

## PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS WITH SACRED NUMBERS IN RUSSIAN AND SERBIAN

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**Abstract:** Our aim is to study phraseological units that have numbers in their construction. The material was collected from phraseological dictionaries of Russian and Serbian languages. In both languages, phraseological units with sacred numbers appear frequently in speech and writing, for example: Rus. *книга за семью печатями* – Srb. *књига за седам печата* [a closed book, literally “a book with seven seals”]; Rus. *за семью запорами* – Srb. *иза седам брава/катанаца* [under lock and key, literally “well guarded”]; Rus. *семь смертных грехов* – Srb. *седам смртних греха* [capital sins, literally “seven deadly sins”]; Rus. *за тридцать земель* – Srb. *преко седам/девет брда/планина* [at (to) the other end of the world, literally “very far away”]; Rus. *чувствовать себя на седьмом небе* – Srb. *бити на седмом/деветом/десетом небу* [(be) in seventh heaven, literally “(to be, feel) boundlessly happy”]; Rus. *в трех шагах от кого, от чего* – Srb. *два три корака* [within a stone’s throw of, literally “very close (to s.o. or sth.), very near”]. Phraseological units with numeric components are regarded as a descriptive meta-language. This analysis can provide an insight into relationships between culture and language.

**Keywords:** phraseological units, sacred number, phrasemes with numeric components, cultural standard

### 1. Introduction

*The symbolic language of numbers* is a product of an arduous process that the human mind carried on, more exactly the process of getting through the essence of the things and through the mysterious links that exist between objects and phenomena. Numbers were not only considered a quantitative qualificative, but also a qualitative reference point or clue since they have been discovered. In Latin, the words “numerus” [number] and “numen” [god] are etymologically related (Bindel 2000, 15), fact that makes us think that the numbers were considered to have divine power. At the same time, the periodicity of cosmic circles are not only some auxiliary means of ordering embedded by man, but some primary realities of the Universe, an absolute vestige of superhuman authorities and therefore they are hallowed symbols of divinity. Novalis has described this magical power of numbers by an analysis extended towards mysticism, stating in his works that it is very plausible to exist in nature a miraculous mystery of numbers. Drawing on this perspective, one can notice that numbers are not means discovered by man in order to rationally order the Universe that surrounds him, but symbols of the absolute addressed to the aesthetic sense of the men that allow them to perceive a kind of an “extra human Harmony of Spheres”. Starting from this premise, “hallowed numbers” have indeed a sacral dimension. Judging from the point of view of this vision of the world, numbers are the structural composition of every creation, being studied in mystical subjects of theological schools since Antiquity. Neoplatonic philosophy from the Late Antiquity and Jewish mysticism from the Middle

Eve studied in detail numbers' symbolism, both Greek and Hebrew letters having numerical value.

Symbolism of numbers (numerology) was one of the basic interests of philosopher and mathematician Pitagora's school in Antique Greece<sup>i</sup>, while Hebrew tradition, Kabala, the old and mystic Hebrew system, contain a lot of texts in which there are mentioned mysterious links and correspondences between numbers and alphabet letters, between numbers and cosmic or body elements. According to Pythagoreans conceptual system, numbers are the key to the laws of the cosmic harmony, this being the reason why they consider numbers to be symbols of a divine cosmic order. Consequently, any element can be expressed through numbers ("everything is numbers"); any of the elements of our universe that are "divine archetypes" and that are waiting to be discovered. Numbers have not been randomly thrown into the world, but they are organized in a balanced and ordered system.

We will pay attention especially to the "profane" aspect of numbers entering the construction of Russian and Serbian phraseological units. In what follows, we intend to insist upon the "divine" feature of words that have the meaning of numbers, drawing on the cultivate tradition of the two peoples' civilization, as well as on some pre-Christian folk beliefs that belong to them.

## 2. Our study

In our research, we used a corpus of Russian and Serbian idioms excerpted from *Frazeologičeskij slovar' russkogo jazyka* (Molotkov 1968), *Leksiko-frazeologičeskij slovar' russkogo jazyka* (Zhukov 2010), *Bol'šoj frazeologičeskij slovar'* (\*\*\*) 2013), *Frazeološki rječnik hrvatskoga ili srpskog jezika* (Matešić 1982), *Srpsko – engleski rečnik idioma* (Milosavljević 2007).

Numbers become symbols at cultural level and not at a linguistic one. They gather shades of meaning and even rich connotations according to the contexts in which they have been initially used. These connotations are noticeable in locutionary micro-contexts. The study of folk beliefs and legends, fairy tales or myths transmitted through literature or in religious forms highlights the tendency of favouring certain numbers to the detriment of others. The psychological mechanism that lays at the basis of this phenomenon cannot be disclosed. Why *three, seven, nine, thirteen* are so frequent in phrases that point on spiritual folk life, and *two, four, six* do not have the same magical power?

