The poetics of conflict: Lexical, grammatical and cognitive analysis of aggressive and argumentative discourse features in contemporary political poetry in Russia and Ukraine

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1. Problem and research questions

Mass digitalization has brought about changes in communicative culture all over the world. These changes include positive aspects such as better contact possibilities when physical presence is not possible. The advent of increasingly interactive and distant modes of communication has also contributed to the strengthening of detrimental ways of interaction, such as the rapid dissemination of fake news, unfiltered hate speech and related phenomena. As a reaction to the negative effects that such forms of communication can have not only on individuals but also on social peace and freedom, research about communication in the digital age has intensified (e.g., Vogel, Luth & Ptashnyk eds. 2016; Bonacchi ed. 2017; Klinker, Scharloth & Szczęk eds. 2018; Gang et al. 2020). Meanwhile, cognitive research has provided first evidence that linguistic choices can be correlated with character traits (e.g., Pennebaker 2011) or influence opinion formation (e.g., Thibodeau & Boroditsky 2011; Lakoff & Wehling 2016).

The project builds on this cognitively and culturally inspired linguistic research by applying its findings to the analysis of contemporary political poetry in Russian. Specifically, it investigates the narratives available regarding the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in political poetry, and seeks to establish the linguistic means by which these narratives are created, substantiated or deconstructed. Since political poetry by definition addresses controverse issues, it is promising to include methods of linguistic argumentation theory in the analysis (e.g., Atayan 2006; Kuße 2018, 2019). As political poetry is a form of argumentative discourse that is typically marked by rather few open markers of argumentation, special attention must be paid to more subtle argumentative means (e.g., evidentiality markers, changes of style, perspective).

The project addresses the following major research questions:

1) What kinds of poems do readers classify as aggressive or conciliatory?
2) Are there systematic linguistic differences between poetry perceived as aggressive or conciliatory?
3) How do aggressive and argumentative discourse techniques manifest themselves in contemporary Russian-language political poetry?
4) What is the role of linguistic "means of transgression" in political poetry? This refers to techniques excessing the boundaries of the language norm (e.g., the use of "nenormativnaja leksika" 'non-normative lexis'), the language system (e.g., by breaking grammatical rules), or the boundaries between languages (e.g., by mixing languages and/or scripts).
5) Does poetry offer alternative ways of construing conflicting viewpoints, and could these alternatives serve as role models also for non-poetical forms of discourse?

Importantly, attention is being paid not only to the lexicon, but to also to morphology and syntax.

2. Preliminary findings and research methods

As an initial study shows with respect to two exemplary cases of Russian political poetry (Schlund submitted), substandard linguistic elements ranging from simple colloquial language (*prostorečie*) and criminal jargon to vulgar language (*mat*) can be exploited to convey politically deviant

positions, with the degree of deviation from the norm corresponding to the deviation from the majority opinion in terms of content (cf. also Bierich 2016). Moreover, there is a correlation between the construction of group identities as active or passive and the grammatical forms used to refer to these groups (for instance, groups construed as passive are more likely to be encoded as semantic experiencers in oblique cases than as full-fledged syntactic subjects in the nominative case).

Currently, a text corpus of political poetry is being constructed. The corpus will contain system-compliant and subversive Russian political poems, which will be compared in terms of different linguistic (grammatical, syntactical, lexical) parameters. Special attention will be paid to the use of non-Russian (mainly Ukrainian, but also English and other) linguistic elements. Additionally, the perception and evaluation of political poems will be investigated by means of an online survey among native speakers of Russian.

A novelty in the analysis of political poetry is the application of argumentation theory (Atayan 2006) and usage-based theories of grammar, such as Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987) and Construction Grammar (e.g., Goldberg 2006), thus applying and further developing the emerging field of Cognitive Poetics (Stockwell [2]2007).

3. Innovativeness and expected gain in knowledge

Deficient communication plays an important role in the emergence of conflicts. Conflicts typically lead to a hardening of opinions and a decreasing willingness to adopt alternative perspectives. Poetry is a literary genre that is particularly suitable for creating alternative viewpoints. In the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, poetry has even participated actively in political discourse and served as a means of exchanging opposing positions.[1]

Poetry has not yet been in the focus of research concerned with detrimental forms of communication. The linguistic analysis of political poetry as outlined above can help to determine the properties of cooperative and confrontative language in general. Moreover, the alternative viewpoints offered in poetry could help to develop alternative, cooperative styles of communication also in non-poetic discourse.

For empirical linguistics, which usually derives its data from non-literary texts or at least prosaic literary genres, the linguistic investigation of poetry still represents a quite new field of research. The hesitant attitude of linguistics towards poetry can be explained above all by the fact that the language of poetry deviates even more than other literary genres from allegedly "authentic" language usage, and therefore has supposedly little epistemological value for linguistics. It is precisely this property of poetry, however, that could offer important insights for linguistics, since poetry may be able to identify and systematically describe the limits of what can be said and understood. The project therefore also contributes to the still emerging field of linguistic poetry research.

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[1] The most famous case in point is the poeto-political discussion that arose around the poem *Nikogda my ne budem brat'jami* 'We will never be brothers' by the Ukrainian poet Anastasija Dmitruk (Stahl 2015; Kuße 2019: 122–136).

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