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## ENGLISH OCCULT DISCOURSE AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

### Abstract

The paper reveals structural and functional peculiarities of English occult discourse as a cultural phenomenon. The research is based on the material of English explanatory and etymological dictionaries and texts manifesting occult discourse on the Internet. The paper uses a comprehensive methodology involving general scientific and special linguistic methods. The paper identifies the institutional forms and types of English occult discourse and outlines ways to study them. The term "occult discourse" denotes the general direction of discourse, which studies the peculiarities of communication in all institutional activity areas beyond science and official religion. Based on the results of etymological and componential analyses, we conclude that occult discourse contains such primary genre varieties as astrological, magical, and alchemical. Regarding socio-cultural features, we note that the function of these types of discourse stem from the symbolic and social meanings that are added to the relevant practices. Thus, the acquisition of occult sciences is part of the general system of thinking and beliefs in a particular society, allowing us to study the relevant fragment of the English worldview in mythological and naive versions.

*Keywords:* occult discourse, astrology, alchemy, magic, world view.

### Introduction

When studying a foreign language, the student is faced with several facts that do not relate to the field of vocabulary, grammar, phonetics or stylistics but instead to the social, everyday or historical spheres. The modern world is in a state of constant dynamic development, raising the problem of successful communication among individuals, communities, and ethnic groups. The

rapid process of globalisation makes the world more connected and more dependent. Integration processes in the field of economy and politics caused the expansion of intercultural and interlingual contacts. The role of the language in cross-cultural communication is exceptionally high, and the English language is considered the lingua franca of today (Crystal, 2003).

The correct use or understanding of some words or phrases sometimes presupposes know-

ledge of their origin, situations in which they can be used, or elementary information from the history, literature, and political reality of the target language's country. Simultaneously with the study of the language, it is necessary to study the culture of its people - to get acquainted with history, literature, economics, geography, country politics, everyday life, tradition, and psychology. The main *aim* of this study is to determine the structural and functional peculiarities of English occult discourse as a cultural phenomenon. Humanity has been trying to understand the meaning of the world around us throughout its existence, which applies to both natural phenomena and products of human activity. This desire contributed to the emergence and development of occult sciences, which can be used to explain obscure processes and phenomena. We consider *occultism* as the general name of the teachings and traditions that claim the existence of forces and phenomena hidden and unknown to science, the experience of which is available only to people with special abilities or initiated.

#### Materials and Methods

The research is based on the material of English explanatory and etymological dictionaries as well as texts manifesting occult discourse on the Internet. The paper uses a comprehensive methodology involving general scientific methods: *descriptive method* to identify the characteristics of the object of study; methods of *analysis* and *synthesis* are used to form generalised ideas about the nature of English occult discourse; and special linguistic methods: elements of *compositional analysis* were applied, which made it possible to determine the semantic features of key nominees of discourse; *etymological analysis* allowed us to trace the historical development of the key English nominations of occult discourse; *contextual-interpretative analysis* made it possible to identify and explain the semantic dynamics of different types of occult discourse, the *linguo-cultural analysis* served to identify and explain the characteristics of English-speaking

occult discourse.

#### Literature Review

The researchers claim that collaborating with specialists from other countries, being competitive in the world labour market, and solving professional challenges are really significant for future professionals. Therefore, the development of cultural competence in learning foreign languages is essential (Bakum, Savchak, Kostiuk, Zhumbei, & Poznansky, 2021). Developing the ability to interact across cultures through the medium of a foreign language goes far beyond the acquisition of language skills. It includes recognition of diverse cultural norms and values, the ways to use the language, and the interpretation of social actions (Solodka, Filatova, Hinkevych, & Spanatiy, 2021).

