

**WUT 2020**  
**10<sup>th</sup> International Conference «Word, Utterance, Text: Cognitive, Pragmatic and Cultural Aspects»**

**VICTOR PELEVIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF WORD IN THE LIGHT  
OF POSTMODERN LANGUAGE CONCEPTS**

Irina Ivanova (a)\*, Ekaterina Saprykina (b)  
\*Corresponding author

(a) North-Caucasus Federal University, Stavropol, Russia, Lenina st. 470, 29 ivanovairinna@mail.ru  
(b) North-Caucasus Federal University, Stavropol, Russia, 50 let VLKSM st. 99, 16 evsaprykina79@gmail.com

*Abstract*

Language and Word definitely occupy a central position in Pelevin's artistic world. The writer's metaplot implies constant disclosure of the very notion of «reality» itself and every common view of the world, every popular axiology. It is directly relevant to the language problem and offers its own philosophy of Word, which underlies a specific world designed by Pelevin. Generally, Pelevin accepts classical postmodern dogmatics of correlation between language and «reality» and gladly discloses another ideological, cultural and political simulacrum. By revealing the mechanisms of mind control over a person, who is absolutely sure of their identity and command of language, which actually «commands» the subject itself, Pelevin builds his own philosophy of language. Pelevin's «Word» paradoxically combines the uncombinable: it is always a provocator, a trickster, a deceiver, a skillful persuader. It never has any true «denotatum», it does not «mean» anything and at the same time it is almighty, because there is «nothing» in this world except it. Being «embodied» in literary text and paradoxically personified, Word becomes a problem for itself. It feels almightiness and total emptiness at the same time, fictitiousness, absence of rootedness in existence and ontological irresponsibility. A word seeking for its denotatum, a human seeking for global sense and understanding impossibility of this sense are Pelevin's core themes.

2357-1330 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

**Keywords:** Modern Russian prose, Pelevin, postmodernism, philosophy of language, discourse, text.



## 1. Introduction

Victor Pelevin is one of the most prominent figures of the modern literature process, which has solid reputation but still causes enormous controversy and gets polar opposite reviews from literary critics. Representing «postmodernism» in the minds of contemporary readers and philologists, his name being almost a synonym for it (along with Vladimir Sorokin), Pelevin changes the very idea of what should be considered «fine literature», who should be called «a writer» and what is the writer's grand purpose. A top-notch diagnostician and prophet of our time, one of the most authoritative intellectuals in Russia, Pelevin has definitely created his own unique and easily recognizable artistic world. A classicist of postmodernism, whose texts can illustrate any of encyclopedic postmodern postulates, the writer is nevertheless involved in a complex dialogue with postmodern and poststructuralist theory, thus demonstrating his affiliation with this paradigm and at the same time mocking and disproving its axioms. While Pelevin's texts of the 1990s did actually create «the canon» of Russian postmodernism, his recent novels such as «iPhuck 10» (2017), «Secret views of Mount Fuji» (2018) and «The art of subtle touches» (2019) represent another type of «fictional work», which brings the very notion of «artistry» into question or at least alters its boundaries.

## 2. Problem Statement

There are many research works in modern Russian and foreign literary studies, which regard various aspects of Pelevin's philosophy and artistic work. Recent years saw the following objects of academic interest: mythopoetic aspect of Pelevin's prose (Ivanova, Kubyshkina, & Serebryakov, 2017; Os'mukhina & Siprova, 2017), neomodernism in its dialogue with postmodernism (Krotova, 2017), correspondence with Soviet reality and conceptual importance (Gomel, 2013), the paradigm of mass and elite culture (Chernyak, 2015), ontological aspect (Tatarinov, 2015), reception and transformation of the Russian classics (Chernyak, 2015; Ivanova, 2018, etc.). Just as much interest is aroused by linguistic aspect of Pelevin's artistic work: word coinage (Raenko, 2016), problems of translation (Kirpichnikova, 2018; Vasilyeva & Okuneva, 2015), linguistic modelling of «irreality» (Kolesnikova, 2018) and linguistic peculiarities in general (Kirpichnikova, 2018). One of the most interesting works for us is the one by German philologist Tashinskiy (2012) on philosophy of language in Pelevin's «The Sacred book of the werewolf» compared with linguistic subjectivity by Lacan and Derrida, and concept of reconfiguration in study of autotelicity of language of Pelevin's novels by Polish philologist Javorski (2017).

