

# The Semiotics of Nonverbal Manifestation of Emotions and Its Reflection in the Russian Language and Body Language: Convulsions of Body and Body Parts

GRIGORY E. KREYDLIN

Russian State University for the Humanities

## **Abstract**

One of the problems linguists and semioticians are working on nowadays is the description of how emotions are conceptualized in the two sign codes: in the natural language and in the corresponding body language. But scholars have analyzed usually only limited sets of emotional corporeal signs, whereas other numerous signs and models of behavior are still beyond the scope of research. The goal of my paper is to describe one class of Russian emotional signs, which, as far as I know, has never been described. Bodily manifestations of emotions in the Russian culture and semiotic codes can be divided into two classes. The first class is gestures, which are understood here broadly. It includes manual gestures, gestures of the head, shoulders and legs; mimics, meaningful glances, postures and verbal-nonverbal forms – manners. The second class is formed by physiological reactions that are not signs themselves. The specific feature of the Russian semiotic systems is that emotional gestures and physiological reactions have a great many verbal names that are used in various collocations and idioms denoting bodily manifestations of emotions. The special subclass of Russian idioms – that of gestural phrasemes connected with gestures semantically or/and etymologically – is discussed in more detail. The semiotic representation of Russian emotional signs that denote convulsions of body and body parts constitutes the main part of my work. The convulsions are spontaneous motions of body and body parts, which appear as uncontrolled reactions to physical and emotional impulses. I will point out the semantic and pragmatic features that contrast the words and gestures, and show corporeal sign symbolism that stands behind them.

The fact that somatic objects, that is various organs and parts of the human body, participate differently in the expression of emotion is an important condition of any description of the semantics of emotions and emotional states. Repeatedly confirmed in real-life and laboratory conditions, this fact is perceived distinctly in both the linguistic and nonlinguistic signs of every known culture: in words, phrases, collocations, gestures and gesture-speech complexes. In the act of communication, emotions are usually manifested in behavior that is accessible to external observation. One may determine an individual's current psychological and emotional state on the basis of nonverbal behavior just as well as on the basis of words. For example, we usually understand by an individual's behavior whether he or she is nervous, surprised by something, angry or glad.

Bodily manifestations of emotion are observed in the muscular activity of specific parts of the face; in the gestures of hands, legs, head, shoulders as well as in body positions, in modulations of voices and tones, in abnormal breathing, etc. The reddening of the cheeks, for example, can be an uncontrollable physiological reaction to feeling shame or to an event causing shame. In other words, blush is one of the possible symptoms of shame. When a person is furious or frantic, he or she often swears, turns his or her head from side to side and runs, or clenching the fists and shaking them. When one is happy, he or she exults, celebrates; smiles, jumps, laughs, dances, sings, and wants to share his or her joy with others. As Australian-Polish linguist Anna Wierzbicka points out, «Russians actively and quite consciously 'give in to the power' of their feelings» (Wierzbicka 1996: 43).

Language manifestation of emotions and nonverbal embodiment of emotions are not, however, characteristic for all cultures: violent manifestations of emotion, for example, are on the whole uncharacteristic of Anglo-Saxon culture and alien to Japanese culture.

As for the Russian culture, the nonverbal manifestations of emotion exist there in two basic forms: these are **gestures** and **physiological movements or reactions**. The main criterion for distinguishing gestures from purely utilitarian physiological movements and bodily reactions is the **sign character of a gesture** and the **non-sign character of a physiological movement**. For example, when a tight collar rubs against the man's neck, turning the head from side to side is a movement and not a gesture. The same applies to the shifting of legs when they have become numb. Gestures, as opposed to physiological movements, serve to express and transmit a certain conventional (or, more rarely, iconic) meaning. Thus, sneezing or blowing one's nose normally do not possess a sign-function. Indeed, we sneeze not to express or communicate some meaning; we do not sneeze to inform an interlocutor of disorders in our breathing system. Although any bodily action of a person can say something to an observer about this person or an event related to him or her, that is, any action can be a signal or symptom of one's internal psychological state, this does not mean that every action should be considered a sign. In the words of Oscar Wilde, «it is not wise to find symbols in everything that one sees.»