The linguists consider the possibility of a systematic conciliation between the English culture and different languages within an interdisciplinary approach, which may narrow the scope of divergences and help in promoting students' Intercultural Communicative Competence (Bagui & Adder, 2020). This fact underlines the relevance of the present study. When a national-cultural component is included in the content of teaching a foreign language, adequate means are needed for its assimilation. Such means can be authentic materials: literary and musical works, objects of reality and their illustrative images, bringing the student closer to the natural, cultural environment. The communication of knowledge about culture, history, realities and traditions contributes to the development of a positive attitude to a foreign language and the culture of the people who are the native speakers of this language.

The leading linguistic and cultural task is the study of linguistic units that most clearly reflect the national characteristics of the target culture: realities (designations of objects and phenomena characteristic of one culture and absent in another), connotative vocabulary (words that coincide in basic meaning but differ in cultural-historical

associations), background vocabulary (designations of objects and phenomena that have analogues in the compared cultures, but differing in national characteristics of the functioning, form, purpose of objects). At the same time, cultural and regional value, typicality, well-knownness and orientation towards modern reality, thematicity and functionality of phenomena are the most important criteria for selecting the national-cultural component of the content of teaching a foreign language. Teaching a foreign language will be more successful if the linguoculturological aspect is included in the content of what is taught, comprising the use of linguistic and cultural information as a valuable source of linguocultural material (Tulusina, Sadykova, Zaripova, & Carlson, 2021). The use of English occult discourse as authentic texts in the course of country studies will improve students' interest and promote further research into the world view of English-speaking society.

In the modern humanities, the term *discourse* is considered one of the most popular and widely used. Different paradigms are used in different meanings and contexts, often denoting different concepts (Pallotti, 2016). The linguistic study of discourse is associated with a change in the scientific paradigm in philological studies in the second half of the twentieth century, namely, the transition from studying structural aspects of language to its functioning. Historically, the discourse has been viewed in terms of formal and functional linguistics, which later became part of a systematic approach that began in the 1970s and 1980s. In modern linguistics, discourse is interpreted as people's communication from the standpoint of their belonging to a particular social group or concerning a typical speech situation (Price, 1999).

It should be noted that there is no established classification of discourse at the present stage of development due to the variability of social conditions of communication. We propose the following criteria for the structural-formal typology of discourse: code (verbal/nonverbal, mixed, creolised); message (oral / written, hybrid); dis-

course participants (monologue, dialogue, polylogue). There is a structural and semantic typology of discourse under the reference context, i.e. the social sphere and the position of the communicant concerning the contextual situation: the sphere of discursive activity (institutional, domestic); topic (denotative correlation); type of text according to the method of presentation (description, story, etc.). Recent research in the field of discursive activities focuses on the following types: political, administrative, legal, military, pedagogical, religious, mystical, medical, business, advertising, sports, scientific, stage and media types of institutional discourse (Dijk, 1995).

#### Structural Features of the English Occult Discourse

In the above list of types of institutional discourse (political, administrative, legal, military, pedagogical, religious, mystical, medical, business, advertising, sports, scientific, stage, etc.), the term *mystical discourse* is somewhat unjustified, in our opinion. Let us consider the dictionary definition of the adjective "*mystical*": "*having a spiritual meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence*" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2008). It emphasises the vagueness, the incomprehensibility of what is considered mystical.

We suggest using the term *occult discourse* to denote the general direction of discourse, which studies the features of communication in various mystical practices, magic, astrology, etc., i.e. all areas of institutional activity that go beyond science and official religion. We distinguish this term from *esoteric discourse*. Esotericism is a cultural phenomenon of different epochs, which includes, on the one hand, belief in the existence of the supernatural world and mystical ideas about it. On the other, the magical means of communication with it. It is characteristic of both traditional doctrinal religions and non-religious mystical currents. Esotericism is sometimes seen as a profound positive knowledge of the world,

hidden from the uninitiated. A specific form of esotericism is occultism (Dijk, 1995).

