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Cancel Culture – the Speech Behavior of Modern Society

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ABSTRACT

The research paradigm of 21st century linguistics links the study of discourse with the use of language as a public practice. The **subject** of the study is linguistic features of different levels, characterizing the phenomenon of cancel culture. The new discourse practice or speech reality functions thanks to the media and the Internet in various areas of modern speech – in political and business communication, in professional and everyday life. The **purpose** of the study is to consider cancel culture as a linguistic object that reflects the speech life of modern society. The **relevance** of the study is determined by a modern request for regulation and control of speech behavior in the public sphere within the framework of constructive criticism. The article implements the following **research tasks**: to describe the linguistic essence of the cancel culture and characterize the latter as a phenomenon characteristic of the communicative behavior of representatives of the linguocultural community. The linguistic **method** of discourse analysis is used as the main tool for analyzing texts with functioning examples of lexical units representing the cancellation action, which makes it possible to identify features of the communication and evaluation activities of speakers. As a **result**, new language facts in the system of linguistic coordinates are localized and a possible vector for the study of aggressive communication in the language-environment category is determined. It allows for an expansion of the field of scientific understanding of the modern speech environment. The author **concludes** that the cancel culture as a new discourse practice has a thematic and semiotic dominant in the form of destructive criticism. Research of new discourse practice on the identified attractors of criticism and aggressive communication is set as a research perspective.

Keywords: cancel culture; discursive practice; aggressive communication; media texts; language and environment; criticism; attractors

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ОРИГИНАЛЬНАЯ СТАТЬЯ

Культура отмены – речевая реальность современного общества

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Научно-исследовательская парадигма лингвистики XXI в. связывает изучение дискурса с использованием языка как общественной практики. **Предметом** исследования являются языковые особенности разных уровней, характеризующие явление культуры отмены. Новая дискурсивная практика или речевая реальность функционирует благодаря средствам массовой информации (СМИ) и интернету в различных сферах современной речи – в политической и деловой коммуникации, в профессиональной и повседневной жизни. **Цель** исследования – рассмотреть культуру отмены как лингвистический объект, отражающий речевую жизнь современного общества. **Актуальность** исследования определяется современным запросом на регуляцию и контроль речевого поведения в публичной сфере в рамках конструктивной критики. В статье реализуются такие исследовательские **задачи** – описать языковую сущность культуры отмены и охарактеризовать последнюю как

явление, свойственное коммуникативному поведению представителей лингвокультурной общности. Лингвистический **метод** дискурс анализа используется как основной инструмент анализа текстов с функционирующими вариантами лексических единиц, репрезентирующих действие отмены, что позволяет выявить особенности коммуникативно-оценочной деятельности говорящих. Как **результат**, локализованы новые языковые факты в системе лингвистических координат и определен возможный вектор исследования агрессивной коммуникации в категории язык-среда, что позволяет расширить область научного осмысления современной речевой среды. Автор приходит к **выводу** о том, что культура отмены как новая дискурсивная практика имеет тематическую и семиотическую доминанту в виде деструктивной критики и ставит следующую исследовательскую задачу — изучить новую дискурсивную практику по выявленным аттракторам критики и агрессивной коммуникации. **Ключевые слова:** культура отмены; дискурсивная практика; агрессивная коммуникация; медиатексты; язык и среда; критика; аттракторы

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1. Introduction

Cancel culture or cancelling as a form of aggressive communication has become the reality of modern society. Being a new form of discourse practice, cancel culture is able to influence a person's behavior, his/her way of thinking, and actions. Discourse is defined as the use of language to communicate in speech or writing, or an example of this.¹ By attracting public attention to the existing problem, this practice calls to account the subject, whether it is an individual, a group, an organization and even a country that is directly the cause of the discussion. We are going to consider the status of the “cancel culture” phenomenon in the modern communicative environment.

Speech behavior, which in our work we define as a new discourse practice, can be of certain interest to scientists of various fields: political linguistics [1], political science [2], cultural studies [3, 4], linguoculturology [5], linguoargumentology [6]. There are certain scientific works of foreign researchers studying cancel culture as a crucial problem of modern society [9–13].

