

DOI: 10.31648/PW.7673

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AN ANALYSIS OF ONE LEXICOGRAPHIC CASE: THE RUSSIAN NOUN *SVIST* ‘WHISTLE’

ABSTRACT: The paper discusses the application of the case study method to a description in lexical semantics, in particular, to an analysis of a dictionary entry. The author considers the Russian noun *свист* ‘whistle’ as an object, namely, its description in traditional Russian dictionaries. The semantic analysis shows that the description of the polysemy of the word in a dictionary does not correspond to the nature of the semantic representations assigned to this lexeme. The author offers his own version of the semantic description of this noun, in particular, using the category of the image-schematic structure. Special attention is paid to the issue of the dictionary reflection of syntactic representations, i.e. syntactic combinatory of the word.

KEYWORDS: lexical semantics, cognitive semantics, case study, lexical meaning, semantic representation, lexical representation, polysemy, lexicography, dictionary, *nomen actionis*, *nomen acti*

Introduction

Linguistic phenomena, as a rule, are of a general nature: the subject of research are mainly groups and categories of language units, their relations and functions, the rules for their change (transformations, diachronic changes), the rules of compatibility, etc. The study of individual linguistic facts – instances of linguistic forms and meanings, speech events are of a more particular nature. Such an empirical study provides material for formulating scientific hypotheses or verifying existing theoretical concepts.

In this regard, one can refer to the case study as a method widely used in sociology and, in particular, in sociolinguistics (Moore 1995; Rama | Kolachina | Bai 2009; Hollman | Sięwierska 2011; Litosseliti 2018). Its value lies in the fact that scientific objects are considered from the point of view of applying different aspects, relationships and types of categorization, which is not always possible in a study that is carried out in accordance with a certain theoretical background (which, as a rule, has a hypostatic character).

The proposed article presents an analysis of this kind of a lexical entry, namely, how the Russian noun *свист* ‘whistle’ is described in traditional explanatory

dictionaries. On the one hand, this approach makes it possible to focus on various aspects of the description of a lexical unit, based on empirical data. Thus, the linguist can verify the lexicographic description, taking into account different contexts of the use of the word. On the other hand, such observations are important as a starting point for generalizing the properties of units belonging to lexical classes.

The analysis of lexical units to some extent corresponds to the concept of a lexicographic portrait of a word, which is understood by J. D. Apresjan as “a complete description of all [...] aspects of a lexeme in a dictionary” (2009, 114). In both cases, the integrative approach to the description of linguistic facts is taken as the dominant one.

The language material used in the article was obtained from explanatory dictionaries, texts of different styles (fiction, journalistic, colloquial), as well as from the National Corpus of the Russian Language (<https://ruscorpora.ru/new>).

1. The analysis of the lexical meaning

When analyzing an entry in an explanatory dictionary, the main attention, of course, should be directed to the lexical meaning. In the academic “Dictionary of the Russian Language” (Evgen’eva 1984; henceforth: DRL), the noun *свист* ‘whistle’ has three meanings, and within the framework of the first one, the so-called semantic shades are distinguished:

- свист*₁ a sharp, high-pitched sound produced by a strong exhalation of air through compressed lips, as well as with the help of a whistle | a sound that occurs when a jet of air, steam, etc. passes through a narrow hole, moving under pressure | a whistling sound with painful labored breathing | a sound produced by the rapid movement of air through the atmosphere
- свист*₂ a sound of a similar timbre and tone made by certain birds and animals
- свист*₃ the sound produced by an object moving rapidly through the air

All these meanings are repeated in a dictionary by S. I. Ozhegov and N. Y. Shvedova (1992). In the “Big Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language” (Kuznetsov 1998; henceforth: BED), four meanings of this word are distinguished: in contrast to DRL, the first meaning here corresponds to two options:

- свист*₁ a sharp, high-pitched sound produced by the movement of air through clenched lips or teeth, or with the help of a whistle, pipe, etc.
- свист*₃ a sharp, high-pitched sound produced by steam or air escaping through a narrow opening

As we can see, the noun *свист* ‘whistle’ is interpreted as polysemantic. In lexicographic practice, it is not customary to substantiate the polysemy, as well as the number and nature of individual semantic variants. This does not mean that all dictionary descriptions should be taken as correct and justified knowingly. This is precisely the fact that in different sources the polysemy of words is interpreted differently. An analysis of the above-cited dictionary entries shows that the description of the ambiguity of the lexeme *свист* ‘whistle’ is far from an objective picture that can be presented on the basis of linguistic material.

