

Traditional esthetic categories in linguistic interpretation

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Devoted to my beloved daughter Catherine

Summary: The notion of “beauty” is structured in respect to human language. Beauty in the language means: something unusual, very clear in sense, sparing use of words, the truth of the good. In the narrow sense, harmony in language is created in the course of its use, and in the wide sense, objective harmony is formed in the historical development. Linguistic harmony can be internal and external, it is binary. Playing qualities of language are also an esthetic feature. They are illustrated on the Russian language. The opinions of Russian contemporary thinkers about esthetic qualities of Russian are present. The ecological level of linguistic communication also refers to linguistic esthetics. Ecological noise and pre-language are blended together. The problem of comparing languages in their esthetic characteristics is touched upon. The ideas of Coleridge, Leibniz, W. Humboldt, Reid are included into the considerations.

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The central notion of esthetics is *beauty*. Lets' apply this notion to human language. Beauty in the language hasn't an accidental realization, it is the logical consequence of its existence and the base of its perfection. One of the aspects of linguistic beauty is clear notion. Beauty of the language is not only the result of current communication experience, but here also belongs “dead beauty”, past beauty, generated by the previous experience. Beauty doesn't vanish from the language. Thanks to the high emotional key, beauty intensifies the cognitive function of the language. Oral speech adds to the beauty of our life in the ideal aspect. Beauty in the language is connected with discovering something new, unusual, that makes up the core of the creative process in the widest range. Original is the phrase when it expresses the discovery of new phenomena in man and life. Primness, neatness, formality and triviality form kind of speech ballast.

N.G. Chernishevskii connected “the evil influence of high, lofty notions about excellence of style”¹. Style, in his opinion, is formed not by itself, with its independent qualities, but is the result of very true and sharp way of thinking. The beauty of words can't be detached from the perfectness of thinking. The beauty of thinking, as stated above, includes the following qualities: new approach, either meaning itself, or by developing meaning; exactness and clear meaning, achieved by using

¹ Чернышевский Н.Г. Собрание сочинений в пяти томах. Т.4. Москва:1974. С.46-48.

sparingly linguistic means, as abundant linguistic means dissolve the meaning; the beauty of thought has the truth of the good.

S.T. Coleridge compares “harmony” in the language with “beauty” in esthetics². He transforms the notion of harmony from linguistics to esthetics. By his determination, harmony means the corresponding of figurative representation through words to the object being presented by them; harmony in language is the correlation between the object and its designator, mutual relationship between the phonetic structure and morphology rules. Coleridge differentiates between the two notions: esthetic harmony in language, created in the course of its use, and objective harmony, containing in the historically formed system of the language (he develops these notions after G.W.Leibniz). But harmony should be understood phenomenologically, that is in the aspect of a possible influence on the recipient.

Let’s go on with Coleridge’s consideration about the application of the notion “harmony” to language. Harmony can be external, which presupposes the accordance of the notion with the corresponding object, and internal, that is the accordance among the very linguistic means. The internal harmony in language can also be differentiated:

- the accordance of the meanings of words, which affords the building of the logical chain in thinking;
- the accordance of the grammar structure of the utterance, here belongs morphological and syntactic means, and the peculiar language tuning- harmony in style;
- the accordance in the sound structure of the utterance (intonation, voice dynamics, tembre, phonetic qualities of speech);
- the internal language harmony presupposes the consonance correspondence with metalinguistic means.

Reid pointed out esthetic imperfection in the language of civilized society, because of the fact that many metalinguistic means (gestures, mimics, etc.) have been substituted by articular linguistic means³.

When we speak of language harmony, we develop consideration in two directions: harmonic structure of a particular national language as a whole, as it has been stated above, language follows the principle of perfection (expressiveness gets higher, so do exactness and fineness of meaning, national languages develop cooperation, language means become more universal, sparing and careful; harmony in the language of a particular individual builds the language activity of a person into all-language internal and external harmony.

² Mc.Kusick James C. Coleridge’s Philosophy of Language. Yale Univ.Press: New Haven and London, 1956. P. 79, 42-43, 81-83.

³ Mc.Kusick James C. Coleridge’s Philosophy of Language. Yale Univ. Press:New Haven and London,1956.P.11.

A.V. Mikhailov, a well-known researcher of germanistics, has studied the problem of harmony as an esthetic category of human language on the material of classic German literature. J.W. Goethe saw the internal text harmony in balancing the personality of the writer and the reader. This type of harmony is realized, in his opinion, in keeping stable the distance between the writer and the reader.

