DOI: 10.24833/2410-2423-2018-1-13-121-127

RUSSIAN ABSURD TEXTS

S.V. Chernova, A.D. Ferguson

Moscow State Institute of International Relations (University),
76, Prospect Vernadskogo, Moscow, 119454, Russia.

Australian Technical and Further Education (TAFE), English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS), 66 Ernest Street, South Brisbane, Queensland 4101.

The article is devoted to the study of comical absurdity. The aim of this article is threefold: first, to outline basic characteristic features of comical absurdity and examine lexical stylistic devices in absurd texts; second, provide a classification of absurd messages; finally, to outline common scripts of Russian absurd anecdotes. The authors come to the conclusion that basic characteristic features of comical absurdity are inductive or deductive errors, lack of time, place, number or action coincidence, tautological repetitions, nonselection, and parody. Imagery and expressivity of comical absurdity are created with the help of metaphors, personification, overstatement, understatement, oxymoron, and pun. The authors divide irrational messages into pseudo-absurd, relatively absurd and verily absurd postulates. Three common scripts of Russian absurd anecdotes are outlined depending on the clarity of verbalization and a communicative purport. The results of this research would help to avoid confusion, which is not rare in discussions on comical absurdity.

Ключевые слова: *comical absurdity, pseudo-absurd postulates, relatively absurd postulates, verily absurd postulates, semantic characteristics, pragmatic characteristics, syntactic characteristics, anthropological characteristics, nonsense, anecdotes.*

The beginning of the 21st century is provoking the increased interest in absurdity. This article is devoted to the study of comical absurdity. The aim of this article is threefold: first, to outline basic characteristic features of comical absurdity and examine lexical stylistic devices in absurd texts; second, provide a classification of absurd messages; finally, to outline common scripts of Russian absurd anecdotes.

In the ordinary consciousness of native speakers, absurdity is characterized by such conceptual parameters as: "lack of clarity/obscurity", "inconsistency of common sense", "discrepancy between an existing state of world affairs manifested in the violation of generally accepted social norms and values".

In the scientific and artistic consciousness absurdity is the "way to prove the falsity of the thesis", a certain reaction to the "alienation from the world" and an "aesthetic category".

We distinguish the concept of "absurd (absurdity)" and "nonsense". Absurdity is a symptom of a specific situation, when something, which is contrary to common sense, life experience or logic, is allowed as possible or might take place in reality, while nonsense is absolutely unthinkable and considered to be an artificial set of incompatible words devoid of any meaning or hidden senses.

Absurdity is mainly caused by the appearance of "polysemantic logic". In "unambiguous logic" the statement can be either true or false while in "polysemantic logic" everything is possible and has equal probability [3, p. 259].

Nowadays there are a lot of different statements in which rationality and absurdity are mixed in different proportions. Some of them provoke a feeling of ineptitude, while others are full of deep hidden sense. Something that is nonsensical for one person can be full of sense for another one in particular circumstances.

In "polysemantic logic" comical absurdity is a peculiar way of considering our reality. Knowing its specific features helps to avoid the communicative failures in cross-cultural communication.

TRAITS OF ABSURD TEXTS

Though the boundary between some rational and irrational statements is rather vague, there are some traits that are peculiar to the organization of most absurd texts. The basic characteristic features are the following: inductive or deductive errors; lack of time, place, number or action coincidence; tautological repetitions; nonselection and parody.

Inductive or deductive errors appear when entry (particular/general) dispatches do not correlate with their (general/particular) final conclusions. They are mainly cases in which absurd reasoning contains some logical mistakes:

I*n view of the fact that there are subterranean waters, there are also subterranean fishes.*

Such inductive or deductive errors can be examples of either intentional or unpremeditated acts. The latter appear mostly in the speech of uneducated people or small children. The feeling of absurdity appears as a result of simple logical mistakes, which in most cases produce a comical effect.

