

# *The Language of Magic*

Edited by Eleonora Cianci and Nicholas Wolf



## IL SEGNO E LE LETTERE

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# INTRODUCTION

*Eleonora Cianci*

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This book contains a selection of papers presented at *The Language of Magic* conference, hosted in Pescara from the 22nd to the 25th of May 2019. The conference was organized for the first time in Italy by the *Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming*, part of the *International Society for Folk Narrative Research* (ISFNR)<sup>1</sup>.

The idea of focusing the conference on the language or, better, on the *languages* of magic implies that each verbal charm needs to be delivered through words. Texts like charms can be considered as *parole* acts that refer to the concrete instances of the use of a *langue*. Verbal charms involve the use of words, which may be oral or written, spoken, whispered, sung, carried on, or swallowed, but they must be expressed in a specific fashion and in a specific language to gain the necessary power. The conference has revealed the unexpressed potential of the study of the power of words in magic, although many scholars have studied it in many fields in the last decades. Charms and magic are research objects for scholars of anthropology, folklore, history, religious studies, history of science and medicine, literature, philology, and linguistics. As we are going to read in this book, the research on this topic is multi-disciplinal and international.

The *Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming* has always sought to encourage the study of *verbal* charms. The 2019 conference was therefore enthusiastically hosted and funded by the Department of *Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne* of the Università degli Studi 'Gabriele d'Annunzio' di Chieti-Pescara, which cultivates several scientific interests in linguistic issues. Moreover, Abruzzo is an Italian region with a long tradition of old sacred rituals and pre-Christian customs that merge into folklore performances.

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<sup>1</sup> The Committee consists of Eleonora Cianci, James Kapalo, Mare Kōiva, Lea Olsan, Haralampos Passalis, Éva Pócs, Jonathan Roper, Emanuela Timotin, Andrey Toporkov, and Daiva Vaitkevičienė. For further information on research activities and future conferences, see: <http://www.isfnr.org/committee-on-charms-charmers-and-charming.php>.

This book is a selection of fourteen out of forty-four papers presented by scholars from twenty different countries, a distillate of themes from various disciplines. The study of the language of magic was carried out according to different research approaches within various disciplinary fields. Subjects range from the study of old magic up to the still practised rituals. Some authors focus on Medieval and Early Modern charms written in different languages: Old Irish (I. Tuomi), Old High German (E. Cianci), Old Norse (M.C. Lombardi), Middle English (S. Harlan-Haughey); other scholars study charms in modern languages (Italian, Romanian, Russian, Finnish, Irish). In fact, it has been pointed out that charms and rituals still used in modern times are deeply rooted in the Medieval period, such as the English versions of the *Super petram* charms derived from Latin sources in Ireland (B. Hillers). Themes are presented with various methodological approaches. The older charms are studied with a philological, linguistic, or historical-oriented method, while the modern ones require an anthropological, folkloristic, and historical approach (L. Giancristofaro, L. Jiga Iliescu, I. Veselova). Some authors focus on the performative value of powerful and technical words in charms (H. Ilomäki, N. Wolf) even when the words are not written but alluded to by iconographic gestures (L.V. Fadeyeva) or, in other circumstances, magic words are hidden by taboo or euphemisms (L. Golubeva - S. Kupriyanova, M. Kōiva). Apart from “actual” charms, there are some literary texts in which magic is displayed and described, such as in some Old Norse texts, the Russian bylinas or the English *Secunda Pastorum*.

A remarkable fact connecting almost all these studies is that the charms reveal a strong relationship with Christian rituality, liturgy, and belief. Canonical or apocryphal elements play a crucial role as a model either in the *historiola* or in other parts of the charms. For instance, using neumes in charms seems to draw inspiration from liturgical chants.

Most charms and rituals discussed in the following chapters, either old or modern, are indeed remedies against a variety of illnesses or serious issues, childbirth for instance, in which words play the most important role. Healing comes thus from a special use of the language. The very existence of forged charms also demonstrates the belief in magic and the success of healing charms in everyday life, shaped by emulating the actual ones in the Russian tradition and eventually translated into English (A. Toporkov).

The conference offered even more opportunities of discussing multiple themes, most of which are embedded and well represented in the chapters of this book: charms as texts (meaning, analysis, editions), multilingual



charms (the interplay in the same texts or manuscripts between Latin and vernacular languages), how to do magic with words (the narrating power of the *historiola*, performative language, charm instructions, speech acts), oral and written transmission of charms (textual tradition in a written environment, writing surfaces, the power of the written word, the alphabets of magic, orality, memory, variation), charms as verbal remedies (interaction with medical and religious texts), the rhetoric of charms (argumentation techniques, belief narratives), what the charms do not say (taboo words, gibberish language, censorship, etc.). A great deal of information was discussed during three days of the conference, inspiring further research.

The conference days were also cheered by some moments of leisure, such as the Rhythm' and Blues concert by the UdA band, a music group made of students, professors, and employers of the University of Chieti-Pescara<sup>2</sup>, or the tailor-suited guided tour at the Archaeological Museum of Chieti (Museo Archeologico Nazionale d'Abruzzo "Villa Frigerj" di Chieti). This place hosts extraordinary artefacts of Italic history, the *Capestrano Warrior*, for instance, and some less famous, apparently ordinary objects used to perform magic and rituals.

The conference was a precious chance to bring together scholars from different countries and disciplines, and share ideas, projects, and opinions, not to mention the opportunity to enjoy Italian food, wine, music, and culture together. At that time, we were absolutely unaware of how priceless the opportunity was to meet and join discussions together, as we are now after two years of social and academic restrictions due to the pandemics.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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<sup>2</sup> UdABand, "Hit the Road Jack, Cover by UdABand", *YouTUBE*, May 2, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCxRODHV3GI>.

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