Curses in Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar Linguistic Cultures: A Comparative Analysis of Wishes for Injury, Illness, and Death

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Abstract This article presents a linguacultural comparison of curse formulas relating to illness, injury, and death in the Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar linguistic traditions. These formulas remain insufficiently systematized in the scholarly literature, particularly in the case of Crimean Tatar, a gap that motivates the central aim of this study: identifying the key semantic dominants associated with physical suffering, illness, and death. The study draws on two comparable corpora compiled from lexicographic sources, folklore collections, and literary texts, and employs a thematic classification adapted from prior research to group curse formulas according to their semantic and pragmatic characteristics. The analytical framework incorporates perspectives from linguistic anthropology, cultural semantics, and the pragmatics of taboo speech. The findings reveal both universal and culture-specific patterns in the verbalization of bodily suffering, vulnerability, and mortality across the two traditions. The study contributes to a more systematic, comparative account of curse formulas in Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar linguistic culture.

Keywords: *Curse formulas, Verbal aggression, Ukrainian, Crimean Tatar, Linguocultural analysis*

1. Introduction

Curses, verbal formulas and set phrases expressing ill wishes toward an individual or hostile forces are attested across many languages and cultures. They serve as a powerful means of expressing anger, aggression, frustration, and indignation, and this need for emotional release appears to be universal (Jay, 2000). Though widely condemned on moral and religious grounds, curses have been employed since ancient times with the intent of serving a protective function, such as warding off harm, invoking divine punishment, or restoring a sense of justice, and are also believed by their speakers to bring about misfortune, illness, and other negative outcomes for the target. Many cultures hold the belief that a curse will return to haunt the person who uttered it, particularly if spoken without just cause (Çağrıcı, 1992). While curses are discouraged on ethical, religious, and cultural grounds,

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they persist in the speech of those who have suffered injustice, oppression, or discrimination. Feeling helpless, such individuals naturally desire justice and punishment for those who have wronged them. Where legal redress is unavailable, or the desire for retribution cannot otherwise be satisfied, curses may serve as a means of expressing anger and hatred toward an aggressor, as well as of asserting a sense of power over an otherwise futile situation. In this sense, a curse functions as a verbal and symbolic act through which the speaker expresses intent to harm, while simultaneously mobilizing collective or personal fears in ways that generate real emotional and behavioral effects (Jay, 2009).

Curses in Slavic and Turkic languages represent a significant cultural and linguistic stratum, reflecting deeply held beliefs about the power of words, social norms, and symbolic aggression. The Slavs and the Turks coexisted for many centuries within a shared cultural and historical space; however, they belong to different language families, which makes the comparison of these two linguistic traditions typologically significant. Examining curses through the lens of cultural codes illuminates the ethnic mentality, worldview, and social experience embedded in both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar linguistic cultures. In Ukrainian, curse formulas have not yet been fully systematized in a single lexicographic source. In the nineteenth century, they were primarily recorded in collections of proverbs and sayings, though their connection to beliefs about the performative power of words was already recognized. The first substantial collection of Ukrainian curses appeared in 1864 in Nomys's "Ukrainian Sayings, Proverbs, etc.", while Sumtsov's (1896) "Wishes and Curses (Mainly Little Russian)" long remained the only comprehensive scholarly attempt to describe them. Contemporary research reflects a growing scholarly interest in the subject. Yakovenko (2005) examines their linguistic and cognitive aspects. Slipetska (2013) analyzes their emotional and pragmatic properties across three linguocultures. Voitsekhivska (2014) studies their communicative functions in conflict discourse. Demianova (2014) focuses on their structural-semantic and social functions. Ivannikova (2015) investigates oral curse formulas in the village of Hubcha. Savchenko and Khmelevskyi (2019) examine the imagery of Ukrainian and Russian curses. Tykhovska (2020) explores the ethnopsychological dimensions of oaths and vows in Transcarpathia. Shevchuk and Balushok (2021) analyze historical types of curse formulas. Shulzhenko (2022) studies folk curses of the Chyhyryn region, and Pyskach (2025) examines curses of the Transcarpathian dialect. Though largely regional in scope, these studies collectively lay the groundwork for a systematic analysis of Ukrainian curse formulas. By contrast, research on Crimean Tatar curses (qarğış) remains limited and fragmented, encompassing an analysis of the terms "alğış" [good wishes] and "qarğış" [curses] in folklore (Seferova, 2014), ethnographic observations of curses and protective formulas (Useinov, 2019), and partial descriptions of their use in folk literature (Sava, 2018). This study examines Crimean Tatar curse formulas in comparison with Ukrainian ones, with the analysis limited to units pertaining to the themes of physical harm, illness, and death.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Paradigm of Linguistic and Cultural Studies

The modern study of language is inextricably linked with the study of culture, a relationship formalized within the field of cultural linguistics, an interdisciplinary domain that emerged at the intersection of ethnolinguistics, cultural anthropology, cognitive linguistics, the semiotics of culture, and the philosophy of language (Paul-Kirokosyants & Vorobyov, 2023). This field examines linguistic units as carriers of cultural information, through which the collective mentality and worldview of a given community are encoded and transmitted. The comparative approach in cultural linguistics makes it possible to identify culturally determined differences and similarities between languages by analyzing how ethnic patterns of thought are reflected in linguistic structures (Sharifian, 2011). Within any given culture, universal values and culture-specific conceptual models coexist, as illustrated by Wierzbicka's (1992) observation that not everything that can be said in one language can be said in another and that the lexicons of different languages suggest different conceptual universes.