Let us consider, first of all, the historical development of the corresponding English nomination. This lexical unit was first recorded in English in 1870 and denoted the doctrines, principles and practices of occult sciences: “*occultism (n.) The doctrine, principles, or practices of occult sciences, “1870, from occult + -ism. Related: Occultist”* (Online Etymological Dictionary, n.d.).

The dictionary entry also illustrates the use of this lexical item and, at the same time, explains that it denotes a system of pseudo-sciences that must be distinguished from prescientific magical practice: “*Occultism is to be distinguished from the primitive magic described by anthropologists, which is prescientific, pre-philosophical, and perhaps prereligious, whereas occultism is a pseudo-science or system of pseudo-sciences, often supported by an irrationalist philosophy, and always exploiting the disintegrated debris of preexisting religions”* (Online Etymological Dictionary, n.d.).

Thus, the lexical unit *occultism* comes from the adjective *occult*, the etymology of which is defined as follows: “*occult (adj.) the 1530s, “secret, not divulged, “from French occulte and directly from Latin occultus” hidden, concealed, secret, “past participle of occultare “cover over, conceal,” from assimilated form of ob “over” (see ob-) + a verb related to celare “to hide” (from PIE root \*kel- (1) “to cover, conceal, save”). Meaning “not apprehended by the mind, beyond the range of understanding” is from the 1540s. The association with the supernatural sciences (magic, alchemy, astrology, etc.) dates from 1630s. A verb occult “to keep secret, conceal” (c.1500, from Latin occultare) is obsolete”* (Online Etymological Dictionary, n.d.). This adjective was first recorded in English in the early XVI century in the meaning of “*secret, not made public*”, which came from Latin through the French language meaning “*hidden*”. Later, the lexical unit *occult* developed the meaning of “*beyond reason*”, while the association with the

supernatural sciences (magic, alchemy, astrology, etc.) appeared only a century later.

The dictionary definitions of the relevant nominations in modern lexicographical sources of English are as follows: “*Occult sciences - those sciences of the Middle Ages which related to the supposed action or influence of occult qualities, or supernatural powers, as alchemy, magic, necromancy, and astrology”* (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2007); “*Occult sciences alchemy, astrology, magic, etc.”* (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2008). As we can see, they present the same meaning and structural composition of the occult sciences. Thus, we conclude that the occult discourse contains such primary genre varieties as *astrological, magical, and alchemical*. Regarding the term *necromancy*, which refers to the practice of communicating with the souls of the dead, we refer to it as a variety of magic, based on the following definition: “*1. the magic practised by a witch or sorcerer; 2. a form of divination through communication with the dead”* (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2007).

Let us consider the etymology of the critical nominations of these types of occult discourse in English. “*Magic - late 14c., Magike, “art of influencing or predicting events and producing marvels using hidden natural forces, “also” supernatural art, “especially the art of controlling the actions of spiritual or superhuman beings; from Old French magique “magic; magical,” from Late Latin magice “sorcery, magic,” from Greek magike (presumably with tekhnē “art”), fem. of magikos “magical,” from magos “one of the members of the learned and priestly class,” from Old Persian magush, which is possibly from PIE root \*magh- “to be able, have power”* (Online etymological dictionary, n.d.). As we can see from the etymological reference, the lexical unit *magic* was first recorded in English in the XIV century, which got into by borrowing from the ancient French meaning “*the art of influencing or predicting events with the help of hidden natural forces.*” The language form itself comes

from the Proto-Indo-European root for “*have power*” and historically precedes the nominations *occult, occultism*.

Regarding the English nomination of *alchemy*, the etymological dictionary indicates that it appeared in English in the middle of the XIV century from the Old French language: “*Alchemy - medieval chemistry; the supposed science of transmutation of base metals into silver or gold (also involving the quest for the universal solvent, quintessence, etc.), mid-14c., from Old French alchimie (14c.), alquemie (13c.), from Medieval Latin alchemy, from Arabic al-chemistry, from Greek khemeioa (found c.300 CE in a decree of Diocletian against “the old writings of the Egyptians”), all meaning “alchemy,” and of uncertain origin*” (Online Etymological Dictionary, n.d.).