However, rather a blurry division between gestures and physiological movements, as well as their common biological foundation, partially explains why many physiological movements in a communicative act **may be consciously used as gestures**. For example, a woman, wishing to draw an interlocutor's attention to the fact that her tooth hurts, may place her hand to her cheek, in which case the movement becomes a gesture. An important feature of the Russian culture is not only the presence of such **symptomatic gestures**, but also the large quantity of

linguistic units naming them, that is, **linguistic nominations**. The signified of all symptomatic gestures is an emotion and not its manifestation, e.g. grief, not tears. Some examples of Russian symptomatic gestures and their nominations are: *pikryt' rot rukoj (ot izumlenija)* 'to cover one's mouth with one's hand (from amazement)', *kusat' guby* 'to bite one's lips', *barabanit' pal'cami po stolu* 'to beat one's fingers on the table', *privstat' so stula* 'to half-stand up from a chair', *delat' bol'shie (kruglye, strashnye) glaza* 'to make big (round, scary) eyes', *topnut' nogoj* 'to stamp one's foot'.

Symptomatic gestures have another series of important characteristics. They may be performed not only in the presence of another person, but also when a gesturer is alone. In other words, symptomatic gestures in their initial usage are not dialogical. However, a gesticulating person may use such gestures intentionally, precisely to **designate the corresponding emotion**, while at the same time either not experiencing the emotion (for example, consciously deceiving the interlocutor), or experiencing it to a lesser degree than that which is evidenced by the gesture. This means that in the Russian culture there is a regular transfer of gestures from the symptomatic class into the communicative class.

## EMOTIONAL CONVULSIONS AND RUSSIAN VERBS DESIGNATING THEM

In the Russian language there are many words and phraseological units that designate actions of various intensity caused by psychological states. As I have said earlier, an important aspect of the Russian linguistic conceptualization of psychological states, in particular emotional states, is their relationship to the idea of the motion of the body and its parts. A frequent uncontrolled reaction to physical events and emotions is the spontaneous movement of the body, which for convenience I will call a *convulsion*.

The direct causes of convulsions may be the most various - from external influence and pain (e.g. *nogu svelo sudorogoj* 'to get a cramp in the leg', *korchit'sja ot boli* 'to writhe with pain', *bit'sja v pripadke* 'to thrash in a fit', *vzdrognut' ot neozhidannosti* 'to start from surprise', *c]ezhit'sja ot holoda* 'to curl up from cold') to interior factors and their manifestations (e.g. *drozhat' ot jarostii* 'to tremble with rage', *trjastis' ot smeha* 'to shake with laughter', *drozhat' ot straha* 'to quiver with fear', *grud' kolyhalas' ot volnenija* 'the breast heaved with excitement'). Convulsions, like manual gestures, meaningful facial expressions, and postures, can be **dynamic symptoms**, that is, quite reliable keys to revealing the emotions a given person feels at the present moment.

Further, I will examine in short some characteristics of Russian verbs that designate a specific type of convulsion. Specifically, they all designate «observed or perceived spontaneous and uncontrollable muscular contractions and wavering of the human body or its parts, caused by emotional experiences.» Therefore, these verbs are united within the synonymic row **verbs of emotional convulsions**, and the proposed explication serves as a semantic invariant of this row.

The dominant lexeme of this row (Novyj Objasnitel'nyj Slovar' Sinonimov 1997: 12), is the verb *drozhat'* 'to tremble', which has the widest domain of usage and is stylistically neutral. The synonymic row includes also the verbs *kolyhat'sja* 'to heave', *trjastis'* 'to shake',

*trepetat* 'to quiver, *vzdragivat* 'to start', *dergat'sja* 'to twitch', and some other significantly less common and stylistically marked verbs.

