

Sources for the History of Mentality: Latvian Folk Anecdotes of the 19th – Early 20th Centuries

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Abstract The research is funded by the Latvian Council of Science, project “The Baltic Germans of Latgale in the context of socio–ethnic relations from the 17th till the beginning of the 20th century, project No. lzp–2020/2–0136”. The history of mentality / mentalities is a significant branch of modern historical science, the relevance of which as a component of social history is only increasing. The purpose of the article is to define some features of the mode of thinking / world perception of Latvians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries based on the analysis of the lexical composition of Latvian folk anecdotes. This investigation is based on the linguistic analysis of Latvian folk anecdotes (5671 items), published in 1929–1930. The subject of the history of mentality has three facets: way of thinking / perception of the world, ideas about man and various phenomena of the world, existing forms, and norms of human behaviour. The revelation of the mode of thinking / world perception embodied in verbal texts demands to use linguistic analysis in three aspects—structure of texts, structural and functional. The analysis of the lexical thesaurus of Latvian folk anecdotes reveals the mythological mode of thinking/world perception of Latvians. The incomplete isolation of a person from the surrounding world and the resulting concreteness defines this way of thinking. Such features of this mode of world perception indicate narrowness and density of the sphere of human contacts, which was characteristic of the life of Latvians living in the territory of Latvia.

Keywords mentality; source; linguistic analysis; Latvian folk anecdotes

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Introduction

The history of mentality/ mentalities as a branch of historical science got crystallized at the beginning of the 20th century and retains its significance to the present day (which is justified by a considerable number of scientific journals thematic specialization of which includes mentality, for example, *Reflexions Historiques; Mentalities; The International History Review; Culture and History Digital Journal; History and Theory; Dialog so vremenem* etc). Publications in the said editions provide evidence of the expansion of both, the range of phenomena that come into scholars' attention, and the source data base together with chronological framework as not merely mental systems of antiquity and the Middle Ages are being studied currently, turning out, apparently, to be increasingly relevant as a component of social history. As once pointed by Aron Gurevich, "The history of society and the comprising it large and small groups can no longer be studied in isolation from the history of the world views, value systems, forms of social behaviour, symbols and rituals" (9), seen as the story of the relationship between humans and nature, humans and humans, humans and things in different spheres of human life, at its different levels and in two dimensions—physical activity and perception. The most significant factor determining the "rise" of the history of mentality is "the uprising of the masses" alongside with the dominance of irrationality in the conduct of people organized into masses, which was revealed, in the first place, during WWI (Ortega-I-Gasset). It induced, in addition to psychologists, historians and sociologists, to pay attention to psychology in search of a deep motivation for human behaviour, i.e. to the actual and shaped by various means of communication conscious and unconscious, though still actual self-concepts and world perception shared by people (Parsons). The mass—collective, unconscious perceptions constitute the subject matter for the study of the history of mentality, hence do not go beyond its limits, since the cornerstone of human consciousness, including the unconscious, is the mode of thinking, the world perception, which finds its expression in the content of the text structure leftover by humans and recorded in written-visual forms or observed in directly reactive, automatically manifested forms of human behaviour in various situations. Therefore, the subject of the history of mentality has three facets: 1. Mode of thinking/ world perception; 2. The concept of man in various world phenomena; 3. Actual, existent forms/norms of human behaviour.

The aim of the present article is to determine various mentality features of Latvians living in the territory of Latvia at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the present work we will focus on the first facet in the study of mentality. To identify the mode of thinking / world perception, the verbal texts and their linguistic analysis are at the bottom-line, the aspects of which, in the first place, are the structural, text-oriented analysis, comprising the grammatical form of words. Secondly, functional analysis, which considers the function of parts of speech and members of a sentence the given words perform and, thirdly, structural (or contextual—semantic) analysis, regarding word collocation and the arising semantic shades of meaning.

