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**THE NAME AS A SIGN:  
SEMIOTIC FUNCTIONS OF THE NAMES OF THINGS  
IN THE CONTEXT OF SAYINGS AND PROVERBS**

*SUMMARY.* This article is a study in the field of ethnolinguistics. Taking proverbs with the components-names “instrument of labor” and “household item” as data for the analysis, we established that the name of an object can be used as a sign of a household item, as a sign of a situation of actual use and functioning and as a sign of notions formed by this object in traditional consciousness. Functioning as a sign of a household item, the names of objects generally actualize practical features and functions inherent in the object in everyday use. Serving as a sign of this or that situation, the name of an object can refer to some historical, ceremonial or household realia. Serving as a sign of ideas about the object, its name associates the designated object with certain categories — celestial/earthly/infernal, one’s own/someone else’s, outside/inside etc. As far as we considered the components-names “instrument of labor” and “household item”, the first among the notions designated by these names is labor and everything connected with it: concepts of industry/laziness, mastery, images of individual workers, etc. In addition, the names of some objects can also serve as an indication to certain groups of people, divided by social, gender or personal characteristics.

*KEY WORDS.* Proverb, thing’s name, semiotic function, ethnolinguistics.

Over the past three decades, the ethnolinguistic branch in the study of language has retained its relevance. This is due to the fact that in recent years some of the most important humanitarian issues have been related to such notions as ethnicity, nation, mentality, national world view, ethnocultural identity, etc. One of the main goals of ethnolinguistics is “the study of the ethnocultural identity of various symbolic ‘language’ that transmit a traditional world view, with natural language playing the leading role” [1].

Thus, the subject of research of ethnolinguistics is the lingual manifestation of the material and intellectual culture of people. This is why scientists’ attention is often focused on traditional objects — various national household items that, on the one hand, represent certain artifacts of material culture and, on the other hand, can serve as symbols of intellectual culture. The importance of such artifacts is also confirmed by the fact that among lexical borrowings resulting from language contacts, a large percentage are terms related to household vocabulary. N.V. Labunets points out in his article, entitled “Finno-Ugric heritage in Russian dialects”, that “to the number of borrowings having

distinct etymological connections with the Khanty language belongs a sufficient layer of words whose thematic content is related to household vocabulary” [2].

In addition, as noted by S.M. Belyakova, “one of the main principles of human learning and exploration of the world, both in ancient times and presently, has been anthropomorphization. The will to ‘enliven’ the world, to bring it as close as possible to the human has been constantly present in all cultures, including in Russia. [...] The perception of plants, objects and abstract notions (non-material entities) as a part of nature, giving them “an individual life”, has a solid mythological tradition reflected in modern Russian dialects and folklore” [3].

The study of the symbolic content of an object, its symbolic functions, is highly widespread due to the development of semiotics. In this case we refer not only to the so-called “ritual” objects, whose sacral status has never been questioned, but rather to household items used in daily activities of a particular people. According to A.K. Baiburin, “the cultural significance and value of a traditional object was much higher than for contemporary ones. [...] Here objects are always core signs, but signs are also core objects” [4].

Thus, any object of traditional peasant culture that functions in special, non-domestic conditions can perform functions of a sign. This fact has long been proven and does not require argumentation. As far as this study is concerned, while operating in the area of ethnolinguistics, we will build our analysis on the hypothesis that the object name, which functions in a semiotically rich context of such folklore genres as proverbs and sayings, can have sign functions.

The main source of material was the dictionary “Proverbs of the Russian people” by V.I. Dal [5]. An Approximate number of 1040 proverbs with the components-names “instrument of labor” and “household item” were selected from this publication. The dictionaries by V.I. Zimin [6] and V.P. Zhukov [7] were used as additional sources. Another 200 units were selected from them. Taking proverbs with the components-names “instrument of labor” and “household item” as the material for the analysis, we noticed that names of objects can serve as a sign of a household item, a sign of a real situation of usage and functioning behind it, and as a sign of the vision of this object formed in the traditional consciousness.

Serving as a sign of the object, its name often actualizes functions and properties inherent in this object in a situation of real household usage. Moreover, these properties can be both positive and negative, i.e. either help or impede the object in fulfilling its purpose. For instance, the adjective “lopsided” is the most frequently found with the lexeme *spindle*. The deformation of a spindle results in the loss of its main purpose — to spin a yarn. This motif is reflected in the proverbs: *Кривое веретено не надежда* (“*Krivoje vereteno ne nadezha*” — *A lopsided spindle is no hope*), *Сделала дело худое, переломила веретено кривое* (“*Sdelala delo hudoe, perelomila vereteno krivoje*” — *She did a bad thing, breaking a lopsided spindle in two*) (*irony* — in fact there is nothing “bad” in breaking a lopsided, i.e. useless, spindle).

