False Emptiness: Are So-called “Parasitical Words” Really Semantically Void?

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Abstract

Modern semantics gradually masters the increasing quantity of units which earlier were considered semantically “empty” discovering that they have rich and intricate meanings (this is true, in particular, of verbs designating lexical functions, various discourse words, etc.), this trend being an outgrowth of some ideas of the Meaning-Text Theory. The remaining items still often viewed as semantically empty units are those “semi-words” which in terms of speech standards are described as “parasitical words”. The emptiness of such items is imaginary. In each particular case, the considered items may be omitted; however, their full absence in a sentence can produce the impression of pragmatic incorrectness, and the full absence in a discourse the impression of foreigner’s speech. Semantics and functions of items in question are manifold, and each item has some interesting idiosyncratic features. They have a lot of language-specific features and deserve linguistic description no less than other linguistic units.

Keywords

“Parasitical word”, hesitation, discourse markers, phatic markers.

1 Introduction

Modern semantics gradually masters the increasing quantity of units which earlier were considered semantically "empty”, discovering that they have rich and intricate meanings. This is true, in particular, of verbs designating lexical functions, various discourse words, etc. The remaining items still often viewed as semantically empty units are those “semi-words” which in terms of speech standards are described as “slova-parazity” (parasitical words1), i.e. the

1 Sometimes such expressions are called “packing material”, “a verbal peel”, etc. (Веселитский 1965; Успенский 1976), which shows the attitude to such units as to a ballast with no useful functions. Cf. the
items which merely spoil speech and add nothing to the meaning that a speaker wants to express. The choice of "packing material" is therefore a matter of habit, semantically indifferent and depending only upon the speaker’s educational level. Compare the opinion of the literary critic V. Novikov cited in (Shmelev, 1998): «"Как бы" – словечко-паразит, обитающее исключительно в интеллигентских языковых организациях. Это вам не простонародное "бля" ("блин"), но функция у него, должен заметить та же самая (и, конечно же, тождественная пресловутому "понимаешь")» (Новый мир, 1998, № 1).  

Actually, most of those words have a meaning their own; however, they tend to occur (especially in certain idiolects) in contexts where they apparently convey no meaning. In this connection, it would be probably better to speak of “parasitical” use of a word rather than “parasitical” word. Such items should be carefully distinguished from like что ли ‘maybe X or something like that’ (Имя у него какое-то, Эдуард что ли). The latter always convey the meaning that has a counterpart in the semantic representation of an utterance.

The present article is devoted to such items, and we hope to show that their semantic emptiness is imaginary. Of course the demarcation line between semantics and pragmatics can be drawn in different ways. Anyway, the content of words in question is linguistically relevant.

The following groups of items will be briefly considered:

1. Markers of hesitation or spontaneity or of overcoming communicative difficulty. This group includes some units described in Russian as "хмыканье" and "mekанье" revealing certain communicative difficulties faced by the speaker (h’m, e e e, mmm), and also such words, as nu, eto (literally ‘this’), eto samoe (‘this very’);

2. Markers of rough-and-ready nomination or of evading responsibility in case the statement lacks precision: tak skazat’ (‘so to say’), tipa (‘a sort of’), kak by (‘as if, as though’), vrode (‘like’);

3. Markers of the discourse attitude: tam (over there), koroche (more shortly), znachit (it means), v obschem (in general), na samom dele (actually);

4. Phatic units carrying out the function of establishing and maintaining contact: da? (yes?), a? (and?), vot, tak (so), ponimajesh (you understand), prikin’ (you imagine);

5. The parenthetic swear-word blin and some similar but more rude items (they are also rich in content).


terms “fillers of pauses” (Сиротинина 1974 : 71), "empty" particles (Розанова 1983 : 36), and “fillers of voids” (Земская 1983 : 138), which are also used in studies of informal conversation.

2 (“Как бы” ‘lit. as if, as though’ is a parasitical word living exclusively in intellectual linguistic organisms. It has nothing to do with the vulgar “блин” (or “блин” ‘lit. pancake’), but I should note that their function is identical (the fabulous “понимаешь”’ ‘lit. you understand’ has the same function, of course).

