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LINGUISTIC EXPLICATIONS OF THE RUSSIAN POLITICS “CODE” (BASED ON THE DEKODER.ORG CONTENT)

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Abstract

The choice of words and sentences, the creation of new terms, the definition of grammatical form by journalists is the main tool for structuring sociopolitical reality. The paper reveals the dominants of the language code used by dekoder.org journalists when covering news in Russia. Dekoder is a hybrid online format that combines journalistic investigations and scientific arguments in an accessible and plain language for German readers. The method of quantitative and qualitative thematic content analysis allows to determine that vocabulary notes (Gnosen) together with forming a glossary. *Gnosmos* can be seen as a means of implementing a manipulative strategy in media discourse. The most popular topics describing the image of Russia are characteristics of the political leader and the particularities of the political regime, addressing the country's historical past, the place and role of the opposition, the country in conditions of political tension, attitude towards freedom of speech, censorship and democracy, and government's actions during the coronavirus pandemic. As a result of the study, three leading semantic dominants in the German political publications about Russia were identified: concepts of *Demokratija*, *Liberale* and *Juri Dud* as a proper noun. Speech means include basic nominations, evaluative vocabulary with a negative connotation, verbal arguments, interrogative sentences, comparisons, metaphors.

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Keywords: Alternative media, dekoder, Gnosen, image of Russia, language code, media discourse.



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1. Introduction

One of the main features of modern society is the rapid mediatization of all the aspects of individual and social life (Dobroslonskaya, 2019). Modern media not only inform people about certain facts and events occurring in their country or abroad, but also forms a particular perception of what happened in the recipients' minds. The image of a foreign country is created and interpreted primarily through the mass media. The media world picture is closely related to the linguistic one, which is considered as a certain world view, ideology, value system (Vartanova, 2015; Vendina, 1998), as a linguistic form of ideas about human activity and interpretations of the reality (Dobroslonskaya, 2019). The media world picture is presented in different versions (television, radio, press, virtual world pictures), while specific media texts serve as certain performances. In the media linguistics of recent decades, several areas of research in media text and media discourse have emerged: in the context of pragmatics, cultural studies, psycholinguistics, sociology, stylistics and rhetoric (Polonski, 2019). Alongside the verbal level of media discourse, a conceptual or communicative and cognitive level is distinguished in all sciences, since it is "the language of mass media that is the code, the universal sign system, through which a picture of the surrounding world is formed in individual and mass consciousness" (Dobroslonskaya, 2019, p. 43). Language as a means of communicative influence is able to control the perception of objects and situations, to impose their positive or negative assessment.

1.1. Russia's image in German media

Due to historical and strategic relations, Germany traditionally pays close attention to Russia, which is expressed in a large number of German-language publications about Russia's reality. According to Free Russian-German Institute of Journalism, it is possible to determine several phases of interstate relations and several tones of the information flow, respectively, since 1990, i.e. the reunification of the GDR and the FRG (Voronenkova, 2018). After the dissolution of the USSR, the German press operated a rather "mosaic" image of Russia: the mafia, contract killings, corruption, inflation, political intrigues, a weak-willed political leader as well as an insecure living environment. V.V. Putin's rise to power in 2000 has changed the direction of rhetoric forcing German journalists to seek new arguments and evidences. It was the new Russian president, who got much attention as he strove to improve Russian-German relations, for instance, by organizing with Chancellor G. Schröder the St. Petersburg Dialogue Forum to discuss bilateral issues. Since 2015, the attitude of the German quality press (FAZ, Die Welt, Spiegel, Süddeutsche Zeitung) to the foreign policy of the Russian Federation has been characterized to a greater extent as negative. Russia appears to be a totalitarian, dangerous country pursuing an aggressive policy in order to expand its influence. V. Putin seems to be a cold and prudent strategist who does not care about the interests of the people and public opinion. Russians are infringed on their rights; they are deprived of freedom of speech and only a few of them are ready to protest defending their position. With that said, the question of the objectivity of German journalists from the point of view of maintaining neutrality in the presentation of news still remains open.

