

'Truth' in Russian: good or bad?

The paper applies the method of integrated language description to the study of 'truth' concepts in Russian to explain a hitherto unaccounted for polysemy of the Russian word *pravda*

Keywords: linguistics, semantics

There has been abundant research on the Russian concept of 'truth' [Levin 1994, Arutiunova 1995, Bulygina & Shmelev 1997, Wierzbicka 2002], mainly focused on the distinctions between two kinds of 'truth' found in Russian - *pravda* 'factual truth' (as in - *Ja tam ne byl. - Eto pravda* 'I haven't been there. - That's true') and *istina* 'putative truth' (as in *Tolko sejchas emu otkrylas velikaia istina: vse liudi dobrye* 'Only now has he become awakened to the great truth: All people are kind'), as well as on the positive image of this concept and its salience in the Russian language and culture.

However, the existing lines of analysis, as well as the existing lexicographic descriptions fail to account for two important linguistic facts: the nouns *pravda* and *istina* have overlapping polysemies with *both* factual and putative meanings; however, *pravda*, unlike *istina*, develops multiple meanings as a function word, in particular, that of a concessive conjunction, as in *On umnyj, pravda lenivyj* 'He is intelligent, although admittedly lazy'.

The current paper applies the method of integrated language description [Ju.D. Apresjan 1995, 2000], which involves describing semantics, syntax, co-occurrence properties, polysemy, synonyms, antonyms and all other linguistically relevant properties of linguistic units, to the analysis of the Russian words *pravda*, *istina* 'truth', *nepravda* 'untruth', *lozh'* 'lie', *obman* 'deception' and other related concepts to reveal the systematic structure of this entire semantic field, which, among other things, gives an insight into why *pravda*, but not *istina*, was able to develop the concessive conjunction meaning, which can be explicated as follows:

X, pravda Y ('X though admittedly Y') = 'X is taking place; Y is taking place; the speaker wants X to take place; the speaker does not want Y to take place; the speaker thinks that Y is important; the speaker thinks that X is slightly more important than Y'.

We propose to analyze the polysemy of the noun *pravda* 'truth' as follows:

1. *pravda 1* 'the way things are as opposed to the way they are not' (as in *znat' <raskryt', skryvat', iskazit'> pravdu* 'to know <to reveal, to hide, to distort> the truth', *uzhasnaia <otvratitel'naia> pravda* 'horrible <ugly> truth')
2. *pravda 2* 'an utterance which reflects the way things are' (as in *Eto chistaia <svjataia> pravda* 'This is pure <holy> truth')
3. *pravda 3* 'an opinion which in the speaker's view reflects the way things are' (*tvoia pravda* 'You are right, lit.: It's your truth')
4. *pravda 4* 'match between how things are and how they should be' (*Budu iskat' pravdu* 'I'll search for justice; lit. for the truth')
5. *pravda 5* 'match between how things are reflected in a source of information or a work of art and the way they are' (*xudozhestvennaia pravda* 'artistic truth')

We propose to analyze the polysemy of the word *istina* as follows:

1. 'spiritually valuable knowledge of the world and important things in the world' (as in *sviataia istina* 'holy truth', *svetlaia istina* 'radiant truth', *poisk okonchatel'noj istiny* 'the search for the ultimate truth')
2. 'a conception about a certain aspect of the world shared by a group of people or by all people' (as in *nauchnaia <ploskaia, ustrevshaia> istina* 'scientific <commonplace,

outdated> truth')

3. 'the way things are' (as in *Nakonec-to istina raskrylas* 'Finally the truth was revealed')
4. 'match between how things are reflected in an utterance and the way they are' (*Ja ne somnevaius v istine ego slov* 'I don't doubt his truthfulness; lit. I don't doubt the truth of his words')

One can see that the meaning of the concessive conjunction *pravda* combines two important elements, factuality ('X is taking place; Y is taking place') and negative evaluation in terms of undesirability ('the speaker does not want Y'). It is quite simple to account for the presence of the factual element in the meaning of the conjunction *pravda* – after all, the primary meaning of the noun *pravda* is that of a fact 'the way things are', whereas for *istina*, the factual meaning is rare, outdated and accordingly lower in the hierarchy of its polysemy.

However, it is the analysis of the co-occurrence properties of the word *pravda* in its different meanings as well as of its antonyms *nepravda* 'untruth' and especially *lozh* 'lie' that offers a comprehensive answer as to why *pravda* develops a concessive meaning with semantic elements of negative evaluation in it.

While *pravda* in its second meaning has positive connotations (as in holy *pravda*), in its first meaning (which goes unnoticed by either researchers or dictionaries) it does, in fact, contain a strong contrastive and even negative element. *Pravda* in its first meaning does not refer to a neutral knowledge of facts; it is the knowledge of a fact as opposed to the lack of knowledge or a lie; by saying *Ja znaiu pravdu ob etom* 'I know the truth about this matter', one implies that either other people do not know the facts or else they consciously choose to misrepresent them; it is by no means a neutral statement.

Related to this polemical element is the negative evaluation of the naked, unembroidered truth (as opposed to beautified lies) by those who do not want it revealed; thus, there is a striking difference between the co-occurrence properties of *pravda 1* as opposed to *pravda 2* or *istina*. While the *pravda 1* is usually *ugly, cold, cruel, disgusting*, *Pravda 2* and *istina* are usually *holy, pure, radiant*; it is impossible for *pravda* in its first meaning to ever be positive, cf. the ungrammaticality of **Nakonec-to otkrylas' sviataia pravda* 'Finally the holy truth was revealed'; **Ja znaiu chistuiu pravdu ob etom* 'I know the pure truth about this'. The negative connotations of the truth in its first, factual meaning as of something too difficult to bear and therefore undesirable account for the occurrence of a derived concessive meaning, with its elements of factuality and undesirability.