Texts in literature (the notion “harmony” is applied to artistic layer of human language; this notion makes language akin to such language of culture as music) have the following binary qualities, which make them harmonic:

- the writer/ the reader (all the information of a particular text is balanced- the views and ideas of the writer, which are offered to the reader, and the views and ideas, which should be generated by the reader himself in the process of considering the subject chain of events in the particular work of literature;
- real events/fiction; in scientific-fantastic literature – reality/ desire, when fantasy loses its connection with reality, the reader may lose interest;
- dynamics/ statics (an experienced master of words balances the development of events and descriptive episodes – either of external or internal status, or landscapes);
- episodes with characters/episodes without characters (the first ones present life through the personal vision of characters, the second ones teach to understand the life context more objectively;
- symbols/concrete meaning, symbolic episodes make the problems of the text more intensive, the text itself –more problematic, teach to generalize, concretely presented meaning teaches detail perception.

The end of a literary work is kind of a cadence akin to a piece of music. In a work of classics following the principle of harmony the final narration always causes the feeling of being over either with the acceptance of the author’s ideas, or with orienting the reader to his own conclusions. It is better when the two tendencies are balanced, then the work of literature makes an up-bringing effect, and at the same time, showing respect towards the reader, as though making him the moral philosopher.

Esthetic resources of human language help to present the interpretation of the language as playing activity. This philosophical consideration takes much space in L. Wittgenstein’s theory of language.

Let’s regard the playing potential of the esthetics of the Russian language. In Russian ordinary linguistic communication there could be pointed out the following playing-like genres of creative speech activity: fairy-tales, songs, poems, proverbs, sayings, beliefs, magical phrases of frightening and warning, linguistic imitation of animal communica-

tion, dream interpretation, riddles, linguistic attribute of Russian folk plays and games. Playing, realized in a chain of actions, is always accompanied by word-playing, which is based on the phonetic attractiveness of phrases. Rhymed phrases bring harmony and time-cycling in playing activity, set the tempo, bring the actions to order, give an emotional key. All playing –type genres of Russian folklore creative linguistic activity can be united as folk philosophy of our universe. The very such philosophy contains the playing moment: a person is not given any strict directions, a problem is set to him, this problem draws his attention to the life experience, as though make him artificially live this or that episode, leads him to conclusions. That's why folk philosophy is always the praxis of life.

The sense of playing in the analysis of Russian ordinary national type of speech includes: images, symbolic phrases in the form of allegory which is achieved by re-structuring the world of animals (there appear hybrid-type animals, animals turn into each other); the spectre of emotions –caress, not obtrusive teaching, firmness in spirit and readiness to overcome difficulties, humour episodes, concentrated wisdom, attentiveness to an interlocutor, presence of even minor details, the influence of nature forces.

One of a particular traits of the playing potential of Russian national speech is cycling. The basic episode serves the source of further development, and the situation develops the from the basic episode as a growing snow-ball. The cycling structure of speech helps to start from the “root” episode which plays the role of a certain folklore standard, then comes improvisation, trying to exhaust the creative capability. This fact explains the stability of national speech- it is the fundamental feature of traditional culture. We may take several examples of such folklore standards which are especially popular in Russian national linguistic communication: animals come to live in a house; help to the person who lost his way in the forest; adventures of a simpleton who gets luck for his sillines (this is the Russian proverb –“Fools get a better piece of luck”); adventures of a person while looking for the right way and other type of plots. Special rhythm to narration gives the usual repeating of one action, rather prominent for further chain of events, in several attempts.

Sounds in folklore speech are of special interest, they are more prominent then in usual speech: they give a special noise coloring to the narration. The basic rule of phonetic play is the rhyming of the ends of phrases; a peculiar play of sounds in songs is realized through stable change of some vowels for others; sometimes one vowel or syllable is emphasized which is akin to the obstinate bass in polyphony (this may be a dialectical peculiarity, for example, abundance of the vowel “O” in Vologda type of speech). Hence the role of a dialect is to differentiate the national language into phonetically specific layers, corresponding to the nature background. Regionally specific sense and pho-

netic peculiarities come together in dialects. Dialectisms on the background of the national literary standard of a language play an esthetic function: extraordinariness meets literary norms; something unusual, thanks to its psychological freshness, makes a substantial part of linguistic beauty.