3 V. Veselitskii distinguishes between “justified” uses of such words (when they do contribute to the meaning of the utterance) and “unjustified”, parasitical uses when they are not only inconsistent with the meaning of the utterance, but may even contradict or “distort” it (Веселитский 1965: 78).
These items have some properties in common. In each particular case, they may be omitted, although their full absence in a sentence can produce the impression of pragmatic incorrectness, and the full absence in a discourse the impression of foreigner’s speech. Certain phonetic features are characteristic of such units. Some of them are marked by non-canonic phonetics used when pronouncing such units (as ‘h’m’), while others are marked by hyper-reduction, which leads to formation of such variants as ĕskat’ (instead of tak skazat’). We will also see that these units differ from the point of view of prosody.

As we tried to show by the very splitting of the items into groups, their semantics and functions are manifold. However, within each group, the items are not identical and have some interesting idiosyncratic features.⁴

### 2 Markers of communicative difficulty

#### 2.1 “Hmykan’je” and “mekan’je”

Let us begin with items used when a speaker is at a loss in verbalizing the sense that s/he or she wants to express. In such a situation, many speakers not only use various "hesitation words" but also pronounce sounds that are not present in Russian canonic phonetics, i.e. “mekan’je” and “hmykan’je” (see Šmelev A. & E. Protassova, 1998; Шмелев 2004, 2005).

“Hmykan’je” consists in sharp exhalation of air through a nose with the closed mouth and tense vocal chords, coming to the end guttural occlusion. As it is occlusive, the sound is always pronounced quite briefly; in writing it is usually transcribed by means of the combination of letters “хм” or more often "гм". Such "hmykan’je" should be distinguished from pronouncing a phonetically similar yet functionally quite different sound which in natural Russian is actually called хмыканье. The latter corresponds to a squeezed snicker in a situation when the real laughter and especially loud laughter is not encouraged by behavior conventions. Such a squeezed snicker can be never written down as хм or especially гм. On the other hand, the verb хмыкнуть in everyday Russian is not applied to “hmykan’je” as a marker of communicative difficulty. In other words, if a person хмыкнул, the sound cannot be written down as хм or especially гм. On the other hand, the verb хмыкнуть in everyday Russian is not applied to “hmykan’je” as a marker of communicative difficulty. In other words, if a person хмыкнул, the sound cannot be written down as хм or гм, and if s/he produced a sound which is written as хм or гм, one would say in English that s/he hemmed, although it is impossible to say in Russian that s/he hmyknul. In the first case we deal with "squeezed snicker", in the second with a marker of communicative difficulty.

“Hmykan’je” as reaction to a just arisen difficulty in a communicative situation is used when the speaker should react somehow to news, yet s/he is at a loss. A typical example of such “hmykan’je” is dialogical “hmykan’je” – for example, when one is asked a question that cannot be answered at once or when the interlocutor’s utterance is not quite clear. Various

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⁴ The characteristic of semantics of considered units is given in the free form. We only aim at advancing on the way to the inventory of parasitical words assuming that their detailed semantic description is still a good distance in the future. For some other languages, the research in this area has advanced further; the extensive literature on the subject is given in (Хуршудян, 2006: 38–51).
examples of such “hmkyan’je” (written down as \( \text{хм} \) or \( \text{гм} \)) from Solzhenitsyn’s novel *In the First Circle* are presented in (Шмелев, 2005).

The “hesitative” filling of a pause which is often called “ekan’je” or “mekan’je” has quite a different function. It specifies the communicative difficulties connected with the search of the perfect verbalization of an idea or with substantial difficulties when it is necessary to talk although a preliminary plan of speech is lacking. It can function as a sign of fluctuations and indecision, a sort of *figura modestiae*. Simultaneously it can be a sign showing that the speaker has not finished speaking and does not want to give the word to his or her interlocutor. It can also be used to help the addressee to apprehend an idea which is new or unpleasant for him or her. In lecturing, “mekan’je” is used for imitating spontaneity: the lecturer stops, as though s/he was reflecting, and pretends that s/he is searching for the right word to induce listeners to think and to search for this word together with the lecturer. Besides it gives listeners time to write the lecture down.