Source Characterization: Author, Texts

One significant source for the study of mentality, in particular Latvians, is *Latvian folk anecdotes* collected from various sources: the oral sources, including eyewitness accounts or accounts of the participants of some life situations (1: 386-387), and the written ones, extracted from newspaper and calendar publications, beginning with the early years of the 19th century up to the 20s of the 20th century. A compiler and editor of the four-volume edition, which was published in 1929-1930s, was Peteris Birkerts (1881–1956), an outstanding person whose interests, activities and left-over evidence go far beyond the definition of “a literary and folk scholar” as “the texts created by him are so peculiar that they have not yet been properly integrated into the Latvian culture (Pakalns 744), as pointed by a contemporary scholar. In the 1920s, at the age of 43, prior to Birkerts got determined to launch his collection of Latvian folklore, he had written the first textbooks on psychology and sociology in Latvia.

P. Birkerts was tormented by the question, “Do they really (our folk) barely work, solely sing and, whenever possible, hardly ever think?,” which persuaded him to turn to the folklore of Latvians, at first to proverbs and sayings, later to folk anecdotes (Birkerts 20). It was of paramount importance for him to prove that Latvians have their own creative genius, their own ability to think and perceive their own national philosophy. Moreover, the introduction of Latvians into the world cultural space was of equal importance for Birkerts, which resulted in the inclusion of a lengthy sketch *Anecdotes in world literature* in the compiled for publication four-volume issue of folk anecdotes written by his brother, a writer and literary scholar Anton Birkerts. Opening the fourth, final volume dedicated to obscene anecdotes, P. Birkerts outlined some feasible directions for their study: “Folk jokes are folklore, which is suitable as a study material for a folklorist, historian and historian of culture, philologist, doctor, lawyer, educator and other scientists” (3). However, the demand for these texts by scientists of various fields, particularly historical, is unstable and low. According to Guntis Pakalns, “the most popular, many a time

fully or partially republished, as well as the best studied, is the fourth volume, the content of which is obscene anecdotes” (751). It is noteworthy that for a historian the informative potential of sources is not limited by information about various life realia that are recalled there with different degrees of frequency (in this case, anecdotes). As emphasized by the compiler of the collection of Latvian folk anecdotes, “they are of great value as documents of folk psychology” (Pakalns 3). In order to reveal it, it is necessary to identify the world view, which is determined by the mode of thinking / world perception, expressed in language, in the structure of the thesaurus of verbal texts, in a word, for in it, in mind of L. C. Vygotsky, “consciousness reflects itself as the sun does in a tiny drop of water. A word pertains to consciousness like a small world to a large one, like a living cell to an organism, like an atom to the cosmos. It is this small world of consciousness indeed” (509).

The methods, types of thinking that researchers refer to as mythological and scientific-logical ones are based on the capacity of a human’s perceived / conscious distance separating him from the surrounding him world. The latter point provides for self-awareness. The indicators of isolation are qualitative homogeneity—heterogeneity of a human and the natural-objective world as well as connected with its division into subject—object or lack of it. It should be borne in mind, however, that in any cultural-historical era there coexist, intertwining in a certain correlation, mental breaks of both types of thinking / world perception that forms the ground basis of human behaviour.

The Latvian folk anecdotes published by P. Birkerts, comprising 5671 units, recorded by 869 persons from 1565 storytellers and related primarily to the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, are distinguished considerably from the texts so common at present day. They do not show a high degree of abstraction which allows to concisely and succinctly express the essence of many- and multifaceted as well as varied phenomena, being like domestic sketches, capable of brightening up joint gatherings on dark evenings, not too burdened with labour. Typologically, these tales, varied in length, ranging from one sentence up to several pages, can be compared to medieval Western European exempla, however, opposite to them, Latvian folk anecdotes are not didactic (Gurevich 7). The given features of the said texts are evident in their lexical thesaurus, wherein several features manifesting a certain mode of world perception will be defined in the present work.