In recent years, the linguacultural approach has developed within the framework of pragmatically oriented research, with increasing emphasis on the role of context, social norms, and cultural expectations in the construction of meaning (Ramlah & Sartini, 2023; Usmani & Almashham, 2024). Within this framework, speech acts are understood as culturally determined patterns of communicative

behavior that reflect the values and norms of a given society (Kulsawang & Ambele, 2024). Language thus serves not only as a means of representing culture but as an active mechanism through which culture is enacted in speech, a point of particular relevance when analyzing verbal aggression and curse formulas. Within the broader linguacultural paradigm, contemporary research increasingly conceptualizes language as a space for the circulation of cultural meanings. Pishghadam, Ebrahimi, and Derakhshan (2020) introduce the concept of cultuling analysis, grounded in the principle of "culture in language", according to which linguistic expressions function as carriers of cultural memes. Within this framework, language is understood as a system in which cultural meanings are not only reflected but actively reproduced through stable communicative patterns. This model is further developed in Pishghadam, Ebrahimi, Naji Meidani, and Derakhshan (2020b), where cultural memes are examined through the lens of variational pragmatics and classified as either healthy or defective, a distinction that allows linguistic expressions to be interpreted as elements that either sustain or destructively reproduce prevailing social and communicative models.

The primary theoretical foundation of this study is the cultural semantics developed by Wierzbicka (1996), which treats language as a vehicle for culturally specific concepts and values. Within this framework, the meaning of linguistic units is interpreted through universal semantic primitives, which make it possible to identify culturally conditioned ways of conceptualizing emotions, evaluations, and social relations. This approach is particularly well suited to the analysis of curse formulas, as it enables their examination not only as lexical-syntactic constructions but also as culturally embedded expressions of negative attitudes, reflecting deeply held notions of justice, punishment, and the acceptable boundaries of verbal behavior across linguistic cultures. A complementary theoretical grounding is provided by linguistic anthropology (Duranti, 2012), which treats language as a form of social action inextricably linked to the cultural context in which it operates. This perspective foregrounds the ways in which linguistic practices simultaneously reflect and construct social relations, norms, and values. Taken together with research on the pragmatics of taboo speech (Allan & Burridge, 2006), which examines euphemization, prohibition, and the sociocultural mechanisms regulating verbal behavior, these frameworks allow curse formulas to be interpreted as specific speech acts situated at the intersection of emotional expression, cultural taboo, and pragmatic strategies of influencing the target.

2.2. Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar Curse Formulas

Curses are a culturally determined form of expression that reflect collective values, social norms, and worldviews, revealing a society's attitudes toward misfortune, physical vulnerability, morality, and conflict. As scholars have noted, taboo speech frequently exposes deep layers of cultural ideology (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Enfield, 2013). Across languages, curses invoking illness, injury, or death are among the most emotionally charged forms of verbal aggression, though their structure and conventions of use vary considerably (Jay, 2000; Lutz, 1988).

Ukrainian linguistic culture is rooted in ancient agrarian traditions (i.e., calendar rituals, folklore, and oral narratives) that reflect the people's way of life, worldview, and social norms, and that have shaped Ukrainian cultural identity over centuries (Ponomariov et al., 1991). These elements remain a vital source of cultural memory for Ukrainians today, as confirmed by research into the nation's historical and ethnocultural development (Balushok & Taran, 2023). Stemming from this cultural foundation, the Ukrainian curse tradition developed at the intersection of Christian morality and pre-Christian folklore (Ioffe, 2021), producing curse formulas that tend to be more direct, figurative, and emotionally charged. Scholarly research highlights the prominent role of bodily metaphors and the ritualized character of such expressions (Engelking, 2017; Wierzbicka, 1992), as well as their social functions, from the release of emotion to the reinforcement of collective identity in times of crisis (Klymentova, 2025).

Crimean Tatar linguistic culture developed on the Crimean Peninsula from the Turkic linguistic heritage and the broader historical experience of its indigenous people. Sunni Islam shaped moral, familial, and social practices, intertwining with local folklore to produce a distinctive cultural space (Kurtiyev, 1996). Formative historical events, most notably the forced deportation of 1944 and the subsequent cultural revival, profoundly affected ethnic identity and reinforced the role of language as a bearer of collective memory (Aydingün & Aydingün, 2007). Although the Crimean Tatar curse corpus contains few formulas referring directly to expulsion from the homeland, isolated examples reflecting the memory

of this trauma are attested. Such expressions appear in folk songs, for example, Bizni Qırımdan çıqarğanlarnıñ közleri kör olsun [May the eyes of those who drove us out of Crimea be blinded] (Aliyev, 2001), as well as in post-Soviet fiction: anavı hain Stalin, mezarıñda ökürsin, ölgen soñ bayağı yengillik oldı [that traitor Stalin, may he howl in his grave; after his death there was some relief] (Mejitova, 2015). These instances function as markers of collective memory and symbolic encodings of historical trauma. Beyond such trauma-related expressions, the broader Crimean Tatar curse tradition was shaped by Turkic conceptions of the power of words and by Islamic moral norms, which generally discouraged the direct expression of harmful wishes in favor of more indirect or euphemistic formulations (Gürsoy-Naskali, 2009). Nonetheless, corpus data reveal that direct curses invoking Allah do occur in practice, albeit rarely, indicating a degree of divergence between normative religious prescription and actual speech behavior.

Building on the distinct features of each tradition outlined above, this study examines such formulas in Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar, two linguacultures that, despite their geographical proximity, differ substantially in religion, folklore, and norms governing acceptable verbal aggression.

