Cognitive dissonance in philological perspective

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Abstract: The article deals with the problem of cognitive dissonance that represents itself as the discrepancy between cognitive bases of communicants, exteriorized at the level of language. Cognitive dissonance may be caused by various reasons, including linguistic ones connected with the inappropriate choice of language means and communicative strategies, as well as social and other extralinguistic factors, which refer to semantic and conceptual incompatibility actualized in human intercourse. As the result, in most cases the communicants tend to eliminate situations of dissonance by various means appropriate and achieve the state of consonance. Within the domain of literary space the potential of language that refers to cognitive dissonance emergence and its further annihilation if possible may be used to produce a certain stylistic effect and produce the aesthetic impact necessary as well as become intellectual stimulus for further inference. The analysis of cognitive dissonance situations represented in the artistic discourse has shown that in the domain of verbal art their creative abilities, both in terms of naturally occurred and intentionally provoked precedents, represented via means of language, can be exploited for the sake of constructing the specific atmosphere of virtual space and artistic images creation, which contributes to the author’s message successful transfer to the reader or listener. This may be confirmed by the results of linguopoetic and linguostylistic investigations, as well as profound philological context analysis, based on integrating linguistic knowledge with knowledge of the world, in which language data are prioritized.

Key words: cognitive dissonance; communication; vertical context; background knowledge; artistic message; literary space.


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Introduction

In accordance with the cognitive dissonance theory, within the framework of which the present research has been done, the discrepancy between individuals’ cognitions, i.e. between their knowledge, opinions and beliefs as well as the ways information is produced and elaborated, involves psychological discomfort, which calls for its elimination or neutralization in order to achieve the inner balance and peace of mind, i.e. the state of consonance and spiritual harmony [Aronson 1969, Festinger 1968, Schirrin 1994]. Cognitive dissonance refers to situations when a human being experiences certain psychological stress when ideas and actions, including one’s linguistic activity, are not psychologically consistent with one’s settings, beliefs and values, thus becoming issues beyond one’s cultural, conceptual and linguistic world view. Thus, a person experiences dissonance due to the fact of obtaining information that is not consistent with his or her cognitive attitudes since the basic conceptions with regard to the world order as well as fundamental connections and regularities, based on one’s knowledge and individual interpretations, have become destroyed and violated. The state of affairs in question serves as a trigger for making attempts to overcome and reduce the discomfort arisen. Otherwise stated, in case of cognitive dissonance a human being strives for internal psychological comfort and consistency that will enable the person in question to find him or herself in the usual, real and cognizant situation and familiar world. The internal inconsistency tends to become strong motivation to search for various ways to reduce cognitive dissonance, which in the more general sense include the rational approach to the situation, which concerns with making changes to justify incomprehensible social or linguistic behavior of the communicants that causes stress. This can be achieved by adding new cognitive elements to the domain of one’s cognitive system, as well as the confirmation bias application as referred to contradictory information avoidance. In other similar cases search for harmony and consonance refer to both content and ways of presentation, as well as focusing on the statements that support one’s prior knowledge and expectations in terms of values, beliefs and attitudes, usually completely ignoring dissonance- and conflict-causing information [Festinger 1968].

Within the domain of linguistics the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance presents one of the topical and most significant problems that concern with linguistic and general knowledge interaction as referred to the ways of cognitive processes presentation and interpretation, as well as the use of language not only in terms of causing or avoiding cases of naturally occurring and unintentionally provoked dissonance but also with respect to deliberate creation of cognitive and linguistic incompatibility to achieve stylistic and rhetorical purposes. From the heuristic point of view ways of cognitive dissonance reduction are subject to the analysis with regard to contextual
approach and linguistic creativity issues based on
the use of language potential abilities for the sake
of communicants’ conceptual bases coordination.
It should be emphasized that as for the linguistic
area of the analysis one should bear in mind that
first and foremost this concerns language and the
peculiarities of its use in actual speech, which reflects
linguistic knowledge possession and linguistic units
characteristics [Kubryakova 2005, p. 29].

