and that immediately distracts your attention.* (AFW, f., c.20). Another student sees the same prohibition as a bad omen: *There was a very nice girl in our year, and she broke a mirror right on stage. Immediately afterwards two of us got chucked out of college. [...] If you start messing about with mirrors, you can expect the worst.* (AFW, f., c.25). Here the broken mirror predicts unpleasant consequences without being their cause.

The situations in which omens are consulted are stereotypical, so are the semantic principles of their construction, so, to a greater or lesser extent, are the utterances themselves. The stereotype also serves as an argument to justify the omen. If the saying is not 'obvious' this is made up for by its being an expression of 'traditional', universally accepted observations.² *You mustn't shake hands over the threshold — it's a bad omen*³ — and the category of 'omen' dictates how this assertion should be perceived and evaluated, as sanctioned by oral tradition.⁴

It is a sign that you belong to a particular group of people. They all do that, and so will I. And this gives a certain sort of enjoyment [Mosienko 2005]. At the same time, utterances which the speaker believes to be grounded in solid fact (for example, swallows seen as a sign of imminent rain may be explained as a result of the increase in the humidity of the air before a shower) may appear as omens to other people, if the reason for them is unclear to them, and these utterances are also commonly referred to as omens.

- ¹ And, by contrast, the comic effect of parodies of omens is based on the fact that the relationship of cause and effect is obvious. For example: *A popular belief: If you hear screams coming from a dark alleyway and enter it, the screams will get louder* [Kuzma Fomich 2005]; *Wet feet and a running nose mean that you are going to spend a period of time quietly in bed* [Oster 1994: 8].
- ² For folklore as the 'common knowledge' or 'common heritage' of a social group, the representation of traditional values, see [Bogdanov 2001: 47; Pančenko 2005: 82].
- ³ Or else: *It's traditional*. The concept of 'tradition' may be synonymous with 'superstition', but relate to stereotypes of behaviour rather than to verbal stereotypes, and it is more likely to prescribe than to forbid. Like superstitions, traditions may have a practical, symbolic or communicative basis. Thus the protagonist of the film *An Irony of Fate, or, Enjoy your Bath!* goes to the bathhouse on New Year's Eve not in order to wash (he has a bathroom at home), but because he and his friends have a 'tradition' of doing so.
- ⁴ Even individual, personal omens may be said to be traditionally orientated: they are often founded on the same principles as those that are widely known, and people have the same attitude towards them as to those that are generally received.

Like proverbs, omens may function like quotations in speech: ‘Every speaker understands perfectly well that every proverb he uses is a quotation, speech within speech, and he often distinguishes it by his tone of voice from the rest of what he is saying. Proverbs are cited verbatim, but are unlike other quotations in that they have no author to whom they can be attributed’ [Jakobson 1996: 97]; ‘When a proverb is used, the question of truthfulness is in abeyance: a person is not speaking *in propria persona*, but with reference to the experience of others, which is thereby objectivised [...] The very function of a proverb is to stand outside the opposition between truth and falsehood’ [Nikolaeva 1994: 154–155]. Omens may thus be included among epistemic modal utterances, where the function of the modal operator (‘they say’, ‘it is believed’) is taken over by the genre. Omens may be understood as true utterances if the hearer believes that the omen in question is more or less generally known: it is true that *if you spill the salt you will have a quarrel*; it is not true that *if you spill the salt you will meet somebody*. One may trust information obtained from other people, one may treat it with scepticism, or one may ignore it; our contemporaries display a similar ambivalent attitude towards omens.

It would seem that ‘superstitious’ observations ought to be contradicted by the experience of life, but the wide scope for interpretation means that omens are practically invulnerable to experience. Tatiana Tsivyan, in her discussion of rules and omens in Rumanian folklore, notes a particular attitude to such texts: for someone inside the tradition, ‘it is pointless to verify the truth of a rule by experience; he does not need such experience, or can at least do without it. Furthermore, experience may diverge from the rule or even contradict it without being held to disprove this [...] Here if a spoon left in a pot causes insomnia in a ratio of 1:10 instances, it is the nine instances of “divergence” which will be accidental, and the rule will remain incontrovertible’ [Tsivyan 1985: 174]. She explains this attitude towards rules and omens by appealing to such concepts as the ‘primordial mentality’ and ‘archetypical model of the world’. However, this sort of attitude to ‘superstitious rules’ is characteristic not only of ‘traditional’ peasant culture but also of modern urban culture, and may be explained by the semiotic possibilities for interpreting the omen.

