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Philological Readings

MEMORIAL PLAQUE TEXT: COGNITION, COMMUNICATION, MULTIMODALITY

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Abstract

The present paper analyses the interaction of different sign systems in the multimodal memorial plaque texts. In the line with previous studies the authors show that memorial plaques as markers of sociocultural space require interdisciplinary study, taking into consideration the mutual influence of cognition and communication. Relying on the idea that historical objects, located in space, are semiotized, the authors argue that memorial plaque text should be considered as multimodal, in which verbal and non-verbal components are in special relation and present specific memorial plaque text organisation principles, which are common for commemorative practice. The authors illustrate how different sign systems interact in the multimodal plaque texts, using the material of memorial plaques installed in Russia in the 20th – early 21st centuries. Finally, the authors come to the conclusion that the interaction of cognition and communication in the memorial plaque multimodal content provides the realization of the interpretive function of the language.

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1. Introduction

The usage of several channels of information transfer to the observer, reader or listener, i.e. the phenomenon which is defined as multimodality, has been known to mankind since ancient times. Some researchers consider multimodality as a basic phenomenon of communicative practice (Bateman, Wildfeuer, & Hiippala, 2016).

Last two-three centuries have seen the rapid development of many types of multimodal texts – cartoons, posters, advertisements, comics, demotivators, Internet memes and memorial plaques. It cannot be said that the phenomenon of multimodal text did not attract linguists' attention. The study of texts with verbal and non-verbal components is now carried on by such scholars as J. A. Bateman (Great Britain), A. Cienki (Netherlands), T. D. Royce (USA), Babina (2014), Boldyrev, Dubrovskaya, and Tolmacheva (2017), Vashunina (2016), Voloskovich (2011), Iriskhanova (2013), Kanashina (2017) (Russia) and others. Cienki (2016) points out, “new research groups are appearing that take a cognitive linguistic approach to analyzing multimodal communication” (p. 604).

One should agree with the opinion of Voloskovich (2011) that “the study of multimodality in linguistics is aimed at considering different ways of representation involving not only linguistic, but other types of signs, as well as identifying the relations between sign systems and their role in meaning formation in the world of verbal communication” (p. 25). At the same time, a number of studies are devoted to analyzing the characteristics of certain types of multimodal texts. Thus, Bykova (2011) attempted to consider a modular memorial text as a combination of signs of different semiotic nature involved in the memorial text communicative function realization.

No texts can be adequately described only on the basis of the linguistic forms analysis without considering them in close connection with the premises and intentions of the author, his/her goals and personal characteristics. As noted by Kubryakova (2004), “any situation can be described in different ways; various ways of its coding or portraying show that its conceptualization is carried out in accordance with different perspective: it is not simply reflected by someone, it is “constructed” by him/her in a certain way” (p. 115). This requirement is of particular importance when it comes to the memorial plaques text acting as the most “democratic” and large-scale form in the system of commemoration signs representing historical knowledge. According to the observation of such historians as Savelieva and Poletayev (2005), “historical objects located in space <...> are endowed with specific cultural meanings, they are semiotized” (p. 10).

2. Problem Statement

As markers of sociocultural space, plaques represent one of the most common forms of commemoration. Therefore, the study of memorial plaque texts should be carried out not only in the historical, but also in the interdisciplinary aspect taking into account the mutual influence of cognition and communication. To understand the memorial plaque content as a sign of historical memory, it is necessary to keep in mind the multimodal nature of this kind of texts as well as linguistic, cultural and social contexts and rely upon the interrelation of cognitive and communicative functions.

3. Research Questions

In the course of the study, it is necessary to identify and analyze the following main questions: how different sign systems interact in the multimodal plaque text; what the role and proportion of verbal and non-verbal components are in the communicative function implementation (in communication).

4. Purpose of the Study

The main objective of the proposed paper is the analysis of verbal and non-verbal components relations in memorial plaque text.