I am interested not so much in the physiological movements and gestures represented by these verbs as in the models of semiotic behavior that provide their functioning, as well as in those implicit meanings, which were overlooked by earlier reflections of students of emotionally-loaded human behavior and its representation in written texts.

## ATTRIBUTES CONTRASTING THE VERBS OF EMOTIONAL CONVULSIONS

The verbs of emotional convulsions differ in four groups of semantic features: (1) 'the object experiencing the emotional convulsion,' (2) 'physical attributes of the convulsion: amplitude, frequency, duration of the tremor,' (3) 'the emotion causing the convulsion,' and (4) 'other bodily manifestations accompanying the convulsion.'

1. The object experiencing to the convulsion may be the body itself or a specific body part. This depends on the quality and intensity of the emotion: different **emotions of psychological agitation** or a single emotion of differing intensity may cause movements of different parts of the body or of the body as a whole. There exist certain emotional states, which are not the result of psychological agitation, and therefore very rarely or never cause external manifestations in the form of convulsions. These include «calm» states, which have at their base a certain goal. Such states include, for example, satisfaction, disappointment, and uncertainty in one's abilities. Likewise, the majority of emotional states that have no goal, such as surprise, hope, sadness, melancholy, revulsion, and pride, do not cause convulsions. We may also include here many complicated psychic complexes such as depression and anxiety.

Normally, the respective presence or absence of convulsions serves to contrast, in many cases, the opposite emotional states of excitement and stress. Stress is a state of psychological tension, during which the body is in a compressed state and not, as in excitement, a relaxed one. Excitement is an emotion caused by psychological agitation connected with alarm or mental unease. An excited person is not able to hold back his or her emotions, makes disordered movements and gestures, and is entirely focused only on the object or reason of his or her excitement. In order to *release stress*, it is necessary to *shake* a person, to take him or her out of a state of constraint and tension. Contrarily, in order to *release excitement*, one must *calm* a person, to return him or her to a state of mental balance. An individual in a state of excitement may be calmed by words or actions: by pressing him or her to oneself, hugging, stroking, etc. as though taking a part of his or her excitement onto oneself.

A body is able: *drozhat* 'to tremble', *trepetat* 'to quiver', *vzdragivat* 'to start', etc. The verbs *дрожать* to tremble and *вздрагивать* to start from an emotion apply as well to body and some other somatic objects: face, mouth, lips, arms, fingers, nose, knees, eyes, eyelids, legs, back, shoulders, throat, vocal cords (voice), and hair:

(1) *Someone stuck his head into the office door, sighed, and flew away. The accountant noticed that his legs had began to tremble and he had sat on the edge of his seat, but he did not forget to lift his briefcase (M. Bulgakov).*

(2) *He quietly raised his arms up. His entire face trembled and distorted (N. Gogol).*

Emotional *shivering* is characteristic to the body as a whole as well as the arms, breast, and **internal organs directly connected with emotion**: the heart, soul, and nerves:

(3) *The white breast beneath a yellow pearl reddened and quietly trembled (A. Pushkin).*

(4) *Viktor Il'ych was flooded by colorful, inspired roulades, in which his entire insulted body quivered (Vas. Aksenov).*

The emotional verbs *трястись* 'to shake' and *дёрзаться* 'to twitch' apply to the arms, fingers, cheeks, shoulders, legs, and knees; *дёрзаться* 'to twitch' applies to lips, eyelids, moustache and beard as well:

(5) *The naked and unseen letunija restrained and persuaded herself, her arms shook from impatience (M. Bulgakov).*