When paralogism is deliberately created and the speaker's intention is to confuse the interlocutor or convince him or her of an eccentric idea, we deal with absurd sophisms, which can be defined as outwardly correct cases of some absurd thoughts:

Чем больше учишься, тем больше знаешь.
Чем больше знаешь, тем больше забываешь.
Чем больше забываешь, тем меньше знаешь.
Чем меньше знаешь, тем меньше забываешь.
Но чем меньше забываешь, тем больше знаешь.
Так для чего учиться? [13]
The more you learn, the more you know.
The more you know, the more you forget.
The more you forget, the less you know.
The less you know, the less you forget.
But the less you forget, the more you know.
So why learn?

Such 4-lined absurd sophisms are very popular in Russia and show the traditional love of wordplay. This wordplay involves twisted and unusual wording, which is aimed at amusing the listener by showing how intelligent the speaker is. Russian absurd sophisms are instantly spread by young people and mainly focus on common social vices.

The next basic characteristic feature of absurd texts is the lack of time, place, number, action or name coincidence.

– Когда ты в последний раз навещал свою бабушку?

– Одним октябрьским утром в сентябре, прошлым июлем.

– *When did you last visit your granny?*

– *One fine October morning, in September, last July.*

The combination of time coordinates and image semantics can be violated in the same absurd text:

– По стене ползет кирпич, видит – висит календарь.
– Который час? – спрашивает кирпич.
– Среда, – отвечает календарь.
– Ура! – обрадовался кирпич. – Скоро лето!
– A brick is crawling on the wall and sees the hanging calendar.
–"What is the time?"– asks the brick.
– "It is Wednesday", answers the calendar.
– "Hurray!" – cheered the brick. "Summer is coming soon!"

Quite a number of similar contradictory sayings are reproduced in a rhymed form and full of unclear discrepancy:

По стене ползёт стакан,
Деревянный как кирпич,
Ну и пусть себе ползёт,
Муха тоже вертолёт [14].
A glass is crawling on the wall
It is as wooden as a brick.
So what? Let it float,
A fly is a helicopter, too.

This Russian poem for children illustrates the lack of time, place and image coincidence. It is impossible for any glass to climb up the wall and to float simultaneously. In addition, a disturbed semantics of images is on the surface: "A glass which is as wooden as a brick", "A fly which is also a helicopter".

There are a lot of different absurd variations of this linguistic tease which can be placed in a separate group under the general title "Po stene"/ "On the wall". The general traits of such absurd texts are: 1) they are four-lined rhymes; 2) they describe personified inanimate objects including animals (usually hares or camels); 3) they are full of semantic and unclear logical discrepancy.

Tautological repetition is another prominent characteristic of most absurd texts.

– Слушай, как называется твоя новая причёска?

– А как ты догадался, как называется моя новая причёска?

– Твоя новая причёска называется «Как называется твоя новая причёска»?

– Нет, моя новая причёска называется «А как ты догадался, как называется моя новая причёска» [15].

– Listen, how is your new hair-cut called?

– And how did you guess how my new hair-cut is called?

– Is your new hair-cut called "How is your new hair-cut called?"

– No, my new hair-cut is called "And how did you guess how my new hair-cut is called?"

The term "tautology" is frequently used to show the negative attitude of the critic to all kinds of synonymic or syntactic repetitions; it is usually accepted as a fault of style in so called "rational texts". In absurd texts tautology is presupposed, adding its zest and producing a certain comical effect as can be seen from the example above.

The term "pleonasm" is closely connected with tautological repetitions. It can be defined as the use of more words (or even word-parts) than necessary to express an idea clearly [16]: «ромашка растительная», «щука рыбная», «китаец человеческий», «железо металлическое», «лев звериный» («plant daisy», «fishy pike», «human Chinese», «metal iron», «animal lion»). It is important to avoid tautological repetitions and unnecessary redundancies in order not to turn clear and concise texts into absurd ones.

"Nonselection" [10] is another distinguishing feature of absurd texts. We understand this phenomenon as a mixture of problems and events united together without taking into consideration their incommensurable pragmatic value:

Я сломала ноготь! О боже! Кровь течёт, умру сейчас. Завещание. Быстро все сюда!!! [17].

Oh, damn. I've broken my finger nail. I am bleeding and going to die! I am ready to make a will. Come to me fast!!!