As for the original proforma, the opinions of etymologists differ: they refer to it either as units of proto-Indo-European origin or to nominations of Arab origin. Although, it seems possible that this lexical unit has gone through both stages in its historical development. Relevant to our study is that alchemy was a science of the Middle Ages, including occult and natural philosophy and practical chemistry and metallurgy. After 1600, the purely scientific meaning shifted to a lexical unit to denote chemistry. Alchemy remained with the meaning of the pursuit of the transformation of base metals into gold, the search for a universal solvent and panacea: “*Perhaps from an old name for Egypt (Khemia, literally “land of black earth, “found in Plutarch), or from Greek khymatos” that which is poured out, “from khein” to pour, “from PIE root \*gheu-” to pour. The word seems to have elements of both origins. The al- is the definite Arabic article, “the.” The art and the name were adopted by the Arabs from Alexandrians and entered Europe via Arabic Spain. Alchemy was the “chemistry” of the Middle Ages and early modern times, involving both occult and natural philosophy and practical chemistry and metallurgy. After c. 1600, the strictly scientific sense went with chemistry, and alchemy was left with the sense of*

*“pursuit of the transmutation of baser metals into gold, search for the universal solvent and the panacea”* (Online Etymological Dictionary, n.d.).

The etymology of the English lexical unit *astrology* is more transparent. This word was first recorded at the end of the 14th century. As in the case of alchemy, it originally meant that astronomy had the status of official science. The narrowing of the meaning of the modern occurred gradually. It ended in the XVII century: “*Astrology - late 14c., “Calculation and foretelling based on observation of heavenly bodies, “from Latin astrologia” astronomy, the science of the heavenly bodies, “from Greek astrologia” astronomy, “literally” a telling of the stars, “from astron “star” (from PIE root \*ster- (2) “star”) + -logia “treating of” (see -logy). In Latin and later Greek, astronomy tended to be more scientific than astrologia. In English, the differentiation between astrology and astronomy began the late 1400s and by late 17c. This word was limited to the sense of “reading influences of the stars and their effects on human destiny”* (Online Etymological Dictionary, n.d.).

Thus, structurally, English occult discourse contains such primary genre varieties as *astrological, magical, and alchemical*. Let us proceed with the functional features of each type of occult discourse.

#### Functional Features of English Occult Discourse

Astrological discourse represented by horoscopes is studied mainly from a psychological, sociological, anthropological and cultural point of view. The horoscope was developed as a media genre, which contributed to its status as one of the defining features of modern mass culture (Blackmore & Seebold, 2001; Evans, 1996; Tandoc & Ferrucci, 2014). We agree with the view that astrology today is a significant phenomenon for most members of society, a unique system of knowledge based on the idea of the necessary connection between the movement of

celestial bodies and processes occurring on earth. Researchers' analysis of language material confirms that horoscope texts have their specific discursive features. Being pragmatically oriented, astrological discourse and cognitive (astrologers have long been people who were engaged in the search for truth, explaining the deterministic laws of the universe) can also perform socio-political (manipulative) psychotherapeutic functions. It is proved by the etymological and componential analyses that manifest the English-speaking society's attitude to this phenomenon. The notional and motivational features of the concept of ASTROLOGY are *foretelling, stars, and influence*.

The genre structure of astrological forecasting is relatively rigid and includes several steps. The first step in the genre model of the horoscope provides general information about the likely development of events in the specified period of the future. The functioning of the nouns *relationship, affairs, family, partner* and the adjective *married* makes it possible to identify the next step in the genre model - the development of relationships. The lexical markers of the third step are the nouns *money, business, cash, funds, expenditures* and the verb *invest*, the semantics of which indicate that its communicative orientation is to inform about the possible development of financial affairs. The semantics of each step's lexical units explicitly reflect its communicative orientation.