Numbers bear the marks of contextual meanings, developed in contact with a certain type of references. In the situations in which numerals act as elements of identification and not as quantifiers, these marks are instances of meaning. For example, numerals can qualify an action, a state, a manner of acting and even characterize the subject. At the basis of this operation lays a comparison or a metaphor containing a number. Marked by these "symbolic" apparitions, the numeral extrapolates its extra-linguistic values in other phraseological constructions in which they are used. *Seven*, as a number denoting entirety that sums *four* (a symbol of earth) and *three* (a symbol of heaven) is used in phrasemes as follows:

- *семь пядей во лбу* [as smart, wise, exceptional as the sun shines on, literally "seven spans on tongue"]: "*Geniuses are those men that are as wise as the sun shines on, you don't meet them often.*"<sup>ii</sup>

- *книга за семью печатями* [a closed book, literally “a book with seven seals] – it is a biblical phrase that refers to the secrets known only by the Great Creator. This is the reason why it has in Russian, Serbian or other European languages the meaning of “hidden, uncomprehensible for the human mind: “*Our difficulties, as our successes, are a closed book for Americans*”.<sup>iii</sup>

This sacred meaning of *seven* can be found in an array of realities linked to rituals from Russian people life that Vladimir Dal` enumerates in his dictionary: *семь свечей* [seven candles], *семья в семь работников* [seven is regarded as a symbol for joy, literally “family in seven workers”], *судно в семь сажень* [literally “a ship of seven fathoms”], *семь лошадей в упряжи* [literally “seven horses in a harness”], *в семь строк* [literally “in seven rows”], *отдать семерицею* [literally “to give seven times more”], *семик – Троицын и Духов день – это седьмой от Пасхи четверг, когда рядят березку, водят хороводы* [Semik – Day of Trinity and Spirits – this is the seventh Wednesday from Easter when people decorate birches, lead dances] (2001, 585).

The proliferation of symbolic usage of some numbers is not only an issue that draws on the way they enter the construction of phraseological units. It can be explained by interfingering of different domains in which these numbers are regarded as main concepts, the borders between these domains having been erased. There is a relationship of continuity among theoretical established categories (folk culture, mythology, religion) based on common values and concepts. For example, some contemporary secular beliefs undertake some antique symbols. The same symbols can appear in religious texts that act in their turn as a source of the images established by phrases. On the other hand, the loss of the motivation of a certain number preference can bring an advantage to the symbol because of the fact that the “mystery” that enframes it enhances its expressiveness and power of persuasion.

### 3. Results

Since ancient times, symbolists has adjudged qualitative value to numbers, as opposed to mathematics, which analyses only quantitative properties of numbers and relationships established among them. Although almost every number has a *symbolic value*, especially relevant for the cultures taken into account in our analysis are the numbers *three*, *seven* and *nine*. Radenković (1996, 333) states that “the numbers that play the most important roles in rites and customs, as well as in folklore texts (fairy tales, short stories, poems, riddles) are *three*, *seven* and *nine*.”<sup>iv</sup>

These numbers captivated people attention even since Antiquity, this being the reason why there is such a superstition that these numbers have magical power: “*Numero deus impari gaudet*” [Gods like uneven numbers] – line 76 from The 8<sup>th</sup> *Egloga* of Vergilius (Berg 1995, 257). Since they liked uneven numbers, gods decided Graces to be *three*, world wonders to be *seven* and muses *nine*. For example, Greeks thought that there are *seven world wonders* and venerated *seven sages*, while Egyptians thought that Nile had *seven braces*. Romans believed the legend that Rome was build on *seven hills*. In numerology and symbolic arithmetic systems, *seven* in the number that is the most loaded with mystical and esoteric significations. *Seven* is the number of cosmic entirety resulted from the summation of *three* (the symbol of the heaven) and *four* (the symbol of the earth), fact noticeable in the following Romanian phrasemes: *șapte (sau nouă) ceruri* [seven (nine) heavens], *cartea cu șapte peceteți* [a

closed book, literally “the book with seven seals”), *șapte păcate grele* [Capital Sins, literally “Seven Heavy Sins”]. *Seven* defines divine superlativity in all its gorgeousness and completion. It is a seal of the Holy Spirit operation. As a divine Author of the Holy Scriptures, The Holy Spirit imprinted the filigree of the number *seven* on the Bible’s pages. The number *seven* appears very frequently in the Old Testament. It is used 77 times, describing events like *the seventh day*, the Sabbath Day that ended the cycle of the divine act of creation. In the creation process, *the seventh day* belonged to God, in this day He rested. In Joan Apocalypse, *seven* also has great importance, being mentioned *seven churches*, *seven stars*, *seven candlesticks*, *seven spirits*, *seven cups*, *seven trumpets*, *seven kings*. Similarly, Joan sends best wishes to *seven churches* and sees The Sun of Man among *seven candlesticks* with *seven stars* in His hands.

