

## The SUN as the key metaphor in the language and culture of the Turkic peoples \*

The necessity to apply the cultural approach to the study of vocabulary units is significantly obvious in the analysis of folklore words, the metaphoric nature and semantic variety of which come from the myth itself and from mythological thinking. The processes of creating meaningful texts and understanding cultural texts, or the problem of “real understanding of the folklore metaphoric language” are one of the most significant problems in the contemporary folklore studies (Potebnya, 1976). In this respect, the study of the so-called key words, which reflect the basic values of a certain culture and define their culture’s special features, has become increasingly popular in the last decade (Vezhbidtskaya, 1999). The peculiar cultural significance of such lexical units is very closely connected with the world view of the native speakers, and, as a rule, it finds itself in the system of metaphors and phraseology.

The polysemantic word \*kun is one of the key words in the Turkic peoples’ traditions. It stands for the universal fundamental concept of the ‘sun’; the lexeme forms a meaningful and emotional center of the texts. It is characterized by many counterpoints, which occur due to complex metaphoric meaning. The image of the daytime heavenly body serves as a marker of the people’s sunlit world in Turkic mythology. It is associated with the deity and beauty, light and truth, time and life, just like in all the other peoples’ cultures.

Analyzing the semantic and functional features of the word ‘\*kun’, it is worth mentioning that it is used not only in the meaning of ‘sun’, but also in the meaning of ‘life’ in the Turkic languages. The first two meanings are all well-known in almost all the Turkic languages. The meaning ‘life’ is registered in the Yakut, Azerbaijani, Turkmenian, Kumic, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Chuvash languages (Tenishev et al., 1997). For example, in Yakut texts, the shaman chants the following words: “*Tyynyng-kyunyung baaryna...*” – “As long as you have the ability to breathe (life, sun)...” Syntactical parallelism joined with the help of synonymy reflects the

---

\* The research is completed with the support of the Russian Fund of Philological Studies

semantically close lexemes *tyyn* ‘breath’, ‘life’ and *kun* ‘sun’, ‘life’ as shown in the following example: “*Tyyn onnyugar tyynnaagy, kun onnugar kyunneegy...*” – ‘we give you what holds life within (literary – ‘breath’, ‘sun’) instead of life’ (Khudyakov, 1969).

The lexical and semantic variant of the word *kun* ‘life’ in the modern Yakut language transferred into the class of semantic archaisms and it is not given in any of the modern Yakut language or Yakut-Russian dictionaries. The given meaning of the word *kun* is preserved as a component of different set expressions: the expression *kunten syuter* ‘to take away the sun (life)’ means ‘to kill’; *kunten syutyuyu* – literary means ‘the loss of the sun (life)’, i.e., death. “*Kyummyutten syuter kyunyum buolla*” – ‘The day has come for me to leave this world’ – says the passing away (Pekarsky, column 2418). The Yakut people used to say “*kyunyu kyoh, yutyum*” – ‘I saw the sun’ instead of ‘I was born’. In other Turkic languages, *kyon kyor* ‘to see the sun’ meant ‘to live’ (Lvova et al., 1989). “*Kyunyum kharaarda!*” – ‘My sun (life) has faded away’ – exclaims a Yakut person feeling that his life is coming to an end (Pekarsky, column 3343). Upon their death, the characters of *Olonkho* exclaim: “*Yuryung kyunyum olboodyujde, mangan kyunyum balaadyida!*” – ‘My white sun has faded, my white sun has become blurred!’. The first part of the complex sentence also functions as a proverb about the approaching old age (Proverbs, 1965).

The epitaphic formulas in Enissey monuments often contain the following words: “*Kyon ai azydym jyma!*” – ‘Alas, (I) stopped feeling the sun and the moon!’ (Malov, 1962). They also contain such examples as: “In my 61<sup>st</sup> year (of life) I stopped seeing the sun in the blue sky” (Batmanov, Kun, 1963).

