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Polyphonic parenting debate in Russian social media: A pragmatic perspective

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Abstract

The article examines the evolution of a new language for discussing private and personal matters in the public space of Russian social media. The goal of the study is to reveal the formats of talk that may serve the manifestation of the new public language, reflected in multiple discourses through which Russian parents position themselves in the Internet parenting forum debate. The data for the research were obtained from the conversation analysis of parents' posts on *Alpha Parenting*, a popular Russian Facebook community platform. The study aimed to analyze more than 400 posts of parents of young children (6-12 years old) uploaded from 2017 to 2019. The emerging formats of talk are examined from a perspective of pragmatic communicative acts that shape the interactional situation in a chat forum. An interplay of the multiple forms of talk in the online forum is understood through the prism of Bakhtin's analytical apparatus, which is based on the concepts of *voice* and *polyphony*. The results illustrate the simultaneous presence of different languages in public discussions of private life. These may pertain either to everyday informal communication constituted in the private and interpersonal sphere, to discursive practices of authoritative talk, to the meta-ways of discourse monitoring and management, or no less important, to the therapeutic public emotional talk about one's private inner world and emotional experience. The study suggests that the ways of communicating about emotions represent an emerging emotional therapeutic attitude and language that has been regulating and reshaping Russian Internet communication.

Keywords: *Russian social media, virtual parenting debate, formats of talk, multivoicedness, emotionalization, Bakhtin*

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Полифоническая дискуссия родителей в российских социальных сетях: прагматический аспект

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Аннотация

В статье рассматривается эволюция нового языка для обсуждения частных и личных вопросов в публичном пространстве российских соцсетей. Целью исследования является выявление форматов беседы, служащих проявлением нового публичного языка, посредством которых российские родители позиционируют себя в дебатах на интернет-форумах по вопросам воспитания детей. Данные для исследования были получены в результате анализа родительских дискуссий на Alpha Parenting, популярной российской платформе сообщества Facebook¹. В ходе исследования было проанализировано более 400 постов родителей детей 6–12 лет в период с 2017 по 2019 г. Форматы виртуальной беседы рассматриваются с точки зрения речевых актов, формирующих коммуникацию родителей в онлайн чат-форуме. Взаимодействие множественных форм разговора понимается через призму аналитического аппарата М. Бахтина, основанного на концепциях голоса и полифонии. Результаты иллюстрируют одновременное присутствие разных форматов и стилей в публичных обсуждениях частного и личного. Эти дискурсивные стили могут относиться к повседневной неформальной коммуникации, принятой в межличностной сфере, либо к дискурсивным практикам авторитетного разговора, либо к метаспособам мониторинга и управления дискурсом, или, что не менее важно, к терапевтическому публичному эмоциональному разговору о внутреннем мире и эмоциональном опыте. Исследование показывает, что различные варианты разговора об эмоциях представляют формирующуюся эмоциональную терапевтическую установку, влияющую на язык и регулирующую и преобразующую российскую интернет-коммуникацию.

Ключевые слова: *российские социальные сети, виртуальные дебаты о родительстве, форматы беседы, многоголосие, эмоциональность, Бахтин*

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Introduction

What kind of language is being created in the public field of Russian social media to discuss personal matters? Which discursive formats are predetermined in the virtual talk about the private realm and which new modes of communication is the new language developing? These questions regarding an emerging public language have become extremely intriguing with the increasing role of social networks. Indeed, for the past decade, the Internet debate has become the main platform for a new public conversation about private issues. The most interesting discussions about relationships, individuality, feelings and emotions have come

¹ Признана экстремистской организацией и запрещена на территории РФ.

from social networks,² and undoubtedly, the ways of talking about these and other important personal topics both mirror and shape this new discourse in the public sphere (Lerner & Zbenovich 2016a, 2016b, 2017, Vakhtin & Firsov 2016, Wahl-Jorgensen 2019).

Having followed these debates during recent years, however, we have noticed that the boundaries between symbolic private and public space have become very blurred. The public discussion exposes us to language that would previously have been hidden deep in the intimate sphere of human consciousness, but which has now come to the surface and has become everyone's property, thereby often creating the impression that one is eavesdropping on someone else's private conversation. Furthermore, the emotionalization processes have become increasingly dominant in the domains of social media, imbuing contemporary public talk with psychological emotional content (Lerner & Zbenovich 2013, Prihod'ko et al. 2020, Zappettini et al. 2022) and questioning conventionally accepted distinctions between private and public modes of expression.³ No less important is the current weak and under-developed condition of Russian public language which, until fairly recently, did not have its own apposite register, which might have been used to express more subtle messages, going beyond merely voicing strong personal emotion or bureaucratic clichés (Kharkhordin 2016: 281). During the last decade, people were only just beginning to learn to overcome their intrinsic inability to speak publicly. Thus the current participation in public discussion by novice public speakers may often end in virulent disagreement, resulting in injurious language aimed toward the addressee.