(6) *Upon seeing the bear his legs shook from fear (U. Kuinzi).*

2. The second feature that differentiates the examined verbs is the physical attributes of the convulsion itself.

The verbs *drozhat* 'to tremble' and *trepetat* 'to quiver' designate frequently repeated and relatively protracted tremors of low amplitude. Generally, we must make an effort to notice a *slight trembling* or *quivering*: only *strong trembling* and *quivering*, when accompanied by other convulsions of the entire body are easily visible. The verb *vzdragivat* 'to start' designates a single and upward-directed (one of the meanings of the Russian prefix *vz-*) movement of the body, of relatively great amplitude (note the incorrect usage *\*melko vzdragival* 'he subtly started'). The movement of the body's frame during a *start* resembles the movement that often occurs during an attempt to jump up. The Russian verb *kolyhat'sja* 'to heave' communicates rhythmic — repeated at a specific frequency — tremors, also of relatively great amplitude and repeating throughout specific intervals of time (note the anomaly *\*melko kolyhalsja* 'he subtly heaved').

In its character, the movement encapsulated in the verb *kolyhat'sja* 'to heave' resembles the rocking of the body from side to side. The verb *trjastis* 'to shake' describes a very frequent (quicken) tremor usually of great amplitude. Such tremors are impossible not to notice visually (note the incorrect usages *\*He hardly noticeably shook* or *\*His hands shook unnoticeably*). The verb *dergat'sja* 'to twitch' designates a sharp abrupt movement in one direction.

3. The third feature differentiating the verbs of emotional convulsions is the internal reason that causes them.

The psychological reasons for the origin of those actions designated by the verbs *drozhat* 'to tremble' and *trjastis* 'to shake' cover practically the entire range of **direct strong emotional reactions**, both positive and negative. This includes joy, delight, happiness, fear, anger, hatred, etc., and also their typical manifestations, such as tears, sobbing, and laughter:

**The strength of emotional experience** in the event that a person *shakes* is a good deal greater than when he or she *trembles*. Therefore, the movement *to shake* is stronger and more noticeable. The sentence *he shook with anger* speaks of a stronger feeling than the sentence *he*

*trembled with anger*. The voice inside a person transmits weaker emotions: the voice *trembles* or *shouts* but does not *\*shake*.

The greater strength of emotional experience is manifested not only in the physics of movement, but also in the semantic agreement of the linguistic designations of emotions with the other movements and gestures that accompany them. Thus, one may *tremble* and *shake with laughter*, but with *a roar of laughter* (xoxot) one may only *shake*: (*\*to tremble with a roar of laughter*). The expression *to shake with horror* is preferable to *\*to tremble with horror*. In conclusion, one may find in Russian texts phrases like *he shook all over with indignation*, as though some unknown external power could cause such a strong movement of the human body, given the impossibility of the sentence *\*he trembled with indignation*. People *quiver* (*mpeneuyum*) from strong agitation caused by feelings of different nature. Fundamentally, *quivering* is caused by strong mental excitement, the sweet expectation of something, intense fear, horror, or despair. Moreover, *quivering* most often designates **an internal shiver**. One often describes one's own internal feelings and experiences specifically by means of the Russian verb *trepetat* 'to quiver', and authors use this verb to communicate the internal feelings of their characters.

Also, people do not like when another intrudes upon their personal space without special permission, unexpectedly touching their body, especially when they do not expect this. Such a violation of the norms of nonverbal behavior by other people is unexpected and unpleasant (Kreydlin 2002: 421). People may *start* not only from sudden events, but also from unexpected and startling sounds of various strengths, which unexpectedly and suddenly come into their thoughts, and from sudden strong sensations of temperature (cold, heat):

The body or a part of the body may *колыхаться* 'heave' from intense excitement and also from **strong manifestations** of other feelings: tears, sobbing, laughter:

(7) *His entire body heaved and will heave for a long time from this laughter* (F. Dostoevsky).

D. The fourth, and the last attribute contrasting the verbs we are discussing is the presence of other bodily semiotic manifestations concomitant with the convulsion.