In the Gospel of Matthew (Biblia 1994) there are also present collocations dominated by number *seven*: *seven claims* in *The Lord’s Prayer*, *seven parables*, *seven blames on Pharisees*, three groups of *two sevens* (fourteen) in Jesus genealogy. According to the old tradition of the Church, the Holy Oil<sup>v</sup> (mystery established by Lord Christ Himself when He sent his disciples to preach) necessitates *seven* priests, signifying *seven gifts* of The Spirit mentioned by Isaiah (11:2-3). Thus, the prayer for the Holy Oil is uttered by *seven priests*<sup>vi</sup> for *seven times* (*seven fragments from Epistles* and *seven fragments from Gospels*) and the anointment of the sick is done for *seven times*. This symbolic number recalls some events from the Old Testaments. The Prophet Elisha bent *seven times* upon the dead child whom he resurrected (4 Kings 4:34-35), the priests that blown the trumpets were *seven* and the city of Jericho was circled *seven times* when it was conquered by Hebrews at the entering of the Promised Land (Joshua 6:6-13). The prophet Elijah also prayed *seven times* on Carmel Mountain (3 Kings 18:42-45).

This number represents perfection, harmony, luck, happiness. The cult for number *seven* draws his roots from one of the oldest civilizations of the world, namely assyro-babylonian civilization. Priests of Babylon worshipped *seven gods* that had *seven* analogous *celestial bodies*, The Sun, The Moon, Mars, Mercury, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn. In Ancient Egypt, *heptameter* was considered to be the symbol of eternal life. Number *seven* is loaded with solar symbolistics as it is linked to the *septimal* cycle of the week. We distinguish *seven base tones* on a musical scale and *seven colours* of the spectre (*seven colours* of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet).

Due to the value that *seven* has, its multiple, seventy seven, also has a symbolic value, reminding of the motive of Peter’s *seventy seven times* of forgiving. It is, as Șăineanu states:

“A familiar number in our fairy tales (multiplied in the case of Slavic peoples: *seventy seven outlaws*, *seventy seven wounds*), Petre Voinicul [Peter the Powerful] spoils *seven dragons* and gives his mother the keys of all the store rooms, banning her to enter *the seventh*. When the old people that have been blind for *seven years* regained their eyesight, they saw at the beginning like a *sever year old* child and the emperor sent them in the *seven parts* of the world to seek for the thief of the crown.”<sup>vii</sup> (Evseev 1999, 446-447)

*Septomania* is also mirrored in the language itself, where there are lots of idioms with number *seven*. Thus, we have idioms such as Rus. *книга за семью печатями* – Srb. *књига за седам печата* [a closed book, literally “a book with seven seals”]; Rus.

за семью запорами – Srb. *иза седам брава/катанаца* [under lock and key, literally “under seven locks”]; Rus. *семь потов сошло с кого* – Srb. *пробило га је десет знојева* [to sweat blood, literally Rus. “seven pots coursed from him” and Srb. “pierced by ten ostriches”]; Rus. *спустить семь шкур с кого* [to skin someone alive, literally “to get seven skins from someone”]; Rus. *чувствовать себя на седьмом небе* – Srb. *бити на седмом/деветом/десетом небу* [to be in seventh heaven, literally Rus. “to fill oneself in seventh heaven” and Srb. “to be in seventh/ninth/ tenth heaven]. Russian idiom *до седьмого колена* [kinship to the seventh grade, literally “to the seventh generation”] with Serbian variants *до девет дедова* [literally “to the ninth grandfather”], *рођак у седмом/деветом колону* [literally “cousin of the seventh/ninth grade] and *девете пећи жарило* [literally “the ninth furnace glowed”] denote a far degree of kinship.

Religious language contains a diversity of this kind of phrasemes that may imprint an aspect of code to the act of communication. By means of their often use, it is aimed at making references to the bible’s texts and to the images taken from them, as well as at obtaining through the phrasemes a stylistic effect in the manner of the holy texts.