5. Research Methods

The methodological basis of the research is general scientific principles of historicism and objectivity. The tasks are solved on the basis of the complex use of special historical methods as well as those of related sciences: cognitive modelling and cognitive-discursive interpretative methods. They allow to interpret concrete historical material, organize empirically revealed facts in order to show the specifics of the memorial plaque multimodal text in which cognition and communication interact.

6. Findings

As peculiar “markers” of sociocultural space, memorial plaques “present elements of historical and cultural heritage and actively interact with the environment transmitting certain information that, with the change of eras, can reveal its limitations and have different interpretation” (Besedina & Burkova, 2015a, p. 529).

A city is an organized sociocultural space that has its own communication channels for transmitting peculiar “messages” to the present and future generations of its dwellers. The need and readiness of society for the perception of this type of communication was manifested in connection with the increased interest of people in their historical past and historical science achievements (Savelieva, 2016). A city, according to St. Petersburg historian Boguslavsky (1982), should “narrate laconically, concisely, but impressively and informatively. It should speak, reminding and telling about distant and recent past, about wonderful events and people, about traditions, about itself, and not only using visible images, but also directly – with a word” (pp. 34-35).

Commemorative practice has formed certain principles of memorial plaque text organization, both in form and content. The text is fully visible; it has a distinct beginning and end, and, as a rule, is expressed by one expanded sentence constructed according to certain patterns (Besedina & Burkova, 2015b). Specific text organization on the memorial plaque flat surface is complemented by artistic and decorative visualization tools. As a result, a multilayered perception of the message meaning is formed, which motivates the recipient not only to understand, but also to interpret it. For example, the composition of the memorial plaque installed in St. Petersburg in 2005 (Sazhin, 2011) and dedicated to the writer D. Kharms combines various sign systems: verbal and iconic. A viewer when gradually decoding the information contained in the plaque has an opportunity to be involved in the communicative

process. The Dutch researcher Cienki (2016) rightly notes that "...metaphors are part of thought, and not just verbal language, and that cognition has an embodied basis <...> An approach currently prominent in cognitive science is investigating the idea that sensorimotor representations of concepts can give rise to our production of linguistic expressions as well as gestural behaviors – about both physical and abstract domains" (p. 608).

The memorial sign text informs the viewer that "the writer Daniil Kharms lived here from 1925 to 1941". According to D. Kharms biography, it is known that in August of 1941 he was arrested for "spreading slanderous and defeatist sentiments" and in February of 1942 he died in a psychiatric ward of the "Kresty" prison hospital. Thus, the indication of the date "1941" contains an additional tragic meaning. Besides, a line from his poem "A man came out of the house ..." carved out on the board, as if it was written by hand, enhances the drama of the sign perception.

It is believed that this is how Kharms was arrested – he briefly left his apartment and descended to the street wearing his home clothes and slippers and never came back. Moreover, if we remember that this poem was written in 1937, it becomes clear that it reflects one of the most tragic pages in the Soviet society life. The bass-relief located on the memorial plaque depicts the writer as he was captured in one of his famous photographs – wearing "a ridiculous hat".

The perception of textual information merges with background knowledge of Russian history, in which the end of the 1930s – the beginning of the 1940s is marked as years of massive repressions, and D. Kharms became one of the victims. The complex perception of information also touches on the emotional aspect of a viewer forcing him/her to experience the gamut of the emotions from grief to indignation.

This communicative process can be of diverse nature. On the one hand, it contributes to securing the knowledge of the past with an observer – a certain individual – and, on the other hand, for society as a whole, to form specific "fields of attraction". The most striking example of the latter is the memorial sign saying, "Citizens! During artillery fire this side of the street is most dangerous!" (St. Petersburg, Nevsky Prospect, 14). After the Great Patriotic War this sign became a kind of memorial, to which thousands of citizens go to on memorable days.