## 3. Research Questions

Even a superficial survey of the latest research on Pelevin's works shows that the writer attracts academic interest primarily with his unique, peculiar language, given that he can hardly be called an outstanding master of literary style in the sense Turgenev or Bunin in their time had been. Pelevin does not «master the language», but he lets the language «master» him and, in accordance with the principal intuition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, demonstrate all the possibilities of its current state, all types of «discourse», whatever relations with extralinguistic «reality» they could have. Any researcher of

Pelevin's philosophy of language, which is embodied in the «artistic» images of his texts, faces the following ultimate question: how is it possible to «disclose» modern language, its pseudo-words, pseudo-senses and pseudo-meanings so mercilessly and to demonstrate all-mightiness and fascinating capabilities of this language at the same time? Does Pelevin acknowledge any «sacred rhetoric» which opposes «empty rhetoric» (Epstein, 2016, p.206), a word as Word (in view of his, putting it mildly, negative attitude towards Christian «metanarrative»), or does Buddhistic worldview, appreciably different from Orthodox Christian logocentrism, prevail in his attitude to a word? To what extent did postmodern (predominantly French) philosophy of language influence Pelevin's one, and where is the borderline between taking it seriously as his own methodological framework and outright mocking of «smart French gays», that gave birth to thousands of imitators — «discoursemongers» — all over the world?

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of our study is to describe Pelevin's philosophy of language and word in reliance on three latest novels of the writer — «iPhuck 10» (2017), «Secret views of Mount Fuji» (2018) and «The art of subtle touches» (2019) — with due consideration of the context of contemporary postmodern philosophy, which serves for Pelevin as a ground zero, a belief system, a target of irony and parody and a playground at the same time. The problematics we are interested in is expressed on various levels of Pelevin's literary text: as a core theme structuring pseudo-detective plot, object of reflection and dialogues of the characters, creation of pseudo-characters personifying word as such, as play on words, «demetaphorization» of a metaphor, numerous puns («mother tongue, licking itself in the emptiness») etc. All this creates fairly intelligible and integrated Pelevin's philosophy of language, which is in a complex relationship with the original philosophic proto-text.

#### **5. Research Methods**

Pelevin's work, in our opinion, almost excludes traditional methods of literary analysis that date back to the paradigm of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In any case, consecutive application of these methods makes us include the author in the category of mass-cultural, «publicists», magicians from literature, etc. That is exactly how Pelevin's numerous detractors perceive him. However, the application of post-structuralist research strategies to a text that constantly «discloses» itself and uncovers all possible overtones and techniques, does not seem to be a good idea. Pelevin himself protests against the first approach, arguing that art and criticism, which seriously use such concepts as «character», «persona», «empathy», etc., turn into a «dumb and cheap popular mess» for lower classes. The second one seems redundant: Pelevin himself is his own post-structuralist, critic, psychoanalyst and language philosopher, who discloses all these author's masks at once. Perhaps the only adequate research strategy in this case is descriptive poetics, including motive analysis. Motives of word and language (discourse, narrative) are integral part of any Pelevin's novel.

## 6. Findings

It is obvious that, if desired, and with due knowledge of the subject, it is not difficult to restore almost any «influencing text» in Pelevin's novels. Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Žižek — all of them are present here as quotes, allusions, direct references, most often in ironic contexts, or even as characters (imaginary Delon Vedrovois or «the bridge between Sartre and Heidegger» — Jean-Luc Beyond). However, in our opinion, the most significant influencer on Pelevin and the closest one to his mentality is Baudrillard with his philosophy of appearances and hyper-realities, which are scrupulously delineated in Pelevin's novels. Thus, the author's undoubted pathos in the novel «iPhuck 10», as well as in Baudrillard's «Fatal strategies» (Baudrillard, 2017), for example, is an ironic coming over to the side of the object rebelling against the philosophical subject. In fact, «iPhuck» is a kind of illustration of such a «riot of an object», which is represented by a word left to itself in the form of a supersophisticated verbal object — algorithm named Porfiry or superprogram Jeanne-Sappho.