Methodology
The process of speech interaction in terms of
cognitive dissonance theory is closely connected
with such problems as the knowledge inference from
the information transmitted, the intentions of the
speaker or writer decoding, as well as the adequacy
of interpretation of the statement from the linguistic
point of view, including communicative strategies
implementation. In this regard a complex approach
to the phenomenon in question, based on the analysis
of actual speech representations, seems appropriate
in terms of integrating knowledge of the world with the
linguistic knowledge.

We precede from the premise that the phenomenon
of cognitive dissonance should be discussed in terms
of discrepancies between communicants’ cognitions
actualized at the level of language. This means that
the category in question can be regarded as the
cognitive-communicative category, represented by
the opposition of consonance vs. dissonance within
the domain of speech interaction [Drozdova 2011]. It
should be emphasized that any communicative act as a
certain piece of oral or written speech is supposed to be
analyzed in terms of linguistic and mental processing,
with special attention to extralinguistic issues, which
concern with the discursive approach to the study of
the phenomena under consideration, as discourse is a
dynamic phenomenon, based on the entire set of issues
taking part in communication process formation and
referring to the complex approach of the phenomena
in question. The notion of discourse concerns with the
continuity of the topic in question as well as the ability
of new worlds creation, and includes both linguistic
and extralinguistic factors, which determine human
interaction [Kubryakova, Aleksandrova 1999].

The communicative pragmatic function of
language has been discussed time and again and
analyzed in detail via means of various methods on
the basis of different approaches to the problem.
For example, the lingual personality conception,
inTEGRATIVE and dynamic by its nature, plays an
important role within these lines both in terms of
penetrating into the inner structure of the processes
concerned with human ability to use language and
the anthropocentric approach emergence as one of
the fundamentals of cognitive linguistics [Karaulov
2010; Ivantsova 2010]. In the course of human
communication the communicative pragmatic function
of speech serves to be the central one as referred to
interaction of various types of interlocutors. Thus,
such notions as ‘addressee’ and ‘addresser’ deserve
special attention and subject to the analysis in terms of
the speech acts theory, which has become one of
the precursors of cognitive and discursive approaches
to language phenomena [Kubryakova 2005]. Taking
the speech acts conception into special consideration
one should bear in mind that in some cases we may
confront situations with both direct and indirect
ways of linguistic representation used to express the
content and the purport of an utterance. Such cases
are not always easily identifiable and adequately
interpretable, as very much depends on the linguistic
and extralinguistic context actualization that may
implicitly convey additional information and largely
determined by communicative-pragmatic factors,
which lie in the domain of perlocution and focused on
the recipient’s (addressee’s) reaction correspondence
to the addressee’s communicative task and serves to
achieve a certain pragmatic and stylistic effect.

It should always be borne in mind that it is impossible
to experience the true impact of a work of art without
real understanding of the literary text [Nazarova 1994,
p. 129]. The process of understanding represents itself
as a cognitive activity that concerns identification of
a linguistic unit semantic potential actualized in the
work of literature as referred to its function in terms
of the author’s intention realization. The process of
establishing contact between the author and the reader
(or the listener) depends on the appropriate choice of
linguistic means and communicative strategies, aimed
at the convergence of the conceptual spheres of the
author and the addressee. Acts of reality perception
and interpretation are determined by peculiarities
of human consciousness as the reality appears to us
transformed by our cognitive abilities [Skolimovsky
1983, pp. 779–780].