When one *trembles* with his or her body (as opposed to an internal *tremble*), his or her hands press against the body and usually the legs or face *tremble* as well. One may cry or laugh as well, fidget with various movements and actions, or one may become petrified and remain immobile for some time. A person often becomes pale, his or her teeth chatter, the voice *trembles*, and it becomes difficult to speak. In this state the eyes may behave differently: they may «run,» be cast down or look at the object that has caused the convulsion; one's look communicates the feeling that has caused the *tremble*. E.g.

(9) *He choked with joy, cried, trembled, bowed', thanked the landowner, the coachman, the peasants* (I. Turgenev).

(10) *Polina Nikolaevna cast her gaze, trembling with her entire body and nervously huddling together. Her gaze was full of disgust, hate, and sickness* (A. Chehov).

If one *trembles* or *shakes* with pleasure, joy, or the expectation of something pleasant, then usually his or her face brightens, though it grows darker from negative feelings. The fact that light is joined with positive emotions such as pleasure, delight, joy, etc., while the absence of light is connected with negative emotions — displeasure, grief, sadness, etc. — has been

known for a long time. We find a manifestation of the correlation between emotions and light, however, not only on the face, but also in a person's movements:

(11) *She trembled with joy, and her face was radiant* (Yu. Krelin).

(12) *Her face grew gloomy, darkened; she trembled all over and sobbed* (A. Dumas).

The facial expressions and movements used to express and communicate various emotions are not culturally universal. G.V. Baryshnikova, describing the gendered non-verbal differences in emotional communicative behavior and their expression in French literature of the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, notes the following elements of nonverbal behavior as typical for Frenchwomen: movements (but not convulsions): various **games with a fan** (*prendre un jeu d'éventail*), **smiles** — in expressing anger or sadness, whereas only among men does «a smile accompany the expression of joy», as well as **gestures of the eyes and glance** (*un regard terrible, mélancolique, allumé; regarder avec une crainte, une douleur sévère, ouvrir des grandes yeux*, etc.). «To watch (listen) with an open mouth» (*regarder (écouter) bouche bée*) is noted as a typical female gesture, which is not characteristic of the facial-expressive behavior of Frenchmen (Baryshnikova 2004). French men and women frequently use various paralinguistic means to express various emotions. As Baryshnikova affirms, if one can judge from fiction texts, Frenchwomen often express grief by weeping, sobbing, yelling, and sighing, whereas Frenchmen sigh at a fixed and rather large rate, they almost never sob nor yell. Weeping among Frenchmen, although found, generally occurs in a very few places.

When a part of the body *trembles* or *shakes*, it usually poorly fulfills its function. Thus, if the arms *tremble*, they can not hold objects properly; if the legs *tremble*, it becomes difficult to stand; if the lips *tremble*, it becomes difficult to speak, etc.

When one *shakes*, the amplitude of the bodily tremor becomes greater, though one's actions and movements become less accented and distinct than in the case of *trembling*. When we notice a *shaking* person, there often arises the impression that his or her entire body *shakes*.

When the body or its part shake and, to a greater degree, heave, the strong tremors designated by these verbs may be transferred to other parts of the body, however the tremors of other body parts will be weaker.

When one *starts* from something unexpected, one may at that moment scream, turn pale, huddle together, or make disordered movements:

In conclusion, I shall note again that bodily symbolism and linguistic means for describing the manifestations of emotion are quite various and, speaking generally, each culture and each natural language has its own means for describing each emotion. This means, in particular, that in order to complete such an important and difficult task as the complete description of an intralinguistic conceptualization of emotion, it is necessary — for each culture — to indicate in verbal and nonverbal interpretive dictionaries of emotional units not only the typical physiological manifestations of a given emotion, but also how these manifestations are idiomatically expressed in a given language. Among the various linguistic means for the designation of emotional symptoms, a separate place should be occupied by the verbs designating bodily movements, which have been named and described here as verbs of emotional convulsions.

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