The interaction of cognition and communication in the memorial plaque content provides the realization of language interpretive function. The very "genre" of the memorial plaque text implies one coordinate system for its perception by both addressant and addressee. However, it is necessary to distinguish between the interpretation of the meaning laid down by the author and the interpretation that is developed by each individual reader of the text according to his/her views. Thus, the researchers Boldyrev and Dubrovskaya (2015) believe that

participants compare, analyze, and organize information into discourse according to the sociocultural knowledge they obtain as active members of a particular socioculture. Social roles, values, norms, and other social modes result in the national, professional, religious, gender, age and other identities, the knowledge of which is culture-specific and affects discourse construction.
(p. 27)

An author's interpretation due to ideological, cultural and worldview factors may have a number of goals, one of which is the introduction of important historical figures and events into the official discourse field. In 2012, a memorial plaque dedicated to the first Russian Tsar Ivan IV the Terrible was established in Archangelsk. The desire to perpetuate the memory of one of the most controversial figures in Russian history, apparently by amateur authors, has acquired quite a hypertrophied form. For example, it is hardly fair to call Ivan IV "the initiator of democratic reforms of the XVI century" in Russia. One can see here the desire of the board placement advocates to probe townsfolk's opinion. However, it offers knowledge in interpretation that is far from historical reality. At the same time, the fact of the installation of this sign can be viewed as an attempt to search for the "core" in the identity formation of the Archangelites (Bednov, 2014). It is for this purpose that the memory of Tsar Ivan IV is used as he was the founder of the city, the fact that the memorial plaque text also informs about. It is another matter that it is not clear whether the addressee can understand this goal; whether, in words of Boldyrev (2012), adequate conceptual systems "tuning" of communicants has occurred.

The memorial text is a kind of "ensemble", in which its artistic decoration and the font corresponding to the architectural or graphic style of the relevant era, the shape and the material from which the memorial plaque was made of – all play their roles (Bykova, 2011). However, this ensemble is not something that is given once and for all. For early commemorative signs installed at the turn of the XIX-XX centuries or in the first decades of the Soviet times, the main role was played by the text as such, whereas the representative function was performed by the material – marble as a unique symbol of beauty (most of the first memorial plaques in the Russian Empire were devoted to people of cultural and art) or short-lived but cheap limestone, which was important in the context of the Civil War and the crisis of the first half of the 1920s.

The first commemorative plaques of the Soviet period were installed in Leningrad, usually on the facades of factory buildings. One of them is workers' tribute to the memory of V. I. Lenin's public speech at the Bolshevik plant (known as famous Obukhov plant before the 1917 revolution): "To the workers' leader – from the "Bolshevik" plant workers". The text leading role is communicative and ideological as follows from its vocabulary: "Established in memory of the speech of the Great leader of the world proletariat Vladimir Ilyich Lenin at the Obukhov plant workers' rally in May 1917" (Timofeev, Poretskina, & Efremova, 1999, p. 82). Special pathos and solemnity testify to the perspectivization of the memorial plaque text, as one can clearly see "the construction of an object by some participants of a discursive act for the others" (Iriskhanova, 2013, p. 46).

"Another means of perspectivization is a certain interrelation of the elements of verbal and visual components ..." (Babina, 2014, p. 475). The graphic non-verbal system used in the commemoration of the first half of the 20th century had its own well-established symbols: a pen stood for a writer, a lyre – for a composer, a laurel branch – for a military leader and so on. It usually performed an additive function emphasizing the content of the memorial sign text.

The plaques installed in Russia in the second half of the 20th – early 21st centuries are characterized by more individuality. Various styles, images, etc. are used in their design; thereby commemorative signs become a noticeable commemorative artifact of the urban environment. The role of

verbal and non-verbal components are practically equalized as they complement and develop each other in such signs.

Let's give some examples. In 2006, a memorial plaque was unveiled on the facade of one of the buildings in Voronezh: "In February 1936, Anna Akhmatova stayed here when visiting exiled Osip Mandelstam" (Kononov, 2005). The contrasting black-and-white composition with the names of two poets is complemented by a small carved window with symbolical prison-bars to personify the unfreedom of Stalin's day.

