

## II. REVIEWS

DOI: 10.17951/et.2018.30.307

Stanisława Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska

ORCID: 0000-0003-0008-8690

THE RUSSIAN FOLK CALENDAR:  
AN ETHNOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE\*

Review of O. V. Atroshenko, Y. A. Krivoshchapova, K. V. Osipova, *Russkiy narodnyy kalendar'*. *Etnolingvisticheskiy slovar'*, 2015, ed. E. L. Berezovich, Moskva: AST-PRESS KNIGA, pp. 544, ISBN: 978-5-462-01385-0.

The Russian National Calendar: An Ethnolinguistic Dictionary, compiled with academic consultation from Elena Berezovich, is the first dictionary of chrononyms that offers a holistic perspective of Russian folk calendar. It is thematically related to monographs and lexicographic analysis by Svetlana Tolstaya (2005), as well as the works of A.W. Chernyh (2009) and O. V. Vorstikova (2000), all of which are well-known publications in the Slavic *milieu*.

With its systems of temporal divisions and regulations of the annual cycle, the folk calendar is the core of traditional culture since it organizes all aspects of traditional life, not only ritual cycles, agricultural and living practices, but also, to a considerable extent, beliefs, religious rites, obligations and prohibitions followed by a given community, as well as established norms, the breach of which is believed to have negative effects on that community.

Therefore, the researcher is confronted here with a complex and multi-stage task of describing the linguistic material, including such elements of the description as linguistic (dialectal) characteristics of the lexicon (including, where possible, phraseology), the characteristics of ethnocultural *realia* attached to each name, as well as geographical characteristics of the relevant terminology, rituals, and myths. One of the possible ways of providing such thorough descriptions is the ethnolinguistic dictionary, proposed by Svetlana Tolstaya (2005: 23) and applied to the Slavic calendar (in particular to the Polish calendar). The idea of creating an ethnolinguistic dictionary that embraces collected and reconstructed linguistic data was also implemented by the Russian authors, whose work is being reviewed here.

---

\* The review appeared in Polish as "Rosyjski kalendarz ludowy w ujęciu etnolingwistycznym" in *Etnolingwistyka* 30. The present English translation has been financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, project titled "English edition of the journal *Etnolingwistyka. Problemy języka i kultury* in electronic form" (no. 3bH 15 0204 83).

The present publication is ethnolinguistically-oriented and focuses on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-c. linguistic and cultural Russian tradition, focusing in particular on the folk calendar-related terms retrieved from folkloristic and ethnographic sources, dialectal dictionaries of the Russian language, and a body of unpublished materials. The folk calendar, as a collection of data relating to units of time, time segments, and important dates throughout the year, simultaneously depicts the vast knowledge of wildlife and local phenomena, e.g. “Autumn starts on the day of the Elevation of the Cross (the so-called *Vozdvizheniye*, 14/27 September”, “St. Procopius [22 November/5 December]<sup>1</sup> treads down the snow – he paves the way”; “Good weather on *Voznesenye* [the Thursday of the sixth week after Easter] brings good harvest”; “The weather on *Voznesenye* brings the same weather in the following summer”. There is also an expression of agricultural experience: “On St. Nicetas Day [15/28 September] farmers start slaughtering geese for sale”; “Around St. Nicolas Day [9/22 May] the cattle is herded to the meadows for pasturing”; “Potatoes are not planted before St. Nicolas Day because they do not want to grow”; as well as of the rituals and norms of life typical of a given community: *Radunitsa* [the second Tuesday after Easter] is the memorial for the joyfully departed: on that day the risen Christ descends to hell and redeems humankind”.

The Russian folk calendar, published in the form of a dictionary, links the Christian tradition with pre-Christian (mainly agricultural) customs and beliefs. It illustrates a close connection between Christian festivals and agricultural and farming seasons. The symbolic assignment of patron saints to the work and life of a farmer is also of vital importance. In traditional Russian culture, as in any folk culture, the calendar served a clear purpose: it organized agricultural and farming practices, ritual cycles, beliefs, recommendations and prophecies, thus becoming the core of the local tradition. The calendar is founded not only on holy days of the Orthodox Church but also on commemorations of Christian saints whose names were often recalled to mark the beginning or the end of specific agricultural and farming jobs. The dictionary also includes national and dialectal chrononyms (from Ancient Greek *χρονος* ‘time’) that indicate calendar periods and moments of the annual cycle; these are: Orthodox names (*the Day of Holy Martyrs Adrian and Natalia of Nicomedia*); national chrononyms listed in dictionaries of the Russian language (*Trinity, Pascha*); dialectal chrononyms (*Moskkarinnaya nedelya* ‘a week before or after the day of the Holy Trinity’, *Oleniy den* ‘the day of St. Iliya’ [20 July/2 August]).

