

The human body in multimodal communication: the semiotic conceptualization of hair

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The article presents a fragment of the semiotic conceptualization of the somatic object “hair <on the head>” in the Russian language and nonverbal code. We describe the meaning of the standard Russian nomination of hair – *volosy*, identify and analyze key features of hair (such as its size, shape, colour, structure, functions and dysfunctions), the meaning of these features and their standard Russian nominations. A separate part of the article is devoted to the gestures performed with hair, namely caressing and aggressive gestures. By the comparative analysis of verbal and nonverbal Russian sign units we explore connections between characteristics of hair and the corresponding communicative behavior of the person. Special attention is paid to the features of hair which are either semantically or culturally marked as their meanings reflect either social or cultural stereotypes peculiar to Russians. Observation of some Russian set phrases and idioms with the word *volosy* reveals the problem of literary translation of the corresponding texts into foreign languages.

Index terms: body, gestures, hair, Russian, semiotic conceptualization

The present article¹ continues a series of the research devoted to the construction of the **semiotic conceptualization of the human body**. This concept and the term reflect how the **corporal, or somatic, objects** are represented in a natural language (Russian in particular) and how they are used in the corresponding body language. The latter includes several types of nonverbal sign units, such as manual gestures, head and shoulder gestures, postures, facial expressions, etc. [6, 13]. The semiotic conceptualization of somatic objects and corporeality is a formal model that describes what ordinary people, non-specialists, think and say about different somatic objects and how they use them in performing gestures in various patterns of corporeal communicative behaviour.

Somatic objects can be subdivided into several classes. These are the body itself and its parts (e.g. head and arm), parts of body parts (fingers, nostrils) parts of parts of body parts and so on. In

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Russian, the depth of subdivision is 6. The rest are organs (e.g. liver or heart), corporeal liquids (blood, sweat, tears), special places on the human body (armpit, navel), lines (waist, treats) etc.

Semiotic conceptualization of the human body combines different constituents that form several classes. These are (a) somatic objects and (b) their names, (c) features of the somatic objects, (d) values of the features and (e) their names, (f) gestures produced by somatic objects and some other constituents [8: 230 – 234; 9: 42 – 51]. The description of a somatic object is a fragment of the semiotic conceptualization of the human body.

The aim of our article is to describe the object that is called ‘hair <on the head>’ or *vólosy* in Russian. This infers displaying the meaning of the word, its synonyms and derivatives and also to consequently present its physical, structural and functional features, underlining the role that hair plays in Russian culture and aesthetics.

Through this type of description, we explore several aspects of multimodal communication. It connects units of different systems and codes together. Hair serves as an object of both verbal and nonverbal interaction. The units of both codes shape a number of practices involving hair, such as care, treatment and rituals with hair. Caressing or aggressive gestures that involve hair are quite often accompanied by particular expressions, marking the attitude of the person performing the gesture to the addressee. Also, hair as a somatic object connects several systems of the human being (in terminology of [1]). Being a corporeal cover, it is a part of the physical, or bodily, system. At the same time, gestures involving hair and Russian expressions with the word *vólosy* can say a lot about the person’s mood, nature of their emotional state, e.g. *volosy vstali na golove <ot straha>* ‘the hair stands on end <because of fear>’, *rvat’ na sebe volosy <v otchayanii>* ‘to pull out one’s hair <in disdain>’. In these instances, hair is made to be part of the psychic system of the human being. Correlation with the mental system is reflected in a number of thoughtful gestures with hair, such as **to thoughtfully rumple one’s hair** or **to thoughtfully bite one’s hair lock**. Hair belongs to the protective system as well because of its functions. One of these functions is to protect the head from external influences. In the present research, we define and describe these correlations.

While constructing the semiotic conceptualization of hair, we use the so-called **feature based approach** [7, 12]. The idea and main contents of this approach are to present the somatic object as a set of different features together with different language names of the object itself.