Contacts between various languages lead to the comparison of their esthetic qualities. And the realization of the latter depends on the ethnographic context through the language. In various types of literary works we can find many considerations as far as what language is superior in its esthetic, logical qualities. This is the eternal problem in the research of various languages.

The problem about the superiority of this or that language deserved prominent attention in W. Humboldt's works⁴. The scientist wrote that every language has a semantic and grammar structure, which are coated by phonetic material created by the people who speak this language.

The English philosopher and the poet Coleridge goes on with Humboldt's thought that the perfectness of a certain language is determined by the degree of formality, harmonizing of characteristics with each other. In this respect Coleridge supposes that German and Latin have some superiority before English. But he also marks the prominence of the English language from his view point: his native language stands higher than any other language by the number of words with pragmatic meaning, English is monosyllabic in many ways, keeps its ecological underground base, metaphors are typical of it – meaning, image and passion are blended together in words.

Micaelis, a contemporary of Coleridge, also philosophizes about the superiority of various languages. He is of negative opinion about the French language – he dislikes its brevity (Coleridge shares his opinion, criticizing the epigram-type way of French writers). The attractive feature of the English language, in Micaelis' opinion, is that it realizes the mixture of English, Latin and French, and besides it is very dynamic in word-building.

Since the native language of the author of the article is Russian there can be presented the characteristics of the Russian language which make up its best esthetic qualities. Everyday speaking in Russian can be analysed as oral linguistic creative activity which has the following features: the ability to keep fluent, calm conversation, naturally logical, the special skill to listen attentively, replies should be just in time, frankness as coating emotion, but the main feature – image resources, marked by humour and laconism. Proverbs, sayings, oral folklore concentrate the esthetic qualities of the Russian language, as any other national language. But the peculiarity of Russian is that folklore speech of the Russian ethnos is still a love and active, it is more com-

⁴ Wohlfart G. *Denken der Sprache*. Munchen, 1984. S.167-207.

municatively influential in comparison with such Roman-Germanic languages as English, German and French. Folklore phrases make a vaster esthetic role in the Russian language.

D.S. Likhachev indicates the sources which produced the powerful speech culture of the Russians: first of all, the vast territory inhabited by the ethnos which has many variants of geographic conditions, nature itself is very variable, the contacts with other peoples are multiple – these factors created the Russian language. Secondly, the influence of the Church-slave language which played the decisive role in developing literary styles, the latter came in contact with everyday ordinary speech, there appeared many dialects. J.V.Rojdestvenskii pointed out the following features of the Russian language: freedom in word-building possibilities, abundance of synonyms, the possibility of wide application of axiological lexics, a lot of borrowings from very different languages, which make clear wide language contacts, the latter produce many variants of style, literary, artistic elaboration, full sets of terminology in all spheres of technique, science and art, flexibility of word order and hence borderless rhythmic and melodic possibilities make the Russian language welcome to the very fine shaping of meaning, wide possibilities to transmit emotions, images and notions.

Any language – Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, French- has its own unique history; the unique history is its unique origin and unique development, unique embrace of reality and detailing of its elements.

Command of a language can be compared to playing a musical instrument – the more perfect is the skill of playing the instrument, the more perfect is the play itself. Let's analyse the work of a sculptor: every natural material has its pluses and minuses; clay is the most flexible material; clay, wax and gyps are easy to be worked out; sand-stone looks like a man's skin with pores; marble is light-carrying stone, light as though comes from the inside, it suits good to depict the image of motherhood; granite is hard and staunch; bronze is ringing, festive and triumphing metal; wood keeps the living forces – it imitates living nature.

That is why it is a mistake to choose a language which is finer but one should take into consideration how a person has mastered the esthetical parameters for his command of a certain language. The linguistic ideal includes the command of as many languages as possible: the more languages a person knows, the better linguistic development he has; the finer he feels the meaning, the more expressive he transmits emotions. Learning foreign languages makes the intellectual level of a person higher. The mental transfer from one language to another is a fruitful way to practice one's intellect; one tries several ways to linguistically realize one and the same meaning. The interaction of various languages is the end goal of the intellectual progress of mankind. While learning foreign languages the ethnic context (traditional oral literature, folk music and songs, national morals, national images of culture,

national material media, customs and traditions as semiotic codes) widen the spectre of the cultural viewing of our world, building up the natural psychological background that has deep genetic roots in the national mentality, through using this or that foreign language. Language is becoming the chief reservoir of ethnological characteristics. The historical aspect of linguistic esthetics means that a language reflects the human emotional experience, the emotional ripening of the ethnos, stretching from ancient times up to the present. Learning a foreign language is aimed at perfecting the command of one's native language, making one keener on the semantic space of each word, feeling its shades.