2. Methods and materials

Considering cancel culture as the speech behavior of modern society, it is proposed to look at this phenomenon as a linguistic object characterized and functioning in a special way.

Using the linguistic method of discourse analysis makes it possible to describe language characteristics of the cancel culture at different levels.

The empirical material of the study is presented by publications in electronic versions of leading publishing houses: “Arguments and Facts,” “Guardian,” and “New Retail” for 2019–2022.

3. Discussion

Currently, we are all witnessing the functioning cancel culture — a new speech practice of society that has become so obvious that there is a need to study it from a linguistic point of view. This practice is a sign of the post-globalization processes taking place now. It could be called *the spirit of the time*.

It has been noted that the phenomenon is associated with the confrontation and has a great influence on the formation of values in society. At the same time, work on the analysis of the cancellation impact on the language system and communicative practice is still isolated.

Here are several definitions of cancel culture given from various sources. For example, according to the Cambridge dictionary, *cancel culture/cancelling* is “a way of behaving in a society or group, especially in social media, when there is a complete rejection and withdrawal of support for someone who has said or done something hurtful”.²

According to the online English dictionary, *cancel culture* is “a phenomenon or practice of

¹ Cambridge online dictionary. URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/discourse>

² Cambridge Dictionary. URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>

publicly rejecting, boycotting, refusing to support certain people or groups because of their unacceptable views, statements or actions”.³

Collins’ English Dictionary gives the following definition “*cancel culture* is, in particular, a culture of social media communication in which people cease to support a person by being instigated by someone criticizing that person”.⁴

In Russian dictionaries, there is no concept of cancel culture, but you can find terms interpreted closely or synonymously with the phenomenon.

Ostracism — 1. (In ancient Greece) — the expulsion of a citizen from the borders of the state; the decision on this was made by voting with shards (ostracos is a shard in Greek). 2) Exile, persecution, rejection.⁵

Boycott — 1. Complete or partial termination of a relationship with someone. in disagreement with something, protest against something.⁶ 2. Termination of the relationship with someone in protest of someone’s name, behavior, act...⁷ 3. The form of political and economic struggle implies the complete or partial termination of relations with an individual, organization, enterprise, for example. Refusal to hire, buy products of this enterprise...⁸

Taking into account the definitions proposed in the dictionaries, directly or indirectly related to the *cancel culture* as the phenomenon, as well as, taking into account the environment of its functioning, we consider it possible to identify the cancel culture as a type of aggressive communication. In this regard, we adapt the definition of aggressive communication proposed by L. M. Goncharova and characterize the cancel culture as “offensive, active communication that attracts the attention of the audience, <... > activating the audience, emotionally forcing to take sides one of the opponents, empathize with events, actively including in them” [7, p. 306].

The cancel culture functions quite actively thanks to the media and the Internet in various areas of modern speech — political and business communication, in professional and everyday life. In other words, the environment for the functioning of the cancel culture is a media discourse that most clearly reflects socio-political sentiments in society and has a direct impact on the formation of public opinion [2].

4. Results

This section presents cancel culture in the linguistic coordinate system. The coordinates we define are discourse, argumentation and criticism, and the Internet environment (Fig. 1).

Discourse. N. Barebina described modeling of the category of rationality of criticism in the cancel culture: “We are dealing with a new discourse practice integrated into different types of discourses, capable of changing the conditions of social reality and influencing it.” In different types of discourses, you can see communication formats that are varieties of discussions. In the culture of cancellation, the scientist points out, there is a discussion and criticism in one form or another [6, p. 54].

Significant is the fact that for the Russian speech activity, lexemes such as cancellation, prohibition, refusal present a semantic innovation. However, for the English language, this concept is not new; it appeared long before the political events that contributed to the spread of the corresponding culture. This is expressed by lexemes: *called for the cancellations, to be banned, it would halt, were also suspended*.

