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UDC 811.161.1'373:18

**SEMANTIC "DEVALUATION"
OF THE ESTHETIC VALUE OF BEAUTY
IN LOVE STORIES BY L. PETRUSHEVSKAYA**

SUMMARY. This article is devoted to the analysis of the lexemes belonging to the lexical-semantic field of beauty in the short stories about love by the contemporary Russian writer L.S. Petrushevskaya. It is claimed that the Russian lexemes for "beauty", "beautiful man", "beautiful woman" underwent pejorative changes in their lexical meaning. In the stories in question they are employed in an unusual stylistic and lexical surrounding collocating with lexemes of the opposite pole of the semantic field "beautiful—ugly" and activate their comic potential. The process of pejoration of the studied lexemes correlates with the phenomenon of semantic "devaluation" of the esthetic value of beauty in Russian society in the middle and at the end of the previous century.

The language and speech units that were singled out in the prose of L. Petrushevskaya belonging to the middle and end of the 20th century allow to relate the studied works of literature to the aesthetics of dirty realism which is characterized by the absence of stylistic expressivity and by simplicity of speech.

KEY WORDS. beauty, pejoration, comic, semantic devaluation of esthetic value, dirty realism.

The subject of the article is esthetic value of beauty in Russia at the end of the 20th century. The object of the study is the semantic process of pejoration or deterioration of word meaning which correlates with general devaluation of common values in the society as a whole.

The aim of the article is to disclose trends in the development of the semantic structure of the lexemes expressing esthetic evaluation and the base process of semantic pejoration. The material for the research consists of 97 micro-contexts containing nomination of esthetic evaluation of the characters, their behavior and surroundings, which were collected by continuous sampling from 26 short stories about love by contemporary Russian writer L. Petrushevskaya (316 pages). The research was done in the field of pragmastylistics, text theory and lexical semantics. The methods included stylistic, contextual and frame-slot analysis.

The crisis of culture and society as a whole at the end of the 20th century could not failed to be reflected in literature. Devaluation of the basic human values in the era of consumerism, moral negligence, and loss of religious faith resulting in spiritual decline

of people led to impoverishment of the Russian literary language, pejoration of the semantic value of some words which used to have mainly positive connotation.

Loose morality caused complete expulsion of semes denoting moral values from the semantic structure of the lexemes belonging to the lexical field of beauty, which can be found in abundance in contemporary Russian discourse.

In the research in question I call negative semantic changes in the semantic structure of lexical units, occurring under extralinguistic influence, which lead to deterioration and simplification of their meaning, semantic “devaluation”. Such phenomenon can be observed in the works of writers belonging to the literary style of “dirty realism”. Although this subcategory of realism was first meant to denote works of American writers, I consider it possible to apply it to the studied short stories by L. Petrushevskaya.

The mental phenomenon of semantic “devaluation” correlates with the linguistic one of pejoration which is disappearance or replacement of semes of positive connotation with their opposites. Pejorative trends in the language were much studied by Russian and foreign linguists: V.D. Devkin, M.N. Lapshin, L. Bloomfield, S. Ullmann and others.

In the article mainly speech, contextual and stylistic means of producing pejoration, to which I assign sarcasm, irony, antiphrasis, bathos, hyperbole etc. and which are typical of Petrushevskaya’s style, have been analyzed.

It is necessary to point out that out of all usages of the lexemes in question very few were direct nomination of beautiful and pleasant-to-the-eye items. The majority of the lexemes denoting beauty had a completely opposite meaning: their positive semantics were devaluated with the help of the stylistic devices of irony and sarcasm, co-occurrence with low-colloquial words as well as words belonging to the opposite semantic field of the ugly. Thus, usual, expected by the reader, semantic properties of the studied lexemes as well as their stylistic environment change considerably.

Beauty as a category close to the Sublime requires a corresponding elevated style of expression and lexical surrounding. However in the mentioned stories violation of the natural, traditional semantic ties of the lexemes belonging to the semantic field of beauty leading to their deterioration, can be observed. Beautiful men and women often act as the main characters of the stories; they drink heavily, smoke, lead a promiscuous lifestyle, etc. The depicted lexemes “*krasota*” (beauty), “*krasotka*” (beautiful woman), “*krasavets*” (beautiful man) keep the seme of being attractive, but completely lose the seme of moral dignity which was initially present in the dictionary definition of the lexemes in question. However, it is delicacy, subtlety and courtesy that should pertain to beauty according to modern Russian philosophers [1].

It is not seldom that the author resorts to irony when the meaning of the lexemes “beautiful man/woman”, “pretty woman” etc., depicting the characters of her stories, becomes exactly the opposite: “She has hooked hands with gnarled fingers like fir branches, swollen legs; and he is also a handsome man yet to seek, “human specimen” or “beginning and elderly beauties”, “cheap”, “dead” and “painted” beauty [2] (translated by I.B.).

