

SEMIOTICS OF THE UNNAMED IN LESYA UKRAINKA'S POEM "ONE WORD"

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ABSTRACT: The poem "One Word" (1903) by Lesya Ukrainka appears to be one of the least known and appreciated amongst the poetess' literary works. So far, there has been a Soviet interpretation of the poem with the researchers' claim that the image of a political prisoner depicted in the poem is inspired by a Ukrainian revolutionary poet and political exile Pavlo Grabovsky. Furthermore, the key version to define the term "unnamed word" was established by Agatangel Krymsky's in his first review of the poem ("Critical and Philological Remarks on Flies in the Ointment", 1906) regarding the word "will" commonly used in the Yakut language. To avoid unambiguous reading, the author foresees the possibility of replacing the subtitle of her poetry, i.e., instead of "Tales of the Old Yakut" she suggests a subtitle "A Tale of the Native from the North". Thus, it will be more than obvious to claim that the poetess had to focus on the uncertainty and definite ambiguity of a sacred word which an enlightened scribe could hardly explain to the illiterate natives. As such, the plot scheme of the poetry in question is based on the structural-semiotic mechanism of ancient children's game based on guessing the word (real terms or abstract concepts) conceived by the presenter (or a group of people) by means of describing them without direct naming. For that reason, we find it challenging to trace how the author creates a pseudo-imagological effect of "misunderstanding" and "misinterpretation" through the phenomenon of an unnamed word.

KEYWORDS: semiotics, game, mystery, interpretation, interpreter, motive, poem, Lesya Ukrainka

Introduction

Lesya Ukrainka's poem "One Word (A Tale of the Native from the North)" (1903) is one of the least notable and least appreciated among the artist's literary works. The readers are still familiar only with a Soviet version of its interpretation, namely: "The scholars who investigate Lesya Ukrainka's literary activities claim that the image of a political prisoner depicted in the poem is inspired by the figure of the Ukrainian revolutionary poet, political exile Pavlo Grabovsky." The key version to define the notion „unnamed word" was stated by Krymsky in his first review of the work related to the availability of the word "volya" (*in English* "will") in the Yakut language (Krymsky, 1906, p. 106). So, we agree that to avoid unambiguous reading the author considered it necessary to change the subtitle of the work by introducing the subtitle "A Tale of the Native from the North" (1908) (Ukrainian, 1908, p. 103) instead of "The Story of the Old Yakut" in the magazine version of 1906 (Ukrainka, 1906, p. 107). Thus, we have every reason to claim that the poetess had to emphasize the fact of uncertainty of the unnamed sacred word, which allegedly cannot be explained to uneducated natives by the enlightened scribe. We believe that the plot scheme of this piece of literary work is based on the structural-semiotic mechanism of ancient children's play with its key principle to guess the word (reality or abstract concept) conceived by the presenter (or a group of people) by means of description or associations without naming it directly. What is more important for the poetess is the moment of fundamental unnamings and polysemanticity, where each new association, on the one hand, seems to concretize the underlying concept, and on the other – further opens the semantic field, offering a great variety of vectors for other possible interpretations. Lesya Ukrainka's creative heritage is not deprived of the attention of literary critics. In-depth monographs by Vira Ahejeva (Ahejeva, 2001), Oksana Zabužko (Zabužko, 2018), Galyna Levčenko (Levčenko, 2013) and other researchers, special chapters in the research papers by Tamara Hundorova (Hundorova, 2009), Jaroslav Poliščuk (Poliščuk, 2002) and others, as well as numerous articles and dissertations that have been released deal with the analysis of various aspects of the poetess' literary work. However, there are still too few investigations in the Ukrainian literary space devoted to the study of Lesya Ukrainka's poem "One Word (A Tale of a Native from the North)". In particular, Roksolana Zorivchak (Zorivchak, 2006) in her article (section "To help the teacher") dedicated to the analysis of semantics and word usage of certain tokens in the artistic speech of Ukrainian artists, directly mentions the poem by Lesya Ukrainka, considering the contexts of using the word "volya" (*in English* "will") in Ukrainian: As for the word "volya", its semantics in the Ukrainian language is represented by a wide range of finely differentiated markers that have the following meanings:

- 1) lack of restrictions, privileges [...];
- 2) one of the functions of the human psyche, which helps to control one's actions [...];

- 3) desire, [...];
- 4) power [...];
- 5) freedom, independence, an antonym to the words “nevolya”, “rabstvo” (*in English* “slavery”) (Zorivchak, 2006).

