

Dobrosklonskaya Tatiana

Moscow Russia

ROZHDESTVENSKY “THEORY OF RHETORIC” AS THE FOUNDATION FOR STUDIES OF LANGUAGE IN THE MEDIA

Dobrosklonskaya Tatiana, Doctor of Philology, Professor at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies of the Moscow State Lomonosov University, 119899 Moscow, Lomonosovskiy Prospekt, 31, r.402 E-mail: tatdobro@mail.ru

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Dear Colleagues,

Firstly I would like to thank the organizer of the conference Professor Mary Coghill for letting me to present my paper in this “distant” form. Even without the possibility of presenting my talk personally I hope that I will still manage to contribute to this wonderful event specially arranged in homage to the outstanding Russian scholar and thinker Yuri Rozhdestvensky.

In the 1970s as a student of the Philological Department of the Moscow State Lomonosov University I had the lucky chance to attend Rozhdestvensky’s lectures and seminars. It won’t be an exaggeration to say that he was admired by both – students and lecturers, and his classes had always gathered large audiences and provoked new thoughts and ideas.

As my field of research is the language of mass media, which is the subject for the new quickly developing discipline - Medialinguistics, today I will speak about Rozhdestvensky’s famous book Theory of Rhetoric. Published in 1997 by Moscow Publishing House Dobrosvet, it laid foundations for further studies in the field language functioning in mass media. The year of publishing is very important – 1997, when situations with mass media was drastically different from

what we observe nowadays in the so-called “information society”, with high speed Internet connections, multimedia and mobiles being part and parcel of our everyday practices. And in 1997 Yuri Rozhdestvensky published a book where he explains and actually forecasts all major trends in the studies of mass communication and language in the media for the next 30 years.

In my doctoral thesis called “Theory and Methods of Medialinguistics” which I defended in 2000, I relied a great deal on professor Rozhdestvensky’s ideas about how to analyze language functioning in the media. One of the basic categories of media linguistics – the concept of media text was preliminary formulated in his Theory of Rhetoric in the chapter devoted to mass communication “общие места в массовой коммуникации» page 556. He describes media text as an integral unity of verbal and non-verbal signs, stressing the unique combination of different semiotic systems in mass media, specific for each media channel, be it print or electronic media. This idea which immediately correlates with a well-known statement of the Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan “The medium is the message” has become a key element in medialinguistic approach to the study of speech production in the media. Professor Rozhdestvensky also indicated the so-called “patch-work” character (коллажность) of the media text, which has been further described as its multi-dimensional, multi-level nature.

So the book Theory of Rhetoric has served as a foundation for the emergence of a new full-fledged branch of linguistics, i.e. media linguistics, which incorporated all previous achievements in the field.

The term “media linguistics” has been formed by analogy with the whole set of similar terms, used to denote new academic disciplines formed at the junction of several fields of research, such as sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistics, media psychology, media economics etc. As it proceeds from the term itself, based on the combination of two key components “media” and “linguistics”, the subject of this new discipline is the study of language functioning in the sphere of mass

communication. In other words media linguistics deals with overall complex research of a particular social field of language usage – the production of speech in mass media. The emergence of media linguistics as a new branch of language studies is fully justified, taking into consideration a crucial role that mass media has been playing in society for the past 30 years. Nowadays almost two decades later there are many reasons to believe that Medialinguistics has been firmly established and widely recognized as a new quickly growing discipline attracting an ever increasing scholarly attention. As in every full-fledged academic area it conforms to certain conditions and requirements, such as: 1) existence of a thoroughly developed theory, that would serve as a solid basis for further research in the given field; 2) more or less stable inner thematic structure; 3) methodology or a set of techniques and methods of analysis; 4) terminology.

Undoubtedly the most important theoretical component of media linguistics is comprised by **the concept of media text**, which is mentioned actually in all studies devoted to speech production in mass communication. The essence of this concept could be summed up as follows: traditional for linguistics definition of a text as “coherent and integral stretch of language either spoken or written”, when taken to the sphere of mass communication, considerably expands its meaning. In mass media the concept of a text goes beyond the formal boundaries of verbal sign system, and approaches its semiotic interpretation, when a “text” refers to a stretch of any type of signs, not necessarily verbal. So we may assume that media texts can be regarded as multilevel and poly-dimensional phenomena, and that’s exactly what Professor Rozhdestvensky wrote about in the book *Theory of Rhetoric*.

A significant component of media linguistics’ theory is comprised by a set of parameters specially designed for a thorough and coherent description of all possible types of medial texts. So the central concept of a media text is supported by a stable system of parameters, which allow the description and classification

of all texts functioning in mass media in terms of their production, distribution, verbal and media characteristics. This system includes the following parameters:

- 1) Authorship (the text could be produced either by an individual or a collective)
- 2) Type of production (oral – written)
- 3) Type of presentation (oral – written)
- 4) Media channel used for transmitting: the print and the electronic media, Internet
- 5) Functional type or text genre: news, comment and analysis, features, advertising
- 6) Topical affiliation (politics, business, culture, education, sport, and other universal media topics, forming the content structure of everyday information flow).