Having analyzed the material given above, we noted that the meaning of the word is so flexible in a mythological and epic text that the context does not entirely “conceal” the polysemy of the lexeme: *kun* stands for ‘a mighty heavenly body’, ‘the source of life’, ‘sunny day’, and ‘precious life’. The word *kun* with all its meanings does not lose its polysemy in the poetic words of a shaman: “*kyunyun tyynyn kyun diekkinnen ortoydyohhyune, tyynigar tyyn salgaatahhyna, kyunyuger kun salgaatahhyna salгаа, khatyn ebem!*” – “If you directed your bright soul to the sun

(i.e., to life – L.Gabysheva), if you added some life to life, (i.e., to life – L. Gabysheva) and added days to days, then guide me, my dear grandmother!” (Khudyakov). The play on words is lost in the process of Yakut-English translation – we have to bear in mind that both, the sun, day, and life are represented by the same lexeme. Speaking of the semantics of a word, A.F. Losev noted that it is “something that is given in the dictionary separately, when necessary, but it is something represented in an obscure way in the living language” (Losev, 1982).

It is worth mentioning that metaphor ‘sun - life’ generates a whole range of set expressions, similar in their internal form, which are connected with each other in terms of antonymic and synonymic relations, etc. Thus, if there is a metaphor “*kyunyu kyorbyutyum*” – ‘*I saw the light*’, i.e. ‘*I was born*’, then we can also use tropes with an opposite meaning “*kyunten syuter*” – ‘*to take away the sun*’, i.e., ‘*to kill*’ or “*kyunyum kharaarda*” – ‘*my sun has faded*’, i.e., ‘*to die*’. The inner form of these words retains the meaning of the word and expands the general initial image – the sun being the symbol of life. The connections of tropes, set by default, show a possible degree, gradation of the comparison: “*urun kunum olboodujde (balaadyida)*” – ‘*my white sun has faded*’. This is how the Yakut people express the coming of old age. They say “*kuogejer kune*” – ‘*shimmering with light (sun)*’ when talking about youth, the flourishing of life (Sivtsev, 1979). In this case, we can speak of an expanded metaphor, i.e., “a special chain of metaphors, one of which occurs as a result of another” (Nemchenko, 1995).

The ‘sun - life’ metaphor being a key metaphor is actualized not only on the linguistic level, but it can also expand into a motive of the plot, attain a specific form in the culture, function as a belief. It lies in the basis of the Yakut paroemia about human beings, which, in its internal form, is close to the Sphinx riddle solved by Edipus: “*Kun takhsyytygar tyort atakhtaakh*”, / *Kun ortotugar ikki atakhtaakh*,/ *Kun kiiritiger yus atakhtaakh baar ugu*” – ‘*They say there is someone who stands on four legs at dawn, on two legs – in the afternoon, and on three legs – at sunset*’ (Riddles, 1975). The motive of death represented as the fading of the sun can be seen in the plot of Dolgan Olonkho, the main characters of which find out about deadly danger

approaching by looking at the state of the celestial bodies. The horse that the brother and sister were riding asks them: “*Bu kelbit suolbut dieng oduulaan koryung. Kaytak korduk koryungneek kyungyut-iygyt tygar syrдыгyn byurkugurder duu, erge kun-iy tygaryn korduk duu?*” – ‘*Look back at the path you have crossed. Does the light of the sun and moon shine still or did it fade away?*’ (Efremov, 1984). When they turned around, the children saw how “getting dark and foggy, a dark cloud came out of the deep sky...- tumannyran, karaaran, kallaan byyghyttan taksybyta kara bylyt...”. The siblings realized that the abaagy warrior is chasing them; before mounting the horse, they ask God for a favor, and a set expression is used in this phrase: “Kaalar kunum karaaran ile karakpar koston kelle” – ‘My last day, became dark in reality, and it showed me’. The phraseological unit varies in different context and combines two lexical and semantic variants of the word *kun* – ‘*sun*’ and ‘*day*’.

The fundamental idea of the sun being the source of vital energy, and life itself is expressed in the objects of material culture. It is known that many items of the Yakut clothes were decorated with metal circles (*kusenge* ~ *kungese*, *tuogakhta*, *kun*), depicting the sun (Pekarsky, column 1304). Normally, they were attached to the head piece (forehead part), on the chest, on the waist. They served as a shield for shamans in order to protect one of the most vulnerable places on the body, known as *kokhsun kharaga* ‘*the eye of the spine*’. Metal, often silver pictures of the sun were said to have a magic protecting function. In shamanism, losing the “sun” also means a short-coming death of the shaman, in other words, if the metal circle *kusenge* falls off the shaman caftan, the shaman will die soon. This belief serves as a tautology of the widely-spread proverb: “*Kun tullara, kukhenge byata bystara buola*” – ‘*the time has come for the sub to fall, and for the string holding the kugenge to break*’, i.e. it is time to pass away (Kulakovsky, 1979).

