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RATIONALE BEHIND RUSSIAN FOLK NAMES OF MEDICINAL PLANTS

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Abstract

Aim. The present paper deals with semantic study of Russian folk names of medicinal plants. These names indicate a specific pharmacological activity of plants. The aim of the research is to find out rationale behind these names and investigate the semantic motivation underlying the plant name. In case with non-scientific names the motivation is influenced by historical and dialectical factors and associated with using a species as a medical remedy or applying it in the household. The object is the vocabulary of the Russian plant names which provides material of cognitive activities of the past generations, the process of perception of the environment.

Methodology. Reference books on ethnobotany and dictionaries of plant names were used to obtain and select linguistic material related to the issue. The research material was verified and correlated with standard plant names in Latin. The work employs descriptive method, method of etymological and component analysis.

Results. The study of folk plant names with semantics of functional motivation showed the rational base of the nomination which have been supported by the medicinal and pharmaceutical researches carried out in recent years.

Research implications. The theoretical significance of the study is determined by its contribution to the clarification of motivational basis of folk names. The practical significance lies in the possibility of using its results in studies on ethnolinguistics, phytonimic semantics and phytonimic lexis in different languages. The study is based on anthroponomical approach and confirms well-founded nature of plants' nominations as the result of cognitive activity and process of perception of the environment.

***Keywords*:** medicinal plants, folk plant names, Russian folk plant names, semantic motivation, healing properties

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РАЦИОНАЛЬНОЕ В РУССКИХ НАРОДНЫХ НАЗВАНИЯХ ЛЕКАРСТВЕННЫХ РАСТЕНИЙ

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Аннотация

Цель. Настоящая статья посвящена изучению семантики лекарственных растений России, чьи названия указывают на их медицинские свойства и лечебные функции. Цель работы состоит в том, чтобы на основании современных фармакологических исследований растений подтвердить семантическую мотивированность названий, полученных растениями в донаучный период. Предметом исследования являются русские народные названия лечебных трав, номинация которых основывается на признаке функциональности.

Процедура и методы. Материал исследования в виде лексических единиц был получен методом сплошной выборки из этноботанических словарей, подвергнут верификации на соответствие научным названиям. В качестве методов исследования используются описательный, этимологический и компонентный анализ.

Результаты. Обоснованность номинации растений по функциональному мотивированному признаку подтвердилась результатами фармакологических и медицинских исследований лечебных свойств данных растений.

Теоретическая и практическая значимость. Практическая значимость исследования состоит во вкладе в изучение фитонимической лексики в различных языках. Исследование основано на антропоцентрическом подходе и подтверждает обоснованность народной номинации лекарственных растений.

Ключевые слова: лекарственные растения, народные названия растений, русские народные названия растений, семантическая мотивация, лечебные свойства

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Introduction

It is known that people's perception of environment that encompasses history, culture and lifestyle is reflected in language. Researches on the etymology of plant names have been carried out by different scholars with the objective to reveal the motivational features of the nomination process in Finno-Ugric language [1], in Buryat language [2], in Kazah language [3], in various European languages [4], in Uzbek language [5], in Old English [6], in Slavonic languages [7], in Chinese language [8], in Sanskrit [9].

The nomination of plants enables to elicit the naming patterns and determine cognitive principles employed in naming. The nomination process of a plant is based on its characteristic feature that becomes motivational. Motivational features reflect appearance of the plant, the place of its occurrence, healing properties and usage. This article deals with the analysis of the plant names with the semantic component of functional feature. The plant name can be determined by cause or effect of the disease, can reflect name of the targeted organ.

People of different ethnic origin have observed the healing properties of some plants for thousands of years. The writings of the past indicate plant usage for medicinal purposes in China as old as 4000 – 5000 B.C. and in India since Vedic Period as old as 1500 B.C. and 600 B.C. thus proving medicinal plants being an important element of indigenous medical systems all over the world. The efficiency of usage in traditional medicine gained on empirical knowledge was passed from generation to generation. Thus the nomination of some plants was motivated by its function. Ten Russian plant folk names have been analyzed on this subject with botanical and medicinal verification of their properties.

Meaningful names assigned to medicinal plants reflect rationale behind Russian names. This fact can be confirmed on the basis of earlier reports of phytochemical and pharmacological activities carried out by different researchers.

The selection of plant names was generated in accordance with the goal of the article to analyze rational core of the folk names with the component containing either the name of an organ or healing property and usage of the species.

