

**LATIP 2021****International Conference on Language and Technology in the Interdisciplinary Paradigm****DIVINE NON-EXISTENCE: LINGUISTIC MEANS FOR  
EXPRESSING UNCERTAINTY IN GOD COGNITION IN  
AREOPAGITICA**

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**Abstract**

The paper raises the question of the category of uncertainty in the discourse of theology and religious philosophy – in the context of the idea of God cognition. The paradox of the interlinking between the cognition of the Divine with His incomprehensibility is resolved in the constructive conflict of cataphatic and apophatic methods, which have found a high level of implementation in the Corpus Areopagiticum, pseudoepigraphs associated with the name of the apostle Paul's disciple – Dionysius Areopagite. The authors analyze the linguistic reflection of the category of uncertainty, which manifested itself in the linguistic innovation of the anonymous creator of Areopagitica: we have performed an in-depth analysis of the lexical, word-forming, morphological and syntactic means used by him to express uncertainty. The set of methods used by the authors is based on an inductive methodological approach: through the selection and description of specific linguistic facts to comprehension of the essence of the phenomena behind them. A complex analysis of the examples allowed to conclude that while lexical and morphological means are preferred in the cataphatic approach, syntactic and word-forming means are chosen in the apophatic method to convey uncertainty and indeterminacy of the Divine existence. A conclusion is made about the accomplishment of an important objective of a mystical text in the treatises – that is to hide the sacred from the uninitiated and reveal it to the elite.

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## 1. Introduction

The problem of uncertainty is one of the central problems of human existence. Awareness of it is actualized in periods like the present (Yermoshin & Nikolaeva, 2016), but the problem itself accompanies the entire existence of a person as an individual, as well as humanity as a whole (Gerasimova, 2019). In this regard, the history of the philosophical perception of this problem and its details are no less important for making a diagnosis of the current situation than the discussion of immediate challenges and questions (Dorozhkin & Sokolova, 2015).

The category of uncertainty has a special meaning in the history of humanitarian knowledge in religious philosophy and theology in connection with the problem of God cognition. The fundamental impossibility of knowing God in theoretical and empirical ways does not exclude approaching it with the help of an affirmative and negative method – cataphatic and apophatic theology (Podolak, 2011). The culmination of application of both methods in their combination is considered to be the corpus of works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a Christian neoplatonist of the 5th century (Suchla, 2008). He left a number of treatises on the hierarchical structure of the Universe (“De Coelesti Hierarchia”, “De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia” the latter also describes the Sacraments of the Church) and on the attribution of God (“De Divinis Nominibus”, “De Mystica Theologia”), as well as several epistles (Epistulae). These works, the so-called Corpus Areopagiticum or Areopagitica, will be the base of our research. In the paper, when making references to these treatises (Dionysius Areopagita, 1857), we will use their traditional abbreviations in the scientific literature: CH, EH, DN, MTh, Ep. respectively.

## 2. Problem Statement

- One of the most important facets of the category of uncertainty in philosophy is its linguistic reflection as both a tool and a result of its comprehension (Beglyarova, 2008). This was well understood by the author of the Areopagitica: his linguistic innovation, due to its extraordinary brightness and undoubted effect on the reader, has been acknowledged by all researchers since the introduction of the Corpus into scientific sphere. With sophisticated word formation and rhetorical richness of text as a whole, he achieved the effect of “going beyond the word” (Averintsev, 1977, p. 139), which created a semblance of the transcendent reality of the Divine being and brought the reader closer to the God cognition.
- The main problem of this paper therefore can be formulated as follows: is such a unique discourse able to express adequately the theological category of uncertainty (in relation to the God cognition)?

## 3. Research Questions

In connection with this problem, it is necessary to solve the following specific questions. First, the language has lexical, word-forming, morphological and syntactic means for expressing uncertainty. In vocabulary and word formation, these are the means of lexical and word-forming semantics, respectively: the first is embodied by the lexical unit as a whole, the second – with the help of word-forming

morphemes. In morphology, there is a specific certainty/uncertainty category, which finds different embodiments in different languages (articles, verb forms, etc.). In syntax, various rhetorical figures are used to express additional meanings. The task is to find out which of these tools are preferable for the author of the Corpus under consideration.

Secondly, it remains to find out whether he uses the same language means for cataphatic definitions and for apophatic ones.

The main, third, question is whether purely linguistic means are sufficient to express the philosophical category of uncertainty in theological discourse.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The answers to these questions should lead to the purpose of the study, which we would designate as verification of the working hypothesis. First, the linguistic means used to express the category of uncertainty are also an instrument of cognition of this category in the proposed setting and in a certain field of knowledge. Second, the expression of the category of uncertainty in philosophical and theological discourse requires not only linguistic means, but also metalanguage cognitive codes.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The general methodological approach in this study is inductive: from the accumulation and description of facts to the understanding of the essence of the phenomena that stand behind these facts.

