LINGUISTIC AND LEGAL STATUS OF CHILDFREES' NARRATIVES IN RUSSIAN DIGITAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The empirical study presented in this paper is intended to examine the characteristic features of the discourse presented by the texts of Russian who support the idea of being childfree (so-called "childfrees") and to identify the possible intersection between specific childfrees' narratives with the norms of actual legislation. To date, the legal assessment of the speech behavior manifested in the statements offending mothers and children is currently a controversial issue in Russia. Research questions discussed in the paper are as follows: What are the characteristic features of the childfrees' discourse in the Russian digital space? Can the childfrees' speech behavior be construed as verbal abuse demolishing the institution of family and offending motherhood? The findings of the study suggest that different conclusions relate to a journalistic text quoting a childfree narrative and a narrative presented in an Instagram comment. Arguably, there is one-to-one relationship between the legal norms and the language of some of the comments in Instagram, since their characteristic features may be determined as preparatory conditions for the functioning of a conflict-prone text. Given the specifics of the childfrees' discourse in the comments, it can be assumed that the narratives of the childfree ideology supporters should be subjected to expert evaluation, correlating the linguistic analysis of the texts with legal norms.

Keywords: Childfree, law, speech behavior, verbal abuse

1. Introduction

In the Russian Federation, the state family policy is an integral part of the national social policy; the idea underpinning the State Family Policy Doctrine of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025 is the perception of the family as "the fundamental basis of Russian society" (On the concept of the state family policy in the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025, 2014. par. 2). Researchers note that modern Russian society encounters a transformation of motherhood as a basic value; motherhood is no longer interpreted as one of the main biological and social needs of women, and "the scheme of the feminine reproductive culture – daughter-mother-grandmother – is no longer the only possible and desirable scenario of a woman's life" (Klimenko & Karelina, 2019, p. 126).

The idea of conscious childlessness ("childfree") which originated in the United States has firmly rooted in Russian society, and the transliterated Russian term "чайлдфри" is used for self-identification by the vast majority of adherents of childlessness by choice, including those who exhibit aggression and hatred towards mothers and children. Freedom is often mentioned as an incentive to abandon parenthood (Peterson, 2015), this is why the term "childfree" seems to be a well-coined word: the semantics of the morpheme *'-free'* contains the idea of liberation from parental responsibilities imposed by society, presents a challenge to "pronatalism" (Reuter, 2019), and, thus, helps to express the idea of superiority over women who could not avoid motherhood as non-freedom.

As is the case with other countries (Peterson, 2015; van der Wiel et al., 2018), those who choose to be childfree (so-called "childfrees") in Russia put emphasis on individual autonomy and self-fulfillment and perceive it as a privilege that should be protected at the level of human rights. Remarkably, there is a distinctive feature of the Russian version of this trend: the main battlefield for propagating childfree ideas in Russian is the digital space where the childfrees' narratives are predominantly shaped in a rather aggressive form, the use of taboo and swear words being commonplace. Predictably, the majority of Russians view such speech behavior as a threat to the moral well-being of society.

Linguistic investigations of conflict-prone discourses in the digital space appear to be on the rise worldwide, as evidenced by Vessey (2021), Rodgers et al. (2020), Zvereva (2020), Muir et al. (2021). To date, the studies investigating the childfree phenomenon in Russia have been focused mainly on socio-economic and demographic aspects thereof (e.g. Bicharova et al., 2015), but there is surprisingly very little linguistic research in this field. Among the few linguistic studies is Antonova's (2013) investigation of the comments in childfree communities in the Russian social net VKontakte. The author argues that some of the childfrees' narratives can suffice to "moral extremism" (Antonova, 2013, p. 177) as some of the statements proclaim the superiority of childfree women, humiliate and abuse mothers, and, most appallingly, incite violence against children.

There are a number of studies exploring the so-called "bad language", both as a linguistic phenomenon and from the perspective of actual legislation. According to Posidelova (2016), it is necessary to develop a universal scale of invective/abusive potential of the Russian evaluative vocabulary. Similarly, Madzhuga (2019) advocates the development of a legal-linguistic classification of invective words/patterns to facilitate the legal assessment of their use in statements which are made in public. Zvereva (2020) examines trolling in online debates in the Runet, while Bednarek (2019)

investigates the taboo/swear usages in the narrative mass media with regard to communicative norms in society.