Porfiry is trying to explain to the reader his «true self», which actually does not exist. He is just an algorithm that places words in a specific order, and his style (which potentially can be of any kind and depends on the conversational context required by the customer) is based on the best samples of classical Russian literature. In the very first lines of the novel the pseudo-character vehemently denies even the possibility of serious approach to the language, the function of which is to force «the perception of impersonal vibrations flowing into each other and constituting the reality as false entities...» (Pelevin, 2017, p.5). Naturally enough, there is nothing funnier for the character than the «philosophy» taken in quotation marks, based on such a language. And a human being itself is nothing more than a «tangle of animal and linguistic programs», which he naively takes for his «self».

The literary algorithm is a cultural memory «about the way people conjoined words over the last two thousand years in response to external and internal stimuli» (Pelevin, 2017, p.11). Responding to a simple question, if he understood the interlocutor, Porfiry does not explain that the only meaning of this word as applied to him is «the analysis of linguistic material, recognition of semantic kernels and reciprocal generation of connected replicas» (Pelevin, 2017, p.32). He may even «stupidly blink» or «be embarrassed» if the linguistic analysis shows that in millions of similar conversational situations such non-verbal signals are possible and must express certain «emotions». Porfiry's major verbal strategy is cynicism; Baudrillard argues that a man is forced to be cynical, and this is not even a «classical» cynicism, radically depriving the «high» word of its true meaning and idea, but simply appearing «from the secret order of things» (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 102). The French philosopher speaks of intoxication with signs, of their impetuousness, more omnipotent than reality itself: reality «is seduced by signs», «the triumph of simulation fascinates», seduces (this is one of the basic concepts in Baudrillard's terminology). Porfiry indeed does seduce Mara, and Pelevin subtly plays on the primary sense of the word, referring to the classical context of 18-19<sup>th</sup> centuries novels about seduction, and Baudrillard's meaning of it.

According to Baudrillard, objective irony serves as a kind of filter for words (as well as for bodies, concepts and pleasures). Being ever-ready to explain his verbal strategies and to uncover his tricks, Porfiry is, in fact, nothing more than verbal irony, eagerly exposing its «fatal strategies» and «laying itself open» to its opponent, but winning in the end, roughly and heartlessly brining the heroine back to the «reality» that is killing her.

Baudrillard's philosophy of appearances (he managed to catch the Internet in all its omnipotence, but made his conclusions only in the 80s basing on the power of television as a process of simulacra production) basically coincides with Pelevin's one. People themselves have become screens responding to simulation with simulation. This is what happens between Porfiry and Mara (and before that — between Mara and Jeanne), and it makes any verbal communication meaningless at all, but in the end it does not cancel the true affects of a fairly human being: «love» turns out to be a simulacrum, hatred and revenge — do not. «The object is not innocent at all, it exists, and it takes revenge» (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 129).

«Love speaks a lot, love is a discourse» (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 151) and it lives, perhaps, only within the narrative, Baudrillard claims. The «Love» between Porfiry and Mara is an exchange of remarks, but in Pelevin's world it is not surprising that Porfiry can be a lover in physical sense as well, connecting to the technological miracle — an iPhuck. Why not, if love is a discourse? Appearance does not replace or hide the essence, but reveals it.

Pelevin's «smart French gays» invent «linguodudos» — the NLP technique, which consist in «creation and usage of linguistic constructs that do not represent anything but combinatorial capabilities of the language in order to paralyze someone else's consciousness» (Pelevin, 2017, p.313). If the verbal flow is the only intelligible and available reality for a man, it is not strange that he can become a lover in the form of an imaginary subject. Moreover, even sex with philosophy itself is possible — this is the iMovie plot that Mara gets as a filmmaker. (As always with Pelevin, a funny obscene context comes into play — the actualization of the metaphor «to f...ck with one's mind»).

