

ФИЛОЛОГИЯ*(специальность: 10.02.19)*

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It is considered the essence of toxic discourse, language ecology and slang as an essential factor of both language diversity and toxicity. Toxicity is viewed as the characteristics capable of producing damaging effect. An important role of slang issues is noted. The term “toxic discourse” is introduced. Slang is interpreted as one of the factors ensuring linguistic diversity. The destructive role of slang is revealed in the aspect of language ecology. The significance of such kind of study is determined by the urgent necessity of theoretical reflection on discourse toxicity and language ecology.

Key words: toxic discourse, toxicity, toxic comments, toxic text, language ecology, language environment, English, slang, communication.

Modern linguists point out the importance and necessity of rethinking in terms of various language issues due to the current situation in the world, involving the largescale spread of various kinds of viruses that cause pandemics COVID-19 [13]. In the context of the Covid19 pandemic and forced self isolation, people are spending more and more time on the Internet, while the degree of aggression is getting higher and higher. This also affects the reviews and comments that customers leave about the situation in general and different goods and companies in particular. Angry reactions to completely neutral statements, Internet harassment – such issues have become even more widely spread. Today’s public discourse is a toxic mix of ad hominem attacks, tribalism and unyielding advocacy. It is a kind of pollution that sabotages modern communicative space in general and public discourse, in particular.

According to the team research, “toxic messages amount to 21% of the overall conversation touching on the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of the WHO in the

crisis. In other words, 21 out of 100 tweets in the sample are expected to convey a rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable comment. The percentage of toxic tweets increases after 26 March (25%), when many countries were facing the growing adverse effects of the pandemic and passing measures to confine their populations” [12]. It is worth noting that “a higher level of toxicity than the average baseline is detected in conversations around political leaders. Notably, among those, over 30% of messages mentioning the US president are expected to be toxic” [12].

Taking into account all of the above mentioned it is urgent to stick to the point of toxicity, its essence and role in the general discourse space. In the modern world, the problem of identifying texts containing negatively colored, rude, directed against another person – in other words – toxic vocabulary is particularly acute. Today almost every person has one or more accounts in social networks, where he enters into communication acts with a large number of unfamiliar people, many of whom hide their personalities behind pseudonyms (nicknames). The increased number of contacts, even compared to not so distant period of time (some twenty years ago), has resulted in the growing tension, and therefore it may lead to a greater psychological burden due to the inevitable virtual manifestations of aggression, which are also largely associated with the anonymity of this communication. According to a Pew Research Center study, one of the main causes of suicide among teenagers is negative comments about them on social networks.

The relevance of the toxicity study is due to the growing number of content that negatively affects readers’/viewers’ psychological state, as well as contains insults against the individual. Unacceptable words and expressions that create psychological discomfort and express rudeness and aggression have received the common term "toxic vocabulary". The expansion of the lexical combinability of the word "toxic" is of special linguistic interest: previously the word was used in connection with toxic substances, nowadays it is possible to observe its growing spread in oral and written speech. The impact of the globalization process in general and the English language impact in particular on the “toxic expansion” is worth analyzing.

When investigating the problem of defining toxic discourse, it is necessary first of all to define the concept of "toxicity". For a long time the word "toxic" was not generally used and it was not stylistically neutral in the Russian language, it was used most often in scientific and popular scientific publications, and was also included into dictionaries of foreign language vocabulary. In the "Dictionary of For-

eign Words" by I.A. Vasyukova [2, p. 575], as well as in the "Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language" by S.I. Ozhegov and N.Yu. Shvedova [3] such meanings as "capable of causing poisoning", "containing toxins, toxic" are given as basic ones. But under the influence of both the English language and the discourse on the analysis of human relations, which is becoming increasingly popular in the Russian-speaking space, the figurative meaning of the word "toxic" began to gain its popularity. In the last decade, it has been used to characterize relationships between people, and this semantic transfer is based on the conclusion that a toxic person creates unfavorable and toxic relationships and behaves in some way comparable to the impact of a toxic substance [5, p. 91].

Nowadays, some researchers note that in the space of the journalistic style for the word "toxic", its figurative meaning has become fixed as the main one. At the same time, a new concept appears on the material of the established form, combining some irony and the transfer of meaning from the scientific environment to the public one. But all these uses of the word in the Russian language are direct calques from English, where the word "toxic" has long lost its original semantics and forms new lexical relations. In the Macmillan Dictionary [7], one of the modern online dictionaries of the English language, in addition to the main one, the following meanings have already been registered for the adjective "toxic": used about a subject on which opinion is so strongly divided that it is hard to have a reasonable discussion about it; very bad, unpleasant or harmful.