Images and phrasemes from Bible suffer on the lexicalization process the same handling as quotes or borrowings from literature: their source is mentioned and known to the readers. The source text is characterised by metaphors and parables, fact that makes the primary signifier of this category of phrasemes concrete and plastic.

Allusions to the holy texts of Christian religion vary in amount and precision, from the complex phrase that almost faithfully reproduces the original text till the preferential usage of biblical numbers in different, various, specific and incidental contexts that lack individual symbolic value.

To this category belong phrasemes like Rus. *книга за семью печатями* – Srb. *књига за седам печата* [a closed book, literally “a book with seven seals”] that is taken from the John’s vision from Apocalypse. John the Theologus uses the symbol of the book often and proliferous in what concerns the signifieds. The book always lay on the hands of an angel. First of these spiritual books is described as having *seven seals*. There is also written about a lamb that ought to open the seals and to read the book. It was said that nobody was worthy to open and to read the book. This is why we use the phraseme *a book with seven seals* when we want to describe something that is mysterious, unapprehended. In Goethe’s *Faust*, Part I, Faust says to Wagner “The past times are *a book with seven seals* for us.” In Russian and in Serbian this idiom of biblical origin belongs to the formal register used in literary and journalistic works as exemplified in phraseological dictionaries: “*Our difficulties, as our successes, are a closed book for Americans*” (I. Ehrenburg, *Peace for the World*, apud Molotkov 1968, 200)<sup>viii</sup>, or

“And this kind of inspiration does not occur always to everyone, but for you I guess, given being your intelligence, you were not so vulgar and would not be able to follow my thoughts, if only you had not thought about the book with seven seals, if only you had lived permanently in fantasy.”<sup>ix</sup> (Matešić 1982, 244)

Number *seven* is also used in the phrasemes of biblical origin Rus. *семь смертных грехов* – Srb. *седам смртних греха* [The Capital Sins, literally “the seven deadly sins”], sins to the fore of the church, namely the ones that from ancient times have been decreed to be the source of all the murders and crimes. These sins are

hubris, envy, avarice, lust, gluttony wrath, slot. The phraseme *семь мудрецов = седам мудраца* [seven sages of Greece] is the name of the *seven* philosophers and statesmen of Ancient Greece (4<sup>th</sup> century BC): Bias of Priene, Chilon of Sparta, Cleobulus of Lindos, Periander of Corinth, Pittacus of Mytilene, Solon of Athens, Thales of Miletus. Number *seven* was chosen to render the amount of sages because it was a number “agreeable to gods”, being very honoured in Antiquity and the phraseme “The Seven Sages” denotes the climax of thinking, the superlative of wisdom.

Likewise, the myth of the seven lean cows, Rus. *семь тощих коров* – Srb. *седам гладних крава* also has his origins in Bible. Phraseme Rus. *на седьмом небе* – Srb. *на седмом/деветом/десетом небу* [in seventh heaven] appears in religious poems and is based on the belief of ancestors that the heavens are made from crystal and that there are more canopies. Aristotle, the one that said that heavens are made from crystal, claimed that there are *eight heavens*. Others were more avaricious. Theologian Thomas Aquinas asserted the existence of *seven heavens*, while others, more generous, like Dante, talked about *nine heavens*. Moreover, as a hierarchy of heavens had also to be established in the moment when their amount was established, the upper heavens were booked for the “blessed”. It is well understood that “to be in the *seventh/ninth heaven*” means to be in the happiest state, at the height of delight and joy. Russians use only the variant of the idiom with *seven heavens*, *быть на/в седьмом небе*. Molotkov (1968, 272) exemplifies: “All that one could say about Rogozhin himself was that he had a fixed gaze. He kept his eyes glued on Nastya Filippovna, he was astonished, he was in seventh heaven.”<sup>x</sup> Serbians use both variants, *бити на/у седмом/деветом небу* [literally “to be in seventh/ninth heaven”] as in “Warm grew in seventh heaven”<sup>xi</sup> (Matešić 1982, 372) “This bargainer bowed in front of Theodor and he was in seventh heaven”<sup>xii</sup> (idem). The high frequency of the usage of number *seven* is related to the influence of Christianity, the holy number of the Jews replacing number *nine*, the one preferred by Indo-Europeans.

In the idioms above mentioned, the numeral does not signify by its denotative value, but by its very presence meant to evoke a domain of knowledge shared by a large number of inhabitants, domain that is cultural and not linguistic. This is why the numeral cannot vary when it is taken from Bible images, the reference to the source being made through the image as a whole, and not through its components.

Phraseological units based on biblical images most often have total equivalents between the two Slavic languages thanks to the spiritual communion of the two people. There are some possible variations because of the folk or mythological influences from exterior, reflected in language by means of its phraseology.