1.2. Alternative German news about Russia

The all-around digitalization has led to significant structural changes in the media landscape around the world. New technologies have made it possible to move from mass communication to fragmented and more individualized media. As an alternative source of information on the political life, economy, society and culture of Russia, one can figure out dekoder.org, the German online resource which offers, as its media content, translations of publications of independent Russian media (Novaya Gazeta, Slon, Snob, Echo of Moscow), provided with German experts' comments. According to the portal's founder, Krohs (2017), the essence of dekoder.org is to distance the editors as much as possible from the published materials and give the opportunity to the original version in German to be heard. Due to the fact that the average German reader is not familiar with the people and realities that are described in the reports, it was decided to fill in these gaps with scientific notes called German Gnosen.

2. Problem Statement

The founders of the dekoder.org portal declared its mission as to decode Russia, to make it more understandable for the German audience with the possibility of complete immersion in the civil discourse of Russian society. Traditional Western journalism lacks knowledge on the civil society composition and the access to evidence-based awareness of Russian culture. To solve these problems, the project team selects and translates Russian media publications into German, thereby creating a new information channel. Moreover, journalists' publications are provided with links to commentary articles which are a kind of glossary of cultural and historical concepts. These materials which form an independent "competency module" (Gnosmos), are specially filled for decoder.org by European researchers. When reading the article and the glossary, the reader should get the full picture. Thus, decoder.org is a hybrid online format that combines journalistic investigations and scientific arguments in an accessible and plain language.

The project's mission itself gives rise to the question as to what extent the proposed language code in the form of Gnosen, which is a secondary modelled system, affects the objectivity of information message presentation including the interpretation of the embedded meanings by a German recipient.

3. Research Questions

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to define the concept of "language code" in cognitive linguistics.

Language, as a means of communication between members of society, reflects current aspects of a particular culture. The structure of a language is the result of two inherent factors: internal (the mind of the speaker) and external (a culture common to speakers of the same language). The structures of knowledge representation accumulate national and cultural codes that make up the cognitive basis of the language (Pimenova, 2006). A code is a system of signs that establishes both a repertoire of opposing symbols and a correspondence between the signifying and the signified (Eco, 2006). Its correct interpretation requires background knowledge and knowledge about the differences in the codes of the sender and the recipient. At the same time, the code is characterized by a certain entropy that leads to ambiguity of its reading. Barthes (2001) raises the question of the nature of the correlation of cultural signs with the general cultural

background, which the scientist calls the "book of life", the background of "life as culture". In the works of Eco (2006) this concept is described as the outlook of the recipient of an information message. Barthes (2001) pointed out that cultural codes are nothing more than citations – extracts from some area of knowledge or human wisdom. The cultural code is aligned with the phenomena of intertextuality, hypertext, stereotypes and archetypes.

For Krasnykh (2003), the code of culture is like a "grid" that culture "throws over the surrounding world, divides it, categorizes, structures and evaluates. The code of culture is understood both as a content area of culture, and as a means of language that verbalizes the picture of the world.

The cultural code is divided hierarchically into sub-codes. This hierarchy is multi-stage, and the set of cultural codes with their horizontal and vertical relations forms a figurative system of culture (Buevich, 2014). Thus, it can be stated that the linguistic cultural code

- 1) is a modeling system containing a structural analogy (model) of a separate area of being, revealing its internal laws and contributing to its understanding;
- 2) performs a regulatory function, because it influences human behavior to some extent, this code is able to "advise, configure, suggest a certain type of decision and behavior";
- 3) is a speech-generating system because its carriers think in categories and on this basis form and verbally express thought; such codes, intertwining with the verbal code, participate in the generative process (Savickij, 2016).

Studying the country's image, the greatest interest is related to the analysis of the influence using the help of the given language code. As a result of verbal influence, there appears a subtext - a hidden meaning of the message, which is transmitted by the author of the text indirectly. The use of language, which implies the choice of language means and expressions, already has a structuring effect. The choice of words and sentences, the creation of new terms, the definition of grammatical forms are the main tools for structuring sociopolitical reality, because they mean adherence to a certain system of thinking and the possibility to impose positive or negative assessment. Consequently, the linguistic cultural code of a message can be considered as a tool to manipulate mass consciousness.