3. Methodology

3.1. Materials

The Ukrainian corpus was compiled from six lexicographic sources (i.e., Arkushyn, 2016; Bilonozhenko et al, 1993; Franko, 2021; Hrinchenko, 1907-1909; Kolessa, 1983; Vusyk, 2000) and two folklore collections (i.e., Nomys,1993; Sumtsov, 1896) while the Crimean Tatar corpus drew on three dictionaries (i.e., Emirova, 2004; Kurkchi, 2011; Useinov, 2008) and three folklore collections (i.e., Aliyev, 2001; Bekirov, 2008; Dzhamanakly, 2015) and was further expanded to include literary texts: three prose works (i.e., Ali, 1989; Amit, 1986; Bolat, 1974) and four poetry collections (i.e., Fazyl, 1998; Giraybay, 1997; Kermenchikli, 2005; Selim, 1997). This was necessary to compensate for the limited coverage of curse formulas in available dictionaries. All sources used in the formation of the corpora are given in a separate list at the end of the article. However, second coder validation, external expert review of the thematic classification, and quantitative or qualitative validation of the extracted units are lacking. I acknowledge this as an important limitation of this study. All instances of curse formulas were extracted using a continuous sampling method, encompassing both direct speech and authorial narrative. The inclusion of literary sources served to document formulas insufficiently represented in lexicographic and folklore publications. Some sources date from the Soviet period (1970s–1990s), when ideological censorship targeted religious practice rather than linguistic forms per se; as a result, religious elements in curse formulas tend to function as fixed expressions that have partially lost their sacred character (Smolkin, 2018).

The two corpora are of comparable size, comprising 85 and 83 units each. Units were selected according to the following criteria: the presence of an explicit or implicit ill wish; a semantic reference to injury, illness, or death; and a pragmatic function of negative evaluation or symbolic harm. Units that did not meet these criteria were excluded. Ironic, humorous, or playful expressions formally resembling curses were likewise excluded, as their function does not involve the expression of genuine harmful intent. It should be noted that ironic and humorous curse-like expressions relating to illness and death do exist in both traditions. In Crimean Tatar, these include formulas such as qartanañnıñ tişlerini qurt aşasın [may worms eat your grandmother's teeth] and canıñ burnuñdan çıqsın [may the soul fly out of your nose]; Ukrainian equivalents include shchob tebe kachka kopnula [may a duck kick you] and shchob tebe mukha vbriknula [may a fly bridle you]. Such formulas are characterized by vivid, exaggerated comic imagery and are typically directed at mild irritation or momentary disapproval rather than genuine harm. Their exclusion from the present analysis notwithstanding, their existence points to the breadth and diversity of linguistic and cultural resources for expressing negative wishes in both traditions (Demianova, 2014).

3.2. Procedure

Curse formulas related to illness, injury, and death were classified into semantic subgroups according to the curse classification developed by Cholak and Oksuz (2021). Each Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar

formula was given along with a literal English translation. Since the sources consulted do not provide explicit temporal markers for individual formulas, my study introduced a working binary classification of "archaic" (A) and "contemporary" (C). This classification is based on a set of lexical and cultural criteria, including obsolete terminology, particularly the names of diseases, references to traditional mythological and demonological concepts, and cultural referents no longer current in modern linguistic consciousness. Formulas exhibiting these features are classified as archaic, while the remainder are treated as contemporary. This classification is interpretive in nature and functions solely as an auxiliary analytical tool; it does not bear on the identification of the conceptual and semantic dominants that are the primary focus of the study. Finally, semantic subgroups were shown in Table 1, and then each semantic subgroup was presented in subsequent tables, followed by an interpretation of the corresponding curse formulas.

The analysis itself was conducted within a comparative linguistic framework, with emphasis on lexical-semantic structures and cultural determinants. The theoretical grounding draws on cultural semantics (Wierzbicka, 1996), linguistic anthropology (Duranti, 2012), and the pragmatics of taboo speech (Allan & Burridge, 2006). While certain curse formulas lend themselves to interpretation as manifestations of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), a systematic analysis of metaphorical structures falls outside the primary aims of the present study. The analytical framework makes it possible to identify both universal and culture-specific features of Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar curse formulas.

4. Results

The distribution of curse formulas across semantic subtypes is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Semantic Subtypes of Curse Formulas

Semantic Subtype	Ukrainian Curse Formula n=85	Crimean Tatar Curse Formula n=83
Curses of Physical Injury and Illness		
Illness-Related and Physical Condition	13 (15.3%)	12 (14.4%)
Disease or Injury Targeting Specific Body Parts	24 (28.2%)	31 (37.3%)
Curses Expressing Death Wishes		
Direct Curses of Death	8 (9.4%)	5 (6%)
Indirect Curses of Death	14 (16.5%)	5 (6%)
Curses of Specific Types of Death	10 (11.8%)	8 (9.6%)
Curses of Early Death	5 (5.9%)	6 (7.2%)
Curses Denying Burial	7 (8.2%)	6 (7.2%)
Posthumous Curses	4 (4.7%)	10 (12%)

4.1. Curses of Physical Injury and Illness

Curses invoking physical injury or illness symbolically deprive their target of vitality and health (Table 2). While such formulas may appear less extreme than direct death wishes, the prolonged suffering or incapacitation they envision is often framed as a fate worse than death. These curses function by maximally constraining the recipient's well-being and capacity for action, and are intended to produce a lasting psychological impact.