As a result, the difference between vital and insignificant things becomes blurred; reasons and consequences do not correlate with each other. All problems, actions and events become of equal worth in the world of polysemantic logic.

Absurd texts are also frequently characterized by the presence of parody elements:

Яблоня от яблока недалеко падает [18].

An apple tree doesn't fall far from its apple.

This saying, containing a parody element, in itself produces a comical effect upon Russian people due to the fact that it is an inverted variant of a famous Russian proverb "Yabloko ot yabloni nedaleko padaet", which means that children often take after their parents in character, tastes, opinions, habits, etc.

An English variant of this proverb is "The apple does not fall far from the tree" or "Like father, like son". It should be mentioned that there is some difference in connotation between the first and the second English proverbs. "The apple does not fall far from the tree" is commonly used in a negative meaning to describe some vicious character traits. "Like father, like son" is often used more positively or jokingly. The mock variant of the latter proverb might sound like "Like son, like father" that is unavoidably considered absurd.

Any parody is supposed to be critical [4] and provides "a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" [1]. Due to this fact it is not uncommon that a lack of cultural background knowledge can make mock folk texts of one culture seem absolutely irrational or absurd for members of some other cultures, as the implicit precedent texts can be unfamiliar to them, thus they are incapable of decoding the implied meaning of such creative works.

И остановил Иванушка коня своего и пошёл водицы напиться. И поскакали они потом дальше — конь и козлёночек [19].

Ivanushka left his horse and went to quench his thirst. And they galloped together after that: a horse and a goat.

This line can seem absurd only to those who have never read the Russian folk tale "Sister Alenushka and her Brother Ivanushka." According to its content, Ivanushka was extremely thirsty and asked his sister whether he might drink from the hoof. Alenushka gave a negative answer explaining that if he broke that prohibition he would turn into a baby goat. Ivanushka did not obey and upon drinking was at once transformed into a baby goat. So this Russian anecdote shows that absurd perception of some jokes is culturally determined and that particular background knowledge is needed to decipher their implied or "hidden" meanings.

Not only Russian folk tales but also quite a number of different superstitions can become the basis for creating absurd jokes:

САМАЯ СТРАШНАЯ ПРИМЕТА – когда чёрная кошка в пятницу, 13 числа разбивает зеркало пустым ведром... [20].

The most terrifying Russian superstition is when a black cat is breaking the mirror into small pieces with the help of an empty bucket on Friday 13th.

Russians strongly believe in ill omens, and the things mentioned in the preceding joke "a black cat", "a broken mirror," and "a woman with empty buckets" are traditionally considered to be signs of bad

luck in Russia. Russians make fun of these superstitions, but deep down many of these beliefs are taken seriously.

LEXICAL STYLISTIC DEVICES IN ABSURD TEXTS

Absurdity can also be realized with the help of different lexical stylistic devices. At the lexical level its imagery and expressivity are commonly created with the help of a metaphor, personification, overstatement, understatement, oxymoron, pun etc.

Absurdity is metaphorical in nature. It has a unique ability to combine absolutely unrelated things and thereby cause a feeling of extreme astonishment. Sometimes the translation of the initial metaphorical statement from Russian into the English language cannot reveal implied symbolism and therefore seems absurd.

Продаются часы с боем. Бой будет ходить вслед за Вами и носить часы [21].

The musical clock with tunes is being sold. The boy will follow you everywhere and carry the clock.

It is known that an absurd metaphor is able to bring together the images, in which the presumed likeness and symbolism are vaguely unclear.

Приходит маятник к врачу и жалуется: – Я заколебался! [22].

The pendulum came to the doctor and said, "I'm sick and tired of vibrating."

The metaphor shown above involves likeness between inanimate and animate objects. The Russian equivalent of the phrase "to be sick and tired of vibrating" is "zakolebatsja" which means "to be extremely tired"/ "to be all in." The Russian word is emotionally coloured, has a negative connotation and gives rise to vulgar associations among Russian people.

The next lexical stylistic device, which can be found in quite a number of Russian absurd jokes, is overstatement. The comical effect is achieved through deliberate exaggeration of the size, shape, proportion, strength or importance of described objects:

– Как тебя зовут?