Hair alongside skin and nails forms the class of *body covers*. It is one of the main objects that have a social function of presenting a human being, human appearance and identity. Many features of hair are **semantically** and **culturally marked**, or **salient** [7].

The **semantically marked value** of the feature is the value that characterizes not only the somatic object itself, but the possessor of the object. For example, the value *krivýe* ‘ham-handed’ of the Russian word *rúki* ‘hands’ is semantically marked. Thus, the sentence *U Péti krivýe rúki* ‘Petya is ham-handed’ describes the shape of Petya’s hands and presents Petya as awkward and clumsy.

The **culturally marked value** of the feature is the value that both characterizes the somatic object and also reflects some aspects of the culture. For example, the feature “colour of cheeks” has two values: one is /pink/, another is /white/. Both features are marked in Russian culture, because they express not only the colour of the cheeks, but also display the typical Russian stereotypes of human health and illness respectively.

The Russian word *vólosy* ‘hair’ has several meanings. The first one, or the lexeme VOLOSY 1, can be described as ‘thread-like thin somatic object, attached to the head with one end’. The lexeme VOLOSY 1 is a plural form of the lexeme VOLOS 1 but the latter is used more rarely. A typical usage of the lexeme VOLOSY 1 can be illustrated with the sentence (1) *Yá nashlá u sebyá pyát sedýh volós* ‘I found five grey hairs on my head’². This context shows that the word *vólosy* in the VOLOSY 1 meaning is countable.

The second meaning of the same word is ‘a multitude of VOLOSY 1’ (lexeme VOLOSY 2). Here *vólosy* is Pl. Tant. The word *vólosy* in the VOLOSY 2 meaning belongs to **mass nouns**, because it denotes an indivisible and innumerable set of objects. Not all Russian explanatory dictionaries [4, 10, 11, 15] fix this meaning, with the pleasant exclusion being the old four-volume dictionary of the language of Pushkin [18]. Phrases such as *gustýe vólosy* ‘thick hair’, *uhód za volosámi* ‘hair care’ or *sekrét roskóshnyh volós* ‘secret of the marvelous hair’ illustrate the usage of the lexeme.

When speaking about hair, people usually mention its size or shape. Size, shape and colour form a triad that embraces the aesthetic perception of a person’s appearance. It determines an individual’s tidiness or untidiness, attractiveness or shabbiness, beauty or ugliness.

The size of hair can be either **absolute** or **relative**. The absolute size of the somatic object implies its size regardless of any spatial axis, whereas relative size refers to its size in relation to one of the three spatial axes.

The absolute size of hair in Russian is the size of *vólosy* in the VOLOSY 1 meaning (‘long thin threads...’). The absolute size is predetermined by the position of the hair on the head, which goes from the top down. In other words, the absolute size of hair is its length, and Russians say *dlínnye vólosy* ‘long hair’ or *korótkie vólosy* ‘short hair’.

The absolute size of hair in the VOLOSY 1 meaning is closely connected with some other features. First, it is the quantity of hair in the VOLOSY 2 meaning. The typical Russian expressions describing the quantity of hair are *mnógo volós* ‘large quantity’ or *málo volós* ‘small quantity’. The second and third are the density and the volume of hair.

² All the examples are taken from The National Corpus of Russian Language [14], translation is ours (– authors).

Density expresses how closely the separate thin threads of hair are located to one another and how many of them lie on the head. The top of the density scale is expressed in Russian by the adjective *gustóy* ‘thick’ and the opposite point of the scale is expressed by the adjectives *rédkiy* ‘thin’ or *zhídkiy* ‘scanty’, for example (2) *Sn ’áv shápku, jerósha rúsye gustýe vólosy, komissár stál diktovát* (A. Bek. Pózdniy chas) ‘The commissar took off the hat and, rumpling his thick blonde hair, began to dictate’ (A. Bek. The Late Hour).