The power of the word not related to reality, but omnipotent in the Lacanian space of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, is represented in another contemporary art theme that is significant for Pelevin. An object of actual art in «iPhuck» can consist of a name only, i.e. just a few words are sold for a huge amount of money, their unique combination belonging to that particular buyer. Something similar was there in «Generation «P»», where an owner of a contemporary art gallery shows the guest a series of certificates, hanging on the walls, that acknowledge purchase of expensive art objects, while the art objects themselves are kept somewhere in the basement and are not interesting to anyone.

The words build «discourse» — a concept that obviously irritates the author (let us remember the witty theory of discourse and glamor in «Empire V»). In almost all his novels Pelevin uses his favorite technique: «translating» one and the same text into the «language» of various discourses, stylistic exercises that always bring incredible pleasure to the reader. Thus, the art critic explains the concept of the exhibition: «“The curators decided not to enter into an open conflict with the paradigmatic cultural dominant of their time and exerted certain conformism in this matter”. — “I see”, Mara sighed. “Got scared shitless”. — “You could say that”, the consultant smiled» (Pelevin, 2017, p.175).

Apart from Baudrillard's context, directly related to the philosophy of word, the ideas of another popular character of modern European thought — Slavoj Žižek — are actualized in the «iPhuck 10» novel. Žižek's post-Lacan dialectics of interrelationship between the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, and his method of philosophizing within the postmodern paradigm and at the same time in controversy with it, should be close to Pelevin. However, Žižek becomes an object of Pelevin's irony too: his multi-page work on French philosophy becomes bedding in a cage with a guinea pig — a fashionable art object. In the end of the novel the program-algorithm Jeanne (the very same Porfiry) dramatizes the

killing «Invasion of Reality» for Mara from Mara's own Imaginary constructs: a theme that repeatedly appears in Žižek's works.

## 7. Conclusion

In his latest novels, «Secret views of Mount Fuji» and «The art of subtle touches», Pelevin comes back to the problem of the word and language, actualizing another aspect of it: that of NLP technique and the «real» word as opposed to the «semiotic tumor». Tatyana, the female lead of «Secret Views...», is an interesting experiment of Pelevin, who suddenly mixed together the style of a typical «female novel» and feminist discourse, on the one hand, and traditional Buddhist problems against the background of profane pursuit of happiness, on the other, within one text.

Tatyana's naive dreams of success (that is, a rich man to solve all her problems) are all about her search for the «sacred word». Intellectually weak and poorly educated heroine still understands that she lacks a certain set of «right words» that open up access to corps d'elite. Later it turns out that she needed to appeal to the ancient female archetypes, and in her case the power-giving word (the one and only) finds her itself. Fedor, an oligarch also striving for «happiness» under the guidance of an advanced yoga teacher, reflects with his friends upon the nature of the word as power and why the same words have different effect when they come from a true saint or a pseudo-Yogi. Sayado An, Fedor's teacher, explains the difference between the essence of things and «empty words» when a man believes that he conceived something important, «but in fact he just got some trash added to his head» (Pelevin, 2018, p.154). Perception of the true nature of things implies absence of a dispute, it is forbidden to even think about it, all the more so with «words». They can only pull you away from reality and truth.

While in «Empire V» and «The Sacred book of the werewolf» the author's merciless irony was targeted at «discourse», now the main enemy is «narrative». Fedor reflects on the paradox of wealth: a wine for ten thousand rubles tastes the same as the wine for a thousand, and this means that «we drink ... not the wine, but a narrative dissolved in it» (Pelevin, 2018, p.192). People get enslaved by narratives, each for their own social strata. Everything is ruled by the so-called narrative mind, which makes people act and speak in a certain way, buy certain things and actually live not in the world, but in a narrative about it. As always with Pelevin, even the pronouns do not reflect reality, there is nothing behind them. The narrative mind requires personal pronouns, since that makes it easier to combine mixed impressions, bursts, convulsions, thoughts and splashes «into a worthless novel, which is constantly foisted on the brain. This narrative mind is actually our everything, not Pushkin at all» (Pelevin, 2018, p.226). However, Fedor and his friends, being too enthusiastic about going into trans-verbal reality, find it out in terror that their perception of environment literally crumbles, giving way to the same narrative about the world. Words completely lose their function of salvation; the realm of the genuine and the sacred has nothing to do with them anymore.