4. Purpose of the Study

Researchers of media-discourse (Grishaeva, 2018; Mityagina, 2019; Moiseenko, 2019) note that manipulation, i.e., the desire to covertly influence the recipient, is a characteristic feature of media texts. When a journalist needs to deliver some information to a reader, he does not describe the event or the script, but their mental image. The image consists of a number of basic components of the event (subject, means, object, time, circumstances, cause, purpose, result) and, ideally, should reflect them all. However, the text may not include some of these components. The journalist deliberately omits the relevant information because he or she knows that the recipient of the media, reconstructing the image of the event on the basis of the text, will restore this image on their own. The purpose of this research is to present a system of linguistic cultural code embedded in the news content of the German platform decoder.org, as well as to present its explications in German.

5. Research Methods

In order to achieve this purpose, the following methods were used: dictionary definition analysis, structural analysis, content analysis, intent analysis, and the procedure for identifying the hidden figurative basis of a word based on combinatorial and etymological data.

6. Findings

The research was based on explanatory notes (Gnosen), which together form a glossary, the so-called "Gnosmos" (from Greek words gnosis - knowledge, comprehension and kosmos - world, orderliness) and thematically related journalistic articles for 2018-2020, obtained by a continuous sampling method. It is assumed that the image of the country is constructed using code words, semantic dominants from the economic, political and social spheres of Russian reality. We understand semantic dominance as a set of language units and speech techniques that implement the author's intention, subordinate all text components and form the semantic center of the text. The content of the dominant is based on linguistic meanings and on deep meanings hidden behind linguistic meanings that belong to the individual author's and/or collective unconscious. The dominant "constellation" represents the concept sphere (Volkov & Volkova, 2014). Certain characteristics of the image of Russia are implemented through a set of semantic dominants that affect the recipient's consciousness unnoticed.

6.1. What is “Gnosmos”?

The content of the "Gnosmos" section is filled according to the following scheme: the editor analyzes the media publications in Russian, which he is interested in, to see if there are any terms or realities that need clarification. For some of them, a brief lexical reference in the format of a pop-up window (Blurb) that appears when the cursor is hovered is sufficient, for others, an expert opinion is required. To "decode" (from German word *dekodieren*) means to parse the article into semantic dominants, provide their interpretation in German, and translate the entire article.

Dictionary notes "Gnosen" can be conventionally divided into historical realities (Dekabristen, Blokadniki), sociopolitical realities (Sakon (Gesetz), Zentrale Wahlkommission, Default 1998, Silowiki, (Gazprom, Rokirowka, Gopniki), mythological realities (Tscheburaschka), domestic realities (Kommunalka, Walenki, der Teppich an der Wand, Stalin-Hochhäuser) as well as proper nouns (Juri Tschaika, Kirill Serebrennikow, Oxxxymiron, Juri Dud).

6.2. Key semantic dominants of last years

The analysis of the publications on dekoder.org showed that within the political section, the following dominant topics describing the image of Russia can be distinguished: characteristics of the political leader and the particularities of the political regime, addressing the country's historical past, the place and role of the opposition, the country in conditions of political tension, the attitude towards freedom of speech, censorship and democracy, government's actions during the coronavirus pandemic.

In most of the publications the leading semantic dominant is the concept of "Demokratija". Transliteration in writing by contrast with the German translation "Demokratie" serves as a marker for a

special interpretation of this concept by Russians. It is emphasized that the understanding of democratic principles among the citizens of the Russian Federation is not connected with the comprehension of the classical theoretical concept, but based on personal experience. In the Russian Law Dictionary the following definition is presented: democracy is a form of government based on the recognition of principles such as the supremacy of the constitution and laws, sovereignty of the people and political pluralism, freedom and equality of citizens, and inalienability of human rights (Law Dictionary, 2003). The Federal Agency for Civic Education assigns German democracy a special status, with the inviolability of human dignity in the first place: Die deutsche Demokratie ist nicht eine Demokratie, die lediglich Spielregeln vorschreibt, sich sonst aber im politischen Meinungskampf neutral verhält. Sie tritt vielmehr für bestimmte oberste Werte ein, an erster Stelle die Würde des Menschen, die sie als "wehrhafte" und "streitbare" Demokratie verteidigt (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2011). The semantic dominant "Demokratija" is implemented through evaluative vocabulary with a negative connotation (*Um das Vertrauen beziehungsweise das Misstrauen in die Demokratie geht es kurz vor der Präsidentschaftswahl*), verbal arguments (*Abhängigkeit heißt die Öl-Krankheit. Russland ist der zweitgrößte Erdölexporteur der Welt, dennoch haben viele Russen geringe Löhne*). The "peculiarity" of Russian democracy appears in the headlines (*Spezielle Art von Demokratie; Kann Russland überhaupt Demokratie? Besondere russische Werte ?!*), and the predominance of interrogative sentences in the texts of news publications indicates the instability of the state system and confusion of citizens (*Sofa oder Wahlurne? Wählen oder Nicht-Wählen, das ist die Frage vor der Dumawahl! Lohnt sich die Stimmabgabe überhaupt? Oder sollten die Bürger den kommenden Sonntag lieber auf dem Sofa statt an der Wahlurne verbringen?*).

