

*M. Milojkovic*

**SEMANTIC PROSODY AND SUBTEXT AS UNIVERSAL,  
COLLOCATION-BASED INSTRUMENTATION FOR  
MEANING AND LITERARY WORLDS**

**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to present the corpus stylistics theory and practical analytical methods developed by Bill Louw between 1987 and 2011, as well as to apply this approach to Russian literature. It is based on simple and user-friendly methods relying on what used to be known, in the pre-computational age, as the writer's «deviation from the norm». Large reference corpora serve to establish the possible prosodic clashes in the studied text, as well as to point to the most frequent quasi-propositional variables revealing the subtext of the studied poem. Present and absent collocates reveal underprovision or overprovision of the context of situation.

**1. Semantic prosody**

The writer's «deviation from the norm» may manifest itself, firstly, through semantic prosodies. These are founded on the 'contagion' theory of Michel Breal. The semantic prosody (семантическая просодия) is defined by Louw<sup>1</sup> as an aura of meaning surrounding a word or phrase provided by means of proximity or collocation as defined by Sinclair<sup>2</sup>. This aura of meaning may be positive, negative or mixed, or much more specific than this<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Louw W.E.* Irony in the text or insincerity in the writer? The diagnostic potential of semantic prosodies // *Text and Technology: In Honour of John Sinclair, M. Baker et al. (Eds).* Amsterdam, 1993. P. 157–176.

<sup>2</sup> *Sinclair J.M.* «Collocation is the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of one another in a text. The usual measure of proximity is a maximum of four words intervening». *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation.* Oxford, 1991. P. 170.

<sup>3</sup> *Milojkovic M.* Quenched light, or seeing through a glass darkly – a collocation-based view of Larkin's atheism and depression (forthcoming).

A large reference corpus will act to the corpus linguist the part of accumulated experience and thus provide the background against which the writer's «deviation from the norm» can be scientifically studied in detail. Therefore, the presence or absence of prosodic clashes (просодические конфликты) in a poem will be an analytic tool for a scientifically based interpretation. Moreover, Louw<sup>1</sup> scientifically proves that a prosodic clash is either indicative of (intentional) irony or (unintentional) insincerity.

To illustrate the implementation of prosodic clashes in corpus stylistics, let us take Pushkin's famous poem «Друзьям». It contains the expression *оживил войной* – *enlivened by war*. The RNC<sup>2</sup>, as expected, revealed a prosodic clash. However, a subcorpus of Pushkin's prose showed that at least where his prose is concerned, war (the selected node was 'война') is viewed by him not so much as a bloody enterprise but as a patriotic and strategic one, as well as a means to advance one's career. Still, Pushkin's poetic subcorpus gives a different picture. This is part of the second page of concordance lines yielded by the RNC:

Пламя пышет, Встает кровавая заря Войны народной.  
 земного В трудах державства и войны его товарищи, сыны: И Шереметев  
 нами; Россию вдруг он оживил Войной, надеждами, трудами.  
 Наслажденья, Как принимал во дни войны Он вызов ярого сраженья.  
 над честью и над ним, Войну ведет неблагодарный С своим союзником  
 любила [Все роды славы:] дым войны И дым Парнасского кадила.  
 На Русь ли вновь идет войною, Несет ли Польше свой закон  
 бранной славой; Устала грозная рука; Война от мыслей далека.  
 Обезображенный войною, Цветущий край осиротел; Исчезли мирные  
 Гирей для мирной неги Войну кровавую презрел, Пресек ужасне набег  
 Опустошив огнем войны Кавказу близкие страны И селы  
 печали о сыне, падшем на войне.  
 Другой пускай поет [героев] и войну, Я скромно возлюбил живую тишину  
 носился, во дни былые, дни войны, На западе, на юге бился  
 Война. Война! Подъяты наконец, Шумят знамены

<sup>1</sup> Louw W.E. Contextual prosodic theory: Bringing semantic prosodies to life // Words in Context: In Honour of John Sinclair, C. Heffer and H. Sauntson (Eds). Birmingham, 2000. P. 48–94.

<sup>2</sup> The reference corpus used in the paper was the Russian National Corpus.

The collocates (according to Firth<sup>1</sup> and Sinclair) given in bold yield a fairly good account of the poet's attitude to war. It is a bloody pursuit, causing worry to statesmen and desolation to contested territories, but an honourable one. There is no (conscious) irony. There is no (subconscious) insincerity. The expression *оживил войной* is uniquely characteristic of the poet but consistent with his view of the world as expressed in the *literary world* (*литературный мир*) of his poems.

What we have discovered in the literary world of this particular poem is *overprovided context of situation* (*перенасыщенный ситуационный контекст*), according to Louw's Contextual Prosodic Theory (CPT). If in the whole of the reference corpus only Pushkin's text co-selects *enliven* and *war*, the discrepancy between the reference corpus and the text points at overprovision, in the same way in which, for example, Philip Larkin's references to love, mainly defeating hope, point to the *underprovision of the context of situation* (*недостаточный ситуационный контекст*)<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. Subtext

The collocates in the Pushkin example offer us a totality of facts, or a state of affairs, according to Wittgenstein's<sup>3</sup> picture theory of meaning (section numbers refer to those in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*):

1. The world is all that is the case.
  - 1.1 The world is the totality of *facts*, not of *things*.
  - 1.2 The world divides into facts.
2. What is the case – a fact – is the existence of states of affairs.

---

<sup>1</sup> Firth J.R. <Meaning by collocation is an abstraction at the syntagmatic level and is not directly concerned with the conceptual or idea approach to the meaning of words. One of the meanings of night its collocability with dark>. Papers in Linguistics 1934–1951. London, 1957. P. 181.