Here, we can discuss a number of examples in which this new discursive practice of the cancel culture functions. Firstly, the traditionally dominant topos is the threat and demand for punishment:

State broadcasters from countries including Iceland, Finland, Norway and the Netherlands had called for Russia to be banned from the contest, which takes place in Turin in May <...> The Rotterdam Philharmonic also threatened to cancel its longstanding annual Gergiev festival this year, Switzerland’s Verbier festival has asked Gergiev to resign his position as music director of the Verbier Festival Orchestra, and in New York, he

³ Online Dictionary. URL: <https://www.dictionary.com>

⁴ Collins Online Dictionary. URL: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com>

⁵ Dictionary of Political terms. URL: <https://www.dictionary/political-terms/fc/slovar-206.htm#zag-498>

⁶ Large explanatory dictionary. URL: <https://gramota.ru/slovari/dic>

⁷ Ozhegov Dictionary. URL: <https://slovarozhegova.ru>

⁸ Encyclopedic Dictionary. URL: <https://www.vedu.ru/bigencdic/>

was replaced for performances with the Vienna Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall.⁹

The very knowledge of the phenomenon of “cancel culture” in relation to brands (public criticism or refusal to buy for the purpose of “punishment”) is growing. If in 2021 only 7% of Russians knew about it, then in 2022 this figure doubled. Despite the fact that knowledge of the phenomenon of “cancellation” is growing, including due to the departure of foreign companies, fewer people believe in its effectiveness: if in 2021 it was considered effective 67%, then in 2022 only 40% of buyers. They do not believe in efficiency — less is used in practice: in 2022, only 27% “vote with the ruble” (instead of 35% in 2021). Is the cancel culture no longer threatening us?¹⁰

Secondly, the punishment, as a rule, is quite real:

*This is the story of the two New York Times reporters, Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor, and their battle to write the story about the now **disgraced and imprisoned** movie producer Harvey Weinstein and his decades-long practice of intimidation, harassment and rape of young female actors and junior staff, hushing them up with threats and NDA payoffs, enabled by a vast male superstructure of silence.*¹¹

Thirdly, the theme of coercion and inevitability is being exploited:

*This year, the whole world faced the imposition of the phenomenon of the abolition of Russian culture, when the world’s leading theaters refused classical productions of Russian classics, and universities excluded the works of Dostoevsky, Bunin and Tolstoy from the program.*¹²

Criticism and argumentation. The analysis of contexts with functioning variants of lexical units representing the cancellation action revealed the following features of the communication and evaluation activities of speakers. There are always two attractors of such interac-

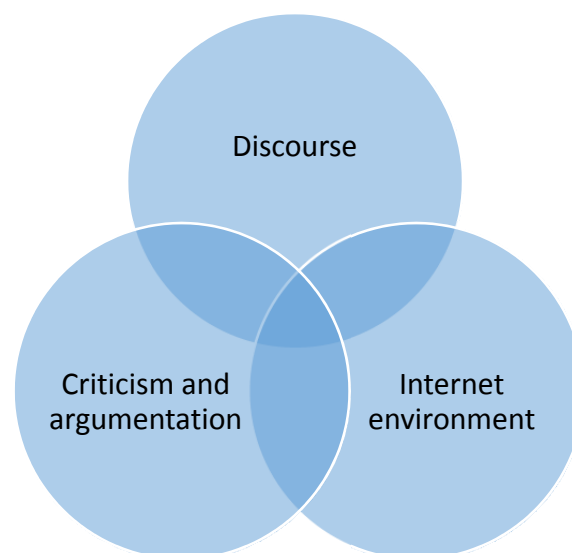


Fig. 1. Linguistic coordinate system in cancel culture analysis

Source: Compiled by the author.

tion — the subject and the object of cancellation. In this case, the subject of cancellation has some moral right to criticize. It can be illustrated by the following example.

*More and more calls are being made for the arrangement of international tribunals of some countries (“righteous”) over others (“sinful”). Attempts are being made to involve the UN and UNESCO in the confrontation. The latter is shamefully silent about the “abolition” of Russian culture in the West, the demolition and desecration of monuments to its representatives in Bulgaria, the Baltic states and Ukraine.*¹³

Criticism as a negative interpretation of action is illustrated in the following example:

*“The ease with which the” cancel culture “is practiced against entire peoples (Russians, Chinese, Venezuelans, Iranians...) has created a breeding ground for the growth of anti-Semitism,” she wrote to Telegram. An important role in this was played by double standards, “which did not leave a single axiom or dogma untouched and perverted everything”.*¹⁴