In a number of proverbs, another sign function of the name of the object is realized — as a sign of situations connected with the object: household, historical,

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ceremonial. In this way, situations of farming and agricultural work are reflected among household realia of Russian peasants' life: *Коса ударила — корова убавила* (“*Kosa udarila — korova ubavila*” — *the scythe cut, the cow diminished*) (with the beginning of the hay harvest, milk yields start to decrease); *Не топор кормит мужика, а июльская работа* (“*Ne topor kormit muzhika, a ijul'skaja rabota*” — *it's not the axe that feeds the man but the labor in July*). In a number of proverbs, the situation of a dinner and reception of guests is reflected. Ex.: *Дорога ложка к обеду* (“*Doroga lozhka k obedu*” — *expensive is the spoon at the time of dinner*; *eng. analogue — a stitch in time saves nine*); *В поле враг, дома гость: садись под святые, починай ендову* (“*V pole vrag, doma gost': sadis' pod svjatyje, pochinaj endovu*” — *a foe outside is a guest inside: sit down, drink from the flagon*) (flagon: a large vessel, with a handle and spout and often a lid, used to hold alcoholic beverages [8]).

The names of some objects can refer to historical events. For example, the image of the pitchfork is associated with the Patriotic War of 1812: *На француза и вилы ружье* (“*Na francuza i vily ruzh'e*” — *a pitchfork is a rifle when fighting the French*); *Докальвай француза вилами* (“*Dokalyvaj francuza vilami*” — *finish the French with a pitchfork*). Certain names of objects in the context of proverbs can also serve as an indication of a particular historical situation. Ex.: *По нынешним порядкам мужику топора не оплатит* (“*Po nyneshnim porjadkam muzhiku topora ne oplatit*” — *with today's rules, a man can't afford an axe*). This proverb refers to the prohibition of chopping wood. Such prohibitions were introduced regularly. For example, during the reign of the tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich (“Tishayshy” — most quiet), a decree was issued, prohibiting tree cutting within 30 versts (a Russian unit of distance equal to 1.067 kilometers) around Moscow. However, the majority of taxes were paid with chopped wood, hence the use of the lexeme *axe* in the proverbs about corvee labor and quit-rent. Ex.: *Не мужик царю оброк платит, а топор* (“*Ne muzhik carju obrok platit, a topor*” — *it's not the man who pays the tsar, but the axe*).

Names of objects can also indicate the ceremonial side of Russian peasants' life. For instance, the traditions of the baptismal rite are reflected in the proverb *Кто хочет кашу есть, тот выкупи ложку* (“*Kto hochet kashu est', tot vykupi lozhku*” — *those who want to eat porridge, buy a spoon*). The example of the custom to buy a spoon during baptism is given by the ethnolinguistic dictionary “Slavic antiquity” [9].

Particularly interesting proverbs are those where the name of an object serves as a sign of ideas about this object, i.e. as a symbol. Let us consider this question in more detail.

Among various concepts that are actualized in proverbs, an important place is taken by the perception of certain objects as a symbol of labor. Moreover, a particular object can both symbolize labor in general and create an image of men's/women's labor, a certain kind of labor, etc.

For instance, the names of the following objects serve as a symbol of labor in general: *wooden plow* (*От сохи не будешь богат, а будешь горбат* — “*Ot sohi ne budesh' bogat, a budesh' gorbat*” — *with a plow, you won't be rich but humpbacked*), *flail* (*Мужика не шуба греет, а цен* — “*Muzhika ne shuba greet, a cep*” — *Man is warm*

because of the flail, not the coat), *kochedyk* (obsolete. — an instrument, shaped as a flat curved awl, made for making bast shoes.) (*He speshi jazykom, toropis' kochedykom* “*Ne speshi jazykom, toropis' kochedykom*” — *less with your tongue, shake a leg with the kochedyk*), etc. In this case, names of agricultural implements prevail, which is due to the fact that such instruments played an important role in peasants' lives.

