

LINGUISTIC LESSONS FROM LANGUAGE PLAY ON THE RUNET

Abstract

I analyze instances of language play, which occur in Russian instant messaging (IM) speech. Two main research questions are: 1) which features of language play in computer-mediated communication (CMC) are endemic to this communication channel? 2) what can we learn about language use and language itself by analyzing this kind of language play?

As a data source I use the website <http://bash.org.ru>. This is a Russian equivalent of <http://bash.org>, a collection of quotes extracted from real IM-conversations. Since the quotes are supposed to be funny, such collections are useful data sources for investigations of language play: all the preliminary work of gathering huge amount of data (otherwise inaccessible) is already done.

Endemic features are predetermined by the communication channel properties, new possibilities provided by CMC. Not surprisingly, IM users make use of typographic expressive means when joking. Possible instruments and devices include capital letters, emoticons, unusual use of non-alphanumeric symbols, writing vertically etc., see (1).

(1)

X: максима нет в сети	X: max is offline
3: а серега?	3: and serega?
X: не вижу	X: i don't see
3: А СЕРЕГА?	3: AND SEREGA?
3: так лучше видно?	3: can you see better now?

However, sometimes jokes make use of less obvious affordances offered by the channel, see (2).

(2)

xxx: напиши ему уже, что б шел на хуй	xxx: write him and tell him to fuck off
ууу: я не могу... я стесняюсь	ууу: i can't... i am ashamed
xxx: иди на хуй	xxx: fuck off
xxx: скопировать и отправить	xxx: copypaste and send

This example reveals a subtle semiotic property of the obscene words. It seems that when you copy paste words typed by somebody else, you partially avoid breaking taboo: you are not 'saying' the taboo words yourself.

An important property of IM is that it is almost as fast and as interactive as *oral speech*, but actually it is still *written speech*. Due to the interactivity of the IM channel, many metalanguage conversations occur there, often devoted to *norm violations*. Norm violation (either intentional or not) often occur in IM speech. They are more clearly seen in the typed text than in an oral conversation, and are less tolerated.

In certain cases norm violations trigger some kind of metalinguistic activity like check-back, resentment or mockery. It is a separate research question when this does happen and when does not, what is important for the current paper is *how* this happens, how does an addressee react to a norm violation by a sender.

Due to the nature of the data source, humorous replies to norm violations are abundant in the data. I divide them into three classes. First class includes humorous replies, which explicitly point to the norm violation, see (3).

(3)

Max_Pain: Я теперь мечь могу купить Onefnt: орфографический словарь лучше купи	Max_Pain: I can buy a sworde now Onefnt: you'd better buy a spelling dictionary
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Second class consists of parodies, replies where an addressee reproduces the norm violation committed by a sender, usually exaggerating it, making it even more severe, see (4).

(4)

-парней можно таак легко манипулировать) -ага. а еще можно, например, ехать троллейбус, мечтать шаурму или думать туман	-it is soo easy to manipulate of guys) -uh-huh. you can also ride with a trolleybus, dream upon shawarma or think to mist
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Third class, the largest one, includes conversations where a norm violation changes the meaning of a sender's utterance, and an addressee pretends to *misunderstand* it, to understand it literally, as if it completely follows the norm, see (5).

(5)

Бэк: мне повестку красную прислали Бэк: типо если не приду меня арестуют)) Бабон: Скажи что я гей Бэк: мне не поможет то что ты гей xD	Back: I've received red call-up paper [from the military registry office] Back: if I don't come they'll arrest me)) Babon: tell that I am gay Back: it will not help me that you are gay xD
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However, there is no reason to limit the research field to the language play devices, which are *endemic* to IM. It is interesting to give linguistic interpretation to all kind of playful experiments with language we can observe in this liberal and innovative medium. See (6):

(6)

Футбольный_Фанат> подскажите плз фотошоп, только не Adobe Photoshop.	Futboljnyj_Fanat> could you please suggest a photoshop, but not Adobe Photoshop
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We do not know whether the joke is intentional or not, but in any case this examples shows that the word 'photoshop' can be used not only as a proper name, but also as a hyperonym for a certain type of software (thus, it is on the way to becoming an eponym).