One more very important point to be made concerns
problems of adequate interpretation and understanding
of the utterance, determined by such parameters as
both general and linguistic knowledge of the recipient
as well as the total conceptual potential of the listener
or reader. Compliance with communication norms
and principles as the basis of successful linguistic and
social intercourse correlates with one’s background
knowledge and individual world view peculiarities
(Kharkovskaya et al. 2020). It should be emphasized
that the reaction to the situation both on the part of
an addressee and addressee involves paying special
attention to each word spoken or written, including all
possible variants and shades of meanings, both actual
and potential, as well as analyzing them in terms of
socio-historical context, which within the limits of
fiction refer to the notion of vertical context [Gyubbenet
1991]. Vertical context concerns the realities, which
first and foremost represent historical and philological
information. For example, linguists start that in terms
of fiction the use of allusions and quotations based on
ancient sources, mythology, the Bible, as well as texts
of English and world literature, Shakespeare’s poetry
should be taken into special consideration in terms
of the English linguistic cultural tradition. Otherwise
stated, the problem of adequate interpretation of the
author’s intention in the work of literature very much depends on the recipient’s background knowledge possession [Akhmanova, Zadornova 1977], or, to be more precise, issues concerned with profound philological context analysis, based on linguistic and cultural knowledge integration, including the use of implications instead of direct and explicit ways of information transfer [Zadornova 1984]. Thus, questions that arise in this connection concern the whole range of issues that refer to language use to create images, situations and other components of the process of virtual worlds creation as well as the peculiar aesthetic effect production, analyzed within the domain of linguostylistics and linguopoetics [Lipgart 2021; Borisova 2008]. V.V. Vinogradov proclaimed the necessity of elaboration of special approach to the language of artistic prose and poetry in order to distinguish the particular branch of philology, based on the aesthetic function of language with respect to realization of the authors’ intention [Vinogradov 1954], which later has been extended and developed as the special domain of philological science, linguopoetics. A.A. Lipgart writes that linguopoetic research, which is determined by the goal of penetration into the entire literary text continuum via means of a certain stylistic device investigation, deals with the analysis of stylistically marked linguistic units in terms of their value and functions as referred to the basic intention of the author and the aesthetic impact produced by a work of literary art [Lipgart 2021]. It should be emphasized that for appropriate understanding of the author’s intention, one should take into account both the artistic techniques specifics and vertical context peculiarities, as well as deep philological context that characterizes the work of art not only as a creative linguistic and literary formation, but also as a sociopsychological phenomenon. The latter possesses both explicitly and implicitly expressed properties, which play an important role to achieve the communicants’ cognitive bases consensus. Precedential phenomena can be regarded as one of the most important components of the process of adequate interpretation of the utterance as they can be regarded as certain ‘keys’ or ‘passwords’ for inference [Gudkov 2000; Krasnykh 2001], functioning as material and language indicators to provide access to implicit information [Vinogradov 2001, p. 39]. Intertextuality that refers to textual as well as extra-textual correspondence within works of literature, introduced both explicitly and implicitly, should be discussed with respect to the entire space of the world culture, on which artistic reality is based, including dialogical interaction between the author and the reader. This refers to its realization in the course cognitive dissonance purposeful creation within the limits of literary space as well as its consequences elimination, in some contexts concerned with correlation of the linguistic sign, by which human experience is fixed, with other semiotic means of expression [Vishnyakova 2002; 2015, 2018]. Thus, in case of cognitive dissonance occurrence various ways of its elimination and compensation are used in the literary sources under consideration, though it is not always the case that consonance is successfully achieved.

Analysis and Results

In the course of our investigation we precede from the premise that cognitive dissonance occurs in situations that refer to the lack of correspondence between cognitive and conceptual bases of the communicants. Within the domain of fiction authors use the discrepancy to transfer both intellectual and emotional-evaluative information in order to create appropriate images, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to present the characters and the environment realistically to make the description plausible. This contributes to deeper penetration into the essence of the basic message of the author concerned with the concept of the artistic text and its adequate interpretation [Vishnyakova 2002]. Social determination of the events described as well as ways of identifying characters within certain circumstances refer to the specifics of individual perception, social status and linguocultural prerequisites for social and linguistic behaviour of the characters that enables the author to create images that possess all the features necessary for a certain aesthetic purpose achievement. Let’s turn to the material and analyze the extract borrowed from “The French Lieutenant’s Woman” by John Fowles. The interlocutors are a young rich heiress Ernestina Freeman and her servant Mary.

‘You will kindly remember that he comes from London.’