The names of certain objects can also serve as a symbol of activities differentiated by gender. For example, the lexemes *spindle*, *pot*, *spinning wheel*, *comb*, etc. are symbols of women's labor: *Знай, баба, свое кривое веретено!* (“*Znaj, baba, svoje krivoje vereteno!*” — *Woman, know your lopsided spindle!*); *Всякий дом большею частью прост, а горшок большею частью прост* (“*Vsjakij dom bol'shacom prost, a gorshok bol'shuhoj*” — *every house is full of a man's hospitality and every pot – with a woman's cooking*). At the same time, the lexemes *axe*, *plow*, *harrow*, etc. are symbols of men's labor. Ex.: *Мужу — соха, жене — кросна* (“*Muzhu — soha, zhene — krosna*” *the plow for the husband, the krosna for the wife*) (*krosna* – a Russian weaving loom); *Муж за бороною, жена за меледою* (“*Muzh za boronoju, zhena za meledoju*” — *husband working with a harrow, wife doing meleda*) (*meleda* — obsolete. Something insignificant, but requiring a lot of time). This distinction, reflected in the language of proverbs and sayings, is determined by real household use: some are used exclusively by men, others by women, because everybody in a peasant family had their own sphere of activity.

Serving as a symbol of labor in general or symbolizing individual kinds of work, names of objects in the context of proverbs are opposed to other objects which function as symbols of military affairs (*Плуг кормит, а лук портит*, “*Plug kormit, a luk portit*” — *the plow feeds, the bow spoils*), leisure, merriment (*Что мне соха — была б балалайка*, “*Chto mne soha — byla b balalajka*” — *what is the plow to me — it's a shame there's no balalaika*), intellectual, paper work (*Перо сохи легче*, “*Pero sohi legche*” — *lighter than the plow, the pen is*).

In the people's traditional consciousness, the image of an object is inextricably connected with ideas about a particular worker, a master of his craft. It is reflected, for example, in such proverbs as: *Думает плотник с топором, да писака с пером* (“*Dumaet plotnik s toporom, da pisaka s perom*” — *a carpenter thinks with his axe, a scribbler – with his pen*); *Не горшок угодник, а стряпуха* (“*Ne gorshok ugodnik, a strjapuha*” — *it's not the pot that pleases, but the cook*).

Human consciousness in general and the traditional peasant consciousness in particular tend to perceive the world through the lens of certain categories, for instance, celestial/infernal, one's own/someone else's, external/internal, etc. Each element of a category is endowed with a certain attitude and assessment. The categorical division of the world by people's consciousness is reflected in proverbs as well.

Possessing a certain semiotic status, objects can serve as “mediators”, intermediaries between the world of human beings and the world of spirits [10]. This property is reflected in proverbs and sayings where individual objects correlate with the other world and, thus, enter the relations of the category celestial/earthly/infernal.

Images of some objects are associated exclusively with the world of the celestial. Ex.: *Ахе (Кабы Бог не дал топора, так бы топиться давно пора*, “*Kaby Bog ne*

*dal topora, tak by topit'sja davno pora*” — *If God had not given the axe, it would be time to drown*), plow (Богу молись, крепись да за соху держись, “*Bogu molis', krepis' da za sohu derzhis'*” — *pray to God, tough it out and hold on to the plow*), bundle (С беленькой котомкой Христос по пути, “*S belen'koj kotomkoj Hristos po puti*” — *with a white wallet, Christ on his way*). As far as the lexemes *axe* and *plow* are concerned, their actualization in the sphere of the celestial emphasizes the importance of the role which is played by the indicated objects in the lives of Russian people. The lexeme *wallet* is associated with the motif of wandering that has been traditionally considered a charitable deed in Russia, hence the association of *wallet* and the image of the Christ.

The names of other objects, for example, *harrow* (**irony** — *На чужой стороне поклонисься и бороне*, “*Na chuzhoj storone poklonish'sja i borone*” — *you will bow even to a harrow on foreign soil*), *shovel* (В лесу живем, в кулак жнем, пенью кланяемся, лопате молимся, “*V lesu zhivem, v kulak zhnet, pen'ju klanjaemsja, lopate molimsja*” — *you live in the woods, reap in a fist, greet pipes, pray to shovels*), *comb*, *spinning wheel* (Гребень (Прялка) не бог, а рубаху дает, “*Greben' (Prjalka) ne bog, a rubahu daet*” — *the comb (spinning wheel) is not God, bestows a shirt though*), reflect their belonging to the earthly world. On the one hand, this may be due to mockery, an ironic attitude towards something, which is created with the use of an object in a function that does not correspond its axiological status (to pray, bow — to a harrow, shovel, pestle; to baptize — in a pot, etc.). On the other hand, the household importance of the object may be emphasized in such a way.