### 2.2 *Nu*

The particle *nu* in a role of a marker of communicative difficulty was analyzed in a number of recent studies. We shall only mention (Баранов, Кобозева 1988) as well as a number of publications of Ju. V. Daragan devoted to the functions of pragmatic markers, in particular, so-called “words-parasites” in Russian oral speech (Дараган, 2000; 2002; 2003). *Nu* is extremely characteristic of the situation of various types of communicative difficulties (hesitation, difficulties in linear construction of speech, a choice of adequate description, improving a slip of the tongue, etc.). Such use is based on the idea that one has to carry out his or her communicative obligations (to answer a question or to continue the story), despite of difficulties that have arisen.

The *nu* of “search” can be considered as a special case of the use of *nu* as “a marker of correction” (as it was called by Ju. V. Daragan), i.e. to correct inexact nomination or to mark an amplifying parenthesis (Дараган, 2000 : 69; 2002 : 120).

### 2.3 *Eto, eto samoe*

Similarly to the marker *nu*, *eto* is also used as a marker of communicative difficulty; however the conditions of the use of *eto* differ from conditions of the use of *nu*. In the case of *nu*, a person often would not like to speak at all but is forced by the communicative situation; s/he does not know what to say or is at a loss to choose the suitable formulation. In contrast, *eto* and *eto samoe* are used when there is a temporary blocking of access to the right word: the person understands what s/he wants to say (and probably, in his/her opinion, the addressee understands it, too), but the way of expressing it has suddenly slipped his/her mind, and s/he cannot find the word. Cf. the episode from the story about a dream cited in the book (Китайгородская, Розанова, 1999 : 324):

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5 This type of use has been described in (Баранов Кобозева, 1988: 51-53) with reference to its functioning in answers to questions and designated as the *nu* of “search”.
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A combination of the pronoun etot (this) with the marker kak ego or the isolated marker kak ego (what’s-his-name) sometimes has the same function:

(2) Дмитрий Андреич/ а помните вот/ на защите м... как его... Успенского/ вы вот тоже говорили о каких-то таких географических... (Земская, Капанадзе, 1978: 141)

Let us consider the prosody of the word eto in the function of communicative difficulty marker: eto is always stressed (the discourse particle eto, on the contrary, is always unstressed: Зачем это ты пришел?); it can even be pronounced with a drawn-out “a”: этаа-а. Not without reason, eto as a marker of communicative difficulty is always stressed. As it shows that a speaker is at a loss in choosing the necessary word, it anticipates a pause after which the speaker either finds this word or not; and before a pause any words tend to be stressed (Розанова, 1983: 36). In comparison, the expanded variant of the aforementioned marker eto samoe is said with a full reduction of the component eto and an accent on the component samoe, which goes right before the pause (et-sамое).

3 Markers of rough-and-ready nomination

By means of markers of this type (типа, kak by, так скажу) a speaker admits the possible inaccuracy of a nomination and refuses responsibility for it. Thus each of these words is characterized by its own history and has a specific socio-cultural aura. Their pragmatic functions also differ somewhat.

The word kak by became popular during the Late Soviet period as an intellectual word of sorts (a word of the intelligentsia) – perhaps originally in contrast with the categorical style of judgments typical of official texts. This fashion may also have been connected with the interest in Dostoevsky: it is known that kak by is one of his favorite words. Moreover, kak by often occurred in the speech of certain scholars who applied exact methods in their research. It expressed the idea that the speaker had studied the given case not as well as s/he would have liked to. Subsequently, as it is often the case with cultural phenomena, kak by moved to lower social strata, having lost thus a significant part of its content. Today, the frequent use of kak by sounds finical.6