In the context of the formation of personal publicity in social networks, the emerging discursive forms of talk about private space are ubiquitous in any kind of web-based communication. In this work, I will purposely inquire into the language of parenting forums, since this social media area invites a special interest in following the discursive private-public interplay of internet debate. Parental communication puts together both public formal and private informal spheres, elucidates public-private topics, and is emotionally and morally loaded. The very issue of parenting is private, since it presents individual perceptions and practices; however, it is concomitantly social, collective and public because of its strong interrelation with cultural conceptions and beliefs.⁴ While the inherent private

² See, for example, the flash mob *I'm not afraid to say*, discussions about the well-known Moscow school # 57 and scandals related to LGBT topics in 2016. For a look at the ways in which the space of public social media debate began to change in Russia, see the conversation between Olga Strakhovskaya and Mikhail Medvedev in the *I Can Speak* educational series hosted by the *InLiberty* project on November 2, 2016.

³ The ways in which psychological emotional language shapes public, collective and institutional talk were discussed at the International workshop "Emotionalization of public domains in cross-cultural perspective: Russia, Israel, USA" convened in May, 2019 at Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, Israel.

⁴ It should be emphasized that the public performance of parenthood and negotiation of its important conceptions would arouse interest in any society as a whole. In Russia, the field of parenthood

status of a parent determines the informal and intimate language register in sharing her position, certain modes of communication are also expected to attest to the strategic and authoritative discourse of the official public sphere.

Different formats of talk in parenting forums show themselves through particular modes of verbal interaction, speakers' communicative intentions and the use of certain linguistic means. At a more general level of the discursive performance, the parental talk breaks down into multiple frames of discourses related to a social self, a context of interaction, or to a way one imagines her virtual partner for communication and correlates oneself with the unfamiliar "Other", anticipating her reaction and interpretation. The parenting debate thus invites a multifaceted reading on the level of complexity of discourses and layers of interaction embedded within the discussion. Inspired by the works of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984) I suggest understanding the multiple forms of talk in the online forum through the prism of Bakhtin's analytical apparatus, which is based on the concepts of *voice* and *polyphony*. I propose to extend Bakhtin's notion of *voice* to the discursive formats of talk rooted in the virtual debate and serving the important constituent elements of a new public language about private matters. In this respect, the article is guided by the following research goals:

- To reveal the essential formats recruited by the interactants to speak about their private lives, internal relationships and inherent emotional experiences.
- To uncover, which linguistic resources and communicative pragmatic acts generate the current nature of the forum debate.

To examine these discursive constituents and represent the structures that operate in the online community debate, I argue for the need of incorporating a cultural and pragmatic analysis of the linguistic form that accompanies the examination of communicative modes and styles as well as of key cultural concepts. I essentially inquire into the functioning of language in the discussion of personal issues that takes place in today's public social media.

2. Literature review

The language of social media has long been an important focus of research in sociolinguistics and communication studies. For the last decade, it has received special attention due to the participation of a broader audience in discussion platforms and the appearance of a rich source of data based on different languages and virtual locations. International scholarly literature has primarily approached the ways of discursive construction of virtual identity and the problems of language choice for building community relations in social network sites (e.g., Reyes 2019, Rhee 2023, Seargeant & Tagg 2014). Scholars have also largely emphasized the emotionality of the social media language, discussing the norms for expressing emotions and revealing the linguistic emotional cues in media texts (Waterloo et al.

provokes particular interest since it has recently undergone a transformation from a common dominant educational model to different styles connected with different social groups.

2014). The emotionality of language has been further addressed from the perspective of social sharing (John 2017, Rodriguez 2015), as this mode of participation in the internet debate undeniably underlies the current general tendency to recount and share emotional experiences, and to manage emotions through interactions with distant acquaintances by receiving their support and validation.

On the Russian scene, the same issues seem particularly relevant and have motivated wide-ranging research. The studies have examined the style and normativity of the blogosphere discourse, focusing on creative language production and exploring digital verbal aggression (Kunstman 2010). Sociolinguists were concerned about the digression of internet language from the conventional norms and orientation towards sensuality, which might have a possible destructive effect on the user (Trofimova 2010). More recently, however, new laws regulating freedom of expression on the Internet have come into force in Russia, and new means have been developed for restricting various kinds of digital discord. Current research accentuates the speech democratization of online communication and characterizes the social media discourse as a new, hybrid form of language originating in the written form, but approaching the oral variety of language as a result of the ever-increasing degree of synchronicity, colloquialism and emotionality (Krylova 2016, 2019, Trofimova 2019).

