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Language Myths, Mysteries and Magic

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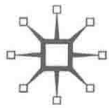

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Language Myths, Mysteries and Magic

Also by Karen Stollznow

GOD BLESS AMERICA: Strange and Unusual Beliefs and Practices in the United States

HAUNTING AMERICA: The Truth behind Some of America's "Most Haunted" Places

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Contents

Introduction

For some people, language is about more than everyday communication. Words have a greater purpose than to make small talk about the weather, tell a joke, or try a pick up line. They believe that language can transcend the normal and enter the realm of the paranormal. Language is thought to have special powers and can be used to communicate with gods, demons, monsters, aliens, and the dead. From ancient curses carved on tablets to modern-day affirmations, supernatural language is used in an attempt to predict the future, diagnose and cure disease, attract good luck, repel bad luck, and to charm and curse.

Language Myths, Mysteries and Magic explores this mysterious side of language. We encounter a fascinating collection of strange phenomena involving language, including folklore and mythology, superstitions and scams, customs and ceremonies, religious doctrine and rituals, and popular paranormal beliefs and practices. As we will see, language is connected to all aspects of the supernatural.

Unusual claims about language appear frequently in the media. We've all heard the story about the woman who goes to bed with a headache and wakes up to discover she has a foreign accent. We've all received emails from princes, presidents, and rich widows promising us millions if we provide them with our banking information. We've all wondered if there are experts who can really tell if we're lying by reading our body language.

As a linguist, I'm often asked about weird language. Can hypnosis increase the size of your breasts or penis? Can personality be interpreted through our handwriting style? Is there a "brown note" that causes a loss of bowel control? Can psychic mediums speak with our deceased loved ones? Can animals talk? If we don't forward that chain email will

it result in death and destruction? So, what is true and what is false about these topics?

Many of the subjects in this book will be well known to you, including the Bible Code, Nostradamus predictions, the supposed healing power of prayer, and whether Elvis is dead or not. Rather than repeating the same old theories I'll be providing new insight into these classic phenomena. This book also digs into topics about which little has been written, such as chain letters, blasphemy, neurolinguistic programming, alien and monster languages, devices that seem to be able to contact the dead, and talking dolls.

We look at some bizarre real-life cases, including the story of a twentieth-century English woman who suddenly began speaking in an ancient Egyptian dialect. We hear about a song that is so depressing it is said that it drives people to commit suicide. We check out the idea that if you fall asleep on a book you can absorb its contents without having to read it. We also delve into the tale of a grim-reaper cat that seems to predict the death of residents in a nursing home.

This book is a magic shop of mystical beliefs and practices. From satanic messages in music to speaking in tongues, these topics are diverse but each involves communication, whether it is talking, writing, drawing, reading, listening, or thinking. As you read through the book you'll see a web forming of myths, mysteries, and magical stories that are all interwoven by the thread of language.

Part I
Magical Language

Introduction

It's tempting to think that a belief in magic isn't common anymore, although we reveal a tradition of superstitious thinking in our everyday language. We expose our linguistic past in our present when we respond to a sneeze with "Bless you!", when we insult someone with "Damn you!", or we tell them to "Go to Hell!".

Language is a crucial catalyst in magical belief, thinking, and performance. From ancient Greece to modern America, these chapters explore language believed to have miraculous powers. Spells, St Jude novenas, affirmations, and online prayer requests are hoped to change the world around us. Divination and prophets are believed to predict the future, while charms attract good luck and repel bad luck. Blasphemy, curses, and chain letters are thought to have the ability to harm, and a sentimental song is said to drive people to commit suicide.

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Curses, Charms, and Taboos

Spells and incantations are written or spoken words and formulas that are believed to have magical powers. A spell isn't inherently positive or negative, although specific kinds of spells do have connotations of good or evil. Charms, cures, and blessings are specifically intended to be good, or are hoped to counteract bad spells. Curses, hexes, and jinxes are always underpinned by bad intentions, like wanting someone dead, or wanting them to become fat.

Charm your pants off

Nowadays, "charm" tends to conjure up images of jewelry, or a rabbit's foot carried for good luck. We might think of "to charm", that is, to win someone over, or a charm school that teaches outdated etiquette. We might even picture the Prince Charming of fairy tales, or a snake charmer sitting cross-legged as he plays his flute to a cobra that looks ready to strike. If something has a "certain charm" it doesn't really have any charm at all.