The volume of hair refers to how much space the hair occupies. This feature also contains two opposite values: /large volume/ and /small volume/. Russians have a special word to express a large volume of hair. It is the adjective *pýshnyj* ‘voluminous’, cf. *pýshnye volosy* ‘voluminous hair’. There is no idiomatic mode of expressions for /small volume/. Voluminous hair is perceived in Russian culture as beautiful. It is not surprising that there is a special practice to increase the volume of hair and a special name for this practice – *pridát’ ob’jóm volosám*. By increasing the volume of hair, people make hair more attractive and raise its aesthetic appeal.

The relative size of hair is its length and breadth. The hair’s length is expressed with the adjectives *dlínnyje* ‘long’ and *korótkije* ‘short’, but also with some more complex constructions, cf. (3) *Devítsa v <...> pilótke na volosáh, pohózhih na mélkie zhóltye strúzhki* (Y. Buyda. Shchína). ‘A girl wearing a <...> garrison cap on the yellow scob-like hair’ (Y. Buyda. Shchina).

The expression *dlínnyje vólosy* ‘long hair’ does not imply that the hair’s length dominates its width. It refers to the hair of the standing person with the hair going top down and describes the hair that is longer than normal hair should be. The expressions *dlínnyje rúki* (‘long arms’) and *dlínnyje nógi* (‘long legs’) have the same scheme of explication regarding the meaning.

The relative size of the somatic objects that can’t be marked as *dlínnyj* ‘long’ or *korótkij* ‘short’ do not have idiomatic expressions. In the National Corpus of Russian Language (NCRL) there are only five entrances of the expression *vólosy srédnej dliný* ‘mid-length hair’, which also denotes its relative (normal) size. But this is not an idiomatic mode of expression.

The breadth of hair corresponds to the horizontal axis. Although hair can be understood as a number of thin threads, we can describe its particular breadth, cf. *tólstyje vólosy* ‘thick hair’ and *tónkije vólosy* ‘thin hair’. There are also special expressions that describe the increase or decrease of the breadth of the hair, such as *uvelíchít’ tolshchinú volós* ‘to increase the breadth of the hair’ and *umén’shit’ tolshchinú volós* ‘to decrease the breadth of the hair’.

During the human life the hair grows, and the ability to grow is one of its fundamental characteristics. It is not an accident that some Russian dictionaries mention this property in the explication of the meaning of the word *volosy*, though it makes the lexicographic description excessive.

The shape can be either natural or artificial, which a person creates through different manipulations with the hair.

One of the kinds of shape that can be either natural or artificial is curly hair. In Russian, there are several expressions for ‘curly hair’, such as *kudr’avyje vólosy*, *kurchavyje vólosy* or *kucher’avyje vólosy*. Though these adjectives are synonyms, they have different derivational potential. For example, there is a noun *kúdri* ‘curls’, which means a separate part of the shape. Two other adjectives do not possess this quality.

Another Russian expression for the shape of hair is *pryamýje vólosy* ‘straight hair’. The straight hair falls, hangs down or cascades parallel to the torso, cf. (4) *Pryamýje zhóstkije vólosy pádali u negó <...> na bróvi* (I. Kuprin Konokrády) ‘The straight coarse hair fell <...> on his eyebrows’ (I. Kuprin. Horse-stealers).

Natural and artificial shapes of hair can change because of different factors – either external (weather, environment, etc.) or internal (age, illness, emotional state of the person, etc.), e.g. (5) *Kózha shchók nalilás róvnym róзовым tsvétom, lób stál bél i chíst, a parikmáherskaja zavívka volós razvilás*’ (M. Bulgakov. Máster i Margaríta) ‘The skin of her cheeks was evenly suffused with pink, her brow had become white and smooth and the frizzy, artificial wave in her hair had straightened out’ (M. Bulgakov. The Master and Margarita. Tr. by M. Glenny. 1967) and (6) *U reb’ónka zakudr’ávilis’ vólosy* ‘Kid’s hair has curled up’.