1.1. The nature of semantic linking

The meanings of the noun as a whole correlate with the individual meanings of the generating verb *свистеть* ‘to whistle’, but the nature of their presentation is different. When describing the meaning of a verbal noun, it would be natural to refer to the meaning of the verb, for example:

*свист*₁ an action corresponding to the verb *свистеть*₁¹

In dictionaries, however, the reverse order of reference is presented, i.e. the meaning of the verb is related to the meaning of the noun:

*свистеть*₁ produce a whistle (in the 1st meaning)

Such a character of dictionary linking should be recognized as unnatural, since it does not reflect the relationship of derivation among lexemes, i.e. the structure of the derivational process. In the case of recurring semantic components of the generating and derived words, the semantic reference to the recurring component must be included in the definition of the derived word. Segura-Bedmar | Colón-Ruiz | Martínez 2017 discuss the problem of semantic linking in the dictionary in more detail.

1.2. The delimitation of lexical meanings

An analysis of individual meanings reveals another problem – the semantic variants of the word. The first meaning (in DRL) refers to a sharp sound made by a person (using one’s own body or other objects²), as well as a sound made without human intervention – as a result of a quick movement of the air flow, in particular, when

¹ The meaning of the noun *Pfiff* ‘whistling’ is presented in one of the German dictionaries in this way: „ein hoher kurzer (und schriller) Ton, den man durch Pfeifen erzeugt“ (Götz | Haensch | Wellmann 1993, 736).

² The dictionary mentions the whistle, but does not mention some musical instruments, such as the ocarina.

passing through a narrow opening. Since the reasons for the appearance of a sharp, high-pitched sound here are different (human actions or the movement of an air flow), it can be assumed that the basis for assigning these shades to one meaning was an acoustic characteristic of the sound. The validity of such a decision, however, can be questioned. The expressions:

- (1) свист хулигана
'a hooligan whistle'
- (2) свист паровоза
'a steam locomotive whistle'
- (3) свист ветра
'a wind whistle'
- (4) свист чайника
'a kettle whistle'

represent situations in which the acoustic characteristics of a whistle, as ordinary experience tells us, differ significantly. The whistle of a hooligan cannot be considered more similar to the whistle of a steam locomotive than to the whistle of a blue tit³, although the whistle emitted by birds and some animals is interpreted in the DRL as the second meaning of the word. Thus, the distinction between the first and second meanings cannot be considered as properly justified.

In the BED, a sharp, high-pitched sound produced by steam or air escaping through a narrow hole is interpreted as a separate (third) meaning of the word, but the description of this meaning is unsuccessful: after all, the whistle emitted by a person is produced in the same way (compressed lips or teeth form a hole, through which the air passes). In addition, the BED does not mention the movement of the air flow in the layers of the atmosphere, thereby excluding the possibility of interpreting the expression as a wind whistle.

1.3. Lexical meaning and image schemes

Special attention should be paid to the third meaning in DRL, which is a mental reflection of another physical situation. To describe it, I will use the concept of an image-schematic structure, introduced in the 1980s (see: Lakoff 1987; Johnson 1987). In the first meaning (a sound produced by a person...) we deal with an image schema in which the sound appears as a result of friction produced by moving air (air jet) with a stationary solid object. In the terminology of cognitive semantics (see: Langacker 2008), the air must be qualified as a trajector, and the stationary solid

³ This fact is confirmed by the statement: *Свист чайника напоминает шипение огромного гуся в вольтере* 'The whistle of the kettle resembles the hissing of a huge goose in an aviary'. This is how a child psychologist explains the fear that a boiling kettle causes in a child (<http://centerfon.ru/poleznaya-informacziya/tyi-ne-bojsya-eto-gus.-ya-sama-ego-boyus> (accessed 15.09.2021).

object as a landmark. Example (4) is understood in this way: the kettle is motionless (its parts and details are also motionless), while the sound arises as a result of the movement of steam caused by boiling water. Another figurative schema presents the situation differently: the sound occurs due to the fact that a solid object moves quickly in a stationary air space (see: Goldberg | Jackendoff 2004, 540).



