

On differences between homonymy and polysemy of Russian onomatopoeic verbal interjections

Abstract

In this article I investigate polysemy within the word class of onomatopoeic verbal interjections in Russian. The main aim of the study is to demonstrate on the basis of data from the Russian National Corpus that these linguistic units combine sound-symbolic, interjectional and predicative features. Secondly, this research analyses cases of homonymy between onomatopoeic verbal interjections and other grammatical classes. It considers cues on the basis of which the linguistic units in question can be identified and classified as belonging to a certain class of words. Finally, this article considers factors that have caused both homonymy and polysemy to be typical of one and the same group of words such as Russian onomatopoeic verbal interjections.

1. Introduction

There has been a long polemic debate about grammatical properties of interjections as a word class. Some scholars insist on a certain degree of affinity that interjections have with discourse markers, particles, routines, animal calls and onomatopoeic words (Kryk 1992; Wilkins 1992; Wierzbicka 1991). Others adhere to the opinion that interjections differ from adverbs and particles (Cuenca 2000); from particles and routines (Ameka 1992); or from animal calls, particles and onomatopoeias (Meinard 2015). In Russian there is a class of words with a very unclear grammatical status. These linguistic units are usually called ‘verbal interjections’ (Švedova 1980), ‘verboids’ (Nikitina 2012), ‘sound gestures’ (Isačenko 1975), ‘narrative predicates’ (Kor Chahine 2008), or ‘iconic depictives’ (Wierzbicka 1991, 290). In this article, I will refer to these words as ‘onomatopoeic verbal interjections’.

Needless to say, similar linguistic units can be found in other languages. Japanese ideophones in particular are divided into three classes: phonomimes (indicate sounds), phenomimes (describe appearances, states, conditions of the extralinguistic reality), and psychomimes (express feelings or mental states) (Hasada 2001; Martin 1964; Shibatani 1990: 154). Such a classification explains why onomatopoeias are often lumped together with interjections. While Russian onomatopoeic verbal interjections come close to Japanese phonomimetic ideophones, interjections in general share the same semantic features with psychomimes.

Although a number of works have attempted to describe and analyse onomatopoeic verbal interjections, an unambiguous conclusion how to distinguish between polysemy within this very class or homonymy with other classes of words has not