Colour and tone are also physical features of hair [5]. In most of the European languages, different colours of hair have special nominations. Russian is not an exception here, cf. *kashtánovyje / rýzhyje / rúsyje vólosy* ‘brown / red / blond hair’ where the adjectives express different meanings of the feature “colour of the hair”. The constructions *svétlyje / t’ómnyje vólosy* ‘fair / dark hair’ and *bl’óklyje / túsklyje vólosy* ‘flat / dull hair’ denote different tones of the hair. Colours and tones create the basis for the well-known classification of people, cf. such names as *blondín* ‘blond’, *belokúryj* ‘fair haired’ for a person with blonde hair, *shatén* for a person with brown hair and *rýzhyj / ryzhevolósyj* for a person with red hair.

Some colours, such as red hair (Rus. *rýzhyje vólosy*), are marked in Russian culture. People with red hair are often perceived with suspicion, as cunning and sly, for example *rýzhyj-besstýzhyj* lit. ‘blushless-red’ or *Chto ya rýzhyj, chto li* lit. ‘Am I red, really?’ etc. Grey hair (Rus. *sedýje vólosy*) is also marked. Grey hair is peculiar to old people, but it cannot only mark the age of the person. It is associated with human wisdom, rich life experience and some other features. Thus, the frequent Russian expression *dozhít’ do sedýh volós* lit. ‘live to a grey hair’ reflects not only the colour of the hair but also the positive attitude towards its possessor.

Hair, regarded as a thread (lexeme VOLOS 1), has two salient parts, which have idiomatic names in Russian – *kóren* ‘root’ and *kónchik* ‘end’. Hair as a set of elements (lexeme VOLOS 2) also has parts, but their nominations are different from the previous ones. These are *pr’ád* <volós> ‘hair lock’, *puchók* <volós> ‘tuft of hair’, *vihór* ‘forelock’, *chúb* ‘scalp lock’, *klók* ‘clump’, etc. These

words form a synonymic row with the common component ‘relatively small set, or part, of hair’, but their meanings are different.

Pr’ád’ <volós> ‘hair lock’ is ‘a relatively small part of thin threads on the head, which are adjoined to each other and thus perceived as a whole’. *Puchók* <volós> ‘tuft of hair’ is ‘a relatively small part of thin threads on the head, which are adjoined to each other on one end and stick up on another end’.

Examples:

(9) *Podstrízhennaja pr’ád’ volós, spúshchennaja na lób, ozhachájet sujetnúju mélochnost’* (A. Chekhov. Rukovódstvo dl’a zhelájushchih zhenítsa) ‘A cut hair lock falling on the forehead marks earthly pettiness’ (A. Chekhov. A guide for those who want to get married);

(10) *Vólosy torchát neróvnymi puchkámí* (M. Petrosyán. Dóm, v kotórom...) ‘Hair sticks up with rough tufts’ (M. Petrosyán. A house, in which...).

Klók ‘clump’ means ‘a relatively small part of thin threads, which are perceived as a single whole and which are either adjoined to the head with one end or not’.

These explications improve lexicographic descriptions of these words given in Russian dictionaries, because they display the significant semantic characteristics of those words which are absent there. Furthermore, they show that *pr’ád’* and *puchók* are semantically closer to each other than each of them to the word *klók*. Both *pr’ád’* ‘hair lock’ and *puchók* ‘tuft of hair’ reflect the specific location of the part of the hair and its structure, either the inner one or outer one.

Functional features of any somatic object are of two kinds: proper functions and dysfunctions [2: 41 – 54, 9: 42 – 51].

Three main functions of hair are **aesthetic**, **masking** and **protective**.

Aesthetic estimation of the human appearance is based much on the perception of hair. If the hair is dirty, untidy, messy or ugly, the perception of the person is estimated negatively. That is why people care about their hair. Hair decoration, a haircut, the changing of its colour or adding volume are special operations which are performed with hair in order to make the person more pleasant and handsome.