With consideration of the insights gained by these studies into the liberation of Internet language, its emotionality and expressiveness, I intend to take a different angle, switching the focus of the current analysis to the discursive organization of a virtual talk. I view the online debate as an interaction (though asynchronous) of distinct perspectives and stances assembled into the structured system of a particular discussion. Talking in a virtual public space thus adopts the original Bakhtinian idea of a dialogic relationship between the voices in a literary text. In Bakhtin's view, a *polyphony* refers to the multiplicity of consciousnesses and meanings within a text; it generates a dialogic relationship between the voices, introducing new elements into the discussion and orienting the talk to the perspective of the other (Park-Fuller 1986). I believe that the idea of multivoicedness is particularly true for the speech situation of the virtual forum debate wherein the concept of *voice* can be interpreted in two different albeit closely interrelated ways: in a literal sense and in a communicative pragmatic one. The latter affords a linguo-pragmatic line of a virtual talk inquiry and is the one I will be using for my analysis.

Within the literal frame, the multi-voiced reality in the forum is created by the interchanging of speakers' discourses that is essentially polyphonic: while all communicants constantly attempt to retain their stances in the debate, each voice affects the voice of the other participant (Langleben 1998) and becomes part of the other's discourse. I believe, however, that what in effect causes parental talk to manifest itself in different voices are the speakers' discursive positions predetermined by the forum domain and embedded in the structure of the

interaction. The roles that forum members adopt may relate to the explicit level of discussing personal matters (e.g., sharing problems or giving advice), or, alternatively, refer back to the discourse itself, identifying dissonances and reviewing the flow of negotiation. Furthermore, the intention of one speaker will be always interpreted by her interlocutor, and the meaning of the original message will be incorporated into the other speaker's intentional frame, giving it new articulations. I found that in view of their structural-discursive positions, parents express their voices within certain formats of talk which embody different speakers' intentions, content and forms of expression.

In this article, I seek to explain how the discussion of private and personal issues in the virtual public space reveals itself in particular formats of talk. I examine the emerging parental voices from the perspective of pragmatic communicative acts that shape the interactional situation in a chat forum. It is important to highlight that speakers' voices interact within a special speech situation of indirect, computer-mediated written communication in which the role of deciphering the interlocutor's message significantly increases. The anonymity of the communicants and their assumptions about the others just on the basis of the interpretation of the received messages underlies the dynamics of interaction. I found it contingent on the conversational goals of the speakers, encoded in their speech acts (SA) and expressed in different communicative patterns. Concomitantly, the flow of discussion is highly shaped by emotional language. I show that the talk about private matters in the virtual forum incorporates emotionalized and therapeutic type of discourse in different ways, configures the relationships between the voices within public discussion, and integrates the culture specific tenets into the act of talking.

In the following sections, I present the formats of talk common to the public virtual debate and discuss each parental voice in detail.

3. Data and methodology

The study was developed as part of a research project on emerging therapeutic emotional discourse in Russia, and continuous work with Russian social media.⁵ My insights on formats of talk were derived from inquiry into discussions in *Alpha Parenting*, a popular Russian Facebook community for parents that enables a conversation on various issues related to child raising.⁶ For my analysis, I have viewed 400 posts of parents of young children, 6–12 years old, out of more than

⁵ The research entitled “Post-Soviet translations of the therapeutic culture in Russian everyday life and media discourse” was supported by a grant from the Israeli Science Foundation (ISF 496/16). It was conducted in collaboration with Dr. Julia Lerner in 2016–2020.

⁶ The group created in 2012, consists of more than 20000 members, predominantly mothers, and is managed by the administrator. A thread of a virtual talk is composed as a main posting and associated responses where the participants signal their attention, co-presence and partaking in exchanging details of their experiences. Posts are directed at any particular person, and both posts and comments can receive feedback.

2600 posts uploaded from 2017 to 2019. I use some posts with their corresponding threads of discussion that serve as the best representative samples of different parental voices, complementing them by other instances taken from different threads of the forum to reinforce certain formats of talk. The parenting posts analyzed are originally in Russian, and I provide translated examples while preserving specific words and expressions in their original form.