Table 2
Illness-Related and Physical Condition Curses

Ukrainian Curse Formula	Temporal Status	Crimean Tatar Curse Formula	Temporal Status
shchob na vas chuma nasila [may the plague descend upon you]	A	*hastalıq çarpsın* [may the disease strike]	C
shchob tebe tryastsya vkhopyla [may a fever seize you]	A	*çarpınıp qalsın* [may he be struck down]	C
shchob tebe obpaly korchi [may convulsions/cramps burn you]	A	*qan qussun* [may he (she) vomit blood]	C

khay tebe khyndya potryase [may a fever shake you]	A	*qanı qurusın* [may his (her) blood dry]	C
hrets' by yoho pobyv [may some mighty force punish him]	A	*yedi parça olsun* [may it turn into seven pieces]	A
prantsi b vas poyily [may syphilis strike you]	A	*şişip qalsın* [may it swell]	C
shchob vas khvoroba vzyala [may illness attack you]	C	*nefesleri tutulsın* [may their breathing fail]	C
shchob ty z hluzdu zyikhav [so that you go out of your mind]	C	*damna tutıp çarpınsın* [may be struck with paralysis]	A
shchob ty skazyvsya [may you get rabies]	A	*yetmiş yıl sıtma tutsun* [may (s)he suffer from malaria for seventy years]	A
shchob tebe vzyalo ta y ne vidpustylo [may it seize you and never let go]	C	*qotur olıp tökülsin* [may it be covered in sores]	A
shchob tebe rozperlo [may you swell up]	C	*bu marazdan ömür-billâ qurtulmasın* [may he suffer from this disease all his life]	C
shchob tebe skrutylo [may pain twist your body]	C	*yumurcaq yaqsın seni* [may the boil burn you]	A
shchob tebe rozirvalo [may you be torn apart]	C		

From the perspective of cultural linguistics and intercultural pragmatics, curse formulas associated with illness and physical suffering in both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar reflect broadly similar notions of bodily vulnerability and suffering as externally imposed. Both traditions represent illness as an external force acting upon the human body and mind (Judin, 2001; Wierzbicka, 1992). However, the Ukrainian data show a marked tendency toward lexical specificity: they draw on the names of particular diseases (prantsi [syphilis], korchi [cramps], khyndya [fever], chuma [plague]) and metaphorically rich constructions (rozperlo [swell up], skrutilo [twist], rozirvalo [torn]), which correlate with the cognitive schemas of "the body as a receptacle" and "illness as an invading force" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In Crimean Tatar formulas, by contrast, general terms (hastalıq [disease]) tend to predominate, while specific disease names (damna [paralysis], sıtma [malaria], qotur [sores]) appear less frequently, a pattern that may reflect cultural taboos against the direct naming of diseases (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Johanson, 2002). Consequently, Ukrainian curses are characterized by greater imagery and somatic specificity, while Crimean Tatar curses exhibit a more restrained approach to verbalizing suffering, favoring general designations of physical disorder over concrete description. In both languages, however, references to disease serve a comparable pragmatic function: intensifying the negative force of the curse by invoking collective fears and cultural memory of illness (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Jay, 2000). A further distinguishing feature of the Crimean Tatar tradition is the use of numerical components (yedi [seven], yetmiş [seventy], which carry the symbolic function of expressing the intensity or duration of suffering (Sharifian, 2017; Tekin, 2020), a form of symbolism that is less systematically attested in the Ukrainian material.

Somatisms are mentioned in the following Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar curses (Table 3).

Table 3
Curses of Disease or Injury Targeting Specific Body Parts

Name of the Organ	Ukrainian Curse Formula	Temporal Status	Crimean Tatar Curse Formula	Temporal Status
tongue (mouth)	*pypot' (tipun) tobi na jazyk* [may a sore grow on your tongue]	A	*ağızıña ağaç kirsin* [may a stake be driven into your mouth]	C
	aby tobi yazyk popryshchylo [may your tongue break out in sores]	A	*ağızıñdan qara qanlar taşsın* [may dark blood pour from his mouth]	A

	khay tobi jazyk odsokhne [may your tongue dry up]	A	*ağızıñ-burnuñ qan tolsun* [may blood rise in your mouth and nose]	C
	shchob tobi iazyk vidnjalo [may your tongue go numb]	C	*ölet çıqsın tiline* [may a plague consume your tongue]	A
	shchob tobi jazyk vykrutylo [may pain twist your tongue]	C	*tili (ağızı) qurusın* [may your tongue (mouth) dry up]	C
	sil' tobi na jazyk [may salt be on your tongue]	A	*tili tutulsın* [may he/she be speechless]	C
	shchob tobi jazyk pokorchylo [may your tongue cramp painfully]	A		
	shchob tobi yazyk ruba stav [may your tongue become stiff]	A		
eyes, ears	*shchob tobi ochi povylazyly* [may your eyes pop out]	C	*eki közü kör olsun* [may her/his eyes be struck blind]	A
	nekhay ochi lusnut [may your eyes burst]	C	*eki közü atılıp çıqsın* [may both her/ his eyes be torn from their sockets]	A
	shchob tobi ochi povydyralo [may your eyes be gouged out]	C	*közü çıqsın* [may the eyes be torn out]	C
	shchob ty oslip [may you go blind]	C	*közleri aqıp tüşkeydi* [may the eyes pour out]	C
	shchob tvoyi ochi ne bachyly [may your eyes see nothing]	C	*közleri patlap çıqqaydı* [may her eyes burst from their sockets]	C
	shchob tobi vukha povidsyhaly/ povidpadaly [may your ears dry up (or fall off)]	C	*kün-yarıq körmesin* [may he never see the day or the sun]	C
			qulağınıñ tozu çatlasın [may their eardrum burst]	A
arms, legs, skeleton	*shchob v tebe ruky vidsohly* [may your hands dry up]	C	*bacağı qurıp tüşkeydi* [may their leg break and drop]	A
	shchob v tebe ruky-nogy vidsohly [may your arms and legs dry up]	C	*eli-ayağı quruğaydı* [may their arms and legs wither away]	A
	shchob tobi povykruchuvalo ruchen'ky ta nizhen'ky [may pain twist your arms and legs]	C	*duşman qolu qurıp taş olıp tüşsin* [may the enemy's hand turn to stone and fall]	A
	shchob v tebe vsi ruky / vsi zadni nohy povidirvalo [may your hands and hind legs be broken]	C	*qolları sınsın* [may their hands be broken]	C
	shchob ty skazyvsya na zadni nohy [may you go mad on your hind legs]	A	*qolları tartılsın* [may their hands be torn off]	A
	shchob tobi ruky pokorchylo [may your hands cramp painfully]	A	*eki qolu üzülsin* [may both their hands be torn off]	A
			beli bükülsin [may his back be bent]	C
			beli qırılsın [may his back be broken]	C
			omurğaň qırılsın [may his spine be broken]	C
			qambırı qurusın [may his hump wither away]	A
			yelkesi qıyışsın [may his neck be crooked]	A
			kemikleri çürüsin [may their bones rot]	C
internal organs	*trysta bolyachok tobi v pechinku* [may three hundred ailments strike your liver]	A	*Alla canıňnı-cigeriňni yaqsın* [may God burn your soul and your heart]	C