Professor Rozhdestvensky's book *Theory of Rhetoric* also helped to solve the problem of typological description of media speech. A universal typological classification, encompassing the whole variety of media texts and overcoming the challenge of constant speech flexibility factor has been formulated within the frameworks of Medialinguistics. This classification is based on the functional stylistic classification formulated by another outstanding Russian linguist Viktor Vinogradov, whose works also deserve being translated into other languages and allows us to single out the following four types of media texts: 1) news 2) comment and analysis 3) features and 4) advertising.

The advantages of this classification proceed from the fact that it allows to adequately reflect the actual combination of two language functions – the function of information and the function of impact. If we try to describe the four above types in terms of these functions' implementation, then news texts realize the information function to the highest degree, the materials that belong to the category “comment and analysis” combine information function with impact due to the increasing use of evaluative components.

One more significant parameter for the analysis of media texts is the “dominant topic” which uses as the main criteria the content factor, or text belonging to a certain theme regularly covered in mass media. The study of everyday media speech flow demonstrates that seemingly chaotic media content is a well structured continuum, naturally organized around stable thematic structures. It may be assumed that mass media structure permanently change the information picture of the world, organizing incessant flux of media messages with the help of fixed regularly reproduced themes, or media topics, which include politics, business, education, sport, culture, technology weather etc. Such lists of traditional media topics can be found in any printed newspaper with its thematic division of pages, or in the newspaper Internet version, providing an even more specified list of subjects covered.

Analyzing media texts in terms of their topical structure presupposes taking into consideration the so called “linguocultural factor”. The matter is that in mass media the information picture of the world is processed through the filters of national language and culture, which is naturally manifested in the choice of culture-specific media topics regularly covered by the media of this or that country. For instance, one of such topics of regular coverage in the British media is undoubtedly the life of the Royal family, scandals connected with top level politicians and immigration, while in the Russian media landscape one can always find texts dealing with criminality and corruption cases among civil servants. Culture-specific topics, regularly covered by the media, can be called, by analogy with “buzz-topics”,¹ because they invite keen interest of the wide public and reflect cultural salience of the national media landscape.

A great significance for media linguistics represents a statement by Professor Rozhdestvensky concerning mechanisms of text production and perception in mass media. He stresses that in mass communication text production acquires special features, determined by collective efforts and salience of the target audience (Theory of Rhetoric, page 476), he also stresses that mass media

spreads not only information entertainment and news, but what is even more important – the STYLE, overall style embracing all spheres of human activities – from fashion and everyday practices to business and politics. This very important idea of Yuri Rozhdestvensky is still to be developed, because nowadays we receive increasing evidence concerning the all penetrating concept of style.

So to conclude I would like to say that today the ideas formulated by professor Rozhdestvensky in the book *Theory of Rhetoric* have received many new developments, one of which is a new but quickly growing discipline – Medialinguistics, which by now can boast a relatively stable content structure. Though the list of issues shaping the content of media linguistics remains open, yet it is possible to single out some more or less fixed topics that form the skeleton of this new branch of knowledge. It may be said that nowadays all media linguistics research is organized around the following six topics:

- 1) Defining the status of media language within the framework of contemporary linguistic studies, and its description in terms of a basic paradigm: language-speech, text –discourse.
- 2) Functional stylistic differentiation of media discourse, classification of media texts on the basis of different sets of criteria: implementation of language functions, media channel (the print media, radio, television and Internet).
- 3) Media speech typology, the spectrum of the media texts' types and genres, description of the main types of media texts: news, comment and analysis, features and advertising.
- 4) Lexical, syntactic and stylistic analysis of the language of media texts.
- 5) Discourse analysis of the media texts, including their production, transmission, perception, social and cultural context, ideological and political factors, interpretative potential of the media speech practices and culture-specific traits.
- 6) Manipulative potential of the media language, verbal and media techniques used for persuasion in advertising, propaganda, public relations and information management, various means of the implementation of ideological component.

7) Comparative studies of media language in different cultural and political contexts, or comparative media linguistics.

I would also like to stress that the ideas and trends put forward by Professor Yuri Rozhdestvensky in his book “Theory of Rhetoric” still invite future research and will always be in the centre of academic attention. And as today English has become the global language there are many texts by Rozhdestvensky still to be translated in the language of global communication. Thank you for attention and with best regards from the Moscow State university, the “academic home” of Professor Rozhdestvensky.

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Endnote

¹ The term “buzz-topic” as applied to the analysis of the media content was first introduced in the book by Tatiana Dobrosklonskaya *Вопросы изучения медиатекстов* (Some aspects of media texts’ analysis) – Moscow, MSU, 2000