The diminutive suffix “k” in the lexeme “krasotka” belittles the merits of their holder: “a blonde old krasotka from the town of Krivoy Rog”, “a little-known krasotka”, “a pathetically dressed krasotka”, etc. In these cases we observe devaluation of the meaning of the word. According to the dictionaries of the Russian language by Ushakov, Ozhegov, Kuznetsov: “Krasotka — low-coll. Good-looking, cute woman, young girl; Nice young woman” [3-6]. The suffix attributes to the lexeme in question a certain emotional coloring showing the author’s attitude to her character. In our case it is negative, mocking, and somewhat sympathetic.

Irony, sarcasm and mockery are typical of Petrushevskaya’s idiostyle. Bathos and antiphrasis contribute to the comic effect in relation to the characters of the studied short stories [7].

Hyperbole and grotesque are widely used by the author [8] as in “Lina, Alka and Tanya, three huge, broad-shouldered beauties...”

Long sentences with enumeration of the smallest details, sometimes unnecessary and unjustified, devalue the meaning of the expression “beautiful man/woman” and distract the reader from the main sense of the words. Beauty should be associated with something grand, majestic, sublime, far from routine life and everything connected with it (rows, squabbles etc.).

According to N.V. Khamitov, the comic is an attempt to understand, reveal and brush off contradictions between the weaknesses, vice of man and the divine good [1]. Thus, maybe the author is trying to attract the attention of the reader to the existing problems of morality.

Beautiful men and women in Petrushevskaya’s stories are always silly and even stupid. If they are not silly, they are immoral.

Being aware of their beauty the characters use it to their own benefit. They are cunning: “A handsome man — he is a deceitful god of love”.

Outer beauty is always stereotypical — it is either similarity with American movie stars or classical standards of antique beauty. Descriptions of beautiful appearances lack originality or sophistication. On the contrary beauty is expressed with low colloquial low-key vocabulary. Beauty, even if it is described as “heavenly”, is accompanied by vices such as heavy smoking, alcohol abuse, and promiscuity.

Beautiful men and women who lost their connection with the divine, as a result lost the support of the superior forces. Their life becomes unfortunate, miserable, dramatic, and even tragic like in the story when the handsome husband is kicked out of the house by his beautiful wife after a fight. It was he who was beating and broke a tooth of his wife. It happened because the wife learned about the abortion of his young student...

If the author uses epithets or similes, which should, it seems, enrich and embellish the style of writing, they are simultaneously devalued with some explanation or specification as if the readers could not understand them themselves: “The wonder of beauty, ideal figure, not a gram of make-up, sad eyes under a lace of eyelashes as if under a veil, a tender little nose and a fresh, very plump pink mouth keeping in itself as if an even row of peeled almond nuts, i.e. shining teeth, looking almost

transparent like precious Chinese porcelain, milk glass”. Thus, the reader is lowered by the author to the same low social level as her characters.

Beauty is seen by the author as some commodity which can be bought in a drug store, a service from a hairdresser’s: “all beauty, as they say, is from a drug store one ruble twenty kopeks a jar”.

All singled out text units were structured with the help of the frame-slot classification. It was possible to establish two main frames — beauty of the man and beauty of the woman. The third and the fourth frames (beauty in the general sense and beauty of nature) were not very representative. The majority of the usages of the studied lexemes occur in their figurative or pejorative meanings of outer beauty devoid of any inner good or morality.

The given conclusion lets us compare the style of the analyzed stories with the American literary movement of the mid 20th century. The term was suggested by American writer and journalist Bill Buford to denote a sub-category of realism depicting “mundane aspects of ordinary life in spare, unadorned language” [English Collins Dictionary].

“Dirty realism is the fiction of a new generation of American authors. They write about — a deserted husband, an unwed mother, a car thief, a pickpocket, a drug addict — but they write about it with a disturbing detachment, at times verging on comedy. Understated, ironic, sometimes savage, but insistently compassionate, these stories constitute a new voice in fiction”. (Ch. Bukowski is said to belong to this generation of American authors and even called its “godfather” [9, 10].

The main characters of the books of this style usually hold minor positions; do not have stable sources of income, experience hardships in material life. Their private life is typically unsettled and dramatic because of some unlucky coincidences. Moreover they lack any moral strength to fight such life circumstances they just go with the flow without hoping to forcefully improve the situation.

Researchers notice that the language of dirty realism is simple, without any expressiveness, extended metaphors, original epithets, similes, interior monologues of the characters, complicated dialogues. If we take a look at the love stories by L. Petrushevskaya through the prism of dirty realism we can easily explain this semantic devaluation of the esthetic value of the lexemes denoting beauty and as a result deterioration of the lexical value of the words belonging to the semantic field under study.

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