– Чебурашка.

– Как ты докажешь, что ты Чебурашка?

Чебурашка махнул ушами, начался ураган, разрушил дома. Больше никто не просил никаких доказательств [23].

– What is your name?

– Cheburashka.

– How can you prove your words?

Cheburashka waved his ears, a hurricane began to blow, and many houses were smashed. Nobody asked for any further proofs after that.

Cheburashka, also known as Topple in earlier English translations, is a famous fictional character in children's literature, originating in the story written by Eduard Uspensky in 1965. This Russian cult character can be described as a funny little animal, somewhat between a monkey and a bear, which is remarkable for its big ears. Cheburashka's characteristics are friendliness, openness, innate goodness and amusing creativity. Cheburashka's aggressiveness is a preposterous plot in itself.

When quantities and qualities are deliberately underrated we deal with typical understatement:

– Как поймать крокодила с помощью пустого спичечного коробка, бинокля и пинцета?

– Нужно посмотреть на крокодила через перевёрнутый бинокль, он станет маленьким-маленьким. Затем его нужно взять пинцетом и поместить в спичечный коробок [24].

– How can we catch a crocodile with an empty match box, binoculars and a pair of tweezers?

– You should look at the crocodile through inverted binoculars. It becomes tiny. Then you should take a pair of tweezers and place it in the matchbox.

English is well known for its preference for understatement in everyday speech, while in the Russian language overstatement comes first.

"Oxymoron" expresses a semantic contradiction in absurd texts:

– О чём этот текст?

– Я не знаю.

– Но ты же читал его громким шёпотом.

– Да, но я не слушал [23].

– Hey, what is the text about?

– I don't know.

– But you read in a loud whisper.

– Yes, I did but I didn't listen to it.

Oxymoron is a combination of two words with opposite meanings (e.g. "loud" and "whisper"), which exclude each other. It reveals the contradictory sides of one and the same phenomenon. Such semantic incompatibility not only creates unexpected combinations of words, violating the existing norms of compatibility, but also reveals some unexpected qualities of the denotatum as well. Oxymorons are inherently absurd: "speaking silence", "cold fire", "living death", etc.

Nowadays, computers play a crucial role in all spheres of human life, and linguistics is not an exception. Old words have gained new meanings and become polysemantic. This process is

reflected in the Russian anecdotes containing puns:

I know why you start squealing when you get down to working with your computer. It happens because you see a mouse.

There are very many absurd situations Russian people face in their everyday lives. Most of them occur in the professional sphere; comically absurd situations are retold by word of mouth and might turn into true-to-life fables:

A young inexperienced woman, after graduating from the university, came to the personnel department with all her documents to get fixed up in a job. She was given an application form to fill in. In the graph "social status" ("socialnoe polozhenie") she wrote "not in the family way" ("ne v polozhenii").

In the Russian language there is a certain phrase "v polozhenii" which means "pregnant" or "in the family way." This absurd mistake appeared due to the fact that the informal meaning of a polysemantic phrase was chosen which was inappropriate for the situation of that official communication.

CLASSIFICATION OF ABSURD MESSAGES

It is fallacious to believe that all absurd jokes intermingle into one ruck of meaningless messages. If we study absurd messages in context, it becomes obvious that they as variable as rational postulates. It is possible to give a classification of all absurd messages, dividing them at least into three separate groups: 1) pseudo-absurd postulates; 2) relatively absurd postulates; 3) verily/ truly absurd postulates.

Pseudo-absurd postulates are utterances that can be mistakenly taken as *absurd ones at first but receive their rational explanations in the end:*

"There was a door bell. The man opened the door. He saw a hamster, a chipmunk, a hippo and a giraffe in the doorway. The hamster starts its conversation: "Good morning. We receive a call that you frequently use hallucinogens."

It is worth mentioning that sometimes the opposite process takes place and absurd texts may seem rational at first sight:

When will I get up if I set my alarm clock at 8 o'clock, my father shifts the set time one hour later, my mother shifts the set time two hours earlier than my father does and I have already eaten ten water melons?

Those jokes in which absurdity becomes evident only in the end can be called pseudo-rational postulates.

