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Sociomorphic metaphor in Nabokov's works

Novels of Vladimir Nabokov possess great metaphoric force. One of the most popular ways of metaphoric mapping is using sociomorphic metaphor. This model includes metaphoric expressions with source domain 'SOCIAL LIFE'. As compared to anthropomorphic and biomorphic metaphors, sociomorphic metaphors are rare in Nabokov's works. This can be explained by his negative attitude to any facts of social life. Vladimir Nabokov wrote, 'I don't care about groups, communities, masses and so on'.

In Russian novels most metaphors of this group represent cognitive models with source domain 'ART' (THEATRE, FINE ARTS, LITERATURE, MUSIC), some metaphors belong to 'GAME' or 'SPORT' group. Target domain usually represents some abstract notion (LIFE). In SPORT metaphor target domain is human's speech.

The most widely used are the following five models.

1. LIFE IS A THEATRE

This model is the most frequent. It includes 4 frames.

1) Frame "Performance"

Nabokov's characters play different parts in his own performance.

Но хотя я актером в узком смысле слова никогда не был, я все же в жизни всегда носил с собой как бы небольшой складной театр, играл не одну роль и играл отменно, — и если вы думаете, что суфлер мой звался Выгода, — есть такая славянская фамилья, — то вы здорово ошибаетесь, — все это не так просто, господа. (Отчаяние, с. 388)

(But although I have never been an actor in the strict sense of the word, I have nevertheless, in real life, always carried about with me a small folding theatre and have appeared in more than one part, and my acting has always been superfine; and if you think that my prompter's name was Gain – capital G not C – then you are mightily mistaken).

2) Frame "Setting"

For a good performance one needs good setting, and sometimes Nabokov's characters become aware that their surroundings resemble some properties rather than real objects. Saveljeva noticed that in the novel *Invitation to beheading* the author shows 'unnatural, theatrical, artificial world, made of metaphors'. Theatrical metaphor is very active in Nabokov's novels.

Я снял комнату в гостинице второго разряда, — огромную, с каменным полом и картонными на вид стенами, на которых словно была нарисована рыжевато-коричневая дверь в соседний номер и гуашевое зеркало. Было ужасно холодно, но открытый очаг бутафорского камина был неприспособлен для топки, и когда сгорели щепки, принесенные горничной, стало еще холоднее. (Отчаяние, с. 442)

(I took a room in a second-rate hotel, a huge room, with a stone floor and walls like cardboard, on which there seemed to be painted the sienna-brown door leading into the next room, and a looking glass with only one reflection. It was horribly cold; yet the open hearth of the preposterous fireplace was no more adapted to give heat than a stage contrivance would be, and when the chips brought by the maid had burned out, the room seemed colder still).

3) Frame "Rehearsal"

For successful performance actors need to rehearse all the scenes. In the novels by Nabokov one scene is often repeated as a rehearsal of a main performance.

Уже однажды они Драйера удалили. Был покойник; были даже все внешние признаки смерти; тошнота смерти, похороны, опустевшие комнаты, воспоминание о мертвом. Все было уже проделано на голой сцене, перед темным и пустым залом. (КДВ, с. 214)

(By now Dreyer had already been several times murdered and buried. Not a future happiness, but a future recollection had been rehearsed on a bare stage, before a dark and empty house.)

4) Frame “Opera”

In some cases theatrical metaphor is connected with opera or operetta.

Сегодня, кстати, познакомился я с местным жандармом, — совершенно опереточный персонаж! (Отчаяние, с. 460)

(Today, most aptly, I made the acquaintance of the local gendarme – a perfectly farcical figure!)

2. LIFE IS FINE ARTS

This model is not very typical for Nabokov’s works; it’s difficult to pick out specific frames in this model. The author usually references to the creator of life’s picture and to different kinds of pictures (portrait, landscape), sometimes a bad portrait is called a ‘caricature’.

В каждом окошке, как тусклый портрет, виднелось лицо чиновника. (Отчаяние, с. 403)
(...and at every counter, framed in his little window, like some tarnished picture, showed the face of an official.)

3. LIFE IS LITERATURE

Vladimir Nabokov always paid great attention to the similarity of real life and literature. The reason of it is, perhaps, in the fact that, most of his feelings and recollections he gifted to his characters. V. Nabokov mentioned in one of the interviews that ‘in real life he often met people or events that were to be placed in the novel’.

This model has the following frames.

1) Frame “Book”

It is natural that life is represented as a novel or a book.

Но не думай, я не стесняюсь возможных недостатков, мелких опечаток в книге природы. (Отчаяние, с. 342)

(You must not suppose, however, that I am ashamed of possible slips and type errors in the book of nature.)

2) Frame “Chapters of a Novel”

Первая часть дороги, — первая глава путешествия — всегда подробна и медлительна. (КДВ, с. 124)

(The first chapter of a journey is always detailed and slow.)

3) Frame “Characters”

In this case literature is closely connected with life.