The masking function of hair manifests itself in its ability to hide or mask anomalies of the head, ears, neck and some other somatic objects. Hair may serve to cover unpleasant ears, scars on the forehead, wrinkles, etc. For example, (11) *Strízhka, iméjushchaja pýshnyje lókony – éto optimál’nyj variánt dl’a úzkih líts* ‘A haircut with big curls is the best solution for a thin face’ (forum www.raykovstudio.ru).

As to the protective function of hair, it protects the head and its parts from different mechanical and environmental damages, cf. (12) <Zimój> *vólosy sámí sozdajút normál’nuju dl’a*

golový temperaturú i golová ne m'óržnet 'In winter the hair keeps the warm temperature of the head, that's why it does not feel cold' (forum www.lovehate.ru).

Some dysfunctions of hair manifest the inner illness of the human body or that of its parts. It is not an accident that hair illnesses constitute a special medical discipline called trichology. Hair illnesses presuppose the special methods of treatment, which usually take a lot of time. If the hair treatment has not been started in time, the illness can transfer to other somatic objects, which are spatially connected with hair. Some illnesses cause hair loss, and some lead to its excessive pathological growth. There are also several kinds of illnesses, the main symptom of which is the appearance of contagious objects in the hair, for example dandruff or lice.

Hair illnesses have both scientific (medical, biological, etc.) and common names. Thus, the common Russian name for the hair illness *seboréja* 'seborrhoea' is *pérkhot* 'dandruff', and the common Russian name for *gipertrihóz* 'trichauxis' is *volosátost* 'hairiness'.

Gesture somatism is a nonverbal sign unit, of which the nomination includes the name of the somatic object, the name of its feature or the name of a value of the feature. Gesture somatisms with hair are divided into two groups: one with hair as an active object of the gesture being performed and another with hair as a passive object [7: 116].

Russian cultural norms present hair as non-controlled by people [3, 16, 17]. It grows, falls out, moves, stands on end regardless of a person's will, but in the majority of corporeal sign movements hair is a passive somatic object. Among Russian gestures with hair the most frequent are **pogládit' po volosám / po golové** 'to stroke one's hair / head'; **trógat' volosy** 'to touch one's hair'; **igrát' chjími-to volosámi** 'to play with one's hair'; **utknútsa litsóm v volosy** 'to burrow one's face into one's hair'; **tselovát' volosy** 'to kiss one's hair' and **namátyvat' volosy / pr'ád' volós na pálets** 'to wind a hair lock around one's finger'. The physical representation of all these gestures includes the act of hair touching. In Russian culture, it is not severely tabooed – that explains why there are lots of gestures with hair touching.

In other cultures, this action is considered as taboo and special permission from the addressee to touch his / her hair is always required, even in a silent form. The permission to touch the hair demonstrates the high degree of trust to the gesture performer. It especially concerns the attitude of a man towards a woman and vice versa, where hair touching expresses feelings of tenderness, love and intimate relations between the two people.

Russian caressing gestures with hair are opposed to Russian aggressive gestures. The goal of aggressive gestures is to bring physical damage to the addressee and to hurt him / her. By doing this, the performer demonstrates an extremely negative attitude to the addressee. The examples of such gestures are **taskát' zá volosy** 'to drag by the hair'; **drat' zá volosy** 'to pull by the hair'; **d'órgat' zá volosy** 'to pull one's hair'; **hvatát' zá volosy** 'to seize one's hair'.

We presented a fragment of the semiotic conceptualization of hair as it is expressed in the Russian language and body language. We have analyzed Russian nominations of hair, considered the physical, structural and functional features of hair and their values. We discussed several types of units related to hair, such as phraseological expressions with the word *vólosy* and gesture somatisms with hair.

Many aspects of the semiotic conceptualization of hair have been left behind. This is the description of symbolic meanings and typology of various corporeal practices with hair. It is also the comparative analysis of different semiotic conceptualizations of hair that are generated by different types of discourse and texts (scientific, folklore, artistic, etc.) as well as the comparative analysis of semiotic conceptualizations of hair in different languages and body languages (e.g. English, French and German). All of these important and interesting problems deserve separate studies³.

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