Most lexemes are actualized by the fact that the objects referred to belong to the world of the infernal: firstly, by indicating the connection of an object with images of the devil or a witch (Ведьма в ступе едет, пестом упирает, помелом след заметаем, “*Ved'ma v stupe edet, pestom upiraet, pomelom sled zametaet*” — *a witch rides a mortar, leans on a pestle, sweeps her traces with a broom*); secondly, by creating an image of a fate in the afterlife (И в аду хорошо заступничество: ину пору хоть кочергой, вместо вил, подсадят, все легче, “*I v adu horosho zastupnichestvo: inu poru hot' kochergoj, vmesto vil, podsadjat, vse legche*” — *intercession is good in hell as well: sometimes they poke with a poker, not with a pitchfork, it's better anyhow*); thirdly, as a contrast to Christian artifacts (a candle, a cross) (Упрямые, что лукавый: ни Богу свеча, ни черту кочерга, “*Uprjamyje, chto lukavuj: ni Bogu svecha, ni chertu kocherga*” — *Stubborn as the Evil One, no candle for God, no poker for the devil*).

The names of objects also function within another category, the category of one's own/someone else's. It is dominated by objects that actualize belonging to the category of “one's own”. Among them, all kinds are present: from *spoon* to *axe* and from *trough* to *basket* (Ех.: Своим топором мозолей не натрешь, “*Svoim toporom mozolej ne natresh'*” — *your own axe won't give you blisters*; У нашего корытца ничего не добиться, “*U nashego korytca nichego ne dobit'sja*” — *our trough won't get us anywhere*). The actualization of the meaning “one's own” with the help of the possessive pronoun “our” is frequent. This indicates the non-sole character of possessing objects in the traditional peasant household.

The actualization of the category of “someone else’s is, above all, associated with the image of the other side which is compared to such objects as *broom, sieve* (which, at the same time, belong to the world of the infernal) (Ех.: *Родная сторона — колыбель, чужая — дырявое решето, “Rodnaja strana — kolybel’, chuzhaja — dyrjavoe resheto” — Native land is a cradle, abroad a leaky sieve; Из села Помелова, из деревни Веникова, “Iz sela Pomelova, iz derevni Venikova” — From the village of Broom*). Besides, the objects used in the everyday life of a higher class, are also called “foreign”, for instance, *plate* (*Хороша рыба на чужом блюде, “Horosha ryba na chuzhom bljude” — good is the fish on a foreign plate*).

In the analyzed material, we found proverbs within which, in the context of naming certain objects, an image of their location appears. Certain objects actualize in such a way the image of the “inside”, others — “outside”. For example, names of such objects as *plow, harrow, sickle, plough* are incorporated in the external space expressed by the lexemes *field, woods, meadow* (Ех.: *Гости, ведь не соха у тебя в поле торчит, “Gosti, ved’ ne soxa u tebja v pole torchit” — Guests, it’s not your plow that sticks out in the field, is it?*), owing to their actual use. On the other hand, the functioning of such objects of “internal” household use as *shovel, frying pan* in the external space is only possible in the context of an “absurd” proverb to create a comic effect: *В лесу живем, в кулак жнем, пенью кланяемся, лопате молимся, “V lesu zhivem, v kulak zhnem, pen’ju klanjaemsja, lopate molimsja” — you live in the woods, reap in a fist, greet pipes, pray to shovels; В лесу и сковорода звонка, “V lesu i skovoroda zvonka.” — in the woods, even a frying pan rings*).

Various objects can also serve as a symbol of man. In particular, they can serve as an indication of personal characteristics, kinship, gender and social identity, etc. Of the most frequent occurrence is the creation of an image of a stupid person with the help of names of objects. This occurs, firstly, by means of describing absurd actions (Ех.: *Дурака учить — решетом воду носить, “Duraka uchit’ — reshetom vodu nosit’” Teaching a fool is like carrying water in a sieve; eng. analogue – you cannot wash charcoal white*), secondly, with the help of comparison with various parts of the human head (*Мозговина (голова) с короб, а ума с орех, “Mozgovina (golova) s korob, a uma s oreh” — a head like a box, a mind like a nut*), thirdly, with the help of comparison between a stupid person and certain objects (*Глуп, как сибирский туюс, “Glup, kak sibirskij tues” — stupid as a Siberian beetroot*).