‘Yes, miss.’

‘Mr. Smithson has already spoken to me of him. The man fancies himself a Don Juan.’

‘What’s that then, Miss Tina?’

‘Never mind now. But if he makes advances I wish to be told at once. Now bring me some barley water. And be more discreet in future’ [Fowles 1969].

Thus, within these terms cognitive dissonance may serve as one of the specific devices concerned with the author’s intention elucidating. Actually, the conversation presents a good sample of two cognitive dissonance varieties, the reasons for which are lack of social grounds and life experience as well as lack of education and cultural knowledge possession, where both lead to the usefulness of any attempt to eliminate the dissonant situations. In the passage the mistress warns the maid against her lover; she hints at his free manners of a person living in the capital and compares him with Don Juan, referring to the literary name as a common noun indicated by the indefinite article (a Don Juan), i.e. a person with a certain kind of reputation. The appeal to literary vertical context and lack of feedback demonstrate differences in linguistic and cultural knowledge possession on the part of the female characters in question. As for the cognitive dissonance effect, it becomes absolutely clear that the
maid’s background knowledge absence prevents her from understanding the content of the utterance and impossibility of the dissonant situation elimination or reduction. The maid is completely unaware of the fact that dissonant has arisen due to the limitations of her individual world view and social status. At the same time, the maid’s social and linguistic behaviour demonstrates incomprehension with regard to the concerns of her mistress, who faces the cognitive incompatibility occurred and who is confined to the current state of affairs resolve by giving an order to inform her in case of his ‘making advances’. Cognitive dissonance is evident due to the corresponding communicative-pragmatic marker in the addressee’s lack of understanding: “What’s that then, Miss Tina?”. It should be noted that the addressee does not try to neutralize or reduce cognitive dissonance by giving some interpretive explanation, using the following remark: “Never mind now”, which refers to the futility of further discussion due to social restrictions and different social affiliations. Thus, from the point of view of the mistress, it seems inappropriate to continue the conversation, since for her the other interlocutor (the maid) is not of any interest or value in terms of effective communicative results [Gudkov 2000].

At the same time the comic effect produced can be discussed within the framework of the precedential phenomenon mentioned and the way linguistic units function to attract attention of the reader and to produce certain stylistic impact. The author of the novel is fully aware of the fact that the reader possesses the necessary information of the cultural phenomenon in question (Don Juan) and is familiar with its implicit characteristics, which facilitates inference. The use of the verb “to fancy” (“The man fancies himself a Don Juan”) which means ‘to picture in the mind’, ‘to imagine’, ‘to have an excessively high opinion of oneself’, ‘to be rather conceited’ enhances the emphasis and reinforces the mistress’s irony along with anxiety, but the maid practically does not pay any attention to it, which serves to intensify the artistic effect produced and evokes a response from the reader. Thus, in a number of cases cognitive dissonance tends to be analyzed within the scope of stylistic and poetic potential of language use, especially in cases of intertextual phenomena actualization that contribute to the creation of a multifaceted stylistic effect based on the abilities of several closely related phenomena immediate application.

One more example can be adduced to illustrate the point – the conversation between the two main characters of the novel “The Collector” by John Fowles, Miranda and her kidnapper Frederick Clegg, who pretends to be called Ferdinand, by the analogy with the protagonist of Shakespeare’s play “The Tempest”. Nevertheless, in the novel Miranda calls Clegg ‘Caliban’, which is the name of a monstrous man, violent and uncivilized, who tries to abuse Miranda, the princess from Shakespeare’s play. In the following example the use of the unit ‘Tantalus’, in which the futility of Clegg’s effort is evaluated in accordance with its real signification, serves as one of the attributes to reflect the opposition of two lingual personalities that represent the two mindsets:

‘I shouldn’t have given you such a shock.’
It’s not your fault, I said. I’m not like other people. Nobody understands.

‘I understand.’
I dream about it, I said. It can’t ever be real.
‘Like Tantalus.’ She explained who he was [Fowles 1963].