Fig. 1. Image schemes of the first and third meanings of the word (DRL)

A native speaker may not understand the acoustic nature of a sound (in particular, whistling), but they seem to be aware that in one case the air is moving, while in the other case the solid object is moving. The cognitive (and, more broadly, functional) approach to the description of lexical meanings is that the meaning is interpreted as a semantic representation, that is, a reflection of a fragment of reality in the mind (including a fragment of one of the possible worlds). Since such a reflection is adapted to the conditions of interpersonal communication, as well as other (not necessarily social) forms of human behavior mediated by language, the meaning of a word can be qualified as a lexical semantic representation, i.e. the mental processing of an object about which a person has a need to say something. In other words, the meaning is a functionally demanded and functionally determined lexical semantic representation.

However, a question arises: do the presented figurative schemata for the emergence of the sound (as semantic representations) relate to the noun *whistle* as a unit of the lexical system of a language, or are they realized in its speech use? This question is not accidental: there are examples in the language material when the cause of a sharp, high-pitched sound is not named. We observe this situation in the sentence:

- (5) Протяжный свист при торможении пугает и настораживает.
 'The lingering whistle when braking is frightening and alarming.'

The word *свист* 'whistle' here by itself does not indicate the acoustic nature of the sound, i.e. in the image model of the first or second type, the whistle in this sentence means only a high, sharp sound that is heard in the car when you press the brake pedal. Additional information about the source of the sound can be

obtained from the context and due to the special technical knowledge of the recipient: for a specialist, the information reported in (6) can mean a sound caused by (technologically unforeseen) vibrations in the area of action of the brake pads and brake disc, while for a non-specialist, the information about the sound source will not be available⁴.

The fact that the lexical semantic representation (in a common language) contains only part of the special knowledge about the denotation is explained by the need for communicative interaction of subjects in conditions where their semantic thesauri differ significantly. The lexical conceptualization of the sound is specified as far as it is necessary in the speech behavior of a person who is not an expert (for example, in the field of acoustics or mechanics). The fact that only part of the information processed in the course of speech activity is verbalized is indicated by the existence of concepts “without a name”, following Y. S. Stepanov (2007, 192ff.). In this regard, one can also cite a statement by A. V. Vdovichenko: “The content of consciousness certainly has a part that is not correlated with any forms of verbal (or other) representations” (2018, 115).

If the access to the context is limited (as is our knowledge of the situation described in the sentence), the specification of the acoustic nature of the sound is impossible. So, reading the following statement:

- (6) Свист в разных точках достиг высшей силы, а потом стал спадать.
(Михаил Булгаков)
‘The whistle at different points reached its highest intensity, and then began to subside.’

we cannot state with certainty that the noun *свист* ‘whistle’ is used in the first, second or third meaning (of those mentioned in DRL). The noun *свист* ‘whistle’ means here only a high, sharp sound, without an additional indication of its source. Similarly, in constructions such as:

- (7) свист локомотива
‘a locomotive whistle’
(8) свист дежурного
‘an attendant whistle’
(9) свист снегиря
‘a bullfinch whistle’
(10) свист суслика
‘a gopher whistle’
(11) свист пуль
‘a whistle of bullets’

⁴ One can imagine a situation in which a participant in a car forum on the Internet reports (6) in order to get an explanation about the nature of the whistle.

the noun *свист* 'whistle' contains the general acoustic characteristic of the sound (high, sharp, short, strong), and the information about the additional specification (including the source) is carried by the noun in the genitive case.