Likewise, symbolism of number *seven* can be attributed to the interest for ancient culture and for its esotericism. More than 2000 years ago writers spoke about *the Seven World Wonders*, Rus. *семь чудес света* - Srb. *седам светских чуда* [literally “seven wonders of the light”], about those wonderful settlements, buildings or realizations of the ancient world. Around 120 BC a Greek poet, Sidon Antipater, wrote about *seven* similar buildings situated in the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean Sea. Information about the wonders of that world was registered for posterity, but from what we call *The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World* only one exists nowadays, Great Pyramid of Giza. The others are Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, Statue of Zeus at Olympia, Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, Colossus of Rhodes, and Lighthouse of Alexandria. Thus, *The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World*

were established in Antiquity. What was established then became a wide known phraseme today and when something very impressive appears, it is called *the eighth wonder of the world*.

Because of the frequent usage of phrasemes like the ones described, one can say that *seven* is a productive number in what concerns *phrasemes with numeric components*, from the two researched cultures. Cardinal numeral *seven* can be found in Russian phraseological units like *книга за семью печатями* [the book with seven seals], *семь пятниц на неделе* [someone that says something one day and another the next, literally “seven Fridays in a week”], *семи пядей во лбу* [as smart, wise, exceptional as the sun shines on, literally “seven spans on tongue”], while in Serbian in phraseological units like *књига са седам печата* [the book with seven seals], *преко седам брда* [miles away, literally “over seven hills”]. In like manner, numeral *seven* also generated phrasemes that are not of a biblical, mystique or religious origin. Here there are: Rus. *семь потов сошло с кого* – Srb. *пробило га је десет знојева* [to sweat blood, literally Rus. “seven pots coursed from him” and Srb. “pierced by ten ostriches”]; Rus. *спустить семь шкур с кого* [to skin someone alive, literally “to get seven skins from someone”]; Rus. *седьмая вода на киселе* – Srb. *девете тете дете* [pip squeak, literally Rus. “seventh water on kissel” and Srb. “ninth baby’s aunt”]. In addition, one can notice resemblances between the two languages in what concerns both the construction and the inner form of the phrasemes. However, there also are numerous differences between the two languages in what concerns this type of phrasemes, even cases in which a phraseme from a language does not have an equivalent in the other language. For example, Romanians say about a drunk man *a merge/a umbla pe șapte cărări* [literally “to walk on seven paths”] (Rus. *на ногах не стоит/языком не ворочает* [literally “one cannot stand on his feet/ turn his tongue”, Srb. *пијан као смук<sup>xiii</sup>/свиња/земља* [literally “drunk like a fish/pig/ground) and the education one received at home is called *cei șapte ani de acasă* [literally “seven years from home], phrasemes that do not have an equivalent with numeric component in Russian and Serbian. On the contrary, there are Russian phrasemes with numeric component that have in Romanian equivalents that contain metaphors of quantitative symbols. For example: Rus. *семь бед один ответ* – Srb. *куд пукло да пукло* - Rom. *fie ce-o fi* [one might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, literally Rus. “seven troubles – one answer”, Srb. “everything is broken that have been broken”, Rom. “be as it may be”]; *за семь верст киселя хлебать = ићи преко седам/девет брда* [to go all that way for nothing, literally Rus. “to make a kissel seven miles long”, Srb. “to go over seven/nine hills”]; *семь верст до небес и все лесом = обећавати брда и долине (а promise marea și sarea)* [to talk a lot of hot air, literally Rus. “seven miles to the sky and all forest”, Srb. “to promise the hills and the valleys” and Rom. “to promise the sea and the salt”].

Hence, one of the numerals that function as a symbol is *seven*. It occupies a special place among both the natural numbers from one to ten and in geometry, astronomy, optics, anatomy, mythology, and religion. Therefore, it is little wonder that *seven* appears so frequently with its symbolic valencies in phraseological units, each time evoking representations or situations of a cultural character.

However, more relevant from a folk, mythic or sacral point of view is number *nine*. Symbolistics of this number is due to the fact that it is a multiple of number *three* (3x3=9). Number *nine* represents the triplication of the three worlds: of the body, of the intellect and of the soul. It symbolizes eternity, completeness, incorruptibility. Greeks

had *nine* muses (at the beginning they were only *three*), conceived by Zeus in *nine* nights of love. In Christianity, it represents the harmony and divine perfection; in the Jew tradition, *nine* was considered the number of truth. Symbolistics of this number is found in every element of the Romanian folklore. Its magic efficacy is presumed especially by the texts of the incantations. The effect of spells is due to happen after *three*, *seven* or *nine* days (Evseev 1994, 117). To circle *nine* times a worshipping place (church, cemetery, chapel, choir, thumb) or a natural element (stone, piece of land) contributes to the occult forces coming to help in case of diseases, slow development in children, infertility in women, or to bring luck and rich crop in the current year. To circle something *nine* times means to accomplish a sacral act: the numeral has more power than the action itself, its symbolistics conferring mystic significations on the act.