At the same time, the researcher does not touch upon the issues of analyzing those structural and semantic levels of the concept in question and the peculiarities of their artistic embodiment directly in Lesya Ukrainka’s text. Namely, we find this aspect especially fruitful for the completeness of the ideological and aesthetic perception of this work.

Objectives

The aim of the work is to investigate the semiotics of the game and its constituent elements (guessing an unnamed word by the hero-sender, concretization of polysemantic token through delineation of associations as well as process of interpretation through clarification questions, etc.), to trace how the author creates the effect of “misunderstanding” due to the phenomenon of an unnamed word.

Methods

The outlined problem is quite fruitfully solved by a combination of methods of structural semiotics, imagology and “close reading”. Thus, structural semiotics (as a method quite frequently used in the study of classical literature and Ukrainian in particular) gives grounds to ascertain that the text of Lesya Ukrainka’s poem “One Word (A Tale of a Native from the North)” is created on the structural principle of a language game (riddles) as well as to single out and analyze the structural and semantic components of the game in the poetess’s text. This enables us to study basic mechanisms of making up a game dialogue between the hero-sender of the message (i.e., riddles) and the heroes-interpreters as well as evaluate structural levels of semantic content of the concept hidden in the riddle (semantic fields of direct and figurative meanings of a multi-meaning word, all its direct and indirect associations and connotations), behavior patterns and essential strategies presented in the act of game communication. In the usage and interpretation of the above-mentioned terminology, we follow the works of Yuri Lotman, the founder of the Tartu School of Semiotics, as well as the ones of semiotics researchers Olena Brazgovska and Olena Aleksandrova. We use the method of imagology to study the peculiarities of the functioning and interpretation of “own” and “alien”, mainly – to analyze the pseudo-imagological effect of misinterpretation and misunderstanding between foreigners and natives, created by the author for the artistic representation of different levels of consciousness development.

Materials

The phenomenon of the game has repeatedly attracted the attention of culturologists, philologists, psychologists, sociologists and representatives of other branches of art and humanities. Russian researcher Elena Brazgovskaya has analyzed approaches to the game and its semiotic nature in culture. Based on the definition of Johan Huizinga, she sees the game principles in the functioning of culture, arguing in particular that the world and culture as a whole are developing “under the sign of the game” (Brazgovskaya, 2008). Extrapolating the concepts of language play and linguistic world image, borrowed from Johan Huizinga in the philosophy of the late Wittgenstein, the researcher argues that any elementary expression as well as any text (from the simplest to the most complex one) is perceived and deciphered / decoded by the recipient: “The concept of language play includes an idea of existing and potentially possible ways of using languages as well as different nature of language practices. The result of different language games comes to be a different linguistic world image. According to Wittgenstein, the language game appears soon after we formulate the question to ask ourselves: why do we use this sign / sequence of signs / text?” (Brazgovskaya, 2008, p. 201). And furthermore: “The concept of *language play* is based on the analogy between the people’s behavior in playing *games* as such and in different systems of real action, in which language is intertwined. Both here and there, a pre-developed set of *rules* is assumed, which comes to establish a kind of “charter” of the game. These rules provide possible combinations of certain arrangements and actions for a particular game” (Brazgovskaya, 2008, p. 201). According to the researcher, in the concept of the late Wittgenstein the notion of language game is transformed into the idea of game as a form of life: “Language is a set of ‘life games’: by telling, asking, perceiving speech and recognizing words, we participate in communication, and while speaking of the future, we just revive our present, and by naming something, we create it for the world” (Brazgovskaya, 2008, p. 201).