<sup>2</sup> Milojkovic M. (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein L. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. 1922. Trans. D.F. Pears and D.F. McGuinness. London, 1960.

For Wittgenstein<sup>1</sup> logical atomism is a priority. He visualizes it within logical variables: «Every proposition has a content and a form. We get the picture of the pure form if we abstract it from the meaning of the single words, or symbols [...] That is to say, if we substitute variables for the constants of the proposition, the rules of syntax which applied to the constants must apply to the variables also.» Here Wittgenstein supports Bertrand Russell's<sup>2</sup> view on the language of logic, on which Louw bases his other analytic tool, subtext: «A language of that sort will be completely analytic and will show at a glance the logical structure of the facts asserted or denied [...] It is a language that has only syntax and *no vocabulary whatsoever* [...] *if you add a vocabulary*, [it] would be a logically perfect language» (emphasis added).

*Subtext (подтекст)* is the state of affairs (Wittgenstein's *Sachverhalten*), or a literary world, arrived at by searching a grammatical string found in e.g. a poem and wildcarding all content words. The most frequent content words shown by the corpus instead of the wild cards Louw calls, according to Russell, quasi-propositional variables<sup>3</sup>. These variables he then uses to interrogate the persona of the poem.

Let us look at the first stanza of Alexander Blok's famous poem: «Ночь, улица, фонарь, аптека, / Бессмысленный и тусклый свет./ **Живи еще хоть** четверть века – / Все будет так. Исхода нет». The third line contains the grammatical pattern V imper+еще+хоть, which satisfies the requirements for extracting subtext. The main corpus of the RNC yielded the following 12 concordance lines confirming to this pattern (apart from the 9 instances of quotation from Blok's poem):

---

<sup>1</sup> *Wittgenstein L.* Some remarks on logical form. 1929 // Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical occasions 1912–1952. Klagge J. and Nordmann A. (Eds.) Indiana, 1993. P. 29–35.

<sup>2</sup> *Russell B.* My Philosophical Development. Nottingham, 1956. P. 197.

<sup>3</sup> *Louw W.E.* Automating the Extraction of Literary Worlds and their Subtexts from the Poetry of William Butler Yeats // Para, por y sobre Luis Quereda. Falces Sierra, Marta *et al* (Eds.) Granada, 2010. P. 635–657.

чем кажется, та Инка, **дайте** еще хоть раз взглянуть, что она таит в себе  
 ты еще так молода! **Поживи** еще хоть немного для себя ... - Мне  
 просил меня Левка. - **Не уезжай**, еще хоть немного побудь . Послушай, не  
 на обломках жизни, и **напиши** еще хоть раз Для неулыбчивой отчизны  
 месяц будем перебирать , **дай** мне еще хоть что-нибудь.  
 вливая Копешкину бульон. - Ну **съеште** еще хоть ложечку. Горе мне с  
 Ну-ка прочитай-ка еще хоть одно твое правило.  
 - Скажите еще хоть одно слово - и я  
 Ирина, - такая жалость. **Останься** еще хоть на недельку. (Увидев Кулыгина, вскрикивает  
 Отдавайте и вы мне. - **Подожди** еще хоть с месяц. Мельник поскреб  
 Когда будет досуг, **напишите** еще хоть несколько строчек  
 Эй, **выпей** еще хоть стаканчик, Аммалат-бек; сердце

Out of the 12 lines, eleven offer the context of expressing a wish, and one the context of threat. In most contexts the wish is intense, in some verging on pleading. If we were to implement Louw's way of interrogating the persona through quasi-propositional variables, we would consider the most frequent ones. *Give, stay/do not go and eat/drink* may point to the satisfaction of primal needs – humans need to give and be given care and nourishment. The primal prosody is supported by the presence of the verb *live*, that may be taken as appearing twice as the line by Blok is also in the reference corpus, quoted on the whole nine times. The persona, if interrogated by Louw, would probably confess to an intense basic need to live, which, on some not necessarily literal level, is in danger of not being satisfied.

Let us now consider the first stanza of the famous poem by Pushkin: «Я помню чудное мгновенье:/ **Передо мной явилась ты,**/ Как мимолетное виденье,/ Как гений чистой красоты». Pushkin's chosen word order in the second line is poetic and the exact grammatical pattern yielded no results in the RNC. We reversed the word order. The search line ты+\*сь+перед\* gave the following 6 lines:

А чем ты умывалась перед нанесением крема?  
 „Давай поиграем“, - предлагаешь ты, **прохаживаясь** перед ним в соблазнительном  
 помню один чудесный момент, когда ты появилась передо мною, как будто  
 Помнишь, ты **извинилась** перед гостем, вышла за  
 - Чем же ты **провинилась** перед волшебницей, что она  
 так испугала моего садовника, зачем ты **появилась** перед ним?

The third line is an intentional paraphrase of Pushkin. The last three lines create contexts of guilt. The second line creates a context

of sexual provocation. The sample is almost too small for a tentative attempt to interrogate the poet's attitude to the addressee, but the quasi-propositional variables of guilt and provocation may be pointing at suppressed mixed feelings of the poet. A larger reference corpus is necessary to provide better access to subtext.

The reversal of the word order in the preceding example was founded on the hypothesis that grammatical patterns may form collocations creating states of affairs, just as individual words, so *ТЫ+\*СЬ* and the prepositional phrase are viewed as collocates. Thus co-selection, whether of lexical or grammatical collocates, chunks states of affairs. Collocation becomes instrumentation for meaning.

#### **Acknowledgement**

I am grateful to Bill Louw, University of Zimbabwe, for introducing me to the world of corpus stylistics, and his generous help and support at every stage of my research, including writing this paper.