	sto kopanok/kol'ok tobi v pechinku [may a hundred stabs/pokes hit your liver]	A	*yaş yüregiň sançılsın* [may your young heart be pierced]	A
	tryastsya tobi v pechinku [may vibrancy strike your liver]	A	*yüregini dertler/çayanlar biylesin* [may their hearts be filled with scorpions/suffering]	A
	boday tebe za sertse vzyalo [may it seize your heart]	A	*qursaqları patlağaydı* [may their bellies burst]	A
			damarında dolaşan qan qurusın [may the blood in your veins dry up]	C
			içi-bağrı dert tolsun [may his insides be filled with suffering]	C

Across both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar linguistic cultures, curses targeting bodily organs share a common focus on physical vulnerability as a culturally significant site of harm, though they achieve this through different means. Ukrainian formulas more frequently target specific internal organs (liver, heart), limbs, and sensory organs (eyes, ears, tongue), and tend to employ metaphorically rich and hyperbolic constructions (vidnjalo [go numb], vykrytilo [twist with pain]) that intensify the vividness and concreteness of the suffering invoked. Crimean Tatar formulas similarly reference vital organs (heart, liver, tongue, spine, bones) but tend to convey harm through generalized physical effects, immobilization or wholesale destruction of the body, rather than through detailed somatic visualization. In both languages, such curses serve a comparable pragmatic function: they represent the addressee as stripped of the capacity to speak, see, hear, or move, rendered, in effect, incapable of action or harm. In this way, the speaker symbolically neutralizes the threat posed by the target without direct confrontation, enacting a kind of verbal disempowerment (Jay, 2000). Overall, Ukrainian formulas are distinguished by greater somatic specificity and metaphorical elaboration, while Crimean Tatar formulas tend toward generalization and an emphasis on extreme or total physical consequences (quruğaydı [wither away], omurğaň qırılsın [may his spine be broken]), a difference that reflects divergent cultural models of corporeality and the performative power of words.

4.2. Curses Expressing Death Wishes

The theme of death is prevalent in both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar curse traditions (Tables 4-9). Its mode of expression, however, including metaphorical framing, symbolic indicators, and structural form, varies considerably depending on each culture's beliefs, funeral rituals, and conceptions of death and the afterlife.

Table 4
Direct Curses of Death

Ukrainian Curse Formula	Temporal Status	Crimean Tatar Curse Formula	Temporal Status
boday ty/vin zdokh [may you/he die]	C	*geberip ketsin / geberip qalsın* [may he drop dead]	C
shob ty pomer [may you die]	C	*ölip ketsin* [may he/she die]	C
shchob tebe Perun zabyv [may Perun strike you dead]	A	*ölüñni köreyim* [may I see your dead]	A
shchob tebe Chornyy Boh ubyv [may the Black God kill you]	A	*Alla canıñnı alsın* [may God claim her/his soul]	C
shchob tebe rodymets ubyv [may paralysis kill you]	A	*Alla boynuñnı ursın* [may God strike off his/him neck]	C
khay yoho Boh viz'me [may God take him]	C		
a shob vy vyzdykhaly [may you perish]	C		
shchob tebe hrim ubyv i blyskavka spalyla [may the thunder kill you and the lightning burn you]	A		

In both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar traditions, direct death wishes represent a comparable degree of extreme verbal aggression, realized through verbs denoting death (zdohnuty, gebermek, ölmek, [to die]), which lend these formulas high illocutionary force and reflect the speaker's most intense negative emotions, principally anger and hostility (Jay, 2000; Wierzbicka, 1992). In both languages, such directness transgresses communicative norms and forecloses any recourse to mitigation strategies. The two traditions diverge, however, in the cultural and religious framing of the curse's addressee. In Crimean Tatar formulas, direct death wishes are frequently mediated through invocation of Allah (Alla canıñnı alsın [may God claim her/his soul]), reflecting the Islamic conception of God as the sole arbiter of life, and indicating a notable divergence between religious prescription and actual speech practice (Duranti, 2012). Ukrainian formulas, by contrast, combine Christian appeals (khay yoho Boh viz′me [may God take him]) with invocations drawn from pre-Christian belief systems (Perun, the Black God), attesting to the persistence of a mythological stratum within Ukrainian cultural memory (Ponomariov et al., 1991). Despite their shared pragmatic function of expressing extreme aggression, Ukrainian curse formulas thus exhibit greater variability in the identity of the supernatural addressee, while Crimean Tatar formulas are characterized by greater religious homogeneity.