The dictionary is based on: (1) linguistic sources, including: (a) dictionaries and lexicons of Russian dialects; (b) regional ethnolinguistic dictionaries which include the names of seasonal songs, names of rites and their participants; (c) unpublished dialectal sources, in particular the records of the Toponymic Expedition of the Ural Federal University to the North Territory and the Kostroma Oblast; the Saint Petersburg records used for the purpose of the *Dictionary of Russian Dialects*; as well as (d) the data collected in the field in the Tambov Oblast and the Oryol Oblast by T. V. Machracheva; (2) folkloristic and ethnographic sources.

<sup>1</sup> These are the dates in the Gregorian and the Julian calendar, respectively.

The dictionary contains over 7,000 entries and a thorough index. The entries are arranged in alphabetical order (pp. 1–192): each offers structural, grammatical, phonetic, and/or accentual variants of chrononyms. The first element of each entry is the definition of the chrononym with a simplified Orthodox name and the date (in the Gregorian and Julian calendar), e.g. “СОФІЈА. The day of the Holy Martyr Faith, Hope, and Love and of their mother Sophia, 17/30 Sempتمبر”.

Each explication with its illustrative context is followed by a description of the territorial scope of each chrononym. The next part of the entry provides contextualized instances of use of a given chrononym, often from folk dialects. The commentaries of ethnographers and other researchers in folk culture are rarely quoted. Generally, it is the context that illustrates a given word.

In those entries that comprise numerous contexts, the linguistic material is arranged according to various thematic scopes, allowing for a consideration of:

a) an assessment of a given festival and its celebration in the annual cycle (e.g. the entry SVYATOY DUKH, SVYAT DUKH should be read as “the Day of the Holy Spirit, the Monday after the Day of the Holy Trinity”);

b) true stories relating to the date of a given festival (e.g. FOMINÓ VOSKRESEŇYE “The doubting Apostle Foma [Thomas] met the risen Christ on Sunday and put his hand in Jesus’ side and his finger in the mark of the nails and thus he [Foma] believed that Jesus is the Son of God”);

c) motivation behind the name of a given festival, e.g. SERDÍTAYA BOGORÓDITSA [Angry Mother of God]: “The day of the Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God, named *Hodegetria*; we also call the icon *Serditaya* [Angry] because on that day the wind always destroys haystacks”; *Sheroka Maslennitsa* [the Maslennitsa is the period from Friday to Sunday in the week prior to Lent] was a carnival-like period, celebrated all over Russia”;

d) legends, e.g. SRÉTÉN’E, SRÉTÉNYE, SRÍTÉN’E, SRÍTÉN’Ě [Candlemas Day, 2/15 February]: “Candlemas Day is the feast of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, brought by the Virgin Mary”; “Candlemas Day is a meeting of God with a saint; “On that day the righteous and devout Simeon met the Virgin Mary and Joseph who brought little Jesus to the temple to be dedicated to the Lord”;

e) religious and existential practices connected with a given date, e.g. “On Maundy Thursday farmers feed their sheep with bread sprinkled with salt and stained with soot. It has to be done in complete silence, only then will sheep not bleat”; “On the day of St. Iliya [20 June/2 July] a fair was organized, people were trading sheep”; “Young bachelors, especially on New Year’s Day, [...] plough the village fields, all young men gather together, and the one at the back holds the plough in order not to let the girls from the village get married outwith of the village. We drag the plough, ten of us”; “On *Dmitryevskye Soboty* [the Saturday before the Day of the Great Martyr, St. Dmitri Solunsky, a.k.a. Demetrius of Thessaloniki] it was popular to bring meat to the cemetery, to commemorate the dead. It was the Saturday before 7 November”;

f) prophecies: “On the day of St. Ivan new birch brooms are made, each having the *kupalchnitsa*, a yellow grass inside. Next, people wash in the banya and throw the broom into the river. If the broom sinks, the prophecy says that the person

will die the same year”; “They threw the washing-up cloth out in the street before Easter, on Maundy Thursday. If the washing-up cloth does not freeze during the night, the weather in the summer will be fine; but if it freezes, the weather in the summer will be bad”;

g) recommendations and regulations: “Before the feast of *Kupala* [24 June/7 July] a kitten has to be drowned in the river; thus, there will be no floater on *Kupala* feast, otherwise somebody may find a drowned man on that day”; “On New Year’s Eve, i.e. on the Day of St. Basil [13 January] sourdough has to be prepared to make sourdough bread throughout the whole year. A person who has received money on that day has to put it on the table”;