The fact that a whistle can be produced by a person or an animal, by an object rapidly cutting through the air, or by the movement of the air in the atmosphere, cannot be a basis for isolating different meanings of this word, because there are no linguistic, namely, distributive grounds for it (if we keep in mind the well-known J. D. Apresjan's distributive criterion):

- (12) Другое – советский стилиага, чью челку встречает свист толпы и ножниц⁵.
 свист толпы | свист ножниц
 'Another is a Soviet dude, whose bangs are met by the whistle of the crowd and scissors.
 the whistle of the crowd | the whistle of the scissors'
- (13) Оглушительный рев моторов, свист ветра и тысячи байкеров – в Москве открыли мотосезон.
 свист ветра | свист байкеров
 'The deafening roar of engines, the whistle of the wind and thousands of bikers – the motorcycle season has opened in Moscow.
 wind whistle | bikers' whistle'
- (14) [...] Имя которого обросло легендами о [...] свисте пуль и ночных ветров.
 свист пуль | свист ветров
 '[...] Whose name is overgrown with legends about [...] the whistle of bullets and night winds.
 the whistle of the bullets | the whistle of the night winds'
- (15) А так возможен свист ремней генератора и кондиционера.
 свист ремней | свист кондиционера
 'And so the whistle of the generator and air conditioner belts is possible.
 the whistle of the belts | the whistle of the air conditioner'

In all the above sentences, two previously identified image schemata are presented simultaneously. So, in the last example, the whistle of the generator belts occurs as a result of the movement of the belts (the second figurative diagram), and the whistle of the air conditioner emerges as a result of the movement of the air inside the air conditioner (the first figurative diagram).

As a confirmation of this unspecified meaning of this noun, I will quote the following sentence:

- (16) Свист свисту рознь.
 'There are no two whistles alike, whistles differ.'

⁵ All examples are taken from the National Corpus of the Russian Language.

Here it is impossible to speak of any definite reason for the sound made by a person, an animal, a moving air current, or a fast-moving small object.

However, sensory (including auditory) sensations are processed differently. Cognitive processing of sensory stimuli (such as noise, whistling, clanging, squealing, grinding, rumbling, humming, etc.) is difficult due to their physical nature, therefore, to a large extent, their processing relies on intuition and the so-called sensory memory – in this sense, sensory phenomena are imponderable. Cognitive mechanisms are also partially involved in the processing of such stimuli, which, for example, makes it possible to distinguish sounds by their acoustic characteristics or sources. However, in many cases the verbalization of signs is very difficult, especially for non-specialists. In linguistic literature (see: Karunts 1975), words naming sound signals and actions are described with a number of differential semantic features taken into account, but one can doubt that they are actually processed in the course of speech activity. Most likely, these are frame structures of special knowledge.

Many dictionary definitions (especially those related to sensory vocabulary) are not so much realistic mental representations as their verbal descriptions, i.e. how certain sound signals can be described so that they differ from other sounds. Therefore, the dictionary meaning ‘a sharp, high-pitched sound produced by a strong exhalation of air through compressed lips, as well as with the help of a whistle’ should be understood precisely as a verbal representation of a whistle, i.e. what can be said about it, although this is not equivalent to the image or sensation that arises in our minds when we pronounce or hear the word *свист* ‘whistle’.

If we keep in mind the cognitive competence inherent to an “average” native speaker, we have to state that the descriptive tools available to us (such as the adjectives: *high*, *sharp*, *strong*) are not perfect: they are not enough to distinguish between many sound signals (as largely imponderable phenomena). For example, we are aware that whistling and ringing are different sounds, but their distinctive acoustic features from an ordinary point of view, “by ear” are not entirely obvious. So, in one of the texts we read:

- (17) Многие [...] упоминают, что иногда слышат звон в одном из ушей – это высокий резкий звук, довольно неприятный и сразу же обращающий на себя внимание. (Дорин Вёрче)
 ‘Many [...] mention that they sometimes hear a ringing in one of their ears; this is a high-pitched sharp sound, rather unpleasant and it immediately attracts attention.’

As can be seen, ringing is defined here as a high sharp sound, i.e. using descriptors that correspond to a whistle in a dictionary. In this regard, it seems that the dictionary description of the lexical meaning, in addition to descriptive elements (if they are

possible at all), should also contain an index element, i.e. a reference to a typical (and, as a rule, known to the user of the dictionary) situation of the emergence or functioning of the sound. This approach in linguistic semantics is associated with the study of prototypical effects (see: Lakoff 1986). The names of taste sensations are traditionally described in a similar way: in the definition of the adjective *сладкий* 'sweet' there is a reference to sugar, in the definition of the adjective *соленый* 'salty' there is a reference to salt, in the definition of the adjective *кислый* 'sour' there is a reference to lemon or vinegar. In accordance with this principle, the whistle description may include a reference to the most characteristic sound source, such as a whistle.

