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If You Cannot Whisper: The Performative Language of Magical Spells

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Meaning is not primarily what a word has; it is something a word does. The basis of much Slavic folk wisdom is a belief in the inherent power of words: some utterances are taboo, others sacred. Still more words are the province of magic, a culturally contextual conceptual system within which spells, curses, and oaths are the primary vehicles utilized by a practitioner seeking to affect the world around him/her. An analysis of Austin’s and Levinson’s theories of the performative aspects of linguistic utterances can provide an explanation of how folkloric practitioners empowered their spells with conjoined magical words and performative ritual actions to shape and alter reality through whispered spells. Magical words in Slavic practice are not merely tools by which they express meaning; they are the means by which spell-casters make manifest that meaning.

Working Magic

Magic is a conceptual system within which spells, curses, and oaths are the primary vehicles through which a practitioner seeks to affect the world around him/her. The term “spell” is an umbrella under which beneficent and maleficent intentions separate into spells (those cast by someone with paranormal capabilities), curses (often times cast by said practitioners, but also in the province of “ordinary” people), and oaths (promises and verbal insults).

Spells, curses and oaths are the tools of magical practice. The waving of wands, the use of sympathetic magical practices and contagious magical practices are the common Western cultural perceptions of spell casting. Starhawk’s assertion is that none of these tools are necessary, for “to work magic, I need a basic belief in my ability to do things and cause things to happen.” (1979:111) The language of magic, across cultures, consists of symbols and images. To cast a spell is to project energy through a symbol. (Starhawk 1979)

One of the most often cited magical references in anthropology is Bronislaw Malinowski’s Magic, Science, and Religion. (1948) For him, culture’s magical language brought about the production of supernatural effects in and for the members who heard them. The words gain power if uttered in the context of action. (Tambiah 1968) Rituals
employ a number of verbal art forms, and Malinowski felt these words were equivalent to actions.

The role of a spell is culturally contextual. Outside that context the spell itself is meaningless. (Tambiah 1968) For Slavs, the spell or curse itself manifests in a myriad of ways. Spells are a representation of the magical act, a formation in utterance of an invisible cognitive event invoking supernatural intervention, yet the formulaic utterance of a spell or curse can also act as a key that releases the force intended by the speech act itself.

**Whispering**

True enchanters normally whispered spells and referred to them as “sent on the wind.” (Kmietowicz 1982:72) An old Polish proverb advises, “If you cannot whisper, you will not drink,” meaning that if the architect of the spell is not successful, i.e. if they cannot successfully whisper a spell, they will not receive payment, and, therefore, will have nothing to drink. (Kmietowicz 1982) The belief in the power of the word was so pervasive among Slavs that they avoided pronouncing some word so as not to provoke the undesired action. Taboo words in their languages were more common than magical words.

There are specific conditions for casting a spell in Slavic magic practice. All enchantments must occur in silence and in hiding, thus the proclivity for whispering. (Kmietowicz 1982) Most of the Slavic words used to refer to a spell derive from roots that mean “word, speaking, or whispering.” (Ryan 1999:310-311) It is the act of casting that, in concert with the actual words used, make a charm magical. The *sheptun*/szepcze (the one who whispers) waits until there is a wind blowing in the direction of his victim, asks his clients for a handful of earth, snow, or dust, and throws this into the wind in the direction of his victim. The practice was so widespread that in 1598 Boris Godunov, on becoming tsar of Russia, “enacted an oath from those in his service that they would not by means of magic send any evil upon him by the wind.” (Ryan 1999:413) Interestingly, the Russian word for epidemic means “something carried on the wind.” (Ryan 1999:35)

**To talk is to act**

“Language is not a neutral entity. It is a thousand ways biased.” (Bolinger 1980:68) Language consists of more than words; it includes the various forms of delivery of those words. All speech acts change, in some way, the conditions that exist in the world. (Wardaugh 1986)

