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Street Art or Successful Commercial Projects? New Functions of the Symbolic Usage of Language in Linguistic Landscapes of Russian Cities

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Abstract. The urban linguistic landscape is a dynamically developing object of study in linguistics, sociology, economics and marketing. Its texts are able not only to transmit information, but also to serve a decorative — or symbolic — function. The article examines five creative projects that place texts with symbolic meanings in urban space. The author analyses the texts, identifying their possible functions and the reasons for the high social demand for such projects. Three functions are proposed for the texts in question: psychotherapeutic, marketing, and educational, while the marketing one is often implemented covertly. The article provides a comprehensive analysis of each project and concludes that their popularity among urban residents is linked to the high level of stress in the current socio-economic context and feeling of loneliness in large cities.

Key words: linguistic landscape, urban linguistics, sociolinguistics, symbolic function of language

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Стрит-арт или успешные коммерческие проекты? Новые функции символического использования языка в лингвистических ландшафтах российских городов

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Аннотация. Городской лингвистический ландшафт — динамично развивающийся объект изучения лингвистики, социологии, экономики и маркетинга. Его тексты могут выполнять не только функцию непосредственной передачи информации, но и декоративную — символическую —

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функцию. Рассмотрены пять креативных проектов, которые размещают тексты с символическим значением в городском пространстве. Автор проводит анализ текстов, выявляя их возможные функции и причины высокого социального спроса на подобные проекты. Предложено три функции, которые рассматриваемые тексты выполняют в городском лингвистическом ландшафте: психотерапевтическая, маркетинговая и образовательная, при этом маркетинговая функция зачастую реализуется скрытно. Приводится анализ каждого проекта и делается вывод о том, что их популярность среди горожан обусловлена высоким уровнем стресса в текущем социально-экономическом контексте и одиночества в больших городах.

Ключевые слова: лингвистический ландшафт, городская лингвистика, социолингвистика, символическая функция языка

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Introduction

Linguistic landscape studies are one of the recently emerged disciplines at the crossroads of linguistics, sociology, urban studies, and economics. Its object is a congregation of linguistic signs in the urban space and their functions. In their book on linguistic landscape studies, D. Gorter and J. Cenoz refer to this discipline as one of the most dynamic areas of sociolinguistics and reveal that it is challenging to agree on only one definition of linguistic landscape and identify the borders of these studies due to a rapidly changing social context and new forms of linguistic signs [1. P. 2]. In this research, we focus on linguistic landscape as a combination of linguistic objects — both oral and written — in the urban space. E. Shohamy adheres to the similar understanding of linguistic landscape, embracing its multi-modal nature [2. P. 27].

In 2015, the John Benjamins publishing house introduced the *Linguistic Landscape* international journal. In its very first issue, E. Shohamy and E. Ben-Rafael defined the key aim of linguistic landscape studies — “to describe and identify systematic patterns of the presence and absence of languages in public spaces and to understand the motives, pressures, ideologies, reactions and decision making of people regarding the creation of linguistic landscape in its varied forms” [3. P. 1]. Russian researcher V. Ivanov shares this point of view and claims that linguistic landscape analysis “went from quantitative assessments of presence of certain languages in the bilingual context to a comprehensive instrument for evaluating the functioning of languages in the public urban space, the influence on official and unofficial language policies, and on particular actors” [4. P. 434]. Following this stance on the purpose of linguistic landscape studies, researchers investigate linguistic

objects from the perspective of two types of their functions: communicative (instrumental, informative) and symbolic (function of language fetishisation).

As for the former function, R. Landry and R. Bourhis underlined that linguistic landscapes help define language characteristics and its prevalence on the certain territory — it is a function of transmitting information [5. P. 25]. For example, a direction sign, an announcement on the door, or a menu at the restaurant are examples of objects that serve a communicative function. The latter function, symbolic, is of no less importance — it reflects the status of the languages used in the linguistic landscape users' worldview. H. Kelly-Holmes refers to this function as “linguistic fetish”, for in this case the choice of a language and a particular word is bound not to its definition, but to how it looks, what associations it may evoke in potential customers, and how these words and languages can contribute to creating necessary associations in their consciousness [6. P. 39].