Table 5
Indirect Curses of Death

Ukrainian Curse Formula	Temporal Status	Crimean Tatar Curse Formula	Temporal Status
a vyjshla b z tebe parunka [may your soul depart from you]	A	*canıñ çıqqay edi / canıñ çıqsın* [may your soul leave you]	A
boday ty propav [may you disappear]	C	*yer yutsun* [may the earth swallow you]	A
shchob toby provalytysya kriz zemlyu [may you sink through the earth]	A	*yerge batsın* [may he/she sink through the earth]	C
kat tebe bery [may the executioner get you]	A	*qara yerge kirsin* [may he/she enter the black earth]	A
shchob tebe syra zemlya prokovtnula z vohnem ta dymom [may the damp earth swallow you with fire and smoke]	A	*kemikleriñni mezar toplasın* [may your bones gather in the grave]	A
shchob tebe syra zemlya pozherla [may the damp earth devour you]	A		
pokryj yoho syra zemlya [may the wet earth cover you]	A		
shchob tebe poklaly na lavu [may they lay you on a bench]	A		
shchob tebe v domovynu poklaly [may you be laid into a coffin]	A		
shchob tebe napered p'yatamy ponesly [may you be carried out feet first]	A		
shchob tebe v chotyry doshky zakhovalo [may four wooden boards enclose you]	A		
shchob tebe domovyna vzyala [may the coffin take you]	A		
chervy b tebe poyily [may worms eat your body]	A		

Both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar traditions employ indirect imagery as a strategy for expressing death wishes but differ in their dominant motifs. Two such motifs stand out in the Ukrainian data: the Earth motif, in which the earth functions as an active, engulfing force capable of consuming or destroying a person, evoking vivid images of death through burial, and the motif of disappearance or removal (boday ty propav [may you desappiar]), which conveys the idea of a person's expulsion from the world of the

living (Duranti, 2012; Jay, 2000; Ponomariov et al., 1991). Crimean Tatar formulas likewise feature the Earth motif (yer yutsun, yerge batsın, qara yerge kirsin), indicating typological parallels with the Ukrainian tradition, but place comparatively greater emphasis on the soul as the seat of life (canıñ çıqsın [may your soul leave you]) as the vehicle through which the indirect death wish is realized. The motif of disappearance or removal from social space, prominent in Ukrainian, is not productive in Crimean Tatar expressions. Despite their shared reliance on indirect strategies and a common image of the Earth as a destructive force, Ukrainian formulas thus exhibit greater semantic variability overall, while Crimean Tatar formulas foreground the spiritual dimension and show less engagement with the motif of disappearance.

Table 6
Curses of Specific Types of Death

Ukrainian Curse Formula	Temporal Status	Crimean Tatar Curse Formula	Temporal Status
povis'sya na sukhiy verbi [may you hang from a dry willow]	A	*tufanlar yer yüzünden silsin sizni* [may the storms erase you from the earth]	A
shchob tebe povisyly na hylyatsi [may you be hanged on a dry branch]	A	*tirileyin yerge kömülsin* [may you be buried alive]	A
shchob tebe vohon' spalyv [may fire consume you]	A	*cellâtlar boynuñ ursun* [may the executioners strike your neck]	A
shchob ty try raza zhoriv [may you burn three times over]	A	*tüyülip/tıyılıp ölsin* [may he die choking]	C
shchob hrim prybyv/ubyv [may thunder strike you dead]	A	*çekişip ölsin* [may he perish in suffering]	C
shchob tebe persha kulya ne mynula [may the first bullet not miss you]	A	*qurşunğa oğrasın* [may the bullet find him]	A
shchob tebe chykhotka zabrala [may consumption take you]	A	*saplansın pıçaqlara* [may the knives plunge into him]	A
shchob tebe khalyera zabrala [may cholera take you]	A	*ateşte yansın* [may it burn in the fire]	A
boday tebe burya vyvernula [may a storm uproot you]	A		
shchob tebe blyskavka zapalyla [may lightning set you aflame]	A		

Curses of specific types of death in both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar serve the shared pragmatic function of expressing maximum verbal aggression, but differ in their degree of elaboration and the range of conceptual models of death they draw upon (Duranti, 2012; Jay, 2000). Both traditions invoke common death scenarios: violent death (hanging, burning, death by weapons), death caused by natural forces (storm, thunder, fire), and death resulting from illness or physical deterioration. The Ukrainian data additionally attest to a model of socially mediated death through institutions such as execution or imprisonment, further expanding the range of negative conceptualization. Crimean Tatar death curses similarly encompass violent and painful modes of death (strangulation, burning, burial alive), but tend toward greater brevity and less figurative elaboration; elemental imagery is more restrained and mythological references are largely absent. Ukrainian curses, by contrast, display a richer and more expansive figurative structure, in which physical destruction is combined with natural, painful, and social models of death, a complexity that reflects the interplay of folk belief, religious symbolism, and deeply held notions of the performative power of words (Demianova, 2014). In sum, while both traditions deploy direct death formulas as instruments of verbal aggression, Crimean Tatar curses tend toward compact and functionally direct expression, whereas Ukrainian curses are characterized by greater semantic variability and a more elaborate figurative organization that integrates physical, natural, and social motifs.