We join the opinion of Coleridge and Leibniz that one shouldn't discuss the superiority of this or that language on the level of ideal harmony abstractly; ideal qualities of a language are created by great minds, who pass the worked-up standards to the rest of speaking that language. Coleridge marks that a language in its structure and content can't be ideal naturally, from its origin. A language is developed to the ideal by the leaders of artistic reality, these are poets and masters of words, first of all. The possibility of a language to express ideas depends on the quality of work done by artistic leaders and the historic period to which the language belongs. Coleridge, being a poet himself, calls a poet the word-building genius of a language.

Here we can build a parallel with various languages of culture. The problem –which language of culture has artistic superiority- is actual too. But is it senseful to say that painting is fuller of meaning than music? Various languages of culture make different slices of our reality. The comparison of languages of culture and various languages fails in one aspect: languages of culture are international in their meaning, they need no language to language interpreter. Here rises one more serious problem: to what extent wordy languages determine the specific features of languages of culture. And they do! This problem is rather culturalogical, and the considerations of the present article are rather linguistic.

Let's go on with the esthetic analysis of a language in respect to nature. The problem of interrelation of ecological background and linguistic communication has both a synchronic and diachronic tradition of consideration. The problem of nature essence of language was discussed in English empirical philosophy (Coleridge, Lord Monboddo). Reid pointed out the following criteria of natural essence of language: mimics, gestures and modulation of voice. He states that modern civilization has corrupted the natural clarity of language. In his opinion the more natural is the language, the higher are its esthetic qualities. That is why he admired the wild language.

Ecological noise plays a decisive role in sound coating of words and phrases, articulated by our ancient ancestor. These were just the sounds of nature that urged the primitive man to develop his own

method of sound communication with the world around, this activity later produced human language. The problem of differentiating sounds uttered by our ancestor and the first historical registrations of human language refers to the archeology of linguistics.

If we apply to the ethnographic description of the aboriginal way of life (let's take the missionaries' descriptions of Australian aborigines), we notice, at once, the attention of the ancient man to surrounding nature noises, as in the aspect of imitating various sounds and hence training the voice organs, so in the aspect of interpreting the sounds heard to get information about the world around. The same can be said about the Indian tribes of the American continent. The American Indians tried to discern and differentiate the whispering of the world. The ancient man had the hearing organs of fine tuning for analysis and understanding the sounds of the world of nature. We can justly say that at that period of human civilization there existed a certain all-nature ecological language which included the pra-language of our ancestor.

This historic consideration of interrelation of human language and nature lets us make useful conclusions for contemporary linguistic communication.

First of all the modern social status of a man lacks hearing nature. It is a serious drawback of our existence because when we hear and listen to nature, our esthetic perception becomes finer and forms humanistic prerequisites for contacts with nature. In this respect the ancient man surpassed his modern brother. Secondly, the attention to the sounds of nature makes the phonetic structure of the modern language better, connecting the language with sounds of nature, hence we achieve the so-called music of speech.

For the forming of the ecological background of linguistic communication there are two main factors:

- 1) touching the world of nature;
- 2) perception of nature through various arts- painting, music, literature, etc.

The methods of teaching Russian at school includes turning to nature, but in fact it is restricted by including nature images into oral speech or texts. The problem how nature influences phonetics, stylistics and even grammar is underdeveloped. Here a set of exercises can help. Nature can make a substantial tribute, hardly ever possible to be estimated, to curb the tendency of devaluation in linguistic communication, to make its esthetic possibilities more exhaustive, humanistic.

When a man turns to nature by describing it in word creative process, he gets richer in spirit, esthetizes communication. The best works of the Russian poet Pushkin, the writer Turgenev were created far from the busy city life. The same can be said about Russian composers. Similar examples can be brought from other national cultures.

As the conclusion the ecological level of communication can be pointed out:

- 1) deepening of the sound perception of the world around us;
 - 2) skills and habits to master the language of nature that is to understand the communication between the objects of nature, here belongs animals' communication;
- use of nature images for making our speech more artistic, then the moral qualities of linguistic communication become more humanistic; nature often shows higher ethical standards which bring the good and kill the evil in our life.

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