Since our research primarily concerns the issues of linguistic representation of speculative constructions, the leading methodological approach is the cognitive method, which implies the interdisciplinary integration of specific methods of the humanities. In this case, the interdisciplinary approach includes a number of philosophical and linguistic methods.

From the philosophical methods, we primarily choose the epistemological and hermeneutical methods, since the research focuses on the question of cognition (epistemology), which is implemented in the text (hermeneutics). From the linguistic methods, we use the method of synchronous description, which includes, among other things, the method of word formation analysis, stylistic analysis, and contextual description.

#### **6. Findings**

##### **6.1. The cataphatic method of God cognition and the linguistic means of its expression**

Cataphatic theology is an affirmative method. In fact, the very idea of writing a treatise on Divine names presupposes a priori the enumeration and interpretation of the known – primarily from the Holy Scriptures – Divine attributes. In the figurative-symbolic terminology of Pseudo-Dionysius, these are mainly so-called “suitable images”. These include, first of all, those names that God reveals Himself or through the authors of the Old Testament books (in accordance with the general mystification idea, the author, a disciple of the Apostle Paul, converted by him during the apostle’s stay in Athens, could not know the New Testament, which by the end of the 1st century AD had not yet been compiled). These are

common predicates that will be included in the New Testament canon: ἀγαθός ‘good’, φῶς ‘light’, ἔρωσ ‘love’, ζῶή ‘life’ σοφία ‘wisdom’, νοῦς ‘mind’, λόγος ‘word’, δύναμις ‘power’, σωτηρία ‘salvation’, etc., as well as more rare and intricate ones: ἥλιος δικαιοσύνης ‘sun of righteousness’, ἑῶσ ἀστήρ ‘morning star’, μύρον εὐῶδες ‘myrrh odoriferous’, etc.

It is noteworthy that such Divine names as μέγας ‘great’ and μικρός ‘small’, ταὐτός ‘the same’ and ἕτερος ‘other’, ὅμοιος ‘similar’ and ἀνόμοιος ‘dissimilar’, στάσις ‘repose’ and κίνησις ‘movement’, etc. (for example, DN IX) are found next to each other in the same text fragment. The confrontation of antonyms becomes a lexical means of expressing uncertainty.

The cataphatic God cognition cannot, however, ignore the “unseemly symbols” that the author of the Areopagitica mentions in all his writings (Ruaro, 2008). These are Divine attributes such as “air” or “stone” (MTh III), “leopard”, “bear” or “worm” (CH II, 5). A significant fragment of the Epistle to Titus is devoted to explaining why God is said (with reference to the Psalms) to drink (in inebriation, μεθύειν) and to be in ecstasy (ἔκστασις), etc. (Ep.IX, 5). The confrontation of such often overtly pejorative characteristics with traditional ones such as “good” and “light” creates a contrast that emphasizes the phenomenon of uncertainty in the naming (and cognition) of God.

So far, we have been discussing names that are mostly non-derived. But, according to the author and in accordance with his Neoplatonic philosophical platform, it would be more correct to apply to God (as the Cause of everything) the name αὐτοεἶναι ‘self-existent being’, αὐτοζῶή ‘self-existent life’, αὐτοδύναμις ‘self-existent power’, etc. These composita in comparison with their producing base (“common” names) are also intended to raise a question from the reader: what characterizes God more precisely? what is closer to His essence? Thus the uncertainty increases.

The phenomenon of uncertainty in the naming of God is well expressed at the morphological level. Where possible, the author of the Areopagitica prefers to give the Divine predicates a grammatical form of the neuter gender (for this he uses the derivational method of substantivating adjectives and infinitives). As a result, it is preferable for him to call God not ἀγαθός, but τἀγαθόν, not μέγας, but τὸ μέγα, not ὑπαρξίς ‘being’, but τὸ εἶναι (substantive infinitive of the verb ‘to be’) – and there are many such examples. The form is as abstract and neutral grammatically as possible, and grammatically conveys only the most general idea of the object of cognition through naming.