*Nine*, being the last of the digits, represents an end and a restarting, a movement towards another level. The idea of born and germination is also present (*nine* is the measure for pregnancy), as well as the idea of death, well represented in Serbian phraseology. *Nine* opens the series of transmutations and one can explain this by the fact that Serbians worship ancestors in a greater measure than Russians do. *Nine* is the number closely linked to the after world, to transcendence, and to the wizardry of death and resurrection. Next, we will cite something from V. Chaikanovich: "the worship of the ancestors represents the spine of the Serbian Mythology and rituality"<sup>xiv</sup> (apud Evseev 2001, 34). Serbians use phraseme *од/до деветога деда/до седам дедова/до девог колена* [down to the last detail, literally "to the ninth grandfather/ to the seventh aunt/ to the ninth generation"] that means that blood kinship goes down or up to the ninth degree, moment when any kinship disappears. "Only people could relate to such an extent how that marriage happened, as with all other things, if they are good or bad, down to the last detail."<sup>xv</sup> (Matešić 1982, 91)

One can notice the massive presence of number *nine* in folk calendar of both Romanian (Baba Dochia has *nine* sheepskin coats and *nine* are the days of "Babele") and Russian (the old calendar had as a multiple number *nine*) peoples. Hence, in Russian fairy tales, events take place "over three or nine lands" - *за тридевять земель*, while in the Serbians "over seven/nine hills" - *преко седам/девет брда*. In Romanian fairy tales, mystical distance is denoted by phraseme *peste nouă mări și nouă țări* [literally "over nine seas and nine lands"]. The phraseme specific to the Russian language *тридевятие/тридесятое царство* [literally "over three-nine/three-ten kingdoms"] with the phraseme *тридевятие/тридесятое государство* [literally "over three-nine/three-ten states"] as a variant is directly linked to the folklore and has a partial equivalent in Serbian language, namely *преко седам/девет брда* [literally "over seven/nine hills"].

Likewise, *nine* appears in an array of other Russian, Serbian and Romanian phrasemes, also. Thus, Russians say *девять в году радостей* [literally "joys are nine in a year"], *девятый вал роковой* [ninth wave]. A symbol for the unleashed soaring and not completely undangerous lays at the basis of the phraseme *девятый вал/девети вал* on both Russian and Serbian [ninth wave] languages: "Giant streams of anger grew among people and formed the ninth wave"<sup>xvi</sup> (Molotkov 1968, 54). Serbians also use phrasemes that have in their construction number *nine* as follows: *бити девета рупа на свирали* [to be the fifth wheel, literally "to be the ninth hole on the flute"], *будити/пробудити се из девог сна* [to get up from a very heavy sleep, literally "to be the ninth at a plough"], *бити девети у плугу* [to be the fifth wheel, literally "to be the ninth at a plough"], *у девет зора* [very early in the morning, literally "at the ninth down"], *увео у*

девет [a person who lost very much weight, literally "withered at nine!], зна да прича за девет [to talk very much, literally "to know the story for nine"], девета вода кисела [pip squeak, literally "ninth water on kissel"], камен ти главу раздеветао [a curse, literally "may your head split in nine parts"] etc.

To the set of sacral and magic numbers also belongs digit *three*. Number *three*, as unifying, dynamic and productive structure, embodied in the symbolic triade, crosses the entire world of imagination and can be encountered at all levels of the existence: physical, psychical, macrocosmic and microcosmic. All over, it expresses a perfect order, a totality organised in a hierarchy. Fundamental number, it integrates the triple unity of the alive being or results from the summation of *one* and *two*, being in this case a product of the combination between the Heaven and the Earth. It is the sign of the masculine principle (yang), dynamic and fertile, a sign of the Heaven as an opposite of the Earth, a sign of the universe totality (underworld – earth – heaven) and of the person (unconscious – conscious – overconscious). Most of the ethical and fundamental virtues or deficiencies are reduced to a triade: belief – hope – love, truth – beauty – good, equality – fraternity – liberty etc. The things that ruin the human's belief are deceit, indecency and badinage. *Three* are also the sins that lead man to Hell: calumny, obduracy and hate and *three* the virtues that lead man to believing: humiliation, morality and fear of the Judgement Day. *Triade* characterize any creative act: creator – the act of creation – the creation. Man, Sun of the Heaven and of the Earth completes The Great Triade. Time is split in *three sequences*: past – present – future. There are *three dimensions* of the world: dimension of nature – dimension of humanity – divine dimension. Pythagoreanism established *three elements* of the human being: body – soul – spirit. In Antiquity, people used to drink *three* (or *nine*) glasses.