The issues of offending speech in the public domain are addressed by legislators. For example, the use of taboo and swear words in mass media is prohibited by the Russian federal law (Federal Law № 34-FL); profanity and obscenity are banned under the law on the State language of the Russian Federation (Federal Law of the Russian Federation № 53-FL).

2. Problem Statement

For a reason, the opposing social judgments associated with childfree ideas, as well as the offensive character of the speech behavior in Russian childfrees' discourse make it worthy of linguistic study. Given that the words used in the childfrees' narratives are closely connected with a vulnerable sphere of privacy, personal choices and moral values, it is relevant to determine the intersection between the specific speech behavior and actual legislation. The relevance of the research is also due to the fact that the legal assessment of the speech behavior manifested in the statements offending mothers and children is currently a controversial issue in Russia, since the childfrees' narratives are scattered across network resources that cannot be classified as mass media.

3. Research Questions

What are the characteristic features of the childfree discourse in the Russian digital space? Can the childfrees' speech behavior be construed as verbal abuse demolishing the institution of family and offending motherhood? These important issues related to the family policy in Russia are addressed via empirical linguistic analysis of the childfrees' narratives in the Russian digital space.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the characteristic features of the discourse represented by different types of texts produced by Russian childfrees, to describe their linguistic features and to identify the intersection between specific narratives and the norms of actual legislation.

5. Research Methods

The dataset was drawn from open Runet resources and Instagram. The textual material that we dwell on in this paper contains the texts selected on the basis of their thematic dominant "childfree". Hashtags were used as a tool pointing to a topic of interest ("being childfree") and serving to organize publications in Instagram. We have divided the retrieved data into two groups of textual evidence: 1) a quote of a childfree narrative in a journalistic text and 2) a narrative in an Instagram comment. Research methods include qualitative analysis of on-line texts grouped on the basis of the thematic dominant and hashtags; the method of component analysis of lexemes; the method of content analysis.

6. Findings

6.1. Quotes of childfree narratives in a journalistic text

The articles quoting people who explain their choice to be childfree are found in a variety of Russian online media: electronic versions of printed publications (Cosmopolitan, Hello!, Натали, Эноб, Men's Health, Esquire), the Internet portals (Woman.ru, ЯПОКУПАЮ.ру.), etc.

The instances of narratives to be considered further were retrieved from the article in the electronic version of the "Эноб" magazine (The child will not bring me joy – only problems …, 2017). The article contains interviews with eight people of different age: Kira (19), Aleksey (26), Tatyana (32), Alexander (29), Alisa (37), Gleb (35), Julia (36), Tatyana (49). The narratives include a detailed explanation and assessment of two options – the choice in favor of being childfree is presented as a positive one, while the choice in favor of parenthood is given a negative connotation. The lexemes used by the interviewees are predominantly connotative, expressing attitude**:** *более интересные и позитивные занятия; неинтересно; недостаточно умные; пугать; головная боль; проблемы; мерзкие; гадость.* There are instances of profanity labeling and nicknames, abusive by nature: *овуляха; яжемамка; яжебабушка; раздолбай; плодячка.* The meaningful tokens rendering a negative connotation make up 11 % of the total number of words. The most frequently used tokens are a negative morpheme '*не-*' (*неинтересно; недостаточно; неизвестно),* a negative particle '*не*' (*не та; не принесет*), negative pronouns and adverbs (*никакой; нисколько*), collocations with a negative connotation (*навязанный обществом стереотип*; *никому не нужный ребенок; загубленные судьбы),* oppositional conjunctions (*а; но*).

The use of contrasting semantic categories, which make up 12 %, makes the reader to perceive the choice to be childfree as an alternative better than parenthood, at different cognitive levels: 1) intellectual identification *smart – stupid (умный – глупый), 2)* social identification *responsible – irresponsible (ответственный – безответственный)*, 3) moral assessment *the good – the evil (добро – зло),* and 4) emotional response *good – bad (хороший – плохой).*

6.2. Narratives in Instagram comments

The data revealed 8,912 subscribers of the Russian Instagram childfrees' communities (data as of 07.02.20). The analysis in this category of narratives is limited to publications and comments in the Childfree_community account. The total number of publications in this account is 2010; 185 publications which received more than 50 comments (the maximum number of comments is 310) were selected out of the total number.