Magical discourse is distinguished based on system-creating features: its goals and participants. Communication takes place within the given framework of status-role relations. The primary purpose of magical discourse is to implement essential warning, correction, and protection strategies. The participants are the client - the person who seeks help and the agent - the bearer of secret knowledge, the mediator who communicates between the client and supernatural forces. The fundamental inequality of the participants in communication is mainly demonstrated by the agent's appearance, his behaviour, the presence of symbolic attributes of the magical process, and a specific way of pronouncing

magical texts.

According to our observations, modern social consciousness does not associate magical discourse with any particular social institution. It integrates scientific, religious, and medical communication as a unique cultural system. It can be seen in the results of the etymological and componential analyses that manifest the English-speaking society's attitude to the phenomenon of magic. The notional features of the concept MAGIC are *power, supernatural, extraordinary, use of means, influencing or predicting events, hidden, controlling, spiritual, and superhuman*. The motivational features of the concept are determined by the etymology of the English lexical unit *magic* and are verbalised as follows: *to be able, to have power*. The definitions of these units contain the following significant components: (1) SUBJECT (PHENOMENON), (2) PROPERTY OF THE SUBJECT (PHENOMENON) - power to influence, control, (3) OBJECT - people, events, (4) ATTRIBUTE - spiritual, supernatural, hidden.

Magical discourse implements a protective function associated with distillation and cleansing magic and aims to neutralise household phobias (fear of disease, failure, mystical negative impact on the human destiny) through magical semiotics (charms, amulets, talismans, tools, etc.); magical verbal texts (orders, spells, omens, etc.) describing the mechanism of human influence on the world around us in order to protect against its adverse effects; mystical artefacts (dummies, wax figure, bell, candle, magic recipe, brew, broth, needle, thread, philtre, potion, jar, moly, wand, wand, magic ring, magic mirror), which are attributed to the suggestive power within the magical protective ritual.

The magic text has a pronounced suggestive potential, is symbolically rich, and implements essential warning, correction, and protection strategies. The warning is manifested in prognostic installations (verbal-prognostic genre), embedded in warnings about possible dangers, reflected in the ethnicity-specific system of warning signs (signs). Correction aims to treat illness-

es and normalise the deviant psychosomatic state through clearly algorithmic, semiotically saturated rites and orders (verbal-suggestive genre). Protection from harmful external influences is carried out through spells (verbal-action genre) and symbolically rich rituals.

As for the last subtype of English occult discourse, the definition analysis showed that the notional features of the concept ALCHEMY are *unscientific, search, transformation, eternal life, universal medicine, mysticism, and secrecy, purity of thought, durability, versatility*. The motivational features of the concept ALCHEMY are determined by the etymology of the English lexical unit *alchemy* and are verbalised as follows: *occultism, search, unscientific*. The critical problems of alchemic discourse analysis remain its structure and stratification, the establishment of its features, units, categories, and types, elucidation of ways of organising various discursive invariants, and development of methods and procedures of analysis and description of discourses. These questions will be viewed in separate publications.

### Conclusion

The paper identifies the institutional forms and types of English occult discourse and outlines ways to study them. We consider it appropriate to use the term *occult discourse* to denote the general direction of discourse, which studies the peculiarities of communication in various mystical practices, magic, astrology, etc., i.e. all areas of institutional activity that go beyond science and official religion. Based on the results of etymological and componential analyses, we conclude that occult discourse contains such primary genre varieties as *astrological, magical, and alchemical*. Regarding socio-cultural features, we note that the function of these types of discourse stems from the symbolic and social meanings that are added to the relevant practices. Thus, the acquisition of occult sciences is part of the general system of thinking and beliefs in a particular society, allowing us to study the rele-

vant fragment of the English worldview in mythological and naive versions. The perspective of this study is to analyse the genre varieties of astrological, magical and alchemical discourses and study the strategies and tactics of communication within each of them.

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