

LINGUISTIC REPRESENTATION OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

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Abstract: Cognitive dissonance is a psychological phenomenon that we constantly encounter in everyday life. Referring to linguistic research on dissonance, the author examines cognitive dissonance from a linguo-stylistic perspective. The examples presented in the article are drawn from the discourse of English literary prose; they not only illustrate cognitive dissonance but also provide a basis for classifying dissonance phenomena. An initial classification is proposed that comprises two groups—linguistic and non-linguistic—each of which is analyzed in detail. The conclusion outlines prospects for future research aimed at studying more deeply the relationship between cognitive dissonance and linguistic mechanisms.

Keywords: cognitive dissonance; dissonance phenomena; verbalization; literary-prose discourse; linguo-stylistics; context; stylistic devices; linguistic mechanisms.

Cognitive dissonance (CD) is an inseparable part of our lives. Any event that conflicts with our knowledge, views, values, or beliefs produces a state of psychological discomfort, and we strive to reduce this discomfort. This is likely why Leon Festinger's theory has become widespread not only in psychology but also in other fields. In particular, exploring this psychological phenomenon from the standpoint of contemporary linguistic research is of special interest.

There have been a number of attempts to apply the theory of cognitive dissonance within linguistics. For example, in a publication by V. Z. Demyankov, the problem of dissonance is examined within the framework of discourse. Using material from newspaper articles, the author discusses how readers understand and interpret a text when a headline does not match its content, as well as which cognitive mechanisms are activated in such cases. He concludes that "language games" associated with cognitive dissonance are perceived differently by representatives of different cultures: what is acceptable in Russian newspaper discourse may be entirely inappropriate in another linguistic culture.

Another attempt to study cognitive dissonance from a linguistic perspective is found in T. V. Drozdova's dissertation research. Working mainly with literary texts, she describes how cognitive dissonance is verbally manifested in the process of speech interaction. According to Drozdova, word meanings in the system are linked to specific cognitive contexts—knowledge structures or blocks that underlie meanings and enable understanding. If a speaker fails to associate a word with its appropriate cognitive context, cognitive dissonance arises. Dissonance can also result from choosing an inappropriate code—for instance, inserting professional slang into everyday conversation. On the part of the interlocutor, this is marked by reactions such as confusion or displeasure (e.g., *she*

frowned; “I don’t see your point,” he said).

The theory of cognitive dissonance has been examined not only in psychology but also in linguistic subfields such as translation studies. In translation theory, the concept is used to explain and evaluate discrepancies between a source text and its translation. Researchers have introduced the notion of the “translator’s cognitive dissonance,” which encompasses the translator’s awareness of semantic differences between the source and target texts and their reaction to those differences. Once the translator recognizes such differences, they attempt to overcome cognitive dissonance by minimizing discrepancies for future readers and selecting the most suitable translation solution. However, the dissonant state can persist because no chosen solution is ever perfectly satisfactory, forcing the translator to reconcile themselves to the adopted decision. One manifestation of such tension is leaving certain words in their original form—without translation or even transliteration. In fact, this does not resolve the dissonance, since an optimal translation presumably exists but remains unknown. Another attempt to mitigate dissonance is to provide an extensive translator’s commentary at the end of the text.

Ongoing research on cognitive dissonance is also relevant and applicable to linguo-stylistics. This psychological phenomenon helps us attain a deeper understanding of the nature of linguistic phenomena and to analyze literary discourse on a new level.

Adapting L. Festinger’s terminology—while leaving aside the phenomenon’s antecedents and consequences—we may define cognitive dissonance in a linguo-stylistic context as “a state of discomfort that arises in the reader’s mind during the process of reading a text.” This universal definition enables a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon from a linguo-stylistic standpoint. Whether deliberate or accidental, implicit or explicit, such “incongruities” appear in texts at almost every turn and undoubtedly play an important role in how readers interpret discourse.

To understand how cognitive dissonance is expressed in texts, we analyze English literary-prose discourse. This analysis shows that cognitive dissonance can manifest at various levels of language—grammatical, lexical, syntactic, at the level of a text fragment, or across a whole text. In addition, dissonance may take on a “non-linguistic,” compositional character that extends beyond the bounds of the text, influencing the reader’s background knowledge without being tied to the meaning of individual words or to language play.

For the purposes of classification, it is useful to divide dissonance phenomena into two broad groups:

1. phenomena directly related to language units and their use in creating literary discourse (“linguistic”);
2. phenomena associated with the content of particular text fragments (“non-linguistic”).

Below we discuss these two groups and illustrate the phenomena using the proposed terminology.

1. Cognitive dissonance at the linguistic level

When studying cognitive dissonance at the linguistic level, we must first consider stylistic devices. Among stylistic devices, one can distinguish those whose cognitive mechanism is essentially dissonant and those that do not require dissonance for their effect, though dissonance may contribute to it. A representative of the first type—i.e., devices in which dissonance is inherent—is the **oxymoron**. An oxymoron combines concepts of mutually opposing meaning; their logical incompatibility triggers cognitive dissonance in the reader’s mind. For example:

*As he mechanically shot his arms back and forth, wearing on his face the look of **grim enjoyment**, which was considered proper during the Physical Jerks, he was struggling to think his way backward into the dim period of his early childhood. A sort of **vapid eagerness** flitted across Winston's face at the mention of Big Brother. Nevertheless Syme immediately detected a certain lack of enthusiasm. Quite soon he grew to have a feeling of **positive dread** when the appointed day came round.*

In these examples, oxymora are constructed not on conventional antonyms but on lexical items that signal opposition or divergent evaluative coloring. *Grim* (harsh, severe) collocates with the idea of “not very enjoyable,” clashing with *enjoyment*; similarly, the liveliness implied by *eagerness* conflicts with *vapid* (dull, insipid), and *dread* (fear) is paradoxically characterized as *positive*.

Another stylistic device whose mechanism relies on cognitive tension is **personification**: attributing properties of living beings to inanimate entities. Here, the dissonance stems from imposing actions or qualities that an inanimate object cannot, by nature, perform or possess.

Cognitive tension likewise underlies **irony** and **sarcasm**. To produce a comic or critical effect, the author presents reality in a distorted way or directly states the opposite of what is intended:

At the start of the winter came the permanent rain and with the rain came the cholera. But it was checked and in the end only seven thousand died of it.

To conclude, the stylistic devices discussed above are, in essence, dissonant. It should be noted, however, that virtually any stylistic device can produce dissonance depending on context, even if cognitive dissonance is not its underlying mechanism. Cognitive aspects—including the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance and its verbalization in literary texts—constitute a promising direction for linguo-stylistic research. Future work is planned to investigate more deeply how this psychological phenomenon relates to linguistic mechanisms.

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