The instances of linguistic phenomena discussed below preserve the spelling and punctuation of the comments' authors. The data suggests that the main feature of the speech behavior in the comments is bluff speech aggression aimed at offending motherhood, in general, and women giving birth, in particular. The most frequent means of expressing verbal aggression are lexical ones (60 %). They can be distributed on a kind of the *scale of abusive load*: from words with the lowest load to the most offensive ones. We have rated the lexemes with negative connotation in accordance with this scale as follows: profanity words (*изрыгнутое, тварь, мрази, кретины, не допёрло*), innovative phraseologies with non-literal,

intensifying noun- or adjective-like units with unambiguously negative connotations (*бисячее бинго, жиза, овуляторы, размножители, чилдрены, срапнель, деграднутые, дномужик*) and invectives (swear and taboo words). For ethical reasons, we do not give instances of invective vocabulary, the frequency of which is more than 70 % of the registered lexical means of verbal abuse; and if the instances of invectives in the comments to a single publication are considered, there will be 100 % of their occurrence. The lexemes of all three types are used for offending mothers and children, as well as ridiculing of the person, who is the character of the publication based on a real situation. Semantic means of expressing aggression are mainly represented by contrasting comparison (12 %). Grammatical means of verbal abuse, their frequency being 20%, include rhetorical questions (*«Это насколько нужно ненавидеть людей, чтобы придумывать такие людоедские законы?»; «Вы расчленяете детей!» Я: Ну да и чё?»*), imperative sentences and exclamatory statements (*«Правильно пишет! Нечего плодиться как прусаки»).* Graphics means (8 %) are mainly represented by graphons in combination with the use of Caps Lock (*ПатАмуштА ты бАгАтая; ЛушЭ свАи деньги дитЯткам Атдай; Санешь мУтерью пАймёЖЖ*). The violation of spelling norms is intended to show that being a mother is like being an uneducated, primitive person, with poor abilities; the technique of writing words in capital letters is used to express the peremptory nature of one's own position, the volume of one's statement (*люблю ЖИВОТНЫХ; ВОТ РОДИШЬ-ПОЙМЕШЬ*).

7. Conclusion

The research proves that there is no one-to-one relationship between legal norms and childfrees' speech behavior in the Russian digital space segment. The childfrees' narratives are heterogeneous, the degree of their pragmatic and offensive potential varying.

In journalistic texts the quoted narratives are strong in their denial and ridiculing of traditional family values. Such quotes are micro-texts serving the purpose of contrasting two choices (childfree v motherhood/parenthood) at different levels of assessment and emotional response. Despite the form and content of these texts, which are at times beyond ethical and moral norms, they are not aligned with legal restrictions, but rather with ethical norms, as they are not directed at a specific addressee.

Different conclusions relate to the comments in the Childfree_community account. As it appears, the participants of this group form a specific speech community whose speech behavior is characterized by 1) repeated exposure to the emotional sphere of the addressee, creating or stimulating an emotional state of disgust, contempt, hatred of motherhood/parenthood/the family as a social institution; 2) supporting the egocentric aspirations to the so-called "freedom" from family responsibilities; 3) destabilizing relationships with communicants of other communities. In such speech behavior, the high potential for creating conflict is strengthened by the fact that this communicative behavior captures a lot of communicants, forming a kind of a hatred field.

Despite the fact that Instagram is not an instance of mass media, this resource is capable to "speak" directly to an infinite number of people, and this capability becomes almost inevitable due to the availability of modern technologies to users of all ages. Given that the statements are made publicly and are purposefully addressed to a person or group of persons (mothers, children), and are written with a direct intent to abuse and render a generalized negative assessment of an individual or group of

individuals, it can be assumed that they should be subjected to expert evaluation, correlating the linguistic

analysis of the texts with legal norms.

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