Medieval charms

Before there were charm bracelets, lucky charms, and breakfast cereals by that name, early charms were spoken or written magical spells intended for a range of purposes. It became common practice to write down a charm and place it into a pendant, ornament, stone, or other kind of amulet, an object used for protection or to attract good luck. The charm itself might be a picture, such as a pentagram or astrological symbol. It might be a word, name, or phrase, written in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, or gibberish if you couldn't spell. The charm was drawn on

papyrus, parchment, or paper; or inscribed on communion hosts, leaves, sticks, knife handles, metal, or gemstones. These charmed amulets were worn or carried close to the body for many specific or general purposes: to attract good luck, exorcise demons, cure illness, ensure safe travel, improve memory or sexual prowess, to rid oneself of vermin, to guard against wild animals, avoid sudden death, protect against evil spirits, protect property, to bind thieves so they couldn't enter a house, or to ensure protection from general misfortune. A form of white magic, charms were created for good, not evil.

A charmed life

Healing charms were probably the most common type of charm. In those days, without doctors, charms were intended to alleviate pain or cure disease. Protective charms were prophylactic: to ward off disease, and to protect a pregnant woman against miscarriage, a difficult birth, or having disabled children. Healing charms were like the folk remedies and old wives' tales that still do the rounds today, such as "feed a cold and starve a fever", and the belief that you can scare away hiccups with "Boo!".

Scripture was popularly used in healing charms. Religious texts are often believed to be divinely inspired and holy books are credited with miraculous powers, especially the ability to heal. The alleged curative powers of these divine texts were transferred through contact with the body, so a copy of the Bible, Torah, or Qur'an would be placed against the afflicted body part. Many of these cures were forms of sympathetic magic, that is, the cure would somehow imitate the problem. For example, the Gospel of John contains a number of miracles and healings, and so this book was used as a pillow to cure headaches (Segal, 2006).

To be most effective, charms were kept close to the body at all times. In ancient Egypt spells from the Book of the Dead were written on amulets and wound into the wrappings of mummies. Even the living could benefit from carrying or wearing healing charms for prevention or treatment. These charms included prayers or biblical quotes written on paper or parchment and often bandaged around the affected body part. Charms taken from scripture were somehow relevant to the problem at hand, but sometimes, the "scripture" wasn't even scripture. Many charms used narratives involving biblical figures that had no scriptural source. These apocryphal tales are known as "narrative charms". A fourteenth-century cure for a toothache petitions St Apollonia, a virgin martyr who was tortured by having her teeth torn out. For this

reason, she is the patron saint of dentistry. The following charm was written on material and wrapped around the patient's head.

> In the city Alexandria rests the body of Blessed Apollonia, virgin and martyr, whose teeth the wicked extracted. Through the intercession of Blessed Maria, virgin, and of all saints and blessed Apollonia, virgin and martyr, free, Lord, the teeth of your servant from toothache. Saint Blaise pray for me. In the name of the Father, etc. Our Father. Ave Maria. And let this charm be tied upon the head of the patient.
>
> (Olsan, 1992)

Charms were usually a blend of Christian and pagan practices, and surprisingly, the Church adopted many pagan practices. Milk and honey were blessed by Bible passages such as "be fruitful and multiply", while if farmland was barren prayers were said over the property to make it fertile (Blake, 2010). As a result of this crossover, many charms were composed of Christian elements, and included fragments of Catholic liturgy, prayers, and saints' legends.

To bring the healing text into closer contact with the sufferer, the words might be written directly onto the patient's body. For example, the Veronica charm was used to control chronic bleeding, such as excessive menstruation. This idea comes from the biblical story of a woman who touched Christ's robe and was cured of a 12-year bout of hemorrhaging (Matthew 9:20, Luke 8:40, Mark 5:21). To use this charm, "Veronica" was written on the patient's forehead with his or her own blood, to stem the bleeding. This charm is also linked to the mythical story of Veronica who wiped Christ's brow as he carried his cross to Calvary. This left an imprint of Jesus' face on her cloth, much like the Shroud of Turin. Known as the Veil of Veronica, it was said to have miraculous powers to be able to cure blindness and raise the dead. This fabled cloth became a popular holy relic in the middle ages, and there were many of them, even though it never existed.