In the historical legends of Yakut people, the following is said about the final important bloody battle: “*Bu doyduga... kun tyllar, kungege byata bystar... kete kerdii keme-kune tygaayar*” – ‘*The day of the destined even has come to this land..., the sun setting down, the round shaman necklace falling off*’ (Kulakovsky, 1979). The same metaphor is the key image in describing the victory of the enemy:

*“Chyngaadany oloron aat-suol ylan, kunun tuura okhson, kukhengetin byga taybaan...”* – ‘Having killed Chyngaada, and having attained name and glory, having knocked off his sun, and having broken the kusenge necklace...’ (Kulakovsky, 1979).

Yakut warriors also had an image of the sun in the form of a metal circle on the armor. The circle is called *kyunneekh kujakh in Yakut* (literately meaning – armor with the sun). According to the beliefs, a warrior that lost his “sun” felt unprotected and doomed (Kulakovsky, 1979).

A Yakut legend called *“Dagdagar Botur, Elemte Botur uonna Chabychakhaan Botur”* tells us how one person scared away thirty warriors by shooting a bone arrow into the metal ornament of the sun<sup>1</sup> on the belt of enemy’s chief warrior: *“Komus kurun kune kilbejen igerin Chabychakhaan Botur lappagar muos ogunan ytar”* – ‘Chabychakhaan Botur shot a flat-pointed bone arrow into his shining round ornament of his [chief warrior’s] belt’ (Kulakovsky, 1979). The metaphor of life represented by the sun and the loss of the sun or sunset being the symbol of death is not just a pretty poetic image. Having attained a material object representation, the metaphor generates behavior stereotypes by controlling it.

In conclusion, let us look at a popular expression. Yak. *Kun sire*, Khakas. *kyonnig chir*, Altaic *kyondu djerdegi*, etc. – ‘a place under the sun, this light’. This is how the Middle World<sup>2</sup> is represented in the Turkic folklore as opposed to the Under World, the world of death, where the vulnerable sun and moon shine dimly (compare with the description of the Under World in the Altai epic: a place, where “the eyes do not see the sun and the moon”). Apart from the accepted variant of translation, we believe there can be an additional variant of interpreting the notion of the Earth – being not only ‘sunny place’, but also ‘a place for life’. In mythology of many peoples, including Turkic, the Under World is represented as a country, where there cannot be any birth, development or life: The Under World “with sluggish bulls that the cows do not allow to come near them *ynakh ylbat munutakh ogustaakh*”, “with unmarried women, who never gave birth *djabyyl barbyt djakhtardaakh*”, “with young men who got stuck in the eel standing upright, and with young relaxed women lying down” (Popov, 1936). *“The number of Erlick’s slaves does not multiply and do not*

*decrease until the end of time*”- this is the curse that Ulgen sent on Erlick’s servants, after banishing Erlick to the Under World according to Altaic myths (Berbitsky, 1893).

The analysis of the ‘kun’ as the key metaphor meaning ‘sun’ and ‘life’ showed the semantic unity of the language trope and the symbolic meaning of the object of material culture and motive a folklore plot as well as a component of beliefs, paroemia and legends. The language and culture form a unified semantic continuum.

In some cases, in order to understand the deep meaning of a folklore text, historically reconstructed lexical and semantic variants of the words play a significant role. These LSV are preserved in a folded-up form, being an associative potential of the lexeme, which is actualized in a certain context. It is a well known fact, that a word does not belong to any specific synchronic layer of the language and it has the ability to store a millennium scope of cultural monuments. The nature itself and the functions of oral folklore help the historical elements to hold key positions in the language.

---

<sup>1</sup>If someone shot an arrow into the light spot on the forehead of the enemy’s chief warrior’s horse, this would be a sign of close defeat and death of the enemy (Ksenofontov, 1977). The light spot on the horse’s forehead was also called *tuogakhta*.

