

Wordplay in the new vocabulary of the pandemic

[Giochi di parole nel nuovo vocabolario della pandemia]

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ABSTRACT

EN The pandemic has given rise to a whole host of new words and expressions to describe the phenomena brought about by its occurrence. The entire pandemic vocabulary that has emerged over the past year reflects the people who are living through it, and the various states in which they find themselves: from fear and panic to an imperturbable calm, even a lack of belief in the real nature of the danger. An appreciable layer of this new vocabulary is the product of irony-oriented wordplay, which generates a comic effect. Such sharp-witted descriptions for objects, processes, and actions which have been disseminated by social networks testify to the positive, humorous reaction of some social media users to the threat which has emerged. Some examples of such neologisms are set out in the following text. Taken together, they bear witness to the enduring facility, even in such difficult times, for creative and playful word-smithery which, fortunately, stands in counterpoint to the language of hatred and enmity that is so widespread in Russian public political discourse today.

Keywords: pandemic vocabulary, words of the year, neologisms, wordplay, irony, comic

IT La pandemia ha prodotto una moltitudine di parole ed espressioni nuove, usate per descrivere i fenomeni da essa indotti. L'intero vocabolario della pandemia emerso nel corso dell'ultimo anno rispecchia le persone che lo stanno attraversando, nonché i vari stati in cui si trovano: da paura e panico a calma imperturbabile, o anche scetticismo nei confronti della vera natura del pericolo. Una parte considerevole di questo nuovo vocabolario è il prodotto di giochi di parole in chiave ironica, che generano un effetto comico. Descrizioni argute di oggetti, processi e azioni di cui sono stati disseminati i social media sono prova di come alcuni utenti abbiano reagito in positivo e umoristico alla minaccia. Alcuni esempi di tali neologismi sono presentati nel presente studio. Nel complesso, tali parole sono prova della diffusa tendenza, perfino in tempi difficili, a produrre parole scherzose e creative che, fortunatamente, si oppongono al linguaggio di odio e inimicizia oggi così diffuso nel discorso politico in Russia.

Parole chiave: vocabolario della pandemia, parole dell'anno, giochi di parole, ironia, comico

1. Introduction

In Russia at the end of last year, the results were announced of the 14th annual "Word of the Year" competition, run under the curatorship of the renowned philosopher, philologist and culturologist Mikhail Epstein. Here we outline the details of the contest. The internationally acclaimed event has been held in Russia since 2007. The purpose of the contest is to identify words, expressions and phrases that have acquired notoriety over the monitoring period and have elicited a public response. There are several nominations in the contest: the first two, which are Word of the Year and Expression/Phrase of the Year are focused on lexical units already existing in the language, while the third nomination, that is Neologisms deals with newly coined words and expressions. The theoretical basis of the contest is the concept of keywords for the present moment proposed by Tatyana Shmeleva (Shmeleva, 1993). According to this concept, the words which reflect the overall atmosphere of our time can be distinguished in public discourse, and so they represent a verbal portrait of the present moment. Words of the year are selected on the basis of a number of parameters, which are: the frequency of the word in public discourse, its developed syntagm and paradigm as well as the existence of word derivations and its involvement in word play (Shmeleva, 1993, p. 34-38).

The contest material is collected over the course of one year through Facebook. Approximately three thousand Facebook users participating in the data collection are organized into two groups, conventionally named "Word of the Year" and "Neologism of the Year". The lexical units selected by these groups are recorded along with the context of their usage. By the end of the monitoring period, the competition moderators classify and systematize them according to the frequency principle, after which the Council of Experts begins their work. The Council includes 18 scholars from humanitarian disciplines: linguists, cultural scientists, psychologists, sociologists, writers, and journalists. Following a specially developed and formalized procedure, and working to the parameters set out above, the experts nominate competition winners in all categories (for further details on the 2020 competition, see Epstein, 2020).