To reduce the dissonance occurred as the result of Clegg’s lack of education and cultural knowledge Miranda, an art student art lover, tries to explain the meaning of the name ‘Tantalus’ and the additional connotations associated with it to Clegg, thus, reducing the dissonance. At the same time only superficial approach to what is really going on may give grounds for the discussion of the dissonance genuine elimination in this case.

It is a well-established fact that Fowles repeatedly refers to Shakespeare’s play in his novel and on deep penetration into human psychology he touches upon a great number of philosophical and social psychological problems that can be conceived in the process of inference caused by the author’s ability to use language in such a way as to say more than can be seen at first sight, as much of his message is presented implicitly and concerns the general sense of human existence and mutual relations: “Fowles invites us to defy his main character’s excuses and read between the lines, and the facts paint a more chilling picture. Fred doesn’t accidentally abduct Miranda, there’s a sense that he’s been leading up to this event his whole life” [Andrews 2014].

Fowles’ appeal to Shakespeare’s work in the novel being realized at different levels of representation, including the situation of being cut off from the whole world and its reality as well as the alignment of forces of good and evil in terms of compositional arrangement, enables the author to touch upon problems that concern the state of dissonance emerging not only in individual cognitions, but realized as intrinsic inheritance of human relations. The use of intertextual phenomena, some of which can be analyzed in terms of precedential names and situations, enables the reader to discover the new psychological and linguistic peculiarities of the characters’ mentalities (for example, Miranda’s use of the expression "Come, thou tortoise!", with which Prospero addresses Caliban in “The Tempest” and which remains totally incomprehensible to Clegg, though he rightfully thinks that it might be taken from literature). This serves to prove that the search for the elimination of dissonance at all levels is a very complicated and often impossible task. To illustrate the point one can refer to Miranda’s effort to feel sorry for Clegg-Caliban in her attempts at expanding his world view and awakening living emotions in him. In some cases, Miranda calls him by the name that he would like to be called – ‘Ferdinand’, but there is no feedback at this level either, as the word in isolation
is powerless to change human nature. Thus, in the
dead the girl dies, adding to the collection of a ruthless
maniac, for whom consonance is at last achieved
in his unreal, isolated and limited world. Thus, the
allusion to Prospero’s words “Be collected; No more
amazement; Tell your piteous heart, There’s no harm
done” [Shakespeare 1975], addressed to Miranda in
the play acquires an ominous meaning in Fowles’s
novel, including iconic association of the formal part
of the linguistic sign used. Otherwise stated, in the
virtual literary space of “The Collector” the situation
of dissonance becomes invincible and gets out of
control in terms of its avoidance or impact mitigation,
thus becoming the basis for creating a special kind of
imagery in relation to the characters and atmosphere.

Within the domain of fiction one may come
across situations when interlocutors, who experience
cognitive dissonance, still don’t find a solution to the
cognitive-communicative misunderstanding, even in
case of intelligible and clear explanations received
on the part of both the addressee and the addressee,
including the lingual personalities’ appropriate
features demonstration. For instance:

‘I see! I see!’ went on Jephson, oratorically and
loudly, having the jury and audience in mind. ‘A case
of the Arabian Nights, of the ensorcelled and the
ensorcellor.’

‘I don’t think I know what you mean,’ said Clyde.

‘A case of being bewitched, my poor boy – by
beauty, love, wealth, by things that we sometimes
think we want very, very much, and cannot ever have –
that is what I mean, and that is what much of the love
in the world amounts to.’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Clyde, quite innocently,
concluding rightly that this was mere show of rhetoric
on Jephson’s part [Dreiser 1925].