An omen assumes that the events which constitute its components are separated either in time or space.¹ This means that anyone who

¹ In time, in the case of predictive omens (*if you trip up, you will have bad luck*) and in space, in the case of interpretative ones (*if your ears are burning, someone’s talking about you*) (O. B. Khristoforova’s terminology, [Khristoforova 1998]). ‘It might be said that fate poses a riddle, and life solves it later. The meaning of the riddle becomes clear only after a certain passage of time. This temporal and semantic gap between the event and what it foretells is a necessary element of an omen’ [Toporkov 1998: 38].

wants to interpret any particular events as interconnected always has a range of significant events in the recent past to choose from, for example: *When tourists find bad weather on their route, they usually look for someone to blame. This may be someone who has not packed his rucksack properly, has brought an umbrella, or has left some important item behind* [Shumov, Abankina 2003: 107]. The models for interpreting what has happened may also vary, as in the following example (which relates to the erection of a monument to Lyudmila Gurachenko): *If you put up a monument to someone while they're still alive, they'll soon die* (AFW, f., 40) — *On the contrary, they'll have a long life: a monument lasts for a long time* (m., c.70). As Mikhail Lurye has shown concerning the interpretation of dreams, 'the majority of dreams [...] have greater semiotic potential than an emblem conceived in the abstract with a significance prescribed by an actual event;' the choice of 'what is meant' 'is not confined to a fixed semantic spectrum and allows all kinds of private — individual or adventitious — interpretations and to a large extent is determined by what happens next' [Lurye 2001: 36–37]. These observations are likewise totally applicable to omens, which are often interpreted in a most unexpected manner: *Finding a coin means success in hitch-hiking. This has been tested many times in different countries, including Belarus. Once we found a watch on the Kharkov ring road and immediately got a lift as far as the Dnieper, and the driver gave us chebureki¹ to eat. It wasn't a coin, but then — time is money:)* [Incopolis 2006]. Even diametrically opposed events may be used to prove that omens 'work': *When newbies get a lift quickly, they say that newbies have good luck, and when they have to wait, they say that the road is testing them* (hitch-hiking) (AFW, m., 23).

This property of omens — a wide range of interpretations of events, even including those that are opposite in their meaning and evaluation — is also characteristic of proverbs: for almost every proverb one can find another, opposite in meaning (for example: *A wife is like a straw mat, the fresher the better* and *A wife is like a saucepan, the older the better*). G. L. Permyakov explains this property of proverbs by saying that they are 'situation markers' and that 'situations may be very different, and even completely opposed to each other;' 'you should never try to prove anything with proverbs, because that way you can "prove" absolutely anything' [Permyakov 1988: 30].

Thanks to their status as common ('folkloric') knowledge, omens may also be used rhetorically,² as a means of expressing and justifying individual expectations or evaluations. People use omens, for

¹ A type of deep-fried pastry. [Trans.].

² Omens implicitly contain an appeal to authority, which is a means of contextual argumentation [Ivin 2004].

example, as a means of ‘programming’ themselves or those about them to look forward to something good:

That means money [a large lump of snow has just fallen off the roof] — it’s a popular omen. — *Int.*: Is there such an omen? — Of course falling snow means money. I don’t know about you, but it certainly does for me. Everything means money. It’s the principle by which I live. — Q: Everything for you means money? — My grandma would come out onto the porch of our country cottage: ‘Oh, my knee’s aching!’ And I would say: ‘Grandma, that means money!’ She would be so pleased! Can’t you imagine how much sustenance people get out of positive emotions? (AFW, f., 39).

The following variations on the omen of the first child born in a maternity home are taken from articles in the mass media:

On the first day after its opening a boy was born in the maternity home on prospekt Pobedy at quarter past three in the afternoon. The doctors regard this as a good sign. They say that if the first one to be born was a boy, then everything will be alright: the home will have someone to take care of it [Ishmukhametova, Khorovinkin 2009]; During the first hours of the new year five girls were born at the same time in the maternity home at Kyzylordinsk; this presages a calm and peaceful year [Kholodnyi priyom]; A good omen for the RKB maternity home, which has just reopened after extensive repairs — three pairs of twins born in the space of two days [Khoroshee pribavlenie].

Whoever is born during the first hours or days of the maternity home’s operation, boys, girls or twins, journalists will follow the home’s staff in interpreting the event as a good omen, in accordance with the positive style of articles about the opening of medical facilities.

The ambivalent attitude towards omens in modern culture is thus the result of the special status of these texts as known to all. In particular social and psychological conditions their role increases, and their semiotic potential means that they are applicable to practically any situation in life.

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