h) prohibitions: “On Maundy Thursday, to secure the prosperity of the house, it is prohibited to lend things”; “On the day of the Holy Trinity people do not take a bath at all. If they do, they will get ulcers all over their body”;

i) beliefs and superstitions: “On Maundy Thursday, the cattle have to lie on the ground in the barn – it means that you will live; if heads of the cattle are directed towards the sun, you will live. However, if they are faced in the opposite direction, you will die soon”; On the Feast of Pokrov [the Feast of the Holy Protection of the Theotokos], the Mother of God [Theotokos] intercedes for us before the throne of the Almighty”; “If the New Year starts on Monday, the whole year will be tough for people”;

j) games and play: ‘Well, on the Day of the Holy Trinity [the Sunday forty days after Easter] [...] all people had fun, they would run around in circles and play games”; “The eggs are coloured on the Day of the Holy Trinity”;

k) prophecies: “The frost on Maundy Thursday spells the next forty frosts”; “A warm Candlemas Day announces warm spring”; “The weather on the Feast of St. Stephen announces the weather in upcoming September”; “The Feast of St. Ilya [20 June/2 August] brings rotten weather, while the feast of the Honey Spas [the feast of the First Saviour, 1/14 August] eradicates mosquitoes”;

l) proverbs: “A mean person does not offer even ice on *Kreshenye* [the feast of the Baptism of Christ]”; St. George [23 April/6 May] brings spring to the threshold”; “Rain on the feast of St. George presages a good year for the cattle”; “If there is dew on St. George’s Day, oats should be fed to horses”; “Snow on *Sretenye* [Candlemas Day] presages rain in spring”;

m) calendar songs: “Soon there will be Trinity Sunday, all the meadows will be covered with flowers. The beloved Jesus will come soon and He will soothe our hearts”.

Cross-reference sources are written with small caps in the dictionary. The index (pp. 493–534) is arranged in chronological order and resembles a reverse dictionary, according to the rule “from the content to the form”. At the end of the dictionary there is also a list of dialectal and obsolete words, together with the relevant references (pp. 535–540).

The dictionary may serve as a reliable source for linguists, folklorists, ethnographers, as well as all those interested in language, history, and culture. This ethnolinguistic dictionary, whose ambition is to link the lexicon with the traditional calendar, is an excellent example of lexicographic synthesis, which finds its confirmation in the words of Anna Plotnikova and Tadeusz Piotrowski, respectively:

A dictionary in which [...] words are linked together and reflect the reciprocal relationship of concepts hidden in reality (or in imaginary reality, as is the case in dictionaries of mythologies), is of a high cultural value, first and foremost in its gnoseological aspects. This kind of presentation illustrates and confirms the impossibility of dividing words understood as linguistic signs into their distinct aspects; on the contrary, the unity of the formal and content planes is emphasized. (Plotnikova 2000: 5)

From a semantic perspective, the description of the lexicon is simultaneously the description of culture: the lexicon is a collection of signs pertaining to conventionalized aspects of culture, important for a given speech community. The lexicon encodes those experiences or objects that are intersubjectively perceived as important for the members of a given local culture. As a whole, the lexicon always invites readers beyond the boundaries of experience ascribed to an individual, since nobody plays all social functions simultaneously. Nor is anyone familiar with all the given cultural facts of any language. The lexicon is, in some sense, the description of the world of a given speech community, and the dictionary may be called a peculiar guide to this world. (Piotrowski 2000: 572)

*Translated by Agnieszka-Mierzwińska-Hajnos*

### References

- Chernykh A. V. 2009. *Russkiy narodnyy kalendar v Prikame*. Vol. 3. *Slovar khrononimov*. Perm.
- Plotnikova, Anna. 2000. *Slovari i narodnaya kultura. Ocherki slavyanskoy leksykografii*. Moskva: Russian Academy of Sciences.
- Piotrowski, Tadeusz. 1993. Słowniki języka polskiego. In Jerzy Bartmiński (ed.) *Encyklopedia kultury polskiej XX wieku*, vol. 2. *Współczesny język polski*. 571–588. Wrocław: Wiedza o Kulturze.
- Tolstaya, Svetlana. 2005. *Polesskiy narodnyy kalendar*. Moskva: Indrik.
- Vostrikova, O. V. 2000. *Opyt etnoideograficheskogo slovarya russkikh govorov Sverdlovskoy oblasti*. Vyp. 1.: *Narodnyy kalendar*. Yekaterinburg.