L. Wee and J. House argue that differentiation between communicative and symbolic functions is somewhat conventional and artificial [7; 8]. The communicative function is definitely inherent in language in general, while it is challenging to identify only one function for the linguistic object, as any communicative act can have a symbolic meaning. However, we agree with L. Wee and J. House who add that a distinction between communicative and symbolic functions is convenient and useful for research purposes [7; 8].

When studying linguistic landscape objects in the communicative function, researchers in Russia and other countries focus primarily on analysing translation errors [e.g., 9] and on the presence of ethnic minority and migrant languages [e.g., 10]. We argue that symbolic linguistic objects are less investigated and more complex, as they are directly linked with the social context in the particular period of social development. In 1998, R. Boyne and A. Gell claimed that cities are filled with texts that “speak” with their citizens [11; 12], whereas today's economy and marketing are built around impressions and images that are recreated in consumers' consciousness with different means, including language [6; 13]. H. Kelly-Holmes highlights that symbolic linguistic objects in the linguistic landscape help create a certain image of a company or a space that should resonate with the target audience [6. P. 38]. The author believes that it is language in its symbolic function, and not only communicative, that has become a new worldwide marketing instrument, and the majority of companies use foreign languages in the symbolic function assuming that they improve their status in the customers' eyes [6. P. 40].

The analysis of symbolic resources requires investigating both offline and online representations of linguistic landscapes. As social media gain more popularity, online representations have become as important for research as their offline versions. I. Maly points out that online representations not only draw new audiences, but also contribute to perceiving a place as hip. In turn, new customers become “prosumers” (professional consumers) — they “actively co-construct the image of

a certain place, street or neighbourhood by word-to-word talk, social media-posting and reviewing places” [14. P. 41]. Posts with photographs serve as reflections of the place’s linguistic landscape and a certain marketing instrument, which is usually centred around language. This form of co-participation in the space development is one of the four elements of experience economy. According to its model that was suggested by B. Pine and J. Gilmore in 1999 [15], consumers make their own contribution to creating experience for each other by participating in the events at the tourist place or a coffeeshop and by sharing content on their social media.

Our study aims to analyse creative projects that place texts in the urban space of Russia filling it with linguistic elements that primarily serve a symbolic function and to define the role these objects and projects play in the modern linguistic landscapes of Russian cities and in the perception of space.

Methods

Researchers claim that linguistic landscape studies, as many other recently emerged disciplines, have not yet established a set of methods that are used for studying the urban language and collecting data [16]. This study is mixed-method research — it employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. We selected 116 objects that were found in the urban space — both in its offline and online representations. All objects belong to five creative projects — “Partisanpress”, «Метромост» [“Metro Bridge”], “Hey, Milkev!”, «Это знак» [“It’s a sign”], and “Sloooshai” [“Listen”]. These are five most popular projects on social media that find their representations in urban landscapes.

To analyse the data collected, we used semantic analysis — a qualitative linguistic method. We analysed denotative and possible connotative meanings of linguistic objects — linguistic landscape elements in the symbolic function — to determine text functions. We also concluded on the relationship between these meanings and the social context at the time of the study.

Results

The “Partisanpress” street art project started its history in 2012. Entrepreneurs print posters with different signs on an old press using a wooden moveable type. At the time of the study, we found 134 options of posters with different texts. Although the project was established as a form of street art, it became a business project centred around language in its symbolic (decorative) function. Recognizable posters are now placed in window-shops and at events. For example, the “Yel” souvenir shop in Moscow decorated its window-shops with welcoming «Привет, Москва!» [“Hello, Moscow!”]. At the “Dushno” [“Stuffy”] festival in Peredelkino literature club in Moscow, Partisanpress posters became a point of attraction — they were announced as one of the event’s elements. Two posters that read «Одеть

Надежду, надеть одежду» [an interplay of two verbs — *одеть* (to put on clothes) and *надеть* (to dress someone) — that are commonly misused by Russian speakers] and «Категорический императив» [“Categorical imperative”] were placed on walls of the club. Playful signs with elements of irony were not chosen by mere chance — they represented aesthetics of the “festival for thoughtful people”.