Relatively absurd postulates are those that demand special background knowledge in order to be decoded and understood:

Tri gerlici pod vindom, pryali leitli invingom…
Spichit sekonda gerlica: „Kabi ya bila kingicei,
Ya b dlya fazera kinga super pati sozvala…

It's a parody of Pushkin's famous work "The tale of Tsar Saltan". The original lines of the poem are rewritten with the help of some common English words: "*gerlica*" – *"girl"; "pod vindom"* – *"under the window"; "leitli invingom"* – *"late in the evening"; "spichit"* – *"speaks"; "seconda"* – *"the second" and etc.* The pidgin-like-language used here is clear only to those Russian people who know at least a few English words.

Phonetic transcription of English words is frequently used to produce a comical effect, and relatively absurd postulates often include interlingual homonyms:

Prodam chasi s boem. Boi budet hodit za vami i nosit chasi.

"Chasi s boem" in Russian means "a striking clock" in English. "Prodam chasi s boem" is the same as "I'll sell a striking clock." In the second part of this relatively absurd Russian anecdote it becomes evident that "chasi s boem" means "a clock with a boy." The boy will be sold with a clock and will carry it. This anecdote exemplifies both linguistic and existential absurdity.

On the whole, this type of absurdity can be called "smattering absurdity." The statement "keden firin saksan nanin" seems senseless till we learn that it is phonetic transcription of the first four numerals, which some African tribes (especially "yalunka") use while counting.

Truly absurd postulates are absolutely insoluble statements that "contradict common sense, life experience or logic" [11]:

All birds are flying to the South but one of them is flying to the left.

Truly absurd postulates can be subdivided into semantic, pragmo-logical and pragmo-evaluative absurdity.

SCRIPTS OF RUSSIAN ABSURD ANECDOTES

After due reflection on different plots of Russian absurd anecdotes we may distinguish the following scripts:

1. "X" says something having a certain communicative aim but the verbalization of the purport of communication is not clear at the level of words or word phrases, thus his/ her speech creates

an abundance of mostly semantic type of absurdity which can be expressed in semantic contaminations, semantic disarray, semantic antonymy and semantic distortion.

2. "X" says something having a certain communicative aim but the verbalization of the purport of communication is unclear and the logic of the produced sentences is broken, as a result we deal with pragmo-logical absurdity when initial statements are ill-sorted with subsequent actions and vise versa.

3. "X" has a certain communicative aim. The verbalization of this aim is relatively clear and consistent but the speech act cannot be brought into correlation with the existent life situation or generally accepted social rules of conduct. Such dissonance causes pragmo-evaluative absurdity.

A lot depends on the Receptor's perception and his/her readiness to achieve mutual understanding with his/her interlocutor. Sometimes it happens that "X" says something having a certain communicative aim, but its verbalization is rather vague and the logic of the produced sentences is broken, but "X's" words aren't regarded absurd though they are inconsistent. Due to Receptor's concern "X" manages to achieve his/ her communicative aims, but it is important to outline that if "X's" words conflict with previous experience, general truth or vital social values, "X's" words are doomed to be regarded as nonsensical.

Sometimes it is rather hard to appreciate absurdity for its true value without analyzing the context in which it is used. Rational statements are frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted as irrational ones and vice versa.

In conclusion, it is worth saying that playing its highly unusual innovative role absurdity is directly aimed to startle the listener, shaking him or her out of comfortable, conventional thoughts and judgments, and the monotony of life. Such a preposterous play with "the strait jacket of logic" (Sigmund Freud), realized in anecdotes, gives the feeling of freedom and delight both for the speaker and the amused listener.