6 Some observers interpret “the modish parasitical little expression kak by” (when, e.g. a singer says, Я вам сейчас как бы стою как бы песню ‘I’ll sort of sing you a kind of song now’) as a subconscious syndrome expressing chronic lack of confidence in what Russian speakers say or think (Ryazanova-Clarke & Wade 1999: 327).
Tipa had an absolutely different (and even exact opposite) destiny. It came from the speech of the so-called “bratki”, i.e. criminal circles. The TV journalist Leonid Parfenov, who is scrupulous about details, mentioned in one of his shows that the word tipa with a specific pronunciation was a characteristic sign of the mid-1990s, the period of the wild outburst of criminality. However, tipa occurs in intellectual discourse today, displacing kak by, which has lost its charm. By employing tipa, which may sound slightly ironic, a person shows that s/he is not a bookworm and possibly even “cool”. «А ты здесь типа работаешь?» — «Да типа того». Many intellectuals now talk like this.

The expression tak skazat’ originally had the same function, although it has now almost lost its motivational form. Some speakers (more often among the senior generation) use it as a sort of rhythmic and semantic organizer of speech, sometimes repeating it several times within the limits of one utterance. Similar to other rhythmic-semantic organizers of speech, pronounced mechanically, this expression is said without an accent and undergoes strong phonetic deformation and sounds as [тскат’]. It is often used by people who to have a ready tongue, who speak very quickly, and who use tak skazat’ to try to organize their speech, to break it into fragments, and to facilitate the listeners’ understanding. Such cases have nothing to do with communicative difficulties.

4 Markers of the discourse attitude

The use of items which we call the markers of the discourse attitude is characterized by high automatism; they are usually not accompanied by a pause of fluctuation. Nevertheless, their functions can not be reduced, apparently, to the rhythmic organization of colloquial phrases, and the statement that “their use in an utterance is lexically and grammatically superfluous” (Розанова, 1983) sounds unduly categorical. Items of the given class express the general idea that the speaker follows in his/her conversation.

We shall begin with the markers expressing the general idea of brevity of speech. The marker znachit (often pronounced [ъш’], [ъщ’], [ъч’] etc.) conveys the idea of connectivity of speech. Its summarizing character is very important. The speaker faces a problem of how to give a lot of information to the listener and wishes to do it briefly and coherently. This expression is typical of lecturing speech (in this case, it is less frequently exposed to phonetic deformation); it is also characteristic of the speech of many intellectuals; consider, e.g., the memoirs of T. G. Vinokur cited in the book (Китайгородская Розанова, 1999). At first sight, a similar yet nevertheless slightly different idea is expressed by the marker koroche, which conveys the idea of self-restriction: the speaker aspires to keep himself within the limits of a summary, even giving up details or coherency of the text because s/he is shy or does not want to disturb the listener or does not wish to spend a word in vain. The use of this marker suggests that a person is tongue-tied. The idea of brevity is characteristic of the marker v obschem as well: it shows that the speaker is not ready to expound everything completely and

7 N. N. Rozanova has made a suggestion to call such items “rhythmical phantoms F” (Розанова, 1983: 37, with reference to a metaphor suggested by M. V. Panov). We will deal with them in the next section.

8 Ju. V. Daragan is of the opinion that the main function of the discourse marker znachit is signaling that the speaker is willing to meet his/her communicative engagements (Дараган, 2000; 2002; 2003: 119).
presents only the most important and basic information. A deformed pronunciation (вощем) is characteristic of this marker as well.

Another type of discourse attitude is presented by the marker *tam*. It characterizes not the general discourse attitude of a speaker, but rather his/her attitude to separate speech fragments. The marker *tam* is used when the syntactic structure of a given phrase or structure of a described situation requires mentioning a detail, yet the choice of this detail or the way of its designation is not important⁹ (e.g. *Няня нам бывает нужна вечерами на несколько часов, если мы уходим... там... в театр*) (Шмелев, in print).

### 5 Phatic markers

The group of pragmatical markers in questions is connected with the organization of communicative interaction with interlocutor. Some of them are plainly directed to the interlocutor, being originally verbal forms of the second person.

Thus, the items *smotri* and *prikin’* as discourse markers do not lose the connection with verbs in the imperative mood and contain a direct appeal to the interlocutor. The word *smotri* expresses the invitation to concentrate on and follow the speech (e.g. the explanation of a mathematical operation or the planning of a day). It can hardly occur in narration. The similar item *prikin’* means ‘pay attention, look how interesting it is’; it expresses the invitation to share the general admiration for the richness of life. In contrast to *smotri*, *prikin’* is rather typical of narration.