The “Friend Function” shops in Moscow and St. Petersburg also put Partisanpress posters: «Сейчас самое время» [“Now is the time”], «Просто это красиво» [“That’s just beautiful”], «Спасибо, что пришел» [“Thank you for coming”], «Люди важнее идей» [“People are more important than ideas”]. It is evident that all language objects target at fostering positive and welcoming atmosphere at the shop, which is certainly a good instrument for attracting clientele.

The idea of the “Hey, Milkev!” project belongs to a young resident of Perm, Klim Vikharev. The author places posters with inscriptions on the topics of love and happiness in urban space — for example, «Улыбнись, и всё получится» [“Smile and everything will work out”], «Верьте в то, что любите» [“Believe in what you love”], «Ты лучше, чем ты думаешь» [“You are better than you think”], and so on. In the media and social networks, the project is simply referred to as “kind posters”, and the author shared in an interview that the idea came to him when he began to lack confidence and support in life. He felt that there were many people like him, and kind messages could become important to someone (Perm Online, June, 2023). The project attracted the attention of local residents on social networks, “kind posters” appeared on stickers, bags, postcards, which can be considered an example of language commodification — the use of language objects as a commodity or a business idea. The author has already completed several joint projects with local clothing stores, dentistry, a beauty salon, a cafe and a popular science film festival. The “Fry” coffee shop in Perm decorated its windows with a whole text: «Ты заслуживаешь пить хороший кофе. Ты заслуживаешь читать хорошие книги. Ты заслуживаешь быть любимым. Ты заслуживаешь быть собой» [“You deserve to drink good coffee. You deserve to read good books. You deserve to be loved. You deserve to be yourself”].

In August 2024, “kind posters” appeared on media screens in Perm city transport, which is used daily by hundreds of thousands of residents. Buses, trolley-buses, and trams also began to “speak” to their passengers: «Давай вместе любоваться городом из окна автобуса» [“Let’s admire the city together from the bus window”], «Верь в себя и в неслучайные встречи» [“Believe in yourself and in non-accidental meetings”], «Улыбнись и всё получится» [“Smile and everything will work out”].

The “It’s a sign” project is similar to “Partisanpress” and “Hey, Milkev!” in terms of ideological content, however, it is fundamentally different from other projects discussed in this article. If other projects appeared in the urban offline space and then received their online representations on social networks, this project has

the opposite story. The first photo cards with encouraging texts appeared on the Instagram social network (recognized as extremist and banned in the Russian Federation) in 2020, during the era of the coronavirus pandemic. In an interview with RBC, the creator of the project, Arslan Ibragimov, revealed that he borrowed the concept of the project from the western segment of the Internet (RBC, September, 2021). The same source cites the main function of the project several times — “therapeutical”. The history of the project began with the placement of photographs with text mounted in such a way as if it were part of the urban landscape — language objects appeared in shop windows, instead of advertising posters, on public transport. The purpose of the project and its texts is “to support and encourage people who feel lonely and carry the burden of living in a big city” (RBC, September, 2021). Examples of language objects include the following: «Одно из самых лучших чувств — это потерять привязанность к тому, кто тебе не подходит» [“One of the best feelings is to lose attachment to someone who is not suitable for you”], «Человек, в котором вы нуждались больше всего, научит вас не нуждаться ни в ком» [“The person you needed the most will teach you not to need anyone”], «С кем попало по душам не разговаривают» [“You don’t talk to anyone from the bottom of your heart”], «Абсолютный факт: человек находит время на всё, что действительно хочет» [“The absolute fact: a person finds time for everything they really want”], «Тебе очень идёт быть собой» [“It suits you very well to be yourself”].

The project has found a great response among the account’s subscribers, and entrepreneurs, including the largest Russian and international brands, have begun to show interest in it. Recent joint initiatives include partnerships with VK Video, SDEK delivery service, T-Bank and its travel services, Tvoe clothing brand, Cooper food delivery service, and Yandex Market marketplace. Importantly, the authors of the interview consider this scenario to be natural for any street art project.