Lexical Composition of Latvian Folk Anecdotes and their Features

Thus, to be noted firstly, there is virtually an equal number of nouns, mainly anthroponomic-subject nouns, and verbs, among which there are hardly any

nominating mental, emotional states / forms; it is evident that the dominant group of verbs are the verbs signifying physical actions, states of being and acts of communication, for example, “I’ve pointed to him ...” (2: 346); “One gentleman coming home late at night...” (3: 445); “Once a gypsy was travelling by train ...” (3: 225); “One little girl was cooking milk porridge ...” (2: 93); “There was one very stingy mistress...” (2: 321); “The pastor, listening to the children, asked one boy: What do you know, my child?” (3: 342); “Once there was one pastor who was very fond of hunting. He was always taking a gun with him to church...” (3: 407).

Such verbs of being, presence of something, the acts of communication and physical action demonstrate the world as a value of actual, due to the minimum distance, tangible things involved in the system of continuous and uninterrupted interaction, which in turn refers to mythological thinking.

Secondly, a characteristic feature of the lexical composition of Latvian folk anecdotes is the rarity of the high degree generalization words. This observation is correlated with the remark of Matiss Kaudzitis (1848–1926) about the low level of “our newspaper industry,” as justified by the fact that “prior to the appearance of the newspaper *Peterburgas avize* (1862–1865), such words as “politics,” “religion,” “culture,” “library,” “manifest” were not familiar to Latvians. The nomination “a human” is virtually non-existent, although in the texts relating to the early 20th century and predominantly circulated in the urban environment, the occurrence of indefinite generalizing designations is noticeable, to give examples: “one man” (3: 563), “one chap” (3: 363), “one girl” (3: 364), “one doctor” (3: 363), “one mummy” (3: 362), which indicates an increase in rationality and, accordingly, the ability to abstract, mainly among Latvians living in or near the city. However, a well-known generalization does not eliminate the social determination of the nominated persons—by gender, age, social status, occupation, place in the kinship, ethnic and local affiliation. All the said above points to the concreteness of, in this case, the concept of man, which is uniquely mythological thinking. Specifically, the world perception does diminish the anthropological capacity of a human, it makes it difficult to understand and approve the human essence of any social-specific individual. The lack of typified names against the presence of a considerable number of personal names and nicknames also testifies to the concreteness of the mode of thinking manifested in the analysed texts; for example, “Karlis, Liba and Spritis were sentenced to a year in prison” (3: 217); “The Jew goes for a walk with his son Meiskaya” (3: 248); “Yury, tell me” (3: 416); “Some tailor named Gold” (3: 23); “When Dizkarlis (Baron of Dundaga) was driving down the road” (2: 27); “Janis Biezums was called a Siberian eater” (3: 531); “A baron, who was called Black Peter, due to a very dark complex-

ion, lived in Talsi” (3: 89) and etc.

Personal names, and even more so nicknames, expose the narrowness of people’s circle of communication and the frequency, regularity of contacts in it, resulting in poor distancing that complicates the emergence of reflection and rationality, the ability to understand and behave consciously and meaningfully, providing for immediately reactive behaviour.

The noted concreteness of the worldview is justified by the very rare use of adjectives in Latvian folk anecdotes, which is the third feature of the lexical thesaurus of these texts. Adjectives in their essence commonly relate a certain quality of things, phenomena, states, actions and, therefore, necessitate a certain distance between the observer, the speaker and the object of observation or description. It is crucial for the “author” of any text (oral or written) to be “placed out” of that world which is a precondition for the text to be an object of reflection, generalization and evaluation. In the studied texts of Latvian folk anecdotes, though rare, nevertheless, adjectives are apparent; more commonly, they express a direct impression—a characteristic of a human’s detected impression, commonly associated with judgement of his appearance; for instance, “Beautiful hence lazy daughter” (2: 142); “A terribly beautiful girl” (2: 104, 105, 111); “One angry wife” (2: 531); “His bride is said to be very lazy” (2: 111); “That Levenstein was a crazy gentleman” (2: 71).