2. Completeness of the semantic description

The dictionary definitions, as the analysis shows, are not complete. All the meanings listed in DRL or BED correspond to the concept of 'sound' (nomen acti), although the word *свист* 'whistle' is also used in the actional meaning 'action, the process of producing sound' (as nomen actionis):

- (18) Господь запрещал свистеть в Раю, поэтому Адам старательно продолжил свист и не успокоился, пока не высвистел «Богородице, Дево, радуйся».
 продолжил свист | продолжил свистеть
 'The Lord forbade whistling in Paradise, so Adam diligently continued whistling and did not calm down until he whistled «O Virgin Mary, rejoice»'
- (19) Туки быстро выучил свист с самого начала.
 выучил свист | научился свистеть
 'Took quickly learned the whistle from the start.'
- (20) Шаман закончил свист и картинно упал на камни.
 закончил свист | закончил свистеть
 'The shaman finished his whistle and spectacularly fell on the stones.'

The second remark concerns the fact that the verb *свистеть* 'to whistle' in colloquial speech is also used in the sense of 'to deceive', cf.:

- (21) Не надо свистеть – не были американцы на Луне.
 'No spin yarns – there were no Americans on the moon.'

The noun *свист* 'whistle' is used with the same meaning (albeit infrequently), for example, in one of the comments to an interview with Yury Khashchevatsky, a Belarusian film director:

- (22) Отправляйся в свой совхоз
И собирай ты там навоз.
Православный атеист,
Народу надоел твой свист.⁶
'Go to your state farm
And collect dung there.
Orthodox atheist,
The people are tired of your lie.'

Other examples include:

- (23) Подводя итог, можем сказать, что операция была тупой и абсолютно разорительной. Все, что сейчас придумывают про Протасевича, кровавого маньяка с Донбасса – это абсолютно свист⁷.
'Summing up, we can say that the operation was stupid and absolutely ruinous. Everything that is now being invented about Protasevich, a bloody maniac from the Donbass, is absolutely a lie.'
- (24) Влад, а вот про семинский автобус это, конечно, свист⁸.
'Vlad, information about this Semin's bus is, of course, a lie.'
- (25) Про его неопишуемые богатства это, конечно, свист, благосостояние там улучшилось после продажи гнезда⁹.
'About his indescribable wealth, this, of course, is a lie, the well-being improved there after the sale of the nest.'

Finally, the third remark: perhaps, a dictionary should also indicate the most famous cases of noun *deappellativization*, i.e. its homonymous use as a proper name, taking into account, of course, only the most famous, precedent phenomena. For example, one of the characters of the Soviet film "Start in Life" (1931) is a homeless child named *Колька-Свист* 'Kolka-Whistle'. Although it is a homonym, the nickname is most likely motivated by the fact that the verb *свистеть* 'to whistle' is used occasionally in the meaning of 'to steal'. There is also an urban folklore song:

- (26) Жил на свете Колька-Свист,
Старый вор и аферист.
Он любил красоту Нину,
Танцевал ей «Аргентину».
'Lived in the world Kolka-Whistle,

⁶ <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2019/8/14/344746/comments> (accessed 16.09.2021).

⁷ <https://echo.msk.ru/programs/nevsredy/2843814-echo/> (accessed 16.09.2021).

⁸ https://vk.com/wall-1193_2355366 (accessed 02.10.2021).

⁹ <https://forum.baginya.org/index.php?threads/adele-riviere-Ульяна-Бикбай.5862/page-598> (accessed 02.02. 2021).

Old thief and swindler,
He loved the beauty Nina,
Danced her "Argentina".

3. Syntactic combinatory

Semantic representations can be simpler or more complex, namely relational. In the latter case, the content of the concept reflects not only individual objects, actions, states and processes, but also their configurations, i.e. situational types or propositional schemes:

- (27) „Someone is in a certain state”.
- (28) „The action is directed towards the object”.
- (29) „The action of one subject causes a change in the state of another subject”, etc.

Such semantic representations (of a higher order) correspond in the language to epy syntactic representations, i.e. typical syntactic structures. Since some syntactic constructions are associated with the use of certain lexemes, in many cases we deal with lexical-syntactic representations. It is no coincidence that the theory of lexical-functional syntax has recently gained great popularity (see: Bresnan | Asudeh | Ttoivonen 2016).