One of the largest and most significant joint campaigns of the project from the research point of view is a partnership with the “Cofix” Israeli chain of coffee shops in Moscow. Throughout the month, all cups in the coffee shop, which at the time of the study had 240 branches in Moscow, had recognizable inscriptions of the project written in their trademark red font: «О тебе тоже кто-то мечтает» [“Someone is dreaming of you too”], «Это знак сделать сегодня, а не когда-нибудь» [“This is a sign to do today, not someday”], «Всё, что ты чувствуешь, имеет огромное значение» [“Everything that you feel is of great importance”] (Figure 1), «Впереди лето, тепло, отпуск, разговоры по душам и прогулки до утра» [“Summer, warm days, vacations, heart-to-heart talks, and strolls till the morning are awaiting us”], «Эта мечта появилась в твоём сердце не просто так» [“This dream appeared in your heart for a reason”], «Позволь себе быть неидеальным» [“Allow yourself to be imperfect”], «Спустя год ты будешь счастлив, что начал именно сегодня» [“In a year you will be happy that you started today”]. According to the authors

of the project, the inscriptions appeared on two million cups. Given that “Cofix” operates primarily in the takeaway format, we argue that the joint initiative had a significant impact on the urban linguistic landscape between March 20 and April 15, 2024.



Figure 1. An on-cup sign, part of a collaboration between Cofix and the *It's a Sign* project
Source: photo by O.V. Shcherbakov

The “Metromost” project in Moscow also differs from the other projects discussed in this article. Firstly, this is an official initiative of the city’s Department of Transport, unlike other private projects. Secondly, the linguistic elements of the “Metromost” project are an example of how closely the informative and symbolic functions of language can be intertwined in the urban linguistic landscape. Smolensky metro bridge in the center of Moscow became the first metro bridge in the USSR — it was opened in 1937. In 2019, a media screen was installed on the bridge to broadcast messages to the residents. In 2023, the project had its own channel in the Telegram messenger, which collected all texts that are broadcast on the media screen. Subscribers can send their own messages through a special bot. At the time of the study, the channel had 9,000 subscribers.

According to the nature and content of the texts, they can be classified as follows:

- 1) **playful:** «Я не борюсь с желанием поесть сладкого, я перед ним сдаюсь» [“I don’t fight the urge to eat sweets, I give up on it”], «Лето не пролетело, оно проехало на электросамокате» [“Summer didn’t fly by, it rode on an electric scooter”];
- 2) **motivating, inspiring:** «Вас ждёт только самое прекрасное. Обещаю!» [“Only the most beautiful things are waiting for you. I promise!”], «В душе всегда лето» [“It’s always summer in my soul”];
- 3) **congratulatory:** «НИИ «МосТрансПроект» — 76 лет! Вы создаёте будущее Московского транспорта» [“‘MosTransProekt Research Institute’ is 76 years old! You are creating the future of Moscow transport”], «С Днём программиста! Не за-

бывайте иногда отрываться от своего компьютера и гулять» [“Happy Developer’s Day! Don’t forget to take a break from your computer and go for a walk sometimes”];

4) **cautionary**: «Следуйте рекомендациям врачей — носите маски в транспорте!» [“Follow the recommendations of doctors — wear masks in transport!”], «Победим COVID-19 вместе! Сделайте прививку» [“Let’s defeat COVID-19 together! Get vaccinated”];

5) **invitational**: «Лето закончилось, а яркие события нет. Уже завтра Осенний велофестиваль!» [“Summer is over, but bright events are not. Tomorrow is the Autumn Cycling Festival!”], «Открой в себе художника! Встречаемся 15 сентября на массовом пленэре на Северном речном вокзале» [“Discover the artist in yourself! We will meet on September 15 at the mass plein-air at the Severny Rechnoy Vokzal”].

Cautionary signs appeared extensively on the metro bridge in 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic, and aimed to enable citizens to wear masks and get vaccinated. Other types of inscriptions change each other on the media screen daily. It should be noted that most linguistic objects personify the bridge — the use of pronouns and first-person singular verb forms, rhetorical questions can be aimed at creating a sense of personal communication and presence. On social media, the project is often called “the most sociable bridge”.