The semiotics of the game as such has constantly attracted the attention of other scholars and researchers (Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Yuri Lotman, etc.). “The semiotic essence of the game is the display of a sign by means of another sign. The necessity of the very fact of pointing to the referent and its mapping creates an invariable invariant of any game” (Brazgovskaya, 2008, p. 201). At the same time, a language game is always a process of communication: “A language game as a process involves the interaction of the sender and the recipient, which depends on the conditions of communication, the recipient’s requests and the sender’s intentions, the result of which is a text (oral or written), characterized by a certain meaning and structure” (Aleksandrova, 2014, p. 2). According to the researchers, the main semantic mechanisms of language play are polysemy, homonymy, paronymy, synonymy (Aleksandrova, 2014, p. 3). Language games based on these phenomena have been reflected by such linguists as David Crystal (Crystal 1998, pp. 34-87), George Milner (Milner, 1972, pp.18-19), Franz Hausmann (Hausmann 1974, p. 76), Pierre Guiraud (Guiraud 1976, p. 8), Frank Heibert (Heibert, 1993, p. 46), Thorsten Schroter (Schroter, 2005, p.161). Using a semiotic approach to the interpretation of the phenomenon of the game, Elena Alexandrova identifies three main aspects in the structure of the language game: “pragmatics – as a relationship between a sign and its interpreter; semantics – as the relationship between the sign, the subject of notation and the concept of the subject; and syntactics that deals with the relationships between signs mainly in the speech chain as well as in chronological order in the whole” (Aleksandrova, 2014, p. 3). For us, the first two aspects come to be the foremost ones: pragmatics that is the relationship between the sign (secret word) and native interpreters, and semantics – as an intense desire of the hero through a list of indirect actions and realities to describe the phenomenon of freedom and find a semiotically adequate counterpart in a foreign language of northern people. The effect of misunderstanding and misconception of the characters created by the author acquires an important ideological and aesthetic significance in the context of reading the work: for the “stranger” as the sender of the “message”, the searched word and conversations around the outlined concept perform not only informative, emotionally expressive and cognitive functions, but also communicative: it is imperative for the “stranger” to understand the natives and be adequately heard by them. The problem of understanding and communication in Lesya Ukrainka’s works is connected with the motive of the mysterious word:

... just very often
 he cried and laughed at the same time,
 and wished one word being so prime
 to say and make us comprehend,
 and said if he could say this word to us
 we’d understand it in a rush. (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 80)

Olena Brazgovskaya while analyzing the examples of communication games identified by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the “Brown Book”, states: “Examples of the simplest communication games are the following: to indicate the subject through the process of nomination of objects; select a specific object from the class of similar objects; locate the object relative to the speaker, point of time and space; ask a question about the object in order to obtain all necessary information, etc.” (Brazgovskaya, 2008). It gives us the opportunity to make an assertion that a similar game-communication underlies the plot scheme of Lesya Ukrainka’s poem. Thus, the poet depicts a tense cognitive process of interpretation, in which a shaky relationship of balancing is established on the verge of understanding and misunderstanding between the sender of the “message” (foreign) and interpreters (a group of natives). Interpretation as understanding the meaning comes to be the reverse side of the language game. In this regard, we consider it relevant to recall “The concept of play is related not only to the speech practice of an individual subject (generation of utterances, learning mother tongue / foreign language). The downside of language use is the process of interpreting signs. Interpretation as the identification of meanings is also included in the practice of language games of the individual” (Brazgovskaya, 2008). Particularly productive, according to Wittgenstein, are game interpretations of philosophical concepts and expressions that hide the plurality of semantic nuances (Brazgovskaya, 2008, p. 201). The statement above can make it evident that the last thesis perfectly characterizes the structural and semiotic features of the construction of Lesya Ukrainka’s text based on the principle of language game – riddle, where all its structural components / factors are preserved: 1) the hero-sender of the message (stranger); 2) description of the semantic content of the hidden concept (directly and through indirect associations and connotations); 3) message interpreters