Methodology

To carry out this research reference works on Russian medicinal plants were selected, namely Latin Russian Dictionary of Plant Names[1]. Correlations between scientific and folk botanical names were made by using essays and monographs[2]. Scientific names, botanical nomenclature of species were obtained from The Plant List[3], International Plant Name Index[4]. The validity of uses indicated by Russian names is confirmed through literature survey of phytochemical and pharmacological data.

Reflection of medical properties in plants' folk names

Medicinal plants have been used as the remedies for treating various ailments in different ethnic communities around the world for thousands of years. Humans learned about their properties from long life observations of nature assessing suitability, efficacy and possibility of applying herbs and herbal mixtures to healing various diseases and disorders. The selected plant names represent cognitive and cultural phenomena in plant nomination. The choice of these names is conditioned by the functional principle that actualizes therapeutic use, utilitarian and influencing features of the plants. Modern researches, conducted chemical analysis and pharmacopoeial developments have proved that vast varieties of traditional medicinal practices have been based on inherent properties of plants and healers were not ignorant

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[3] The Plant List. URL: http://www.theplantlist.org (accessed: 10.01.2025).

[4] International Plant Name Index. URL: https://www.ipni.org (accessed: 10.01.2025).

in their craft. Thus modern progress shows how cognitive activities of humans and mental processes are reflected in language. The following Russian folk names of medicinal plants were studied based on the researches of pharmaceutical features of the plants.

Слюногон, L. Anacyclus pyrethrum

The name *слюногон* is a compound formed of two stems *слюна* 'saliva' and *гон* 'produce', derivative of the verb *гнать* 'drive out'. The name suggests that the plant increases saliva. In Russian folk medicine it was primarily used as a painkiller for toothache or any tongue disease. Famous scholar Abu Ali ibn Sina in his major work *Law of Medicine* recommends rubbing body with the mixture of boiled root plant and olive oil for fever [10]. Modern investigations found out that the root of the plant contains substances, which affect the nervous system and stimulate saliva secretion producing neuropharmacological effects of ethanolic extract of the plant [11].

Селезеночник, L. Chrysosplenium alternifolium

The name *селезеночник* signifies that it is used to cure spleen problems as the meaning of the stem *селезен** means 'spleen'. The plant is mostly known as *золотянка* 'golden' due to its small glittering yellow flowers. The plant has also a Russian folk name *грыжник* originating from *грыжа* 'hernia' thus signifying part of organism suggested to be cured. The main function of spleen is to filter the blood and to form antibodies which help fight against infections. It is interesting to note that leaves of plants are edible raw and added to salad. Phytochemical data reveal that it contains bioactive flavonoids and have antioxidant property reported by M. Nikolova and coauthors [12]. These reported properties support the use indicated by the name.

Легочница, L. Pulmonaria officinalis

The plant name *легочница* originates from the noun *lung* and is found also in English with the similar motivational feature (*lungswort*) thus indicating that it is used in the treatment of lungs disorders. The motivational sign is the basic respiratory organ. Pharmaceutical observations done by group of scientists strongly support the use of the plant in folk medicine because plant shows potent antibacterial activity and is used to cure cystic fibrosis among patients [13].

Болиголов, L. Conium maculatum

The plant has been used in folk medicine since ancient times and is known by different names. The Russian folk name *болиголов* consists of two components *боль* 'ache', *голова* 'head' thus meaning that it involves headache. The plant exudes very strong smell that may cause headache. It had been observed that this is a highly poisonous plant. Accidental ingestion of it may result into blockage in central nervous system, depression, respiratory failure, acute rhabdomyolysis, acute renal failure and even death. Literature survey reveals the fact that ancient people were using this plant as a sedative and as an antispasmodic agent.

Дурман, L. Datura stramonium

The Russian name *дурман* speaks for itself meaning dope and signifying that it is used as a dope, a psychoactive drug that stimulates nervous system. It is known to have been used in witchcraft rituals and by folk healers to reduce pain. In India this plant is known to be having extremely poisonous and medicinal properties. The name originated in Sanskrit as *Dhattura* and symbolizes power and caution. It has proven to have large number of pharmacological properties due to presence of most poisonous alkaloids [14]. The Hindus offer the prickly fruit of plant to Lord Shiva which symbolizes that we are surrendering and getting rid of all our bitterness, negativities and toxicity of hate, jealous, pride, anger before Lord Shiva. Thus Almighty God can free us from sins. In India it is applied to ulcers and skin diseases. R. R. Mutebi with coauthors have published a clinical trial report which reveals that accidental poisoning due to consumption of plant parts causes confusion, dizziness, convulsions, hallucination, diarrhea, vomiting, manifest with delirium, agitation, hyperthermia, seizures, rhabdomyolysis [15]. There are a lot of pharmacological evidences in the

form of published works which confirm its dope activity because the ingestion of plant in any form adversely affect the nervous system of the person.