This project is particularly interesting from a sociolinguistic point of view. Even though the initiative to create it came from a government agency and the media screen is actively used to congratulate, inspire, and inform citizens, “Metro Bridge”, like other projects discussed in this article, has become a PR tool of the Moscow Department of Transport. The Russian capital city is developing rapidly, and the department’s projects are responding to the demand of citizens for technological, fast, and modern transport. To introduce new initiatives to the citizens, the department uses the media screen on the Smolenskiy metro bridge, among other things: «Не верю, что выставка «Московский транспорт 2030» в «Манеже» скоро закончится. Ещё есть время сходить!» [“I do not believe that the Moscow Transport 2030 exhibition at the Manege will end soon. There is still time to go!”], «А вам не кажется, что трамваи в Москве похожи на самый романтический транспорт на свете?» [“Don’t you think that trams in Moscow look like the most romantic transport in the world?”], «Виртуальная «Тройка», беспилотный трамвай... Я что, уже в будущем?» [“Virtual *Troika*, unmanned tram... Am I already in the future?”] *Troika* is a name for a transport card in Moscow], «25 лет люблюсь, как ЦОДД заботится о движении Москвы!» [“For 25 years I’ve been admiring how the Center for the Organization of Road Traffic takes care of Moscow’s traffic!”] (Figure 2).

We did not classify this type of object into a separate element, since “advertising” inscriptions are often disguised as playful, motivational, congratulatory, or invitational. The symbolic function is also often disguised in these texts. For example, it is not immediately apparent that the text “Virtual *Troika*, an unmanned tram...

Am I already in the future?” serves to inform about the modern infrastructure of Moscow’s transport and promote it. Such examples confirm the hypothesis previously put forward by L. Wee and J. House — it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish the functions of linguistic elements in the urban linguistic landscape.



Figure 2. A sign on the metro bridge

Source: photo by O.V. Shcherbakov

The more thorough censorship of language objects is what also sets this project apart from others. For example, *Partisanpress* sells posters with obscenities; however, we did not find examples of their use in Moscow’s urban landscapes. In the case of the “Metromost” project, all ideas are moderated, even though anyone can suggest an inscription via a Telegram bot.

Another project that differs from the others is the idea of two Moscow residents called “Sloooshai”. This project is based not on specially invented phrases, but on real quotes from passers-by. In an interview with *Moslenta*, the authors said that they often walk around Moscow and accidentally hear phrases from passers-by that make them think about something (*Moslenta*, November, 2021). At some point, the authors decided that they were interested in sharing them with others. At the same time, the so-called “psychotherapeutic” function is again at the center of the idea: “We wanted the phrases that we collected to have a chance to become something unusual and important to someone. We thought that for someone, the quote written on each of the stickers could become a kind of sign” (*Moslenta*, November, 2021). Examples of linguistic objects include the following: «— Это всё мечты. — Это всё реальность» [“— These are all dreams. — This is all reality”], «Любовь — это радость, которую никто не может похитить» [“Love is a joy that no one can steal”], «Привет и пока — это всё, что мы говорим друг другу в течение этого года» [“Hello and bye is all we say to each other this year”], «Счастье не

нафантазируешь» [“You can’t just imagine happiness”], «Зачем вы хотите посмотреть мир, смотрите людей, это же тоже целый мир» [“Why do you want to see the world, see people, it’s also the whole world”], and so on. Many objects are designed as mini dialogues, as in the first example.

Even though the project, as creators claim, initially was not commercially oriented, today its social networks feature the results of several collaborations with well-known Russian companies, which confirms the great interest in the project from both business and consumers.

At the time of the study, the “Sloooshai” project was the only one where we discovered a joint campaign with a government agency. A selection of photo cards with project stickers and overheard quotes from theatre visitors appeared on the social networks of the Taganka Theatre, subordinate to the Moscow Department of Culture: «Это удивительно, но иногда спектакль может изменить человека» [“It’s amazing, but sometimes a performance can change a person”], «— Мне свет мешал. — Потому что внутри его у тебя нет» [“— The light bothered me. — Because you don’t have it inside you”], «Для тебя конец, а для меня начало» [“It’s the end for you, but it’s the beginning for me”]. Thus, the initiative was noticed by representatives of both the commercial and state-budgeted sectors.