The example above is characterized by the
addressee’s suitable choice and appropriate use of
words to explain the meaning of the precedential
name ‘the Arabian Nights’ to achieve certain
communicative-pragmatic purposes, on the one hand,
and clear understanding of the real state of affairs
by the addressee, on the other. The extralinguistic
nature of the communicative situation in question
represents itself as a factor that determines intentional
misunderstanding of the meaning of the precedential
name on the part of the addressee. In other words, it
is not the intellectual level enhancement and the level
of the addressee’s development of emotional and
evaluative sphere that cause cognitive dissonance, but
the addressee’s hidden motives properly understood
by the addressee. The author uses this technique, as
well as the expressions like ‘oratorically and loudly’,
‘ensorcelled and the ensorcellor’, ‘a case of being
bewitched’, ‘we want very, very much’, ‘much of the
love in the world amounts to’ to realize the intention
to create a plausible image of the current situation and
characters in order to convey the basic message of the
literary work and to provide the necessary aesthetic
impact.

As is well known, the phenomenon of cognitive
dissonance both in the real life and within the
boundaries of literary space may be caused and avoided
by the attraction of the linguistic means of presentation
as well as with the help of other semiotic systems
components use. Thus, for example, the phenomenon
of silence that has been analyzed in the course of
profound philological investigation [Vishnyakova,
2018] presents a special problem within these terms.
Its semantic and functional peculiarities analysis is
closely connected with the vertical context application
as it is difficult to overestimate the effect produced by
the philological potential of ‘silence’ actualization and
its dynamic transfer within the domain of literary space.
‘Silence’ as one of the basic universal concepts can be
extensively exploited to produce cognitive dissonance
as well as to annihilate its consequences. In general,
the phenomenon of silence presented at various levels
of representation attracts attention of both linguists
and representatives of other fields of science, who
perceive it as a fact of speech culture, dominating in
a certain sense over other ways of human intercourse,
including sounding speech [Vishnyakova 2018].

The concept of silence has been extensively
represented in poetry and fiction. For instance, in the
poem by John Milton it is personified:

“No came still evening on, and twilight gray
Had in her sober livery all things clad;
silence accompanied, for beast and bird,
They to their grassy coach, these to their nests,
Were slunk, all but the wakeful nightingale;
She al night long her amorous descant sung;
Silence was pleas’d: now glow’d the firmament
With living sapphires...” [Milton 1904].

In Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” ‘silence’ plays a
significant role in terms of its message transfer and
represents itself as the stimulus for further inference
on the basis of the outspoken (e.g. “The rest is
silence”), along with other significant factors, both
artistic and historical [Lipgart 2018]. Silence has
subsequently become an extraordinarily productive
discourse-forming intertextual poetical device
within the English literary continuum. As has
been mentioned, it can be realized as the cognitive
dissonance inspirational factor as well as the method
of its elimination, being designated by different iconic
and linguistic means, borrowed from the arsenal of
semiotics and semasiology. In the “The Waste Land”
by T.S. Eliot it correlates with the other notional
key-concepts and contributes to the creation of the
very specific conceptual space of the work of art
[Vishnyakova 2002, pp. 96–120]. In some of the cases
it is represented implicitly being the reflection of the
cognitive dissonance emergence as well as images
constructing on the basis of the opposition between
the words and the still: “Speak. My nerves are bad
tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me. Speak to me. Why
do you never speak?”, “Under the firelight, under the
brush, her hair Spread out in fiery points Glowed into
words, then would be savagely still” (Eliot 1974).
Thus, the concept of silence realization via means
of various manifestations contributes to one more
important cognitive dissonance characteristics that
It should be stated that cognitive dissonance as a philological problem can be discussed in terms of its characteristics and functions, among which is its ability to be used within the literary space. Language as the means of communication serves to achieve consonance and understanding in the course of human interaction as well as being used to achieve certain communicative-pragmatic purposes and to create stylistic and rhetorical effect required. This means that in the discourse of fiction and poetry cognitive dissonance situations can be used to construct artistic images and to achieve the aesthetic effect necessary, which contributes to the successful transmission of the author's conceptions and understanding of the basic concept of the text. The use of the language potential abilities enables the writers to create artistic images and complicated collisions, based on cognitive dissonance, as well as to discuss and to solve the humanity’s vital problems, that serves to achieve the state of consonance between the author and the reader (listener) in terms of the author’s message adequate interpretation.

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