Бледные организмы литературных героев, питаясь под руководством автора, наливаются живой читательской кровью; гений писателя состоит в том, чтобы дать им способность ожить благодаря этому питанию и жить долго. (Отчаяние, с. 342)

(An author’s fondest dream is to turn the reader onto a spectator: is this ever attained? The pale organisms of literary heroes feeding under the author’s supervision swell gradually with the reader’s lifeblood; so that the genius of a writer consists in giving them the faculty to adapt themselves to that – not very appetizing – food and thrive on it, sometimes for centuries.)

4. SPEECH IS A GAME(SPORT)

This model contains metaphorical expressions that compare speech of characters with sports. In Nabokov's novels Sport metaphors usually use TENNIS as a source domain (it's the favorite game of the author).

Письма чередуются, — это вроде мяча, летающего через сетку туда и обратно.
(Отчаяние, с. 367)

(The letters come and go – quite like the ding-dong flight of a ball over a net.)

5. SPEECH IS MUSIC

This model is less frequent, owing to Nabokov's utmost dislike of music; he regretted, 'alas, for me music has always been and will be only a fortuitous heap of barbaric sounds'.

So musical metaphor is rare in Nabokov's prose and is represented by some occasional metaphors.

Как часто случается с полуграмотными, тон его письма совершенно не соответствовал тону его обычного разговора: в письме это был дрожащий фальцет с провалами витиеватой хрипоты, а в жизни — самодовольный басок с дидактическими низами. (с. 368)

(As often happens with uneducated people, the tone of his letter was in complete disagreement with that of his usual conversation: his epistolary voice was a tremulous falsetto with lapses of eloquent huskiness whereas in real life he had a self-satisfied baritone sinking to a didactic bass.)

In English novels by Vladimir Nabokov sociomorphic metaphor becomes more active. As in Russian this group refers to the source domain 'ART'. Additional models use TELEVISION AND CINEMA as a source domain.

1. LIFE IS A THEATRE

This model is more frequent in English novels that allow us to single out some additional frames and slots.

1) Frame "Performance"

Slot 1. Kind of Performance

According to the plot, a performance could be a comedy (farce) or a tragedy (drama).

This pistol-packing farce is becoming a frightful nuisance. (Lolita, c. 338)

Slot 2. Actors and Audience

A play is usually performed by actors, playing parts for the audience.

Quietly resurrected, Miss Opposite was being wheeled out by her nieces, onto her porch, as if it were a stage and I the star performer. (Lolita, c. 324)

2) Frame "Rehearsal"

Rehearsal of a main performance is widely used in Nabokov's works.

I had my little black chum with me, and as soon as I reached a secluded spot, I rehearsed Mr. Richard F. Schiller's violent death. (Lolita, c. 299)

3) Frame "Setting"

Circumstances and things can be perfect setting for the performance.

The setting was really perfect for a brisk bubbling murder... (Lolita, c. 92)

4) Frame “Additional Kinds of Performance”

Ballet, circus performance and puppet-theatre belong to this frame.

It was like some dreadful silent ballet, the male dancer holding the ballerina by her foot and streaking down through watery twilight. (Lolita, c. 93)

2. LIFE IS FINE ARTS

As in Russian novels Nabokov often used the followings concepts: “PICTURE” and its parts “portrait”, “canvas” etc.

In the midst of all this, our Person, in his discreet little way (though actually he was half an inch taller than big R.), had happened to nibble, too, at the corner of the crowded canvas. (TT, c. 510)

3. LIFE IS A CINEMA, TELEVISION

This model appeared in the novels of American period (1955, 1972), when television and cinema gained great popularity.

Nabokov compares literature and cinema, using cinematographic methods (“slow-motion”, “cutting” etc.).

She walked up to the open suitcase as if stalking it from afar, at a kind of slow-motion walk, peering at that distant treasure box on the luggage support. (Was there something wrong, I wondered, with those great gray eyes of hers, or were we both plunged in the same enchanted mist?) (Lolita, c. 131)

Cinema metaphor in “Lolita” was incarnated by Adrian Lain in his screen version of Nabokov’s novel.

*I seemed to have shed my clothes and slipped into pajamas with the kind of fantastic instantaneousness which is implied when **in a cinematographic scene the process of changing is cut...** (Lolita, c. 141)*

This scene was literally cut in the film.

Vladimir Nabokov also used typical cinematographic characters in his books.

“Say!” he drawled (now imitating the underworld numskull of movies), “that’s a swell little gun you’ve got there. (Lolita, c. 333)

4. LIFE IS A FAIRY-TALE

This model appears in English novels by Nabokov.

With a petulant snarl, I pushed the front door — and, how nice, it swung open as in a medieval fairy tale. (Lolita, c. 330)

And, as if I were the fairy-tale nurse of some little princess (lost, kidnaped, discovered in gypsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the king and his hounds), I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. (Lolita, c. 38)

Sport metaphors were not found in English novels by Vladimir Nabokov.

Sociomorphic metaphor in Nabokov’s novels shows evolution of metaphoric concepts through Russian and American periods. Both is Russian and English novels theatrical metaphor is the most active.

In English novels literature is more concrete (fairy-tales are the most common source domain). SPORT and MUSIC metaphors are specific for Russian novels; in English novels there are CINEMA and TELEVISION metaphors. Differences, found in the structure of sociomorphic metaphor in Russian and American novels show changes in cognitive map of the author and specific features of Russian and English metaphorical systems.

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