The names of certain objects can correspond to various social categories. For example, the lexemes *kochedyk, flail* create an image of a hardworking man (*Мужика не шуба греет, а цен, “Muzhika ne shuba greet, a cep” — Man is warm because of the flail, not the coat*) and the lexemes *chisel, stove, plough* emphasize roughness in the image of a man (*Мужика в котле семь лет варить, “Muzhika v kotle sem’ let varit’” — It takes seven years to boil a man on a stove*). The image of an adventurous soldier, adaptable to any conditions, is created by the following names of objects: *chisel* (*В животе солдата долото сгниет, “V zhivote soldata doloto sgniet” — a soldier’s stomach will digest a chisel*), *awl* (*Солдат шилом бреется, дымом греется, “Soldat shilom breetsja, dymom greetsja” — a soldier shaves with an awl, basks in*

*smoke*). The image of exquisite aristocratic life is created with the help of such names of objects as *dish, plate* (*Дворянское кушанье — два грибка на тарелочке, "Dvorjanskoe kushan'e — dva gribka na tarelochke" — Noble dish — two little mushrooms on a plate*).

The names of some objects are connected in the context of proverbs with the image of Russian people in general. Among them: the lexemes *chisel* (*В русском брюхе и долото сгниет, "V russkom brjuhe i doloto sgniet" — a Russian stomach will digest a chisel*), *axe* (*Бей русского — часы топором сделает, "Bej russkogo — chasy toporom sdelает" — Beat the Russian, he'll make an axe out of watches*), *pestle* (*Русский народ не боится креста, а боится песта, "Russkij narod ne boitsja kresta, a boitsja pesta" — Russian people fear not the cross, but the pestle*). With the help of these lexemes, such traits of Russian people as adaptability to the most demanding environment and fear of physical punishment are actualized.

In addition, the use of names of the same objects in similar contexts, with only a change in the name of the social category, can be interpreted as a reflection of the proximity of the position or the relation to such categories in people's consciousness. In such a way, the images of peasants and priests become close; as well as the images of Russian people and soldiers; men and soldiers. In this case, the factual relation between different social categories of people is likely to be actualized. It is also important to note that the use of names of certain objects in the same context with certain categories of people is, apparently, due to their household proximity (among the belongings of a soldier are a chisel, a stove; a nobleman — a dish, a plate, etc.).

An important place among proverbs is taken by the association between various names of household items and the image of women. It is interesting that this association does not occur with the image of men. In the context of proverbs, a woman can be compared to a *broom* (*Хорошая жена метла, и худая метла, "Horoshaja zhená metla, i hudaja metla" — a good wife is a broom, and a bad one*), a *pot* (*Баба, что глиняный горшок: вынь из печи, он пуце кипит, "Baba, chto glinjanij gorshok: vyn' iz pechi, on pushhe kipit" — a woman is like a clay pot, it splutters louder when you take it out of the oven*), a *trough* (*Баба не квашня, встала да и пошла, "Baba ne kvashnja, vstala da i poshla" — a woman's not a trough, get up and go*). Besides, a woman's heart is compared to a *stove* (*Женское сердце, что котел кипит, "Zhenskoe serdce, chto kotel kipit" — A woman's heart boils like a stove*), a woman's mind — to a *shoulder pole* (*Бабий ум — бабье коромысло: и криво, и зарубисто, и на оба конца, "Babij um — bab'e koromyslo: i krivo, i zarubisto, i na oba konca" — A woman's wits are a woman's shoulder pole: lopsided, jagged, and on both ends*), a woman's tongue — to a *broom* (*Бабий язык — чертово помело, "Babij jazyk — chertovo pomelo" — a woman's tongue is the devil's broom*). One may notice that a woman is predominantly compared to the objects she uses in everyday life, and the comparison is generally negative.

Thus, we have examined through specific examples the manner of the realization of sign functions in the names of objects in the context of proverbs and sayings. Serving as a sign of an object itself, its name generally actualizes practical functions

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and properties inherent in the object in everyday household use. As a sign of a certain situation, the name of an object can serve as an indication of historical, ceremonial, household realia with which the object is associated. As for the use of the name of an object as a sign of ideas about this object, first of all, it is necessary to note the correlation of a designated object with certain categories – celestial/earthly/infernal, one's own/someone else's, external/internal.

As far as we considered the components-names “instrument of labor” and “household item”, the first among the notions designated by these names is labor and everything connected with it: concepts of industry/laziness, mastery, images of individual workers, etc. In addition, the names of some objects can also serve as an indication to certain groups of people, divided by social, gender or personal characteristics.

The facts presented in this article show, in our opinion, the importance of the study of the sign functions of names of objects that are actualized in the context of proverbs.

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