Unlike both of the items just considered, the word *ponimaesh’* as a discourse marker helps to organize speech and tends accordingly to be unstressed and strongly reduced [пъш]. At the same time it has kept its connection with the verb *ponimat’* ‘to understand’ and its role cannot be confined to the participation in the rhythmic-semantic organization of speech. The use of this item shows that the speaker assumes the addressee to be *a priori* a like-minded person. Therefore it helps to maintain contact.

A particular type of discourse marker is constituted by items used at the end of a phrase and having independent intonational setting. The end particle *vot* was analyzed in a number of publications. It was shown that it emphasizes the semantic completeness of a statement (Розанова, 1983: 34; Долгов, Лейнонен, 1988). Ju. Daragan may be right that the final *vot* not only marks the end of a structurally significant fragment but also anticipates the following one (Дараган, 2000; 2002; 2003: 119). It is possible to add that *vot* is often used in a situation of a long drawn-out pause.

The final *a?* implies that the speaker is not confident and that his/her addressee is interested in contact and is ready to give a cooperative answer. In addition, *a?* at the end of a statement signifies that the speaker would like to get such an answer, simultaneously reducing a

⁹ This *tam* should be distinguished from another *tam* described by Pen’kovsky (Пеньковский 1989: 78–82) which function as a distance and alienation marker. In a lot of contexts, these two functions cannot be neatly separated from each other but constitute a continuum that may be analyzed in terms of contamination of meanings.
distance between the speaker and the addressee. A? at the end of a phrase sounds more naturally in the speech act of request; it makes the request both timid and very insistent. On the one hand, a speaker declares that s/he knows that s/he has no right to demand anything (thus the request is softened). On the other hand, a? helps to establish a sort of personal relation even with a stranger, which makes refusal quite difficult (Левонтина, 2002).

The Russian da? is similar, though not identical: “The Russian da? can have various pragmatic functions, depending on the intonation and type of discourse. In reasoning, da? can show that the speaker wants to check whether the listener understands him/her (cf. the teacher’s da?) or whether s/he agrees. If plans for the future are discussed, da? expresses uncertain hope that the interlocutor accepts the offer. Da? has some other pragmatic functions beyond the bounds of standard Russian” (Шмелева & Шмелев, 1999: 166). Interestingly enough, the functions of the final da? in Joseph Brodsky's speech, of which it was extremely characteristic, are not quite normative. It is a sort of monologic da? with a specific intonation (partly interrogative and partly affirmative) showing, that, having said something, Brodsky checked whether the phrase corresponded to his idea (a “text-meaning” check of sorts, see Левонтина, 2002).

6 “Bliakanje”

The swear-word blin and its more rude synonyms may seem to be grosser analogues of other items (such as those considered above). This is not true, however. The functions of a word like blin have nothing to do with markers like nu or eto or with markers like kak by or all the more with smotri and prikin’. “Bliakanje” seemingly carries out several functions. Such words organize the rhythmic structure of speech and express the general attitude of the speaker, which includes a “cynical” world-view, and/or the interlocutor. They draw a special picture of the world, “where people steal and cheat… and anyway treat their entourage and all those around them with aversion or deep indifference” (Левин, 1998: 819). Blin is the softest of these expressions; however, all of them can freely be used in “hearty Russian talk” (Solzhenitsyn, Easter Procession).

7 Concluding remarks

On the whole, the aforementioned items have a lot of language-specific features and deserve linguistic description just as much as other linguistic units. With respect to "hmykan’je" and "mekan’je," the hypothesis stated in (Шмель & Protassova, 1998) seems to be true, according to which they possess a certain specificity in comparison with English or German fillers of pauses (cf. also Swerts, 1998).10

It is all the more true for the other items in question. One can consider any item in any language which seems to be semantically empty, only to find out that it is unlike all other items.

10 For English there is a number of works describing the differences between such items as uh and um.
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