Number *three* is for Christians the perfection of the divine unity: God is *one* in *three* persons. *The Holy Trinity* lies at the basis of the Christianity and it is considered to be the most complex philosophical and ethical product defining the interaction among the *three centers* or *poles* that for the *Divine Triade*, in their unity and dialectic differentiation: God-The Father – God The Sun – Holy Spirit. It indicates an intellectual and spiritual order in God, in universe and in man. Hence, number *three* appears extremely frequently in *The New* and *The Old Testaments*: the bishops called the name of God *three times*, the tent and the temple had *three sections*, Abraham meets *three angels* (prefiguration of The Holy Trinity). *Three* is also very present in Jesus Christ's life: *three Magi*, *three hours* spent on the cross, *three* were the *dead* He resurrected, there were *three crosses* on Golgotha, the inscription on the cross was in *three languages*. Russian people payed special attention to this fact. This is the reason why number *three* is very frequent in common proverbs and sayings, as well as in different phrasemes, whose translation into Romanian is most often difficult: "God loves *trinity*. *Three is a holy number. Three fingers make a cross*"<sup>xvii</sup> (Dal` 2000, 346) – Rom. *Dumnezeu iubește trinitatea. Trei este un număr sfânt. Cu trei degete ne facem cruce.*

Number *three* has a sacramental value, is the number of all kind of tempting or repetitive actions or invocations, prayers, incantations that is meant to bring accomplishment and success. *Three* is the magic and symbolic number of choices in fairy tales and legends. Thus, number *three* is perceived as an efficient and dynamic unity in the actions related: *moirae* are *three*, *three* are the *suns* and *the daughters* of the king, in fairy tales the heroes are put through *three tests*, against bad spirits one shall spew *three times*, night and the week have *three bad-luck hours*, the wizard goes

*three time* head over his heels so as to transform into another being. Likewise, *three* reminds of numerous practices that, even though aim at different goals, have a common action, namely to circle an object *three times*. This is meant to fulfil a wish, to cause healing, to cover from madness or afflictions. Consequently, we can say that number *three* has the positive connotation of fulfilling an action.

*Ternary* is expressed through different graphic symbols like *the trident*, *the trinacria* (a fish with three bodies and just one head) or, simpler, through *the triangle*.

An old magic and religious ceremony consisted in drawing cuts by means of *three* arrows or sticks, the chosen one being designated the one that was touched by the *third* arrow. In a like manner was chosen the place where a treasury could have been founded.

In what follows we will mention some Russian and Serbian phrasemes that have in their construction digit *three*: Rus. *спустить семь шкур с кого* [to skin someone alive, literally “to get seven skins from someone”]; *будь ты/он/ она/оно/вы/они трижды проклят* [go to hell, literally “be three times cursed”]; *в трех шагах от кого, от чего = два три корака* [only a few steps away, literally Rus. “at three steps from somebody, something” and Srb. “two-three steps”]; *комбинация из трех пальцев = крст од три прста* [fig sign, literally “combination of three fingers”]; *заблудиться в трех соснах* [to get lost in broad daylight, literally “to get lost among three pines”]; *бити на три ћошка* [nervous, literally “to be on three corners”]; *свако чудо за три дана* [happiness is short-lived, literally “every miracle lasts three days”]. A well-known Serbian proverb (Petrović 1997, 219) is *није трећу ноћ дочуван* [fool, literally “not bewitched in the third night”). It refers to the *third* night in which, according to the Serbian folklore, *three moirae* set the newly born faith. In this night all that live in the house wait for *the three fairies* spinning the destiny to come. From this magic ritual also derives the phraseme *није трећу ноћ дочуван* (*mot à mot*: “nu a fost păzit în cea de a treia noapte”).