The competition showed that 2020 turned out to be a highly productive year for the development of the Russian language. The quantity of new words and expressions which emerged last year far surpassed the number of neologisms that had arisen in the previous several years. There were two initial events which gave impetus to the appearance of new lexical units in Russian public discourse: amendments to the Russian constitution (a specifically Russian theme) and the pandemic which, alas, received worldwide distribution. The competition's Council of Experts recognized the words *koronavirus*, *kovid*, *samoizolyatsiya* – *self-isolation*, and the expressions *masochny rezhim* – *mask regime* and *sotsial'noe distantsirovaniye* – *social distancing* as last year's winners (Epstein, 2020). All of these terms were either created or made relevant by the pandemic. The situation is similar in other countries, where the winners of the competition were the words *lockdown*, *coronavirus* (England), *Corona-Pandemie* – *coronapandemia* (Germany), *confinamiento* – *isolation* (Spain), and the Chinese character for *epidemic* (China).

2. Irony as a key feature of the pandemic vocabulary

The entire pandemic vocabulary that came to be compiled in our country in 2020 included lexical units which have long been part of the active vocabulary of the Russian language, but which received additional mass circulation in connection with covid in contemporary public discourse (for example, the words *karantin*, *antitela* – antibodies, *vaktsin*), as well as neologisms which arose over the course

\of the pandemic. Among the latter are many words and expressions defining the various psychological states experienced by people during the pandemic. The spectrum of these states was very broad, ranging from fear, panic and severe anxiety, to complete calmness and, at the far extreme, an absolute disbelief in the reality of any viral threat whatsoever. On social media, the words virusofobia, koronafobia, koronabesiye – coronamania, koronapsycho – coronapsychosis, representing one extent of attitudes to what is happening, and the neologisms koronaskeptiki – coronasceptics, and koronavirusny nigelizm – coronavirus nihilism, recording the presence of the polar opposite, flashed up across the information space.

An appreciable proportion of the new lexical units roaming the expanses of social media were products of wordplay, as understood in its classical sense of manipulating a form of speech with the aim of creating a comic effect (Sannikov, 1999, p. 15). Moreover, all of them are literally shot through with irony, i.e. subtle mockery, concealed by a serious tone of expression or an outwardly positive assessment. As is well known, with the help of irony “a word or utterance acquires in the context of speech a meaning that is opposite to its literal meaning, or else refutes it or casts doubt upon it” (The Culture of Russian speech, 2003, p. 227). This language technique was adopted by users of social media - the creators of the new vocabulary of the pandemic. We viewed the irony which they actively demanded in a psychological sense, from the standpoint of Relief Theory, i.e. as an effective mechanism for reducing psychological tension caused by stress. Professor Willibald Ruch spoke about this mechanism for relieving internal discomfort generated by fear at the 6th International Helological Congress, held recently in St Petersburg, where he emphasized the importance of self-sustaining humour as a whole, a theme which he has exhaustively studied (Ruch, 2008).

3. Examples of ironic neologisms

According to evidence from Marina Vishnevetskaya, collator and compiler of two editions of the Dictionary of Change for 2014 and 2015-2016, which recorded the neologisms of the Internet, press and television over those years, at the start of the pandemic back in March, the new words koronabesiye – coronamania and maskobesiye – mask-mania emerged. Their meanings - a manic obsession associated with coronavirus and the wearing of masks - reflected the negative attitude of a certain section of the public towards media reports about a widespread and rapidly escalating disease (Pal'veleva, 2020). At that time, back in March, it was still hard to believe in the seriousness of the situation and its long-term nature. Alarming information was sometimes perceived as fake news from the media; its repetition in social networks was dubbed infodemiya – infodemic, meaning the viral spread of fake news.

In order to avoid a paralyzing panic, social media began to fight back verbally against the intimidating information, using new ironic terms - words and expressions designed to elicit a comic reaction in others. There immediately appeared a bazovy nabor panikyora – the basic alarmist's shopping basket, including the buckwheat, pasta and toilet paper that instantly disappeared from supermarket shelves, as well as telezhki apokalipsisa – the shopping trolleys of the apocalypse - the specially-prepared trolleys in large chain stores overflowing with the goods listed above. On social media, the expression udalyonushka i bratets-divanushka – homeworking and sofa-bro – popped up, with the twofold inclusion of the diminutive-affectionate suffix -ushk-, lending the situation described by the expression, i.e. the familiar habit of lying at home on the sofa during lockdown, a comical overtone. Towards the end of the year, the old acronym do n.e. (do nashei ery) – before our era (the Russian equivalent of B.C.) emerged, deciphered in a new way as do nachala epidemii – before the start

of the epidemic. Among the lexical units submitted for voting in the Word of the Year 2020 competition, we find such excellent notions as a *vygulyator* – walker - derived from the verb *vygulyat'* (take for a walk in the fresh air) - a witty term for the domestic pets taking their owners for a walk during the period when a strict ban on leaving the house was in place; also *karantier* - a new lexical unit obtained by eliding the words *karantin* (quarantine) and *rantier* (renter), invented for dog-owners who rented their pets out for walks; and *naruzhenosets* – nose-exposer - derived from the expression *nos snaruzhi* (nose outside), indicating someone who wears a mask without covering their nose.