On Mother’s Day in 2021, the Blacklight agency, the “Sloooshai” project, and the “Alter” psychological service launched a special project “Naughty” about the importance of positive parental beliefs. Two stickers were pasted on the walls and facades of buildings in Moscow; each of them had two quotes that were essentially the same, but different in form. Stickers were posted where these phrases were heard from strangers addressed to their children. The sticker on the left is real words, on the right is an alternative answer from psychologists. For example, «Встал спокойно! Что за цирк?» [“Stop messing around! This is ridiculous!”] and «Понимаю, ты устал, хочется побегать и поиграть. Сможешь ещё 10 минут подождать?» [“I understand you’re tired, you want to run and play. Can you wait another 10 minutes?”]. There were 17 pairs of such stickers in total. In our opinion, this is one of the rare examples of the educational function. The texts aim to teach citizens how to communicate with children in difficult situations. However, in this case, the hidden marketing function remains, since the name of the psychological service was indicated on the cards.

Conclusion

We have analysed five creative projects that are changing urban space by placing language objects that perform a predominantly symbolic function, that is, aimed at fetishising and commodifying language. Most of the projects are the initiatives of active users of social networks, who were inspired, among other things, by similar initiatives popular abroad. Our analysis also included the initiative of the official governing body, as well as a joint campaign with a state cultural facility.

We demonstrated that these projects are becoming more embedded in the fabric of modern cities.

Summarizing the results of the analysis, we can identify the following functions of the projects and language objects in the symbolic function considered:

1. *Therapeutical function* is the most popular. As the authors of the projects themselves stated, their texts aimed at supporting, reassuring, or inspiring the citizens. These initiatives mainly appeared in the Russian urban space during the pandemic and became especially popular during the political crisis; thus, we assume that the demand from urban space users for these projects is associated with a high level of stress from urban life, uncertainty, and anxiety, as well as with the accelerating rhythm of life, which is especially relevant in large cities. Without a sufficient level of support in their environment, the citizens find it in the urban space, which, thanks to the created texts, is actively personified and becomes their close friend.

2. *Promotional function*. All projects discussed in this article have become not just street art, but business projects. Their popularity among citizens has played a role in this, including due to their previously discussed therapeutical function. Entrepreneurs, from local businesses to national corporations, saw a new way of advertising and began to actively use it. In most cases, advertising is embedded covertly in these language objects. As a rule, this type of promotional texts does not communicate a call to purchase a product or service directly. The text fits into the concept of a specific project, so that it is more difficult to distinguish the integration between the project and the advertiser from its usual object. We also demonstrated that the promotional function is implemented even for urban infrastructure projects — the Moscow Department of Transport is actively using its “Metromost” project to attract the attention of residents to new modes of transport, routes, payment methods, and so on.

3. *Educational function*. At the time of the study, this is the least popular function. We found examples of its implementation only in the “Sloooshai” project and its integration with the “Alter” psychological service. Text cards placed in urban spaces and their photos on social networks were designed to teach parents how to communicate with children in difficult situations.

The symbolic resources of the linguistic landscapes of Russian cities are no less important and interesting from a research point of view than the issues of translation and language spread analysis. Thus, they can become a useful tool for increasing interest in the native language and its prestige among young people, which has been repeatedly expressed in official circles in connection with new geopolitical challenges. For example, at the meeting of the Council for Implementing State Policy to Support Russian Language and Languages of Peoples in Russia on November 5, 2024, with the participation of the President of Russia, the Chairman of the Council, Elena Yampolskaya noted, “... We have to make the Russian language fashionable in a good way among young people and do it creatively.

I'd like to add that designers today make a ton of interesting art objects based on the Cyrillic alphabet. We can incorporate the symbols of the Russian language in the public space, with the creative approach to the design of our cities and towns in mind, forming a nationally oriented environment. We also propose to support this direction" (President of Russia, November, 2024).

The projects discussed in this article, in our opinion, can claim the role of such solutions, especially those that aim to spread kind, supportive texts in urban space. This is confirmed by the high social demand for such initiatives. Notably, among the collected material, we did not find any inscriptions in English or excessive borrowings, however, the anglicisation of the Russian word «слушай» [“to listen”] was revealed through its transliterated representation in Latin letters in the name of one of the projects, which was a frequent phenomenon ten years ago. Most examples have predominantly positive denotative and connotative meanings.

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