Table 7
Curses of Early Death

Ukrainian Curse Formula	Temporal Status	Crimean Tatar Curse Formula	Temporal Status
shchob ty ne dizhdav zavtrashn'oho dnya [may you not live to see tomorrow]	A	*Yetişmegeydin doğmağa/ dünyağa kelmege* [may you never have been born]	C
shchob ty nedovho vichyv [may you not live long]	A	*yaşlığıñızğa toymañız* [may youth slip from you before its time]	A
shchob ty do ranku skanav [may you perish before morning]	A	*bir-biriniñ qırqına yetmesinler* [may they not live to reach each other's fortieth day (after death)]	C
a shob ty ne doris do svoho rostu [may you never grow to your full stature]	A	*yetişmesin aftasına* [may they not live to see the week after the other's death]	C
shchob ne dizhdav ni Petra, ni Pavla, ni dribnykh svyatkiv [may you live to see neither the feast of Peter nor of Paul, nor even the minor holy days]	A	*toylıq anteriñ kefiniñ olsun* [may your wedding dress be your shroud]	A
		ecel töşegine yat [may you lie on your deathbed]	A

Curses wishing early death in both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar give expression to the shared cultural notion of premature loss of life potential as the ultimate form of negative evaluation (Duranti, 2012; Jay, 2000), but realize this notion through different conceptual emphases. In Ukrainian formulas, the dominant motif is that of premature death as a "failed biography", grounded in a linear conception of life in which the curse denies the target the possibility of reaching normative stages of adulthood, family formation, and old age ("not living to see the morning," "not living to see old age"), with the emphasis falling on biographical incompleteness. In Crimean Tatar curses, this motif is likewise present but is more consistently linked to socio-ritual concretization, that is, to the denial of specific, collectively significant life transitions ("not living to see the wedding," "not living to see youth"), reinforcing the cultural connection between premature death and the disruption of socially sanctioned life sequences. A further ethnoculturally distinctive feature of the Crimean Tatar material is the formula *bir-biriniñ qırqına yetmesinler*, in which the numerical element *qırq* ([forty]) evokes the ritual of the fortieth-day commemoration of the dead, investing the utterance with a sacred-ritual dimension rooted in collective memory. Analogous ritual significance attaches to the forty-day period in Ukrainian culture as well, but this is not directly lexicalized in Ukrainian curse formulas. Ukrainian curses thus more consistently frame premature death as the failure to complete an individual life trajectory, while Crimean Tatar curses frame it as a violation of the socio-ritual sequence of life events, a distinction that reflects broader cultural differences in the conceptualization of age, death, and social normativity.

Table 8
Curses Denying Burial

Ukrainian Curse Formula	Temporal Status	Crimean Tatar Curse Formula	Temporal Status
shchob nad toboyu vorony krakaly [may crows caw over you]	A	*tili qurtlarğa yem olsun* [may his tongue become food for insects]	A
boday tebe zemlya ne pryjnyala [may the earth refuse to receive you]	A	*teniñ mezar tanımasın* [may your body never know the grave]	A
boday tobi/yomu ni dna, ni pokryshky [may there be neither bottom nor lid for you/him]	A	*topraq qabul etmesin* [may the earth not accept you]	C

shchob vas ta zemlen'ka svyata po smerti z hrobiv povykydala [may the holy earth cast you out of your coffin after death]	A	*babañnıñ canına yılanlar qussın* [may the snakes vomit upon the soul of your father]	A
shchob tvoyi kistky povykydalo [may your bones be thrown out (of the grave)]	A	*süyegi ağarsın* [may his bones turn white]	A
shchob tvoyi kosti viter po poli roznis [may the wind scatter your bones across the field]	A	*leşi çöllerde çürüsin* [may his corpse rot in the field]	A
shchob tebe pip ne khovav [may the priest not bury you]	A		

Curses denying burial in both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar reflect a shared cultural emphasis on the importance of burial ritual and the fear of violating the posthumous order, but realize this emphasis through different representational models (Roux, 1963; Zelenin, 1995). In the Ukrainian tradition, this motif is grounded in the Slavic concept of the "unclean" and "restless" dead, those who find no peace and are refused by the earth on account of a violation of social or ritual norms (violent death, suicide, dying without last rites). This is expressed through images of the body rejected by the earth and removed beyond the boundaries of consecrated space, to crossroads, forests, or swamps. A cognate motif appears in Crimean Tatar curses as well, but is realized not through the imagery of the restless dead, but through a more direct and materialized representation of the postmortem condition, encompassing physical decay, exposure to natural forces, and ongoing suffering, that constructs a more concretely corporeal picture of death without burial. While both traditions thus engage with the idea of violated burial norms, Ukrainian curses gravitate toward a symbolic and mythological model of death unaccepted by the earth, emphasizing the social exclusion of the deceased from the realm of rest. Crimean Tatar formulas, by contrast, shift the focus to the immediate physical and spiritual consequences of an unburied death, producing a more materially vivid and tangible representation of the afterlife condition. In both cases, the curse is organized around culturally specific models of death, the body, and the social status of the deceased, but with differing degrees of symbolic abstraction and descriptive concreteness.

Table 9
Posthumous Curses

Ukrainian Curse Formula	**Temporal Status**	**Crimean Tatar Curse Formula**	**Temporal Status**
shchob tvoya mohyla dykym makom porosla [may your grave become overgrown with wild poppies]	A	*cenazeñe kelgenler cesediñe tükürsin* [may those who come to your funeral spit on your corpse]	A
khay chorty torokhtyat' yoho kistkamy na tim sviti [may devils rattle his bones in the other world]	A	*ateş olsun mezarı* [may fire blaze upon his grave]	A
shchob tvoya pel'ka y na tomu sviti nikoly ne zakryvalasya [may your mouth never close in the other world]	A	*mezarı yansın* [may his grave burn]	A
shchob ty na Strashnyy sud ne vstav [may you not rise on the Day of Judgment]	A	*mezarıñnı seller çıqsın* [may his grave be destroyed by a flood]	A
		mezarıñda tikke tur [may he stand upright in his grave]	A
		mezarında ökürsin [may he howl in his grave]	A
		yatacaq yeri ceennem ateşleri olsun [may the fires of hell be their resting place]	A
		ceennemge ketsin/yıqılsın [may he go to hell]	C

	ceennem ateşinde yanğaydı [may it burn in hellfire]	A
	ceennemge direk olsun [may he be a pillar of hell]	A