After this brief introduction, we will turn to the analysis of the syntactic representations of the noun *свист* 'whistle', as well as the corresponding propositional schemes. In traditional explanatory dictionaries, syntactic information is in the background: the syntactic properties of a word can be judged by the examples given in the dictionary entry:

- (30) *выбежал на свист*
'ran out because of a whistle'
- (31) *издал пронзительный свист*
'let out a shrill whistle'
- (32) *с шипением и свистом ударил в мерзлоту*
'with a hiss and a whistle, he hits the permafrost'
- (33) *раздался свист*
'there was a whistle'
- (34) *дышал со свистом*
'he breathed with a whistle'
- (35) *слышен свист*
'a whistle is heard'

An analysis of these constructions shows that noun collocations implement several propositional-semantic roles:

MAKING sound	издавать свист 'make a whistle'
the CONSEQUENCE of sound perception	выбежать на свист 'run out to the whistle'
sound INTENSITY	пронзительный свист 'high-pitched whistle'
the BEGINNING of the sound	раздался свист 'a whistle rang out'
an ACCOMPANYING action	ударил со свистом 'hit with a whistle'
the sound as an ACCOMPANYING CHARACTERISTIC of an action	дышал со свистом 'breathed with a whistle'
the sound as an OBJECT OF PERCEPTION	слышен свист 'a whistle is heard'
the action PERFORMER	свист суслика 'gopher whistle'

As can be seen, although the authors of DRL define свист 'whistle' as a high-pitched, sharp sound, some of the examples refer to whistling as an action, which can be seen as inconsistent.

The second remark concerns the fact that dictionaries do not take into account all the possible semantic roles of the noun *свист* 'whistle' and its syntactic collocates. First of all, we should pay attention to those roles that, according to the National Corpus of the Russian Language, are implemented with the highest frequencies (this can be determined thanks to the list of collocations). Here are some propositional-semantic roles in the valence field of the noun *свист* 'whistle' that deserve mentioning in the lexicographic description of this word:

the SOURCE of the sound	свист ветра, свист пуль, свист снарядов от снарядов 'whistle of wind, whistle of bullets, whistle of shells from shells'
a CHARACTERISTIC of the sound	тонкий свист, протяжный свист 'thin whistle, lingering whistle'
a PLACE OF EXISTENCE of the sound	свист на трибунах, свист на галерке, свист из оврага 'whistle in the stands, whistle in the gallery, whistle from the ravine'

Conclusion

The analysis of dictionary entries has shown that the description of the lexical unit is not complete and not satisfactory from a linguistic point of view. In this case, the general tendency of dictionary definitions is manifested, i.e. an unreasonable multiplication of lexical meanings (see Kiklewicz | Korytkowska 2012, 558) as a result of context dependence: occasional semantic interpretations of a word

are transferred to its meaning in the language system. Although this practice is widespread, it must be recognized as scientifically unmotivated.

Observations of the language material made it possible to significantly modify the lexical meaning of the noun *whistle*. Four of its semantic variants have been singled out:

1. a sharp, high-pitched and usually intense sound, the same type that is heard when using a whistle
2. action on the verb свистеть 'to whistle', i.e. producing a harsh, high-pitched, strong sound
3. deceit, hypocrisy, eyewash
4. Колька-Свист 'Kolka-Whistle', the nickname of the character of the movie "A ticket to life" (as well as, possibly, other precedent deappellatives)¹⁰

As can be seen, all the nuances of the semantic use of the word in constructions are taken out of the bounds of the semantic representations associated with it. The interpretation of the word meaning proposed in the article corresponds to the approach adopted in constructive grammar (see: Goldberg 1995; Jackendoff 1997; Goldberg | Jackendoff 2004): the linguistic meaning of a word has an invariant, supracontextual character, while its particular semantic interpretation in a construction arises as a result of the interaction of an invariant semantic representation with extralinguistic knowledge about the situation in which its referent acts. The same idea is expressed by Vdovichenko (2018, 114), who writes about the "semantic insufficiency (inferiority) of an autonomous word", whose semantic specification is carried out in the context.

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