In the novel «The art of subtle touches» the sacred function of the word would seem to be coming back. Thus, in the first story «Hyacinth» the main character, a guide, reads an ancient spell under the guise of tourist entertainment. The listeners feel the magical power and authenticity of incomprehensible words, and, in contrast to «The Secret views...», it is not magical energy that charges the ritual words, but vice versa: the words summon god regardless of strength and abilities of the invoker, by themselves.

Before being immolated, the offering must be told why and what for it is happening. A profane word (a fable for tourists) turns into a sacred one: sacrifice and death happen «in reality».

The major part of the book — brief retelling of «the novel inside the novel» by K.P. Golgofsky — is also an imitation: under the guise of a fashionable conspiratorial «da-Vinci-code» for businessmen and wealthy housewives the backstory of an unnoticed Third World War is presented. The plot develops around the struggle between the Russian and the British secret service, launching chimaeras — «noospheric imprints», a kind of records in the nation's collective unconscious — into the enemy's consciousness. The chimaera that destroys consciousness is based on a «linguistic construct», and the mechanism of «the linguoconstruct fixation» can be different (even «still in the air», but the letters must be inscribed anyway). Thus, the British activate such memes as «red tsar», «effective manager», «commander of the Victory» and others into modern Russians' consciousness making them set their affections upon everything Soviet and imperial (Pelevin, 2019, p.304). In their turn, the Russian experts come up with the notorious political correctness and «gender schizo» (Pelevin, 2019, p. 317). Even the new gender pronouns were developed by Major Kozlovskaya, brought up in a lesbian family in Manhattan. As usual with Pelevin, a plot-forming event belonging to modern political reality (here, the buzz about Russian interference in the American election) is directly related to the problem of language and the word. It is also specific that a strike on Russia is actually staged by a popular obscene metaphor — the most powerful noospheric torpedo MOAS («Mother Of All Shitholes»): the Russians can be mentally defeated only by indoctrination of the feeling-thought that everything around is «a total shithole». (What else could «smart European gays» come up with?) «The Sacred book of the werewolf» stated it already that it is because of the words that people found themselves in «a total shithole». In the new novel this extremely close to Pelevin «shithole» theme appears again as a metaphor for the absolute existential deadlock, from which there is definitely no way out and could not be any.

As he studies the specifics of Russian postmodernism, Epstein (2016) talks about «autophagia» of the modern language, highlighting the three levels of the word — sacred rhetoric, meaningful rhetoric and empty rhetoric (in other words, the formative, informative and fictitious word) (p. 206). According to Epstein (2016), the word in the Russian language tends to be deflected to the word itself, to «collapse» inwardly into itself, even by the greatest writers. The Russian word strives to «leap» to the great supra-real meaning, completely ignoring the reality of everyday life, and in this aspiration it «collapses» into fiction or silence, the great emptiness. Pelevin works mainly with words of the second and third levels, «God», «self», «soul» and others are «ghost words» for him («Generation P»). However, Tatarinov (2015), perhaps Pelevin's most discerning critic, acutely feels just that, the apophatic dimension of Pelevin's prose: «dissolving ... in attacking hollows» of the human soul turns into a desire to get it back, to return the sacred basis to the human word, having first mercilessly cleared up the space of the modern Russian text (especially political one) from all kinds of simulacra. If the ultimate priority of Russian realism is not just miserable mimesis with modern material, but manifestation of an idea which «transforms the inert matter of everyday life via word» (p. 130), then Pelevin is quite a classical realist, and his latest novelistic word is an event «sophisticating the reader's encounter with the world» (Tatarinov, 2015, p. 235).

## Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research under Grant № 20-011-00260 («Prospects for sociocultural development of Karachay-Cherkess Republic»). Grant program director Sergodeeva E.A.

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