The second semantic dominant of the Russian politics code for dekoder.org is the semantic dominant "Liberale". According to German journalists, Russians are very reluctant to apply this concept to themselves in order to avoid the somewhat unflattering associations. Even during the short reign of V.I.Lenin the word "liberals" was used to call representatives of the bourgeoisie, who are far from the people and show the features of a foreign enemy. In the Soviet era, the word was rarely used and did not acquire pronounced stylistic connotations. Since the 1990s, the liberal has become an identification of political weakness, today - the disease of the West (*Liberalismus als westliche Krankheit*). In a number of early publications about the LDPR (Liberal Democratic Party of Russia), the concept of "liberal democracy" is used, which, in combination with the demagogic rhetoric of V.V. Zhirinovsky, the outspoken leader of the party, is rather a negative assessment. It is difficult for Russian liberals to find their place in the Russian political system (*Jenseits von links und rechts. Sozialdemokratisch, liberal und konservativ oder schlicht links und rechts - das sind vertraute Zuschreibungen für politische Akteure in (west) europäischen Staaten. Auf daufas. aktuelle politische System in Russland lassen sie sich nicht einfach übertragen*). The refusal to accept the "liberal" is explained by the rejection of the classical Other.

The new and very popular code figure of the Russian information space is Juri Dud. Yuri Dud, born in 1986 in Potsdam, decided very early to become a journalist. Already in his youth, he showed remarkable success as a reporter and received professional education at Moscow State University. In 2017, his popularity as a journalist having his own YouTube channel was growing. The secret of Yuri Dud's success lies in the accessibility of his program to the mass audience, transparent conditions for cooperation, and most importantly, in the alternative presentation of information (*Gegenpol zum Fernsehen*). Especially

valuable for a German-speaking reader is the freedom of speech, which can be seen in all of Dud's reports and is manifested in the choice of interlocutors, that includes the leading people of the young generation, and the use of sometimes invective vocabulary: *Der YouTube-Kanal vDud und sein Schöpfer strahlen Freiheit aus – die Freiheit, sich nicht an Sprachkonventionen halten zu müssen und die russische Vulgärsprache Mat nach Lust und Laune verwenden zu können. Die Freiheit, politisch brisante und gesellschaftlich tabuisierte Themen diskutieren zu können und schließlich die Freiheit, die Interviewpartner unabhängig von politischen Vorgaben auszuwählen.*

Dud embodies several social roles: he contrasts traditional dogma and political patriotism with openness and liberal values, cynicism with sincerity, radical protest with moderate and rational criticism. Outwardly, he is a hipster, casually dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt, which is also a modern public enlightener (*Hipster und Volksaufklärer*).

Yuri Dud is described in publications on the dekoder.org portal as the ideal of a young, politically savvy journalist from Russia, whose opinion can be safely trusted. His documentary reports on the Russian hinterland contain a message about the importance of looking at the world with wide eyes, which once again emphasizes its dissimilarity to other Russian journalists who respond positively only about their country: „*die Welt ist groß und klasse “und man soll sich daher besser als ein Teil dieser Welt definieren, „als sie misstrauisch durch den Zaun zu beäugen“.*

7. Conclusion

The analysis of the content of the German platform dekoder.org showed that the dominants of the linguistic “code” of Russian politics are embedded in the dictionary definitions of Russian realities, the so-called Gnoisen, together forming the Gnosmos glossary adapted for the German reader. Gnosmos can be regarded as a manipulative tool in creating the image of Russia through the prism of news broadcasting. We see further prospects for research in the chosen direction in improving the methods and techniques for analyzing linguocultural codes, as well as in identifying and describing the hierarchy of semantic dominants of the German translated press.

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