Finally, the cataphatic syntax is expressed most clearly in constructions with figura etymologica. As, for example, in DN VI, 3, where the base ζω- ‘life, alive’ is continuously repeated: καὶ ἀποπληρωτικὴ καὶ διαιρητικὴ ζωῆς καὶ ἐκ πάσης ζωῆς ὑμνητέα κατὰ τὴν πολυγονίαν τῶν πασῶν ζωῶν ὡς παντοδαπὴ ζωῆς πᾶσα ζωὴ θεωρουμένη καὶ ὑμνομένη καὶ ὡς ἀνευδεῆς, μᾶλλον δὲ ὑπερπλήρης ζωῆς αὐτοζωὸς ζωῆς ὡς ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν ζωὴν ζωοποιὸς καὶ ὑπέρζωος ἢ ὅπως ἂν τις τὴν ζωὴν τὴν ἀφθεγκτον ἀνθρωπικῶς ἀνυμνήσοι. (“For the super-living and life-springing Life is Cause both of all life, and is generative, and complete, and dividing of life, and is to be celebrated from every life, in consequence of its numerous generation of all lives, as Manifold, and contemplated, and sung by every life; and as without need, yea, rather, superfull of life, the Self-living, and above every life, causing to live and super-living, or in whatever way one might ex tol the life which is unutterable be human speech” (The Works of Dionysius, 1897, pp. 85-86). The unceasing repetition of the Divine name in different combinations reflects in the Neoplatonic spirit the variety of emanations of that Divine feature, the name of which we give in

accordance with these emanations. Verbosity at the same time reveals the transcendental reality and separates its simplicity from our knowledge.

## 6.2. The apophatic method of God cognition and the linguistic means of its expression

The apophatic path is the path of negation, or withdrawal of a number of predicative qualities from the object of research, in other words, it is a statement of what the object is not (Kenny, 2000). This path was considered by the author of the *Areopagitica* to be more perfect and productive for the God cognition than the cataphatic path (Golitzin, 2003), which he mentioned more than once in his works, especially explicitly in “*De Mystica Theologia*”.

The most obvious means of expressing the apophase are grammatical constructions with negation, as, for example, in MTh IV and V. As an illustration, we give an example from the 5th chapter of this treatise: *Αὐθις δὲ ἀνιόντες λέγομεν, ὡς οὔτε ψυχὴ ἐστίν, οὔτε νοῦς· οὔτε φαντασίαν, ἢ δόξαν, ἢ λόγον, ἢ νόησιν ἔχει· οὐδὲ λόγος ἐστίν, οὔτε νόησις· οὐδὲ λέγεται οὔτε νοεῖται· οὔτε ἀριθμὸς ἐστίν, οὔτε τάξις, οὔτε μέγεθος, οὔτε σμικρότης, οὔτε ἰσότης, οὔτε ἀνισότης, οὔτε ὁμοιότης ἢ ἀνομοιότης· οὔτε ἔστηκεν, οὔτε κινεῖται, οὔτε ἡσυχίαν ἄγει, οὔτε ἔχει δύναμιν, οὔτε δύναμις ἐστίν· οὔτε φῶς· οὔτε ζῆ, οὔτε ζωὴ ἐστίν· οὐδὲ οὐσία ἐστίν, οὔτε αἰὼν, οὔτε χρόνος.* (“On the other hand, ascending, we say, that It is neither soul, nor mind, nor has imagination, or opinion, or reason, or conception; neither is expressed, nor conceived; neither is number, nor order, nor greatness, nor littleness; nor equality, nor inequality; nor similarity, nor dissimilarity; neither is standing, nor moving; nor at rest; neither has power, nor s power, nor light; neither lives, nor is life; neither is essence, nor eternity, nor time” (The Works of Dionysius, 1897, pp. 136-137). In this passage, we see, firstly, how the very names that were applied to God in the cataphatic part of the exposition (“light”, “life”, “word”, “mind”, etc.) are denied; secondly, lexical antonyms (such as “magnitude” and “smallness”, “equality” and “inequality”, “similarity” and “difference”, “moves” and “rests”, etc.), now being placed in this field of negation, become logically equivalent. Since they are denied in the same way, they are inapplicable to the naming of God, and only in a negative sense can they give the key to the God cognition.

In an apophatic spirit, all the grammatical characteristics of words for describing the transcendence of the Divine being, not involved in the physical characteristics of the created world, are also denied. So, in order to emphasize the timelessness of Divine being, Pseudo-Dionysius gives a negative series of personal temporal forms of the *verbum substantivum* (DN V, 4): *καὶ οὔτε ἦν οὔτε ἔσται οὔτε ἐγένετο οὔτε γίνεται οὔτε γενήσεται, μᾶλλον δὲ οὔτε ἐστίν* (“And He neither was, nor will be, nor became, nor becomes, nor will become – yea rather, neither is” (The Works of Dionysius, 1897, p. 76). The recognition of the non-existence of God (in our time matrix) is the pinnacle of the author’s apophatic reasoning.