Such definitions testify to a fundamental feature of mythological thinking—the incomplete isolation of a human from the surrounding world and the narrowness of the circle of social communication, correlated with it. Frequently recurrent adjectives acquire a stable typological character, indicating the tightness of the said circle, in which, due to spatial proximity, there is a very weak interest in the other as a human.

Still another, fourth feature of the lexical thesaurus of Latvian folk anecdotes is the “abnormal” function of parts of speech. Thus, the nouns, particularly those referring an ethnic community, commonly function as an adjective. For example, “A boy asks German boy, “What’s your name?” (2: 80); “Once one German landowner was walking round the house of the servants” (2: 94); “Russian soldier” (2: 178); “German madam” (2: 58). Ethnonyms functioning as adjectives point to the inclusion of an individual into community, affiliation to which determines his quality and the very existence. Thus, the individual “I” equals, on the one hand, the ethnically coloured “we,” however, on the other hand, it does not dissolve in the socio-ethnic whole, meanwhile preserving its singularity. At the same time, “we” appears not as an organic whole, but as a set of units.

Such conception of man and of his correlation with different levels of social

communities, embodied in a language and, therefore, leading to the layer of the unconscious in the system of consciousness, demonstrates a narrow distance between the individual and the world in which he resides.

However, the ethnonyms functioning as adjectives not only refer a human community, perceived as peculiar and distinct (an ethnonym is always a sign of alienation), but also provide a qualitative description of certain phenomena and institutions—time, administration, army, including language: “The time of the Russian rule” (3: 377); “During the German occupation” (3: 386); “During Russian occupation” (3: 172); “Russian and German soldiers” (4: 173); “The German language” (3: 430–431); “The Latvian language” (3: 429) and etc. This again demonstrates the concreteness of world perception and indirectly testifies to a very deep penetration of the German and Russian origin into the tissue of Latvian life. It is noteworthy that in all such cases, while preserving the mentality of Latvians, nouns–ethnonyms in the function of adjectives should be translated into Russian by nouns in the genitive plural rather than by adjectives; however, this would not be in line with the norms of the Russian language and would not correspond to the mentality of Russians.

In turn, adjectives, as well as participles, often function as nouns–anthroponyms, for example: “The baptised” (2: 255); “The eldest” (3: 431); “The youngest” (2: 388, 431); “The righteous / The unrighteous” (3: 523), “The beloved” (3: 242); “The convicted” (3: 477), etc. At the same time, certain qualities, positions, states “get frozen, transforming into a designation of the holder of the said quality. A human in such case is presented as the qualitatively definite and flat, while the concrete, temporary, situational turns into supratemporal, essential and substantiated.

Another characteristic feature of the composition of nouns in the analysed texts is the relative rarity of deverbal nouns derived from the verbs referring physical actions, for instance: “sleeping” derived from “to sleep,” “eating” from “to eat,” “running” from “to run,” “persecution” from “to persuade” etc. Such deverbal nouns are generalizations that testify to a human’s ability to get abstracted from the situations of human behaviour observed by him and to separate the very action from the doer. It is noteworthy that such word usage is apparent in the texts recorded in Riga and its surroundings. However, there are far more frequent deverbal nouns anthroponyms in which the insolubility of the action and the doer is being manifested, e.g., “a knitter” (3: 438); a teacher” (3: 431); “a traveller” (3: 438); “an eater” (3: 432); “a singer” (3: 403), “a gamer” (3: 432) etc. This recurrently demonstrates the significance of the mental attitudes of mythological thinking in the Latvian world-view system. Moreover, rather poorly reflected by the humanities in Latvia, neither cognized by a broad audience nor transmitted by linguistic forms, they retain their

strength in the mentality of modern Latvians, manifested in their socio–political and speech behavior.

Conclusion

The analysis of the lexical thesaurus of Latvian folk anecdotes has revealed the mythological mode of thinking that is the basis of the mentality of Latvians. It is characterized by incomplete isolation of a human from the surrounding world and the resulting concreteness. Such features of the mythological worldview demonstrate the narrowness and density of the sphere of human contacts, which was characteristic of the life of Latvians in the territory of Latvia.

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