

On the Development of the Symbolic Meaning



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The present paper aims at displaying the ways of the development of the symbolic meaning within the semantic structure of words. With this aim in view two types of symbolic meanings are to be differentiated: the symbolic meaning as a unit of vocabulary and the symbolic meaning as a result of an abstraction and means of generalizing the author's ideology. In this aspect two types of symbols should be distinguished: the traditional and the literary (individual) symbols.

As has already been stated, the semantic structure of words is the least resistant to changes and one of the most prominent changes within this structure is the development of the symbolic meaning. An increasingly large number of investigations come to state that the reasons for the symbolic transformations within the semantic structure of words lie deep in the extralinguistic reality. A definite combination of speech sounds carries a meaning which in its turn stands for a definite referent. The referent, besides its immediate function, may just as well perform a certain symbolic function. Thus, the semantic structure of the word gets enriched with symbolic overtones, consequently, the semantic potentials of the word are enlarged.

Researchers state that the structure of the symbol is two-sided and consequently they distinguish two components: the denotational meaning of the word, which, under special circumstances, is liable to transfer additional symbolic information and the symbolic meaning itself.

On the basis of the profound analysis of the vocabulary units it has become possible to distinguish three main groups of words, denoting objects and phenomena of the objective reality, which, beside their direct lexical meaning, have also acquired additional symbolic overtones. These are as follows:

1. Words denoting natural phenomena and objects, which include the names of different types of vegetation (e.g. *cypress, olive, laurel, palm, rose, poppy, shamrock, etc.*), the names of animals and birds (e.g. *lion, pigeon, dove, raven, etc.*), the names of valuable stones (e.g. *emerald, diamond, etc.*) the names of colours (e.g. *red, white, black, blue, green, etc.*), the names of natural phenomena (e.g. *the rain, the snow, the star, the sun, the moon, etc.*)
2. Words denoting tools and instruments, which include the names of musical instruments (e.g. *trumpet, horn, etc.*), the names of different types of armour (e.g. *sword, shield, etc.*)

3. Phenomena and objects which do not exist in the objective reality, but have been created as symbols of specific qualities and are pure result of imagination (e.g. *phoenix, the wheel of Fortune, etc.*).

It should be mentioned that the phrasal units can also acquire special symbolic value due to the action that is described by its components: e.g. *to tear one's hair, to throw one's glove, to lead to the altar; to show the white feather, to be a dagger's drawn, etc.*

It is apparent that the relationship between the referent and the symbolic meaning is highly conditional and conditionality varies to different degrees. The symbolic meaning of the mentioned groups of words exists in the personal experience of people and are the result of special extralinguistic sphere where these words appear. The specific feature of the words belonging to the third group consists in the fact that they have initially been created as symbols of certain qualities and properties, thus, in the language they are accepted as *proper symbols*. The traditional symbolic meaning is generally registered in the dictionaries. The traditional symbol is the indispensable unit of communication and the same symbolic meaning of one and the same referent is observable in different language communities.

As regards to literary symbols, it should be mentioned that the relationship between the symbolic meaning and the referent is highly conditional. Literary symbols appear as a result of the author's individual manner of generalizing the facts of the objective reality and his philosophical outlook. Symbolic images within the literary text get organically intermingled with the whole text, thus becoming the ideological and expressive core of the text. They become the ideal means for realistic generalization.

For example, let's consider the symbolic image of the white hills within the philological context of "Hills Like White Elephants" written by Earnest Hemingway.

The title of the story and the image of the hills, that look like white elephants, in the philological context of the story gets enriched with additional emotional and evaluative overtones thus becoming a symbolic image. The image is introduced in the title of the story, afterwards it appears in the description of Nature. Through this image the author accentuates the heroine's inner psychological perception of the beauty of Nature. *The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry /H.L.W.E./*. In this example on the background of the brown and dry country the white hills that are clasped by the sunrays, inspire the heroine and make her believe that the happiness is possible to be achieved. The set phrase "*white elephant*" according to Oxford Dictionary of Current English is described as "*useless possession*". Although in the context of the above mentioned story the meaning of this set phrase is enlarged being introduced in a comparison "*hills like white elephants*". In its essence this is an individual transformation of the set-phrase, its meaning subjected to the author's intention and developing in an opposite direction, thus becoming the main means of expressing the author's intention. Taking into account the marked position of this comparison in the compositional structure of the whole story as well as the metaphorical transformation of the whole phrase, we can state that it acquires symbolic function.

This function is still emphasized when we consider the final part of the story. The

occasional symbolic unit loses its originality and becomes the equivalent to the set phrase “*things like white elephants*”, since the heroine loses her hope and faith in the happy maternity, and Nature, with all its colours becomes valueless for her. She looks around and sees the endless clouds covering the hills and there is no trace left of the beautiful scenery. /*They sat down at the table and the girl looked across at the hills on the dry side of the valley.*/ In this passage it becomes evident to the reader that the heroine’s dream along with the colours of the surrounding have faded away. We may just as well state that the symbolic image of the white hills manifests itself as a polyphonic phenomenon, realizing all its semantic and stylistic potentials.

As regards the emotional characteristics of the literary symbol, it should obviously be mentioned that these units are marked by certain expressivity and are endowed with a quality of producing an emotional impact on the reader. In the reader’s imagination the above mentioned image of the white hills get associated with concrete images describing on the one hand the heroine’s emotional perception of the beauty of Nature. On the other hand the reader gets the entire picture of her inner world full of disillusion that brings forth a feeling of sympathy.

Analyzing the above mentioned example of the literary /individual/ symbol within the context of the concrete literary work, it becomes possible to state that the individual symbol is a result of subjective literary perception of reality. It serves as a bridge between the author and the reader, since with the help of symbolic images the intention and the motives of creating a certain literary piece of art are exposed. Unlike the traditional symbol the literary symbol is not included in the dictionaries. Its meaning is vague, the adequate understanding of which can be achieved due to the consistent study of the concrete literary work, combined with the thorough investigation of the author’s individual style.

References:

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Բառի խորհրդանշական իմաստի զարգացումը

Սույն հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում է բառի խորհրդանշական իմաստի կայացման ընթացքը: Թվարկվում են լեզվի հիմնական բառաֆոնդին պատկանող բառային խմբերը, որոնք առավելապես հաճախ են ենթարկվում վերաիմաստավորման՝ ստանձնելով խորհրդանշական գործառույթ:

Այստեղ քննարկվում են նաև խորհրդանիշների երկու հիմնական տարատեսակների՝ ավանդական և հեղինակային խորհրդանիշների միջև ընկած ընդհանրություններն ու տարբերությունները: