Symbolic Names in Videotexts of Russian Political Advertising: Pragmatic and Linguocultural Aspects

Anastasia DMITRIEVA* and Marina GOLOMIDOVA

Department of Integrated Marketing Communications and Branding, Ural Federal University, Ekaterinburg, Russia

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. The paper examines symbolic names in multimodal texts of Russian political advertising video clips of the late 20th—early 21st centuries. The research is aimed at discovering pragmatic and linguoculturological particularities of using symbolic names in political advertising videotexts. The study is conducted in compliance with the linguoculturological approach and the method of semantic analysis. As a result, the following semantic groups of symbolic names have been discovered in the studied videotexts: names of historical personalities, geographical names, names of famous buildings, names of sculptural compositions and names of paintings. The multimodal aspect of their use implies interaction between verbal and non-verbal signs designed to communicate topical political messages. Overall, symbolic names in the studied videotexts are used for creating a candidate’s image, discrediting his/her political competitors and establishing a certain emotional state of the target audience, which is necessary for the desired electoral behaviour of the latter.

1. Introduction

There are several ways of defining a symbol. Broadly speaking (according to Charles Pierce), this term “is applicable to whatever may be found to realise the idea connected with the word”, also it “is connected with its object by virtue of the idea” [1]. The philosophical dictionary characterizes the symbol as “an idea, an image or an object having its own content and simultaneously representing some other content in a generalized, unexpanded form” [2]. The Soviet and Russian literature scholar and semiotician Yu. M. Lotman understood the symbol as a ‘memory mechanism of a culture’ [3], emphasizing its nontemporal aspect. Another Russian scholar, A.F. Losev, noted that “the symbol of a thing is the shaping of its ideal and figurative composition” [4]. Therefore, the key aspect of understanding the notion of a symbol is that there is always a certain image behind it. E.F. Kosichenko, a contemporary researcher, outlines the following features of a symbol: “figurativeness, cultural determinancy, intertextuality, constance and value-based significance” [5].

As for the symbolic name, there is no unified definition existing to date. The already cited E.F. Kosichenko suggests applying the above-mentioned criteria to defining the symbolic status of a proper name. It seems relevant for our study to follow this interpretation of a symbolic name. Thus, the latter should be understood to mean a proper name having a well-known, vivid and persistent image behind it, which gives the onym a particular axiological significance in the context of a culture.

The research works of E.F. Kosichenko [5,6,7], M.L. Kovshova [8], R.I. Vorontsov [9], Zh.A. Rudenko [10] and S.I. Garagulya [11] represent the study of symbolic names functioning particularities in literary texts, media discourse and mass culture in general. However, such names frequently get embedded into new forms and genres of mass communication.

Political advertising texts, which are aimed at linguistic manipulation of the target audience, are of great interest in terms of analyzing symbolic names being part of these texts. Indeed, in this case
symbolic names have a special role due to their ability to convey cultural meanings in a concentrated 
way and evoke clear and familiar images in the consciousness of the target audience.

This paper studies symbolic names in the texts of political advertising video clips. The uniqueness of 
this genre consists in its multimodality, i.e. the combination of verbal and non-verbal components. In 
the aggregate, these allow to create a seamless and multi-faceted image of a politician, to communicate 
the main ideas of his program succinctly and figuratively at the same time.

In this sense, symbolic names play a considerable role. However, we should note two modes of their 
functioning in multimodal texts. Firstly, a symbolic name can be present explicitly in the traditional 
verbal form. Secondly, it can be involved implicitly in the context of a videotext. This happens when, 
instead of a verbal sign, the corresponding visual image appears in the footage. Both the well-known 
name and the visual sign correspond to the same denotation. Therefore, the proper name, which is 
absent in the text, can easily be reconstructed and made actual through the image in the mind of the 
audience perceiving it.

The aim of this study consists in unveiling pragmatic and linguoculturological particularities of 
functioning of symbolic names in multimodal texts of political video advertisement. The research 
objectives include identifying main semantic groups (spheres of concepts) to which these names 
belong, determining the semiotic specificities of their realization and clarifying the role that symbolic 
names play in the creation of manipulation effect designed to influence the target audience (the 
electorate).

2. Methods and Materials

The text material for this research encompasses the videotexts of Russian political advertising video 
clips (about 100) created in the framework of presidential campaigns from 1990s until the present time. 
In order to evoke topical meanings of symbolic names in these multimodal videotexts, the authors 
use semantic interpretation in compliance with the general semiotic approach allowing to consider 
verbal and non-verbal components in their interrelation.

3. Results

Depending on the semantics and linguoculturological particularities, we can determine the following 
semantic groups of symbolic names in the studied political advertising video clips:

1. Names of historical personalities
2. Geographical names
3. Names of famous buildings and urban features
4. Names of sculptural compositions
5. Names of paintings

3.1 Symbolic Names of Historical Personalities

The most prominent and important symbolic names of this group in the studied videotexts are those 
of Lenin and Stalin. Both of them are associated in the consciousness of people in modern Russia with 
the events and realia of the Soviet times. The name Lenin can be considered a symbol of the Bolshevik 
Revolution of 1917 as well as the subsequent dramatic transformations in the state system. In the 
studied videotexts this name is mainly present implicitly: it is not represented verbally but it becomes 
actual in the consciousness of the public via newsreel footage of V. Lenin as well as his plastic images. 
These are consistently used in the video clips of candidates from communist parties: Ленина клич: 
‘Всегда будь готов’—пойте сквозь рокот дружных рядов/Lenin’s call—‘Be ready’—sing through 
the booming of unanimous rows [12] (the initial rhyme is lost in the English translation).
Simultaneously, together with these words, the above-mentioned images of V. Lenin appear in the video clip.

Meanwhile, this symbolic name is sometimes used to create the images of communist candidates for presidency as political competitors. For instance, in one of B. Yeltsin’s cartoon video clips in 1996, which was aimed at consistent discreditation of the communist party chaired by G. Zyuganov, the audience can hear the melody of a famous soviet song “И Ленин, такой молодой…” / “And Lenin, so young…” [13]. Despite the fact that the name Lenin as such is not present verbally in the text, the tune of the song allows most of the electorate to reconstruct its lyrics easily. Thus, the symbolic name is made actual in the addressee’s minds.

The name Stalin has a two-fold symbolic interpretation in the studied videotexts. On the one hand, it symbolizes strong power and state order: [настоящий коммунист верил в красную звезду и бросал в толпу: “Да здравствует, Сталин!” / [a real communist] believed in the red star and whipped out into the crowd: “Hail Stalin!”] [14]. This meaning usually takes place in the video clips of candidates from communist parties. On the other hand, in advertising videos of candidates representing other parties the same name Stalin becomes a symbol of terror and repressions: Сталин – позорное пятно на истории нашей страны / Stalin is a pitch brand on the history of our country [15].

3.2 Geographical Names

The names of geographical features (toponyms) which have acquired a symbolic meaning in the Russian consciousness and culture are represented in the studied videotexts by the names: the Solovki, Chernobyl and Courchevel.

The name the Solovki, the colloquial variant of the toponym the Solovetsky Islands, refers to an archipelago in the White Sea. However, in the minds of Russian people of the older generation it has a persistent association with the soviet prison camps (Gulag) situated on these islands. Therefore, the Solovki as a name has become a symbol of repressions and camp terror. In this sense, the fact of including the image of a newspaper page with a headline “The New Solovki” [16] into one of B. Yeltsin’s political video clips in 1996 is targeted at causing the audience’s fear of a possible return to the repressive regime and making them renounce the idea of voting for the communists.

The symbolic name Chernobyl has a similar tonality. This is the name of the Ukrainian city which suffered from the dreadful catastrophe at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986. The use of a metaphor “political Chernobyl” [17] by one of Russian politicians in 1991 with reference to the program of his competitors was aimed at making the electorate audience feel scared and, thus, motivate them to vote in a certain way.

Finally, the name Courchevel referring to a famous ski resort in France is a symbol of the luxurious life of the society elite and is usually used for expressing ordinary people’s disregard of the latter. For example, in one of the studied video clips we can observe some book covers with the portraits of one candidate’s political opponents as well as ironical headings, one of which – Courchevel – is meant to characterize the millionaire-entrepreneur M. Prokhorov, whose reputation had been spoiled by a scandal in Courchevel [18].

3.3 Names of Famous Buildings and Urban Features

The symbolic names of this semantic category are the Kremlin and the Ostankino.

The name of the Kremlin as the place where the Russian state power is concentrated is a symbol of this power as such. No wonder it appears in verbal and implicit forms (images of the Kremlin walls and towers) in the video clips of most candidates for presidency. In some cases, it becomes part of verbal tropes: те люди, те силы, которые 25 лет назад свергли власть Страны Советов, разрушили Советский Союз, опутали Кремль своими щупальцами, этот неолибералистский спрут… / those people, those forces that overthrew the rule of the Soviet Country 25 years ago, who destroyed the Soviet Union, entangled the Kremlin with their tentacles, this neoliberal octopus... [19].
The name of the Ostankino—a colloquial form of the name of the Ostankino television tower where the studios of the main Russian broadcasting (TV and radio) channels are situated—has long been considered the symbol of the state propaganda in the mass media. It is no coincidence that one of the candidates for presidency in 2018 suggests sticking it up with a special duct tape “Против всех” (“Against everyone”): Останкино обесточь—клей скотч / Deenergize the Ostankino—stick the duct tape [20] (the initial rhyme is lost in the English translation).