In his landmark 1962 work *How to Do Things With Words* J.L. Austin defines the types of performative verbal utterances. Locutionary speech acts are simply the utterance of sounds that both the speaker and the listener know to have meaning. Illocutionary
speech acts are locutionary acts that invoke a conventional force, that is, they do something in the saying: asking a question, making an identification, giving a description. Perlocutionary speech acts are illocutionary utterances that elicit responses in the listener; these acts do something by the very act of saying them, or, according to Levinson, “the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects being special to the circumstances of the utterance.” (1983:236)

Like the act of stating "I now pronounce you husband and wife," or "you are under arrest," spells are performative utterances that occupy a tenuous place in both of the latter categories, according to Austin. The illocutionary act incorporates and instigates the perlocutionary act, taking a stand or creating a response within an audience, (Sbisà 2001), something that a spell, curse, or oath by its inherent nature works to accomplish. “Most illocutionary acts succeed not by conformity to convention but by recognition of intention.” (Strawson 1964:440) Curses, spells, and oaths realize themselves as the meaning of the words fall away, and the “actual enunciation of the curse performs the special act of cursing.” (Kelly 1982:48)

Spells occupy a genre of their own, much like poetic language and proverbs. Genres are not necessarily innate to the text itself, but in the forms performers and their audiences use to produce and understand these texts. (Foley 1997) Spells have highly stereotypical and constrained forms (Foley 1997), yet they are not always independent of dialogic input. They make use of intertextuality, pulling context from across generations and manipulating multiple voices and forms of pronunciation, yet they are emergent as well, morphing themselves to attune to the immediate requirements of the situation. Like poetry, the form of spells is the focus of the utterance, separate from the actual meaning of the words used. (Foley 1997) “It is not the case that words are one thing and the rite another. The uttering of words itself is a ritual.” (Tambiah 1968:17)

Spells derive some of their power from the use of metaphor and from their deviation from the uses of ordinary language (Foley 1997) Spells may incorporate texts no longer understood, but it is in the speaking that they obtain meaning. Curses, spells, and oaths are non-transferable – they belong to the person who utters them. (Jacobsen 1971) According to Austin’s theories, performatives are not true or false, (Dineen 1972) but based on the qualifications and performance of the utterer, they may be right or wrong (Jacobsen 1971), depending on whether or not they are appropriate (Tully 1982), or uttered by someone who has no authority to perform the act in question. (Jacobsen 1971:357) Spells are a variety of claim-making formulas the role of which is to represent actions. (Tully 1982) Excessive deviance from the recognized strictures of the performance may make it unrecognizable as a spell, not only in the wording, but also in the use of tone, speed of speech, pitch, dramatic pause, and physical actions. (Foley 1997) The success of the spell is dependent on whether we use the correct spell, pronounced with the appropriate pronunciation, relative to the receiver. (Johansson 1994) The act of uttering the performative forces the speaker to assume responsibility that the hearer can expect fulfillment of the conditions promised. (Dineen 1972) As “contracts” between individuals the spell gains efficacy by this assumption, and by the presumption that both the spell-crafter and the listener believe they can perform the promise, that they intend to complete the act, and that they have specific knowledge
necessary to complete the spell. (Wardaugh 1986) The very uttering of the spell is an obligation to perform the act.

**Conclusion**

Slavic peoples turned to specialized individuals, called among other names “whisperers,” to perform spells and incantations. The magical workings contain a structured form and rules including silence and seclusion, and these strictures gave rise to the whispering of spells. What made these speech acts magical was the incorporation of the natural world elements, the laws governing words of power, and the knowledge of the enchanter. Linguistically, what made these events identifiable as spells and, therefore, believable as magic, was the performative nature of the genre, not only in the selection of words (either intelligible or not), but also in the paralinguistic features executed by the szepcze/sheptun. Either of these qualities alone did not create the magic: the joining of this pair of aspects into verbal and performative artistry did.

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