It is noteworthy that the “righteous” parties have the argument of their criticism. Here’s how the song contest leader explains his tough decision:

⁹ Khomami N. The show can’t go on: Russian arts cancelled worldwide. Guardian. 2022. Tue Mar. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/01/the-show-cant-go-on-russian-arts-cancelled-worldwide>

¹⁰ New Retail. 2022.1117 URL: https://new-retail.ru/novosti/retail/kazhdyy_tretyy_rossiyanin_poteryal_doverie_k_brendam/

¹¹ Bradshaw P. She Said review — breaking the male silence around Harvey Weinstein. Guardian. 2022. Thu 24 Nov. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/nov/24/she-said-review-breaking-the-male-silence-around-harvey-weinstein>

¹² Verevkina E. Arguments and Facts. 2022. 26.12. URL: https://aif.ru/event/arhiv/poety_donbassa_v_literaturnoy_gostinoy_aif

¹³ Arguments and Facts 14 December 2022. URL: https://aif.ru/politics/opinion/v_poiskah_ustraneniya_razuma_poutihnet_li_ohvativshee_mir_protivostoyanie

¹⁴ Zakharova called the main reason for antisemitism in US. URL: https://aif.ru/society/mo_rf_vsu_prodolzhayut_obstrely_nesmotrya_na_prekrashchenie_ognya_so_storonys_vs

Speaking to Abba's Björn Ulvaeus on BBC Radio 4's Today programme, for which the Swedish songwriter was acting as guest editor, Eurovision's executive supervisor, Martin Österdahl, was asked if the decision to exclude Russia had been hard to make. He said: "It was, and it still is. How Europe feels very much affects the contest. "It is also that when you look back in time, you see that the Eurovision song contest is like a logbook of what has happened in Europe, what the trends have been in Europe. "But, also, what is the kind of mood and sentiment of Europe, and what is the social context of Europe at the time. When we say we are not political, what we always should stand up for are the basic and ultimate values of democracy. Everyone is right to be who they are".¹⁵

This example also demonstrates an actional thesis: *We must always uphold the basic and highest values of democracy. Speech Everyone has the right to be who he is as an argument. An implicit thesis is also analytically revealed. If Russia is not excluded, the competition will be spoiled. Argument: No one would like to see that entry in Eurovision's on-board magazine.*

The special interest should be in the situation of how the cancelled feel themselves. So, the examples show that the object understands well what is happening:

Every fourth Russian feels "cancelled" due to the departure of foreign brands. And about 30% are ready to refuse, and 10% have already abandoned the services or products of foreign companies that left.¹⁶

¹⁵ Grierson J. Eurovision chief says Russia ban stands for 'ultimate values of democracy'. Guardian. 2022. Fri 30 Dec. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/dec/30/eurovisionchief-russia-ban-stands-for-ultimate-values-democracy>

¹⁶ New Retail. November 2022. URL: https://newretail.ru/novosti/retail/kazhdyi_tretyi_rossiyanin_poteryal_doverie_k_brendam/

Internet environment. It should be noted that the phenomenon of cancel culture is noticeably gaining strength in Russian society, thanks to the possibilities of digital space. Our observations suggest that the phenomenon of withdrawal in everyday mode is most widely discussed in the media and social media. Digitalization and accessibility of the Internet environment made it possible to speak freely on any topic under discussion.

5. Conclusion

The relevance of studying this phenomenon is explained by the increasing implementation of various forms of aggressive communication and the search for effective means of protection against it. A feature of this phenomenon is the fact that speech actions can only partly be attributed to conflict communication, while speech behavior itself forms a new ethics that imperceptibly penetrates into the country's linguistic and cultural community. There is no doubt that discussion is the most effective way to scrutinize arguable topics, analyze difficult situations, resolve disputes and conflicts. A distinctive feature of such communicative interaction is constructive criticism, which results in decisions that are mutually acceptable to the participants in the discussion. The phenomenon of cancel culture is a demonstration of "language power".

According to A. Kravchenko, language is a part of the world in which we not only exist, but which we literally create by the power of our "Logos", which gives reason to think about what language is and "what it does with us and for us" [8, p. 17].

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