4. Word-formation models used in neologisms

We hear a lot of lamentations today about the "contamination" of the Russian language, the predominance of borrowings within it, and the anglicisms which have recently entered our language (Plungyan, 2018, p. 224; Shcherbinina, 2015, p. 12). There is talk about the reduction of the word-formation capabilities of our "great and mighty" language. However, the pandemic has amply demonstrated the effectiveness and efficiency of both the Russian language's word-formation practices and its creative potential. Witty and ironic neologisms, built on wordplay and based on the word-formation models of the native language, have helped and are helping us still to both overcome the fear and cope with the stress brought on by covid. Worthy of note are the words *pogulyantsy* – «walk-abouters» and *sididomtsy* – «sit-at-homers» - epithets for those who go «outside» or, on the contrary, strictly observe self-isolation. The first lexeme refers to the verb *pogulyat'* in the sense of «to take a walk on foot, to spend time in the fresh air». The second is a playful transformation of the phrase *sidet' doma*, «to sit at home». Another expressively humorous word is *zumbi* – «zombie», aimed at those who like to sit endlessly on Zoom. Phonetically similar to the word *zombie*, it incorporates that word's semantics of obsession and total commitment, introducing their inherent meanings into the sphere of new computer technologies. And the fortunate verb *raskovidet'sya* – «to loosen up», reminiscent to Russian speakers of the verb *razgovet'sya*, «to break the fast», i.e. to allow oneself long-desired food for the first time at the end of a religious fast, bears the promise of a long-awaited meeting with loved ones after the quarantine is lifted.

The linguistic tools used by the creators of new ironic terms to create a comic effect are well known, and have long been in use in Russian word-smithery. These are paronymic attraction, based on the similarity of the sounds of two convergent words (*rantier* - *karantier*, *oruzhenosets* («squire») - *naruzhenosets* («nose-exposer»), and contamination - the creation of hybrid words, a kind of inter-word overlap, observed in the lexemes *koronabesiye*, *maskobesiye*, playing around with established expressions (*udalyonushka i bratets-divanushka* («homeworking and sofa-bro»), echoing the name of the Russian folk tale "Sister Alyonushka and Brother Ivanushka"), and the technique of confounded expectations used in the expressions *bazovy nabor panikyora* («the basic alarmist's shopping basket»), *telezhki apokalipsisa* («the shopping trolleys of the apocalypse»), and many others.

5. Conclusion

It goes without saying that not all of the neologisms of the past year will enter the active vocabulary of the Russian language. Most of the vocabulary of the 2020 pandemic that has today flooded social media will remain in its characteristic feature, a kind of verbal portrait of a very specific period of time in the fight against the pandemic. A portrait in itself very valuable, that captures the positive, humorous

reaction of some users of social networks to the threat that has arisen. In fact, laughter – which is a joke in the face of danger, – and irony – mild mockery clothed in the form of outward consent and approval – are something that helps a person to survive danger, and not to bend under its weight. This theme is also taken up by theorists studying the phenomenon of irony at a conceptual level, and even see within it the conceptual foundations of Russian culture as a whole, which they refer to as the “ironic dialectic” (Epstein, 2015, p. 5-6). Practical analysts also bear witness to the same, citing the results of numerous empirical studies (Ruch 2015; Karasik, 2020). Furthermore, the comic focus of the newly-minted vocabulary of the pandemic serves as an excellent counterbalance to the language of hatred and enmity that is so powerfully represented in Russian political discourse today, with its emotional aggression (Epstein, 2016), its unwavering division into “us” and “them”, and its discrimination against the latter (Skorkin, 2014). After all, humour is not only an effective tool in the struggle against fear, it is also a universal antidote to hatred.

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