Wear your prayer

To this day, some Jewish people wear their prayers. This is not for protection, but to remind them of their religious rules of conduct. Torah passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy say that the story of the Exodus should be kept constantly in mind: "You shall put these words of mine on your heart and on your soul; and you shall tie them for a sign upon your arm, and they shall be as *totafot* between your eyes"

(Deuteronomy 11:18). It is likely that the texts were symbolic but some chose to take them literally. Observant Jews wear *tefillin* on their head and arms during prayer. These are small black leather boxes containing scrolls inscribed with passages from the Torah. A modern version is to wear religious jewelry, such as medals and rings inscribed with verses of scripture. Some people display sacred and inspirational texts around the house and garden like amulets for the home, such as "Bless this House" or "Bless this Mess".

Another kind of charm involved speaking or writing powerful words and names. This was believed to somehow command the attention of a corresponding deity and get their help. A medieval charm was to write the name of "Ishmael" (the first-born son of Abraham) on a laurel leaf to cure insomnia caused by elves. The healing names could also be recited over the patient's body. A healing charm from the fourteenth century involved listing Latin, Greek, and Hebrew epithets of Christ over the patient, including *Messias* "Messiah", *Sother* "Savior", and *Adonay* "my Lord" (Olsan, 1992). Biblical figures and patron saints were invoked by name to intercede in matters related to their special concern. People petitioned Job to cure their worms because the Book of Job (19:26) says, "And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God." St John survived an attempted poisoning by a drink of snake venom, so he was asked to treat cases of poisonings and snake bites. Invoking the saint's name was believed to establish a connection between the sick and the special power of the holy person. Of course today, St Christopher, St Jude, and other saints are worn on medals and petitioned for help.

Eat your words

Prayers and charms could be recited over the patient or they could be recited *into* the patient. Charms might be whispered into the patient's ears or mouth or spoken to the afflicted body part. Sometimes it's okay to eat your words. To further facilitate the charm's penetration into the body, the patient would eat or drink the powerful words. The name of Christ or a short spell was scratched onto apples, butter, or sacramental bread and swallowed by the patient like medicine. A fourteenth-century English manuscript includes a birthing charm that was written on bread or cheese and then eaten in the hope that the mother-to-be would benefit from the words literally. A medieval remedy to treat a rabid dog or someone bitten by one was to write *quare uare brare arabus arabris albus abbris rew few* on a piece of food and feed it to the sick (Skemer,

2006). Another medieval practice was to wash sacred texts, wring out the iron-gall ink from the pages of the book, and drink it as a tonic.

During the Christian celebration of the Eucharist, the celebrant turns bread (or wafers) and wine into the body and blood of Christ using the words, "This is my body", and "This is my blood". This Holy Communion is a reenactment of the Last Supper where Jesus performed this rite with his disciples. According to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the bread and wine literally metamorphose into the body and blood of Christ. This theory is controversial, and many Protestant denominations consider the act to be symbolic, although they believe that Christ is present at the Eucharist. When the bread has been consecrated by this ceremony it has become powerful. In medieval times, these "hosts" were stolen by parishioners and sold to cure illnesses in humans or animals or to ward off disease. To increase its potency, biblical texts were sometimes written directly onto the bread.

Worked like a charm

Like the mad dog charm above, many charms have melodic sound patterns and they usually had rhyme and alliteration. Exotic words simply sound powerful so many charms included a mix of words from classical languages and even nonsense words. *Rex pax nax* was a tenth-century toothache cure, *max max pax pater noster* was used to stop bleeding, and *arex, artifex, filia* was believed to relieve insomnia (Olsan, 1992). A few examples of sound play still exist. The magical exclamations "abracadabra!", "alakazam!", "hocus pocus!", "presto changeo!", and "ta da!" are still used in corny magic tricks today.

Word games also made charms seem more potent. A common one was the palindrome (it reads the same ways backwards) phrase *sator arepo tenet opera rotas*. This was usually abbreviated to "Sator". It was considered magical because it was reversible and it was hoped that saying or writing Sator would likewise reverse any bad circumstances. In medieval handbooks of women's medicine known as the Trotuala texts, a childbirth charm involved writing "Sator" on a piece of cheese or butter for the woman to eat (Skemer, 2006). To increase its effects, the formula is often written in a word square. The Sator square was considered extra magical because it is readable from every direction.

S A T O R
A R E P O
T E N E T