References

1. Dentith S. Parodija [Parody]. Novaja kriticheskaja idioma [The New Critical Idiom], Routledge, 2000. 224 p.
2. Galperin I.R. Stilistika [Stylistics], Moskva: Visshaja Shkola, 1977.
3. Getmanova A.D. Logika [Logics]. Moskva: Vlados, 1995. Pp. 259-260.
4. Hatcheon L. Teorija parodii: uchenija dvadcat-pervogo veka. Formy iskusstva [The theory of parody: the teachings of the twenty-first century. Forms of art], New York: Methuen, 2001.
5. Ivleva S. Semanticheskij absurd [Semantical absurd], Volgograd, Volgogradskoe nauchnoe Izdatelstvo, 2008. p. 460 – 468.
6. Ivleva S. Komicheskij absurd v Internet_Kommunikacii [Comical absurdity in the Internet Communication], Izdatelstvo Permskogo gosudarstvennogo tehnicheskogo universiteta, 2008. p. 271–282.
7. Ivleva S. Pragmaticheski-logicheskij absurd [Pragmo-logical absurdity], Volgograd: Kolledj, 2010. p. 19–25.
8. Ivleva S. zhenskaja absurdnaja logika [Female absurd logic], Volgograd: Paradigma, 2008. p. 94–102.
9. Ivleva S. Pragmo-ocenochnyj absurd [Pragmo-evaluative absurdity], Volgograd: Volgogradskoe nauchnoe Izdatelstvo, 2009. p. 383–388.
10. Fokkema, D.W. Semanticheskaja i sintaksicheskaja organizacija postmodernistskogo teksta [Semantic and syntactic of postmodernist texts], Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986. p. 81–98.
11. Karasik V.I. Yazykovoj krug: lichnost, koncepty, diskurs [Language circle: personality, concepts, discourse], Volgograd: Peremena, 2002. 477 p.
12. Karasik V. I. Jazykovye kljuchi [Language personalities], Volgograd: Paradigma, 2007. 520 p.
13. Filosofija [Philosophy] [Electronic resource]. Available at: https://otvet.mail.ru/question/33071471 (accessed on 10 June 2017).
14. Russkij folklor [Russian folklore] [Electronic resource]. Available at: http://www.unn.ru/folklore/absstih.htm (accessed on 10 June 2017).
15. Russkie anekdoty [Russian anecdotes] [Electronic resource]. Available at: https://www.anekdot.ru/id/475899 (accessed on 10 June 2017).
16. Literaturnye priemy [Literary devices]. Pleonasm [Electronic resource]. Available at: https://literarydevices.net/pleonasm/ (accessed on 10 June 2017).
17. Russkij forum [Russian forum]. Shutki [Jokes] [Electronic resource]. Available at: https://ask.fm/eva_malin (accessed on 10 June 2017).
18. Russkie smeshnye poslovitsy i pogovorki [Russian funny proverbs and sayings] [Electronic resource]. Available at: http://fb.ru/article/197594/yabloko-ot-yabloni-nedaleko-padaet-smyisl-pogovorki (accessed on 06 June 2017).
19. Russkie skazki [Russian fairy tales] [Electronic resource]. Available at: http://anecarchive.ru/o-zveryushkax/i-ostanovil-ivanushka-konya/ (accessed on 25 July 2017).
20. Zakrytyi zhenskij forum [Private female forum] [Electronic resource]. Available at: http://girls-only.org/5205578.html (accessed on 15 July 2017).

21. Kollektsija onlain anekdotov [Collection of online anecdotes] [Electronic resource]. Available at: https://anekdotovstreet.com/anekdot/prodayutsya-chasy-s-boem-boy-budet-hodit-vsled/95754/ (accessed on 29 May 2017).
22. Zhivoj zhurnal [Life journal] [Electronic resource]. Available at: http://doktor-killer.livejournal.com/4396571.html (accessed on 29 May 2017).
23. Luchshie russkie anekdoty [Best Russian anecdotes] [Electronic resource]. Available at: http://anekdoty.onru.ru (accessed on 29 May 2017).
24. Russkij jumor [Russian humour] [Electronic resource]. Available at http://www.russianla.com/common/humor/story.php/16536?id_cr=(accessed on 15 July 2017).

About the authors:

Chernova Snezhana Valeryevna – Candidate of Philological Sciences, Senior Lecturer, English Language Department No. 1 of MGIMO University. Email: Snezhana85@yandex.ru.
Andrew Douglas Ferguson – a Master of Arts in International Relations at Deakin University Sydney, Australia. English Teacher in TAFE Brisbane, Southbank, Australia. Email: andy.ferg@live.com.

* * *