(natives); 4) the process of interpretation (guessing an unknown word by the natives) in which the word guessed comes to be characterized by a number of other (additional) meanings. Thus, the poetess preserved all the structural components of game communication to represent / describe the behavior of the characters. Consequently, the first line of the poem is signified for the recipient by a clear quasi-magological marker: «Bulo yikh tuta try, chuzhykh lyudey» (Ukrainka, 1975, p. 78), where chronotopos «tuta» (*in English "here"*) indicates one's own, narrator's natural environment, in contrast and in confrontation with which the poetess will later describe the life of an eccentric stranger. The initial lines of the poetry also actualize the sacred number three: originally there were three strangers, but one of them dies and the other goes away, that is, the environment seems to push out the aliens being unadapted to live in it: each of them enters another dimension according to his own way of existence, thus leaving the space for the «chuzhyy» (*in English "stranger"*) there. It is he who exposes his desire to adapt being in it, while not being physically and domestically adjusted to severe and harsh northern climate (the stranger often feels cold, gets sick, hardly goes out when it is cold and frosty, etc.), as well as does his best to master the spiritual and sociocultural dimensions of the new environment. Yes, the main character first learns the language of the natives:

and he who said – learn this as we will tell you
as others have too many words. (Ukrainka, 1975, p.78)

The reference to the comprehension of the language of the northern people has, in our view, an important anti-colonial nature: the main character is deprived of the typical superiority of any civilized man in relation to the indigenous population. Forced to live in the harsh conditions of the northern region, he does not appear here as a conqueror-colonizer, because he does not seek to impose his language, cultural values and his way of life on the natives – he is rather a researcher and observer of the customs and traditions of other people, and what is more, he treats this every “other” with a sense of respect and esteem. Thus, in relations with the local population, a foreigner shows great patience, indulgence and kindness: “...he has never been ours” (Krajina, 1975, p. 78); and then:

...Sometimes it happens,
And no one knows why he gets so impolite – “the stranger”,
You cannot understand him... Well, he used to be polite,
Unlikely, our “toyon”. (Krajina, 1975, p. 78)¹

Thus, “chuzhyy” (a “foreign” newcomer) appears to the locals better than “his” boss. Interestingly, this fact is interpreted in its own way by the natives:

... We heard the people here say that
He is likely to be foolish and that is why he's very kind.
But do the stupid know books?
He knew the way from where river flows,
and who is suffering disease, and who will die or
will be cured. He knew a lot,
but stupid does not know these. (Ukrainka, 1975, p. 78)

The semiotic opposition of “one's own” and “another's” (‘our’ and ‘their’) always ascertains its actualization in the text. In particular, in the representation of the realities of the natural environment. For example, the beauty of the northern lights, which is always admired by ‘strangers’, is combined with severe frost: “He has a fear of extreme frost and when it's frosty he is less likely to go out” (Ukrainka, 1975, p. 79). Plant world, practical skills and abilities, such as the ability to fish and skillfully set traps for animals that are perfectly owned by locals don't come to be commonly recognized by the newcomer. In fact, Lesya Ukrainka's text provides the reader with a number of such oppositions, which give a special emphasis to the contrastive nature of the outlined worlds:

There is hardly anything like this in their land.
The sun is shining on the winter days,
and something grown there, is never found in our land,
and there's something we don't know,
he wished to tell us all about these,
but we don't have a name to all of these –
he said „chuzhyy” – there are no words like these. (Ukrainka, 1975, p. 79)

¹ All translations from Ukrainian in the article are provided by the authors.

The poetry clearly presents the motive of nostalgia. Thus, nostalgia, like acute attacks of homesickness, appears to be an amazing disease that mystically enters into the unconscious part of a person's psyche and sorts him out from the inside:

He has been weak for long, – to state the reason,
that this world was alien for him. Who knows?
He ate, and drank and slept as if being healthy
on saying: “Nothing hurts”. But lost his weight,
and lying on the bed was staring at walls,
he hardly ever spoke to anyone, who calls or
came to see him in his place. (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 79)

Like in fairy tales and myths, neutralizing such a disease appears to be mystic, and therefore, seeking for treatment turns into a search for a magical word that is determined to heal and protect the weak. Lesia Ukrainka associates the motive of the mysterious word with the motive of the meaning and naming. Actually, at this moment the motive of misunderstanding and miscommunication is intertwined into the plot:

We didn't understand what he requested,
we didn't have the stuff like that.
If anyone could give him what he needed
he would be healthy, as one said. (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 80)¹