<sup>2</sup>“The place of death is the fly ash. The place of life is heated by the golden sun” – this typical antithesis can be seen in the Buryat genealogical legends (Ulanov, 1974).

---

## References

- Batmanov, Kun A. C. (1963). *Pamyatniki drevneturkskoy pismennosti Tuvy*. The Tyva monuments of Ancient Turkic Writing, *Kyzyl Press*.
- Vezhbidskaya A. (1999). *Semanticheskiye universalii i opisaniye yazikov*. Semantic Universals and Language Description. Translated by A.D. Shemelev, *Russian Culture Languages*.
- Verbitskiy (1893). *Altaiskiy inorodtsy: Sbornik etnograficheskikh statey i issledovaniy altaiskogo missionera, prot. V.I. Verbitskogo*. Altaic foreigners: A Collection of Ethnographic Articles and Research by An Altaic Missionary, V.I. Verbitsky. *Moscow Press*.
- Gabysheva L.L. (2009). *Folklorny tekst: semioticheskiye mekhanizmy ustnoy pamyati*. Folklore text: semiotic mechanisms of oral memory. *Novosibirsk, Nauka Press*.
- Efremov P.E. (1984). *Dolganskoye olonkho*. Dolgan Olonkho. *Yakutsk Press*.
- Riddles (1975). *Sakha taabyrynnara*. Yakut Riddles. *Yakutsk Press*.
- Istoricheskiye predaniya i rasskazy yakutov* (1960). Yakut Historical Tales and Legends: Vol. 1. Moscow, St.-Petersburg.
- Ksenofontov G.V. (1977). *Elleyada: Materialy po mifologii i legendarnoy istorii yakutov*. Elleyada: Materials on the Mythology and Legendary History of the Yakuts. Moscow, *Nauka Press*.
- Kulakovskiy A.E. (1979). *Nauchniye trudy*. Scientific Works. *Yakutsk*.
- Losev A.F. (1982). *Znak, simvol, mif. Trudy po yazikoznaniyu*. Sign, symbol, myth. Linguistic Works. *Moscow*.
- Lvova E. L. et al. (1989). *Traditsionnoye mirovozzreniye turkov Uznoy Sibiri. Chelovek. Obshchestvo*. Traditional Worldview of the Turks in Southern Siberia. *Novosibirsk, Nauka Press*.
- Malov S.E. (1962). *Eniseyskaya pismennost turkov*. Enissey Turks Writing. *Moscow, St.-Petersburg*.
- Nemchenko V.N. (1995). *Osnovniye ponyatiya leksikologii v terminah*. Main Lexicological Notions in Definitions. *Nizny Novgorod*.
- Obraztsy narodnoy literatury yakutov, sobranniye I.A. Khudayakovim*. Samples of Yakut Folklore Literature, A Collection by I.A. Khudyakov. (1918). *Vol. 2*.
- Pekarskiy E.K. *Slovar' yakutskogo yazika*. Yakut Language Dictionary. (1958-1959). *Yakutsk*.
- Popov A.A. (1936). *Yakutskiy folklor*. Yakut Folklore. Transl. by A.A. Popov. Leningrad, *Sovetskiy Pisatel Press*.
- Emelyanov N.V. (1965). Proverbs. *Sbornik yakutskikh poslovits i pogovorok*. A Collection of Yakut Proverbs and Sayings. *Yakutsk*.
- Potebnya A.A. (1976). *Estetika i poetika*. Esthetics and Poetics. *Moscow, Iskusstvo Press*.
- Sivtsev G.F. (1979). *Sakhalyy kylgas tyldjyt*. A Short Yakut Dictionary. *Yakutsk*.

---

Tenishev E.R. et al. (1997). *Sravnitelno-istoricheskaya grammatika turkskih yazikov. Leksika*. A Comparative Historical Grammar of the Turkic Languages. Vocabulary. Moscow, Nauka Press.

Ulanov A.I. (1974). *Drevniy folklor buryat*. Ancient Buryat Folklore. Ulan-Ude, Buryat Press.

Khudyakov I.A. (1969). *Kratkoye opisaniye Verkhoyanskogo okruga*. A Short Description of the Verkhoyansky Region. Leningrad, Nauka Press.