Posthumous curses in both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar traditions embody a shared conception of punishment after death but ground this conception in different cultural models of representation (Roux, 1963; Zelenin, 1995). In the Ukrainian tradition, posthumous curses draw on Slavic notions of the "unclean" dead, those who died prematurely, violently, or without proper ritual observance, and whose souls are believed capable of transgressing the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Ethnographic sources attest that such individuals were frequently buried outside consecrated cemeteries, at crossroads, in forests, and similar liminal spaces, a practice that shaped enduring cultural anxieties about death and the afterlife (Djuric, 2024; Zelenin, 1995). These beliefs underlie Ukrainian posthumous curses, in which images of the grave, unrest, and rejection by the earth are deployed to symbolically violate the normative order of death, while references to the Last Judgment reinforce the Christian framework of posthumous retribution. In Crimean Tatar curses, by contrast, the general idea of posthumous punishment is retained but the emphasis shifts decisively toward a more concrete and materialized depiction of the deceased's suffering, encompassing images of fire, decomposition, exposure to the elements, and torment of the spirit (for example, [may fire blaze upon his grave], [may his grave be destroyed by a flood], [may he go to hell]). This reflects the Turkic-Islamic model of visualized posthumous punishment and functions as a strategy for heightened expressive force.

5. Discussion

This study undertook a linguacultural comparison of curse formulas relating to illness, injury, and death in two structurally distinct languages, Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar. The comparative analysis reveals that motifs of bodily suffering, illness, and death are extensively represented in the curse traditions of both languages, though the linguistic means through which these motifs are realized differ in significant ways. The Ukrainian material is characterized by a high degree of somatic specificity: it draws extensively on direct references to internal organs, limbs, and sensory organs, and on richly detailed imagery of bodily destruction. Crimean Tatar formulas, by contrast, tend toward greater semantic generality, shifting the emphasis to the overall state of physical destruction or immobility rather than to the detailed visualization of individual body parts. These differences point to divergent strategies for verbalizing bodily experience and varying degrees of figurative elaboration in the expression of negative content.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the key semantic dominants underlying curse formulas associated with physical suffering, illness, and death in both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar are: 1) corporeal vulnerability and bodily destruction; 2) illness conceptualized as an external destructive force; 3) verbal disempowerment through the loss of bodily and sensory functions; 4) death as the ultimate form of social and physical annihilation; 5) disruption of normative life trajectories through premature death; 6) violation of burial and posthumous ritual order; 7) the symbolic opposition between body, soul, and earth; and 8) posthumous suffering as a continuation of punishment beyond death. Across all eight semantic subgroups, curse formulas function not merely as expressions of aggression but as culturally encoded models of suffering, mortality, and social isolation.

In addition, the two linguistic traditions differ systematically in the linguistic realization of these semantic dominants. Ukrainian curse formulas are characterized by greater somatic specificity, metaphorical density, and semantic variability, frequently drawing on detailed bodily imagery, mythological motifs, and socially mediated models of death. Crimean Tatar formulas, by contrast, tend toward semantic generalization, functional compactness, and greater emphasis on spiritual and ritual dimensions, particularly those connected with the soul, divine agency, and posthumous punishment.

At the micro-level of linguistic analysis, individual curse formulas can be examined through the cultuling framework proposed by Pishghadam, Ebrahimi, and Derakhshan (2020) and Pishghadam, Ebrahimi, Naji Meidani, and Derakhshan (2020), which treats linguistic expressions as carriers of

cultural information and agents of cultural replication. Within this framework, certain curses invoking physical suffering, illness, and death may be interpreted as "defective memes", expressions that not only reflect negative cultural attitudes but actively contribute to their reproduction in discourse, normalizing the conceptualization of suffering as a legitimate object of verbal aggression. Examples from the analyzed material include Ukrainian formulas such as *shchob tebe rozirvalo* [may you be torn apart], boday tebe zemlya ne pryjnyala [may the earth refuse to receive you], and *shchob ty nedovho vichyv* [may you not live long], as well as Crimean Tatar formulas such as omurğaň qırılsın [may his spine be broken], canıñ çıqsın [may your soul leave you], and qara yerge kirsin [may he/she enter the black earth]. These expressions may be regarded as "defective memes" because they linguistically encode and culturally reproduce models of bodily destruction, premature death, exclusion from ritual order, and posthumous suffering, thereby transmitting culturally shared patterns of negative evaluation and symbolic violence across generations of speakers. In Ukrainian curses, this function is realized primarily through detailed bodily imagery, whereas in the Crimean Tatar tradition it operates through more generalized constructions that nevertheless retain the same function of culturally encoding negative experience.

Curse formulas in both linguistic cultures thus function not only as instruments of verbal aggression but as elements of the cultural representation of corporeality, suffering, and socially sanctioned forms of negative emotional expression. They reflect stable cultural patterns in which language serves simultaneously as a means of transmitting collective experience and as a mechanism for the symbolic regulation of social behavior.

The findings of this study may serve as a foundation for further research on curse formulas across a range of linguistic cultures, both in other language pairs and from a diachronic perspective, tracing the evolution of formulas from archaic to contemporary usage. Promising avenues for future research include the thematic expansion of the corpus to encompass family and ancestral curses, as well as motifs of misfortune, sorrow, ill luck, and poverty. Further comparative work might also examine the pragmatic functions of curse formulas and their transformation in contemporary communication environments, including digital and online spaces.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethics Declaration

This study did not involve human participants or animal subjects. All materials used were derived from publicly available lexicographic, folklore, and literary sources, and no ethical approval was required.

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