The semiotic mechanism of the riddle game in the text is triggered by the motive of solving – the search for the intended word or concept. The natives ask the foreigner a certain question to clarify specific nature of the concept outlined. As it is typical for children's play, these first clarifications are related to social, cultural and household realities:

We asked him if it is a plant,
a beast, a bird, a meal or even wear.
And he rejected none. (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 80)
The next step is to clarify people's names according to a degree of kinship:
...Once father told me:
“If only father, mother, brother,
sister, or your wife could come to you,
you would be fit and sound, – they are unlikely to be here
and they are likely to be called of how none of us is called?” (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 79)

The stranger's answer makes the natives even more confused with their thoughts bewildered and unclear: the main character feels nervous and excited when he thinks that one of his relatives will suffer as much as he does, «u tsiy pushchi» (*in English “in the virgin forest”*):

if they had suffered there of what
I was suffering here ... (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 80).
Further questions relate to the quantitative aspect of the phenomenon in stated above:
...And do you have enough of this in your neighborhood? (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 80)

The stranger's answer seems to specify the quantitative-subject / subject-quantitative features of the abstract phenomenon («nebahato» – “not so many”, «troshechky» – “a little”, «nema» – “there is nothing”) but, according to the author's idea, only reinforces the effect of misunderstanding:

No, he says, we don't have so much of it,
we suffer more when wish to get,
than feeling happy about this, and we
sometimes seem to get all these at least a little,
either we feel as if we'll get it soon,
or just forget we have none of these.
Yet here we live a little bit ...
and I don't know how you put it ...
not the way we live here. (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 80).

The main character – “sender of the message” deepens up the mystery, in which the concept acquires additional connotations:

Well, when one could wish to leave the hut,
he won't be allowed to do so; he will be tied instead,
then how could you out it ‘where is he sitting’? (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 81)

Inappropriate answers with instructions of a special nature can be viewed in the following lines: “Tut my ne vhadaly: / o dyn kazav “u lisi”, druhyy “v poli”, / use ne do ladu...– “we didn’t guess that”: one says” in the wood”, the other – on the field / there is some disbalance” (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 81) aimed to excavate the effect of misunderstanding. However, we consider the process of guessing, which ordinary and childishly naive natives perceive as a game demonstrating their active involvement in it with all their trust and immediacy, semiotically significant:

“The stranger” has resumed: “Well, it’s OK,
and how could one put it if he had to let the bird,
he had been caring for long, fly away,
how could one say where he will let it free?” Again, one says:
someone – “to the field”, someone – “to the forest”, and someone – “to the snow”. (Ukrajinka, 1975, p.

81)

In terms of semiotics for interpreters (natives), the word invented by a stranger appears as a typical sign of “opaque referent” (the terminology of Olena Brazgovskaya), the meaning of which is not revealed from the first, second or third attempt, but the process of interpretation, presented in the text, demonstrates the phenomenon of polysemy of an unnamed token. Due to the poetess’ artistic ability of making a clear picture of all the inaccuracies in the interpretation of the heroes-interpreters (natives) that emphasized the effect of misunderstanding and miscommunication among characters, the reader-recipient might have a possibility of hypothetical-imaginary participation in the process of reading, thus reproducing the semantic structure of the concept mentioned above: “svoboda” (*in English “freedom”*) (actions, movements, as well as individual-personal and general-social). Under this perspective, we provide further insight into delineation of the semantic field of the concept “volya” (*in English “will”*) by means of associations resulting in its semantic shift, i.e., from neutral to socially recognized ones:

the fact that he feels badly in the cold,
or that he is deprived of food and drink,
or that he has no relatives here,
or that he is not allowed to come back home,
and is deprived of work he wants to do? (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 81)

Afterwards the semantics of the word in question transforms the problem of individual choice and action into more general issue:

He stared saying: “You see, the best for me is
when I can walk and work,
but I am deprived of these.” (Ukrajinka, 1975, p.82)