3.4 Names of Sculptural Compositions

The studied political video clips include the names of well-known (in Russia) sculptural compositions having a symbolic meaning for the Russian people. The name of the monumental statue Родина-мать (Motherland) located on the memorial site “Mamayev Kurgan” near Volgograd (former Stalingrad) created in tribute to the victory in the Great Patriotic war (the Russian equivalent of the World War II) is a symbol of this victory and a symbol of the Russian country (the former USSR) with its heroic past. For instance, in one video clip of M. Syraykin, the communist candidate for presidency in 2018, the image of this sculpture is used to illustrate following line from a song: Если ты любишь Родину-мать, надо под наши знамена вставать / If you love the Motherland, join our colours [12] (the initial rhyme is lost in the English translation). In this case the verbal expression Родина-мать (the Motherland) is merged in the addressee’s mind) with the name of the cognominal sculpture.

The sculpture Рабочий и колхозница (Factory worker and kolkhoz female worker), situated on the site of the Exhibition of National Economy Achievements in Moscow, is well known by most of the Russian people by the use of its image in the opening picture of all the films made by the soviet film studio “Mosfilm”. The name of this sculpture is present implicitly in some video clips of communist candidates and serves as a symbol of the Soviet epoch and the economic strength of the Soviet Union. One of the political videos issued in 2018 starts with a caricature in which the characters of this sculpture (the factory worker and the kolkhoz female worker) are “kicking” the bear being the symbol of the ruling political party “United Russia”. The image is accompanied by the slogan: “Пора менять власть!” (“It’s time to shift the power”) (Fig. 1). This brings into action the non-verbal discredit of the political competitors of the candidate (P. Grudinin) advertised in the video clip [21].

Figure 1. A Shot from P. Grudinin’s Video Clip with an Image of the Sculpture Рабочий и колхозница (Factory Worker and Kolkhoz Female Worker) (2018) [21].

The name of the sculpture David (by Michelangelo Buonarroti) has a double symbolic meaning. Firstly, this is the name of a Bible character who slaid the giant Goliath in an unequal battle. Secondly, the sculpture itself is an example of perfect proportions and a symbol of plastic art. The name David is made actual through the use of the image of this sculpture in one of B. Yeltsin’s videos which make part of the advertising video series Vote or lose visually presenting possible awful alternatives to Yeltsin’s democracy. In the context of the video clip in question, the image of David is opposed to something disgusting (an unidentifiable object resembling either crumpled paper or the inner side of animal skin). Simultaneously, the audience can hear the slogan: “Vote or lose” [22]. Hence, in the
political context, the name David corresponds to the “Golden age” of democracy whereas the second vague object – to the return of the “Stone age” in the political sense.

3.5 Names of Paintings

The symbolic names of this semantic category are represented in the studied videotexts by only one—the name of the painting by K. Brullov “The last day of Pompeii”. In the video clip of one candidate for presidency in 1996, some fragments of this piece of art portraying individual people with fear on their faces serve as an illustration for the following phrase: странам и народам всегда нужны люди, знающие, куда идти, дающие надежду / countries and nations have always needed the people who know the way, who give hope [23]. Demonstrating in this symbolic way the “horrors” of the past (or probably of the present as well), the politician speaks about his ability to find a way out of the existing situation and lead the people away from the inevitable “catastrophe”.

4. Summary

Symbolic names in the texts of Russian political advertising video clips have a considerable pragmatic and linguocultural value. They are diverse in terms of semantics and reflect historical, cultural and everyday realia, they are also an object of value-based attitude. A significant part of symbolic names in the studied videotexts is represented implicitly and becomes actual due to well-known visual signs. Together they allow to convey more succinct meanings and create images that incite an attitudinal an emotional response from the addressee audience.

Usually, these meanings and images are metaphorically or metonymically connected to some aspects of a candidate’s political program or image and reflect his/her intention to coerce the electorate into voting for him/her. In some cases, the use of symbolic names in political videotexts is aimed at discrediting the competitors of a certain candidate. Lastly, these onomastic signs play a considerable role in creating a particular emotional disposition of the target audience: the names are meant to provoke the feelings of anxiety, fear, pride, hope etc. The aim of these pragmatic techniques is to influence the consciousness and beliefs of the addressees and, as a result, to instigate the desired electoral behaviour.

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