However, not only negative language constructs that are obviously suitable for apophase are used by Pseudo-Dionysius (Stang, 2012). According to the author, denial is not only in excluding the signs visible and given in sensory and contemplative experience, but also in showing the exclusivity and belonging to another reality by linguistic means. To achieve it, he uses a superlative – both grammatical and logical (Nikolaeva, 2016; Scazzoso, 1967).

The grammatical superlative (or elative) is expressed in the forms of superlative, and more often of comparative degree of adjectives (in the sense of superlative one): θεϊότερος and θεϊότατος in the Areopagitica have the same meaning, excluding any comparison and implying superiority and transcendence. In addition, the elative can be conveyed by using the preposition ὑπέρ “above, more” (along with its active use as a prefix). As, for example, in the following passage (DN II, 10): Καὶ μέτρον ἐστὶ τῶν ὄντων καὶ αἰῶν καὶ ὑπὲρ αἰῶνα καὶ πρὸ αἰῶνος, πλήρης ἐν τοῖς πλήρεσιν, ἄρρητος, ἄφθεγκτος, ὑπὲρ νοῦν, ὑπὲρ ζώην, ὑπὲρ οὐσίαν. Ὑπερφυῶς ἔχει τὸ ὑπερφυές, ὑπερουσίως τὸ ὑπερούσιον. (“It is measure of all things existing, and age, and above age, and before age – full in things that need, superfull in things full, unutterable, unspeakable, above mind, above life, above essence” (The Works of Dionysius, 1897, p. 24).

In general, it is word formation means that are very productive in conveying a logical elative: in addition to the prefix ὑπερ-, these are numerous formations with ἀ-privativum, and compositions with the initial παν-, ἀρχ(ι)-, ὄλο-, πρωτο-, ἀει-, πολυ-. These morphemes not only mark the word semantically as a sign of the manifestation of transcendental reality, but also become the supporting structures of syntactic constructions, the basis of rhetorical figures, aesthetically strengthening the idea of the unknowability of the Divine essence. In the next fragment (DN I, 1), this function is performed by the prefixes ἀ-privativum and ὑπερ-. Καὶ πάσαις διανοίαις ἀδιανόητόν ἐστι τὸ ὑπὲρ διάνοιαν ἐν, ἄρρητόν τε λόγῳ παντὶ τὸ ὑπὲρ λόγον ἀγαθόν, ἐνὰς ἐνοποιὸς ἀπάσης ἐνάδος καὶ ὑπερούσιος οὐσία καὶ νοῦς ἀνόητος καὶ λόγος ἄρρητος, ἀλογία καὶ ἀνοησία καὶ ἀωνυμία. (“And the One above conception is inconceivable to all conceptions; and the Good above word is unutterable by word – Unit making one every unit, and superessential essence and mind inconceivable, and Word unutterable, speechlessness and inconception, and namelessness” (The Works of Dionysius, 1897, p. 2).

## 7. Conclusion

As the actual material shows, the author of the Areopagitica uses a full arsenal of linguistic means to express the phenomenon of uncertainty: lexical, word-forming, morphological and syntactic. For the affirmative method, lexical and morphological means are more frequent. Word formation and syntax less clearly express this phenomenon. For the negative method, on the contrary, it is word formation in combination with syntactic constructions that play a primary role in the transmission of uncertainty (and indeterminability) of the Divine being.

It is worth noting the specific language means for expressing the main idea, implemented in the phenomenon of the text (Solomonovskaya, 2016). This is the confrontation of antonyms in the same context, which negates their semantic opposition, making them equivalent Divine names in both the cataphatic and apophatic sense. You can say that God is both great and small, but He is neither great nor small at the same time. This paradoxical thinking creates the phenomenon of uncertainty in relation to the naming of God and the God cognition.

The transformation of the grammatical and word-forming meaning of the elative – from superiority to transcendence – is also specific in the Areopagitica discourse.

However, the actual language means are not sufficient for the full disclosure and adequate perception of this category. Christian mysticism has, as a rule, two opposite goals: to hide the sacred from

the uninitiated and to reveal the mysterious to the knowledgeable ones. For this purpose, certain metalanguage cultural codes are used. With regard to the knowledge of God, such codes can undoubtedly include the postulate from the Gospel of John “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18). This is the simplest and most obvious code. There is also an impressive tradition of Neoplatonic philosophy behind the Areopagitica (Markidonov, 2014) with its theory of emanation, which corrects our cognitive abilities (Lilla, 2005). Without the use of such keys, an adequate understanding of the text is impossible, you can easily stop at the cataphatic stage in the charm of the typical verbosity of the author.

A language game, a paradox, an experiment hides the sacred from the uninitiated, but reveals the essence to those who have chosen the right key to these texts. This is how the intellectual selection of the reader is carried out.

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