The natives do not seem to show their eagerness to understand the “stranger’s” problem, as they believe that he is not deprived of anything, because he lives like most of them enjoying more or less fulfilled life: even not having the full set of skills in every day life, he is not suffering or starving. According to them, freedom of movement (though in a limited space), freedom of action (“to be everywhere and do whatever one wanted to”) (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 82), property right (“he sewed, made tea, ate everything he wanted, / whatever he had had, no one could deprive him of that”) (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 82) – these are the opportunities the “stranger” enjoys. Therefore, what else could they offer him? The very fact of limitation of actions and the potential failure to come up with what had been planned before seems intolerable for the “stranger”:

...Where am I to go here?
And what am I to do on living in your bush?
I am unable to escape from you,
I have nothing here...eh, I have no words! (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 82)

The author transfers the issue of existential freedom into certain area of definition and naming, i.e., in the height of words and more broadly – creativity as the freedom to identify things by their names, definition and self-determination, as well as highlights the problem of understanding and misunderstanding. It is no wonder that the “stranger” comes to be a scribe who is not only literate and educated, but is also a recipient and creator of books. He does not only read other books (the motive of the book and reading appears pervasive in the text). The main character seems to be extensively engaged in reading on sharing the information he gained with the natives. At the same time, he creates his own book, in which he writes down the meaning of new unfamiliar words, as well as customs, traditions and songs of the northern people, which proves to be a dictionary-compendium of northern

life. In our view, the dictionary as a symbol of well-structured and defined universe articulates the problem of cognition and comprehension in words of another's exotic world for the main character, because for the artist creative knowledge of the world is his own word comprehension. Instead, the inner world of the "stranger" remains incomprehensible, and even in a greater extent, totally incomprehensible to the natives:

And what for did this word appear to him there?
There are no words, well, it's OK!
He had too many words in his book.
Well, let him use the one he wanted,
We know none, as we have no books and have few words. (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 82)

The fact that the "foreign" scribe seems hallowed to the ordinary dwellers of the North does not appear surprising, hence they have queries about his blessing harmony. As a man of culture, he deeply feels the problem of vocabulary deficiency and for him the moment of naming to comprehend the world using the language is fundamental. Furthermore, the motive for naming the realities of the world by the primitive man has been clearly depicted in mythology and religion. Thus, according to the Bible, Adam gave names to all animals and birds, as if being separated from these creatures in this way, but at the same time manifesting himself as a co-author of the Creator. The motive of death caused by grief and misery due to vocabulary deficiency and the unnamed phenomenon frightens the natives, arising mystical horror and fear in them. According to the logic of ancient myths, the concept of the phenomenon as well as the phenomenon itself and its name come to be close and inseparable in their minds. Therefore, the missing word in their imagination signals the absence of the phenomenon that makes the healing process uncontrollable and almost impossible. In fact, the "stranger" being culturally aware, finds the connection between associative and thematic meaning of the word sacred:

...I am dying of what you have no name for it,
yet, someone eats it in your land,
and what could make me stay alive,
has no name, and no word,
but you have none of it itself,
if only there's just a word,
I could possibly live with you ... (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 83)

The final lines of the poetry actualize the motive of the magic word, which acquires the status of a mystic charm, thus providing the healing power by its presence and leading to death by its absence:

You see, the strangers need it, –
the "stranger" says he doesn't die alone,
and like him still many more will die...
We would already say that word to them,
And if a stranger once gets weak,
what shall we when we have no word,
and what is it and what it means?
Perhaps it's either charms or spell,
If people die of it.... (Ukrajinka, 1975, p. 83)

Conclusion

Our study has demonstrated that the semiotics of the game is the key point in structuring Lesya Ukrainka's poem "One word (A Tale of the Native from the North)" and its constituent elements. An unnamed word is revealed by the character-sender of the message, concretization of the polysemantic lexeme through variability of associations as well as the process of interpretation with questions-clarification of characters-recipients, etc. We also made an attempt to identify the instruments the author uses to create a pseudo-imagological effect of "misunderstanding" through the phenomenon of the unnamed word thus, considering it essential for the poetess to artistically represent different levels of perception and development of consciousness. Hence, using different connotations and shades of meaning of the concept "will, freedom" the poetess uncovers not only social, political or economic freedom and freedom of movement, but also highlights existential freedom, freedom of individual choice and action, freedom of artistic expression and creation, freedom of thought as well as freedom of calling things by their true names.

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