It is also interesting to note that for the first of the above figurative meanings, words such as "bad" and "embarrassing" are given as synonymous variants. For the second of the above figurative meanings, synonyms are not specified, but the date of adding this meaning to the dictionary is April 9, 2018. This once again indicates the relative decency of the consolidation and popularity of this concept in the public consciousness. In addition, in 2018, the Oxford Dictionary chose the word "toxic" as the word of the year [9]. The article accompanying the announcement notes both the 45% increase in the number of queries with this word on the Oxford Dictionary website, and its potential for cultural significance, as well as its ability to convey the "spirit and mood" of the year.

According to the dictionary, most often "toxic" is still used in more traditional combinations, such as "toxic chemical", "toxic substance" and "toxic gas", but at the same time, "toxic relationship" and "toxic culture" have gained a place in the

top ten most popular phrases. In Russia, in the same year 2018, the expert council at the Center for the Creative Development of the Russian Language made a rating of ten words-symbols of the year, among which the word "toxic" was also found, which suggests that a similar transformation of an existing word and the development of its polysemy took place in the Russian-speaking space.

But before entering a new meaning of a word into the dictionary, a new figurative semantics must be formed and fixed in the public consciousness sufficiently stable to be able to fix this fact in the dictionary. The process of forming this figurative semantics with a wider area of use is inextricably linked to the processes that took place in English. According to the analysis of the Corpus of the History of American English [6], the first uses in a different meaning from the original dictionary definition appeared already in the 70s, although it became possible to talk about the mass use of the word "toxic" only in the 80s–90s. And if in the period from 1980 to 1989, 283 cases of the use of the word "toxic" were recorded, then in the next decade the number of cases increased by one and a half times and the word began to appear in popular newspapers and magazines, which indicates its greater distribution in new professional circles. Another interesting trend noted in the analysis is the manifestation of the word "toxic" as an element of the professional jargon of psychologists, which penetrates through the popular media into widespread use, although it is not yet reflected in specialized psychological dictionaries.

In journalistic, scientific and dictionary articles devoted to the problem of toxicity, the following signs of a toxic person and his behavior are given: by his actions and words, a toxic person destroys your faith in yourself and in the world around you; such people use unethical and sometimes illegal methods of manipulation that cause irritation in others; "very negative person, that bitch about everything, spread unnecessary hate or just talk shit about others" [8]. From these descriptions, it can be seen that the semantic component of poisoning and destruction is preserved when using the figurative meaning of the word "toxic", creating a bright memorable image. The further development of the semantics of the adjective "toxic" led to the expansion of its metaphorical use, allowing to name not only the relations, but also the actions and results of these relations, as well as their direct participants. This is how the concepts of "toxic text", "toxic behavior", "toxic user", "toxic comments", "toxic discourse" and others appeared.

Toxic texts can have a destructive effect on the consciousness of the addressee, especially in the case of a young personality, in which the identification processes are disrupted and the course of age-related crises is aggravated. Signs of toxic texts may be the following: open or passive aggression, trolling, attacks on the person and threats. Often, the mockery embedded in the text is disguised as fair criticism or instructions, which creates frustration in the reader's mind.

The toxic discourse is characterized by the following distinctive features: it contains an abundance of words and phrases harmfully affecting both general communicative space and linguistic consciousness of native speakers, it includes unnecessary borrowings, unwarranted comments of cynical and destructive type, excessive use of abbreviations, neither generally known nor accepted.

What makes a toxic text sound even more toxic is slang which is known for – but not limited to – its offensive, vulgar, cynical and harsh character. Slang may be viewed as an effective means of manipulation, which is not suitable for explicit persuasion and argumentation, but is perfect for creating toxic discourse and toxicity in general [10]. One of toxicity manifestations is manipulation, which represents the pragmatic act that achieves its goals, without disclosure of obvious communicative intension: the addresser intentionally chooses such forms of the statement where any elements indicating directly an intentional condition of the addressee are excluded. The substitutive nature of manipulation determines the choice of certain linguistic units, such as words deprived of an internal form, euphemisms and slang. In this respect the language ecology, its basic principles and rules are more than urgent. It is widely believed that the mass invasion of sub-standard, in particular slang, leads to the communicative degradation. The development of communication in this case takes an unstable character: the desired effect is achieved through impoverishment of communication, cultural diversity suffers. Thus, there is a well-known situation in the environment: the achievement of short-term benefits at the cost of the system destruction. As a result, a cultural and ecological catastrophe may occur [11]. Therefore, the introduction of such concepts and terms of linguistic ecology as 'linguistic toxicology' and 'linguotoxins', proposed by A. Skovorodnikov and G. Kopnina, is really needful and essential for further toxic discourse studies [4].

Thus, the concept of "toxicity" is quite young, the process of forming its figurative semantics began in the 70s of the XX century and is still going on. At

the same time, the word "toxic" has already gained significant popularity in the meaning of a person's characteristics or the results of his actions – for example, texts and comments left on social networks, while maintaining the semantic sign of harmfulness and venom. The influence of such texts on a person and his relations in society is now the subject of study by psychologists and sociologists, but their danger is already noted, it creates the need not only to identify toxic texts, but to study toxic discourse.

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