In ancient times, people had a special consideration for several numbers that were considered to be mystique. The belief in the magic power of these numbers preserved until present days while some peoples nowadays only frequently use the above mentioned numbers without any regard to the fact that at the beginning they were considered to have special powers.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study that we conducted tries to show how *numerals* generated *paremiology*, idea in contradiction with what some phraseologists claim, i.e. the fact that they do not have any importance for the construction of the *phrasemes*. In fact, from the material gathered by now and presented above one can notice the great amount of phrasemes with numeral constituents in both the studied languages. There is no doubt that there is a considerable amount of phrasemes (idioms, collocations) that exist in all languages and that reflect various systemic aspects of Russian and Serbian Idiomatics (meaning of the phrasemes, their stylistic values, etc.).

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Masonic numerology is based on Platon's and Pitagora's philosophies. At the basis of the mystic credo of Pitagora's school from the 5th century BC layed the idea that "everything is numbers", that the whole Universe can be rendered through numbers. This school adjudged a gender to each number, the uneven numbers being masculine and even numbers feminine. Uneven numbers were considered immortal because of the fact that they cannot be divided in two and some of them were adjudged with magical power.

<sup>ii</sup> "Гении – то люди семи пядей во лбу, не часто в жизни встречаются" (В. Тендряков, *Несчастье*, apud Molotkov 1968).

<sup>iii</sup> "Наши трудности, как и наши успехи, для многих американцев – книга за семью печатями" (Ehrenburg, I., *Mir miru!*, apud Molotkov 1968).

<sup>iv</sup> "Најважнију улогу у обредима и обичајима, као и у фолклорним текстовима (бајкама, приповеткама, песмама, загонеткама) имају непарни бројеви и то: три, седам и девет" Radenković (1996, 333).

<sup>v</sup> See The Seven Mysteries: Baptism, Chrismation and Holly Communion (Mysteries of initiation and acceptance into the church's body and development into Christ), Confession and Holy Oil (mysteries that restore body and soul powers), Marriage and Ordination (mysteries with specific goals). Holly Oil is the mystery through which, by means of the priests' prayers and unction of

the body with holly oil, the believer is given the divine grace so as to heal his body and soul, to be forgiven of all his sins and to brace his soul.

<sup>vi</sup> If needed, Holy Oil can be administrated by less than seven priests, usually *three*, as the number of the Trinity, or at least *two*. This mystery cannot be administrated under no circumstances be by only one priest as James (5:14) says that if someone is sick, “let them call the priests of the Church”, and not only one priest.

<sup>vii</sup> “un număr familiar în basmele noastre (la slavi, mai mult potențat: *șaptezeci și șapte de haiduci, șaptezeci și șapte răni*), Petrea Voinicul răpune *șapte zmei* și dă mă-sei cheile de la toate cămărilor, oprind-o însă a intra în a *șaptea*. Când bătrânii orbi de *șapte ani* de zile își recapătă vederile, ei văd mai întâi ca un copil de *șapte ani* și împăratul trimite în *șapte părți* ale lumii să caute pe răpitorul coroanei”.

<sup>viii</sup> “*Наши трудности, как и наши успехи, для многих...— книга за семью печатями*” (Ehrenburg, I., *Mir miru!*, apud Molotkov 1968).

<sup>ix</sup> “... а ова врста инспирације не јавља се ни увијек свакоме, а за тебе претпостављам, с обзиром на твоју интелигенцију, да ниси тако вулгаран те не би могао пратити моју мисао, барем за тебе не би требало да је књига са седам печата, ти си барем увијек имао фантазије” (Krlježa, M., *Zastave I-II*), apud Matešić 1982).

<sup>x</sup> “*Сам Рогожин весь обратился в один неподвижный взгляд. Он оторваться не мог от Настасьи Филипповны, он упивался, он был на седьмом небе*” (Dostoevskij, F. M., *Idiot*).

<sup>xi</sup> “*Глиста је цвао у седмом небу*” (Majdak, Z., *Kužiš, stari moj*, apud Matešić 1982).

<sup>xii</sup> “*Овај прекупац се учитиво поклони, а Тодор на деветом небу*” (Domanović, R., *Celokupna dela I-II*, apud Matešić 1982).

<sup>xiii</sup> Mythological snake with supernatural (magical) powers.

<sup>xiv</sup> “Без претеривања може се рећи да се цела српска религија своди на култ предака” *Apud* Evseev (2001, 34).

<sup>xv</sup> “... народ само то потанко изјашњује, како је та женидба била...као и све друго што ваља и не ваља од девет дједова што се оно каже” (Miljanov, M., *Dela*, apud Matešić 1982).

<sup>xvi</sup> “*В гигантских толцах ковался народный гнев, нарастал страшный девятый вал*” (Ivanov, Vs., *Parhotenko*, apud Molotkov 1968).

<sup>xvii</sup> “*Бог любит тройцу. Святой счет, что тройца. Три перста крест кладут*” (Dal’ 2000).