

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ABOUT THE POWER OF WORD IN TARTU

On April 25–27, 2016, the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore of the University of Tartu and the Department of Folkloristics of the University of Helsinki organised an international symposium under the heading *Word Power*, which focused on the aspects related to magic word and, more extensively, study of word use. Traditions related to word magic and the power attributed to the word have, for many years, been in the centre of interest of several disciplines, such as folkloristics, ethnology, anthropology, theology, and linguistics. In the course of time, research focuses have changed and shifted; for example, approaches concentrating on structural elements, performativity, and more general usage context have been applied.

The symposium organised in Tartu, Estonia, was remarkable for its interdisciplinarity and comprehensiveness. The speakers were aware of the fact that, when discussing the magic word, it is pointless and also impossible to view its supernatural, empirical, social, poetic, and rhetoric facets separately, as they are closely intertwined. So the presentations highlighted the mutual impact of language, folklore, mentality, emotions, and literature in the evolution of oral traditions.

Lotte Tarkka's keynote speech about Karelian incantations and songs was convincing and well presented. Tarkka noted that in order to better understand incantations, it does not suffice to read the preserved texts but knowledge of a wider context is needed; for example, the reasons that made people use them as such. The uttering of incantations was usually caused by a concrete situation, and the incantation in turn influenced the further progress of the given situation. Curses, for instance, were used to contact supernatural forces in order to gain magical power, while on the other hand they worked as a rhetorical weapon against the listener. Tarkka pointed out that, according to belief, aggressive incantation might have exerted adverse influence even on an occasional listener. Therefore, in the case of word magic, belief, models of social intercourse, and presentation practices intertwined (and still do), and poetic speech can be both a means for organising human relationships and for channelling problems arising inside the community. Tarkka's ideas about words as influencers of the world's operating systems were linked to Eva Toulouse's presentation about the speech of Yuri Vella, a Nenets reindeer herder and poet. The speaker described how Vella, a representative of the traditionally quiet Nenets, acquired eloquence not inherent in this ethnos, and polished it to perfection, in order to forward his message as effectively as possible, in different non-traditional contexts (e.g. in communication with oil magnates or folklorists).

Two more presentations were dedicated to Nenets culture. Karina Lukin introduced Nenets narration strategies, the alteration of the third-person speech and narrating from the viewpoint of the experiencer as a means of achieving poetic convincingness. Laur Vallikivi described the changes that occurred in the Nenets' language use after their conversion to Christianity, illustrating how religious reformation often inevitably brings along the acquisition of new speaking manners.

Quite a few discussions concerned the role of silence in language use – sometimes lack of words can be rather eloquent. This topic was linked with the keyword speech of James Kapaló about hidden words. Traditionally, plenty of magic and religious knowledge has been regarded as secret; also, throughout times, states have had their secret services,

secret files, and other hidden information. In order to navigate in today's virtual world, each of us needs a secret personal password. The speaker also discussed, in light of the ideas of Foucault, Bourdieu, and other theoreticians, some critical problems associated with the communicative power of secret words.

The relationships between secret words and rituals were also discussed by Ergo-Hart Västrik on the example of the cult of Setos' Peko, and by Margaret Lyngdoh on the basis of name taboo beliefs in Khasi belief narratives in India. Elo-Hanna Seljamaa's presentation about forbidden love and child killing, based on an Estonian folksong *Mareta's Child*, is also connected with taboos and popular ways of their verbalisation.

Several speakers referred, while discussing the representative and ideological nuances of language, to the theory of speech acts. Laura Siragusa showed, on the example of Vepsian folklore, how spatial and temporal perceptions are combined with specific ways of speaking. Jonathan Roper in his keynote speech discussed vernacular theories about right and wrong name forms in traditional songs (e.g. the dilemma lord Donald *versus* lord Roland) on the basis of material collected on Newfoundland. The speaker maintained that even in the same language words do not denote the same things for all people; they can be related to different experiences; for example, words of the same domain can be connected with establishing the truth, hiding, or distorting it.

The first day ended by a film screening by Rajat Nayyar about an initiation rite in India. Once again the audience had to declare that, without explanations, what is self-evident in one culture is often incomprehensible for someone from another culture.

The second day continued with more presentations. Aleksis Moine's paper about Finnish charms was interlarded with a number of fascinating examples. Moine pointed out that healers, in order to add authority to their words, often ascribe them to supernatural beings, saying, for example, "I do not speak with my own mouth, I speak with the Creator's mouth!" In the same way, incantations might describe the accompanying activity, claiming that the healing ritual is performed with the hands of the Creator. On the one hand, such use of words adds to the power of the charm; yet, on the other, the healer evades the responsibility in case of failed treatment, referring to the Creator's will not fathomable for human beings. Kati Kallio's presentation also drew on Finnish material, dealing, based on the theories of linguistic anthropology, with the role of poetic language as carrier of ideologies, identities, and beliefs, both among the elite and common people. Kallio referred to the Lutheran reformers of the 16th century, who, in the beginning, tried to avoid the use of Kalevala-meter in hymns; yet, by the early 17th century some of its elements had already been introduced. Therefore, the verse itself was not regarded as condemnable and 'pagan' anymore; rather, it was unacceptable to use it in charms.

Frog's research explored, on the basis of Finno-Karelian long incantations, words as material objects, often described not as means of communication but rather as a tool. Also, some lore texts indicate that an incantation can be owned by only one person – as if it is a physical object. A certain transition from a word to an object can also be seen in rituals, in which the healer utters the incantation above water and the patient drinks the water as a substance enriched by the power of charm.

In conclusion it can be said that the conference achieved its purpose, enabling substantial discussions about the power of word and suitable theoretical research frameworks, comparison of research results, and outlining new perspectives.

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