Живокость, L. Delphinium elatum

The folk name of this plant *живокость* (*живой* 'live', *кость* 'bone') relates to its function as a bone healer. English name *Guardian Lavender Candle* has been motivated by the appearance of the plant due to the form of the flowers. In Russian community healers used roots of the plant to cure bone fracture and luxation. This use is corroborated with the research findings tissue repair activity in mongrel mice with isolated chemical complex from the plant [16].

Кровохлебка, L. Sanguisorba officinalis

The name *кровохлебка* being a combination of the noun *кровь* 'blood' and derivative from the verb *хлебать/поглощать* 'absorb' signifies that the plant absorbs blood. The Russian name indicates that it was traditionally used for cooling the blood, healing wounds, against blood related diseases. This use is correlated with its hepatoprotective activities and application for the treatment of diseases in women [17].

Зверобой, L. Hypercicum perforatum

Russian folk name *зверобой* implies that it may kill a beast (*зверь* 'beast', *бой* 'fight'). The name indirectly indicates plant's powerful property. The etymology of the Russian name is ambiguous and does not have precise explanation. According to some assumptions, the name originates from Kazakh *джерабай* meaning 'wound healer'. In Slavic languages the plant got names Ukr. *діробой,* Brus. *дзіробой* (*діра, дзіра* 'hole') due to the holes in the leaves of the plant. According to ancient mythology Greeks used plant to protect lives from demons and evil spirits. It is also considered a protective plant against witches and evil spirits in English folk culture. English name *St. John's Wort* is supposedly associated with the Feast of St John on 24 June when this plant was used in rituals. Calming and pain-relieving properties had been used for wound-healing. Chemical investigations reveal that bioactive chemicals viz., phenylpropanes, flavanol glycosides, biflavones, napthodianthrones, phloroglucinols. Clinical studies reported by K. M. Klemow and co-authors exhibit that the plant is used to cure depression and mood disorders. It may be guess that aroma of plant may have some neurobiological effect on the patient so as to ward off effects of evil spirits [18].

Чистотел, L. Papaveraceae

The Russian folk name *чистотел* is a combination of the adjective *чистый* 'clean' and the noun *тело* 'body'. Name indicates that it was used to cleanse skin. The plant got its name due to the properties of its extract to remove sores from body, the fact noted by people in different parts of the world. In England it was similarly used against warts and corns. Its antifungal and antimicrobial properties that make this plant applicable for skin diseases have been reported by Zielinska [19].

Чистец, L. Stachys lanata

Name *чистец* signifies that it is used as a skin cleansing agent. It has different names in other regions of Russia but the motivational feature reflects its usage. *Чистяк* has similar root *чист** clean. Another name of this plant *бородавочник* is of a different origin (*бородавка* '*wart*') and got the name on a motivational feature as the object of application. In folk medicine grated root or grassy parts were used for itch (scabies) and wart. This use is supported by its antibacterial and antifungal activities against various bacteria [20].

Девясил, L. Inula helenium

The plant name *девясил* is a combination of *девять* 'nine' + *сила* 'strength'. It owes its name to peoples' belief that the plant gives a person strength and may heal nine diseases, the figure nine having sacred meaning. It was considered a universal remedy for liver and spleen. This use is attributed to its antioxidant, anti-flammatory, hypoglycemic and hypolipidemic properties of root extract [21].

There exist two plant species where names sound confusing in Russian *чистотел*, L. *Chelidonium majus,* and *чистец,* L. *Stach-*

ys lanata. These species represent different plants though similar in properties, the fact explaining the motivational feature of their nomination.

Conclusions and perspectives

In this study it was showed that folk plant names that reflect medicinal terms and practice have been nominated due to cognitive activities of our ancestors who had obtained knowledge of medical properties of plants through observation and perception. Healing properties of the plant and its usage motivates the above-mentioned plant names. The rational base of nomination has been supported by phytochemical and pharmacological experiments and researches carried out in recent years by scientists of biology, medicine and pharmacology. From these results we suggest that potential cross-cultural study of plant names may be undertaken in other languages.

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