The memory of M. Chagall's life in Petersburg (1915–1918) is immortalized by a memorial plaque resembling a palette and made of light-coloured granite (Perekupny Lane, 7). Its decor was assembled by the architect V. Bukhayev from special coloured glass pieces designed as schematic figures – replicas of the master's paintings, in particular his famous painting called "The walk". The inscription font is stylized as Yiddish, the language, in which the artist wrote letters and his autobiography.

In 1999, a memorial plaque dedicated to the Russian composer and writer I. P. Larionov (1830–1889) was set in Saratov. Much of his life was associated with this city on the Volga. The plaque immediately attracts attention with its excessive ornament in the form of a wreath framing the portrait of the hero. In this wreath one can see raspberry, viburnum and exotic birds. The text of the memorial plaque reads: "In this building from 1876 to 1889 the author of the "Kalinka" song, Ivan Petrovich Larionov (1830–1889), worked on the editorial staff of the "Saratov paper". It assures an observer that this board is dedicated to the memory of the author of the world-famous song "Kalinka" mistakenly considered a folk song (Gansky, 2016).

In 2015, at the initiative of the city government in Moscow, a bronze plaque was installed in honor of N. S. Khrushchev with the following inscription: "A prominent statesman and political figure Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev lived in this building from 1965 to 1971". These dates mark the last period of life of the former head of the Soviet state. The bass-relief depicts N. S. Khrushchev sitting against the background of a symbolic landscape with the Moscow Kremlin as a symbol of the 20th CPSU Congress, which denounced the personality cult of I. V. Stalin, and the ice drift on the river – the image of the "thaw", and the outlines of new urban neighborhoods – the famous "namesakes" of the hero. Next is a portrait of Yu. A. Gagarin. Thus, "on the memorial plaque field, all the most important symbols of the era came together, causing an observer to recall relevant background knowledge <...> the memorable sign "spoke" in the context of multimodality" (Besedina & Burkova, 2018, p. 43), which is a good illustration of the thesis of Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran (2016), multimodality marks a departure from the "verbal" and "non-verbal" communication.

Paragraphemic elements that are adding to the verbal fragments of the memorial plaque content include font, and not only its structure, but also "execution". In 1950 – mid 1980s gilding was often used in the process of manufacturing the plaques dedicated to V. I. Lenin and the revolutionary events of 1917. Such memorial signs turned out to be "covered in gold" in both literal and figurative sense, since by the middle of the 20th century certain formulations had been formed reflecting the mythology of the Russian revolution (Tikhonov, 2017). The text of the annotation board established in 1970 in Leningrad can serve as an example of a classic collection of such stamps: "Lenin Street. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the founder of

the Bolshevik Party, the leader of the Great October Revolution, the founder of the first socialist state in the world, lived and worked here, at 52/9 from 4th (17th) April to 5th (18th) July 1917”.

Speaking about functions and meaning of a memorial plaque visual element, it should be borne in mind that a visual sign can expand the boundaries of the text, fill it with additional and not always predictable meanings (Voloskovich, 2011). The commemorative boom that has been seen in Russia in recent decades has actualized the problem of memorial plaques existence in the sociocultural space of a city. At the same time, stone engravings were widely used for name-bearing memorial plaques, which was probably due to economic reasons. The similarity of such memorial signs with gravestone plates makes it necessary to state that in commemorative practice one should distinguish between urban environment memorial signs and artistic-textual compositions that are characteristic of gravestone monuments.

7. Conclusion

Thus, in order to understand and study memorial plaque content as a sign of historical memory, which has certain linguoculturological and social context, it is necessary to rely on the interaction of cognitive and communicative functions of the language.

Plaques are an example of multimodal text that has a set of sign systems involved in the communicative function implementation. Such systems include, in addition to the text itself, artistic and graphic images, the font, the shape of the memorial sign and the material from which it is made. Over the last century, one can see a change in the interaction of verbal and non-verbal components of multimodal text, an increase in meaning and complication of non-verbal signs functions.

One should note the diversity of communicative process going on in the study of the memorial plaque content by a modern observer.

Finally, the interaction of cognition and communication in the memorial plaque content provides the realization of the interpretive function of the language.

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