I have first singled out the patterns of utterances that constitute the interactional mode of discussion, and through which the communicants realize their conversational goals. I trace how the speakers' voices are linguistically indexed through SAs and show which linguistic structures may be additional indicators of messages that different voices demonstrate in the process of discussion. I argue that a particular voice embodies a verbal communicative intention of a speaker, and may be in part an outcome of interactional negotiation, in part a construct of others' perceptions and representations, and in part an outcome of underlying messages or broader socio-cultural situations. In this way, I have identified four formats of talk that organize the interaction in parental debate. They are the voices of *Calling for Help*, *Support Group*, *Authoritative Knowledge* and *Discourse Monitoring and Management (Meta-Talk Voice)*. Considering discursive linguistic forms of the forum discussion as constitutive of a new public language about private matters, I investigate patterns of discourse with an emphasis on the social use of language, drawing on conversational analysis and speech act theory (Austin 1962, Grice 1975). I explore Russian emotional linguistic scripts, including attributes of self-expressions and key concepts, as markers that contextually generate the new public language of social media in parenting forums. I question the meaning of these linguistic forms and their pragmatic function in a particular format of the online talking as well as within the broader discursive formats grounded in their cultural tradition of the Russian Soviet and post-Soviet discursive universe.

4. Results

4.1. *The voice of calling for help*

Many parents experiencing personal struggles turn to the online community to speak about their situations and seek advice or encouragement from their peers. Their posts often start with a request for help and support. Across a range of requests, the majority are hearer-oriented ones in a form of an explicit directive. In the examples (1–3), one can see the typical instances of such appeals.

- (1) *Girls, help! I argue and argue with my husband.* (March 12, 2017)
- (2) *Talk to me! Only this group I trust.* (May 7, 2018)
- (3) *Tell me how to react ... I'm on the brink.* (February 2, 2019)

The language in which the requests are cast may be too forthright and categorical for our ordinary perception of requesting, but both situational and cultural factors influence the use of the directive request strategy. First, it can conceivably be accounted for the cases of emergency (3), when the circumstances

call for immediate action. In addition, the directness of requests seems to agree with general trends in digital interaction in forums that feature parity and reciprocity. There is a certain degree of obligation in carrying out the request while being part of a community and undergoing a similar situation. The level of directness assumes a specific degree of familiarity between the interlocutors; indeed, more casual explicit requests with less mitigation are more common between friends and would otherwise be considered face threatening acts with a large rank of imposition.⁷

At the same time, however, the users in effect solicit help from people who are almost strangers. Though they direct the requests to the intended virtual recipients, their addressees are distant in time and space, with little or no knowledge about them. In Bakhtin's terms, they "turn to the other" (Bakhtin 1984: 267) with their problems, anticipating the response from the alien someone and generating a dialogical relationship with an unknown interlocutor whose perspectives might fit with their own understandings. The omnipresence of the invisible "Other" as a source of a judgment seems to be an inherent nature of the discussion format in the virtual community.

The help request in the parental posts obviously entails making public one's own private experience. In this sense, the act of sharing one's appeal represents a form of emotional therapeutic communication (John 2017: 98–99)⁸ since it reveals one's private self by conveying emotional content and embodies a type of talk through which communicants gain emotional encouragement from one another. Thus an expression of self, communicated in the *Calling for Help* voice serves both as a means of construction of public intimacy, and as a means of getting a better sense of self which will resonate with others' perspectives by showing their empathy and understanding.

The initial requests are followed by authentic personal stories that occur in everyday life with the aim of strengthening the self and receiving informational and emotional support. The act of online sharing is revealed in the following example of a post by N*. The following information about N* is available – she is 35 years old, married and has 3 kids. Her position of being a mother feels like an overwhelming and incredibly stressful job.

- (4) (a) *I am mad at my daughter, and I suffer with a sense of guilt. (b) I ask for support and advice. (c) And the main question is not even a question, but just whining about what a terrible mother I am! (d) I have already forgotten about my hobbies; there is simply no strength for anything, no enthusiasm and inspiration. (e) I only want that no one should touch me. (f) In short, the thought consoles me that one day I will hand over*

⁷ A great body of research in linguistic pragmatics focus on requests as face threatening acts with a high level of imposition on the hearer, and as a threat also posed to the speaker's face (e.g. Brown & Levinson 1987). The risks associated with performing a direct request include both a possible refusal on the part of the hearer to grant the request and an infringement upon the hearer's freedom of action (Sifianou 2012).

⁸ John defines sharing as "making private stories into public communicative acts" (p. 98), emphasizing the fact that therapeutic social sharing is central to public discourse of social media.

everyone to the kinder-garden and begin to live! (g) Maybe I just want to hear that I'm not exactly a terrible mother. (September 17, 2017)

The post (4) revolves around the author's lack of confidence regarding her performance as a good mother, framing her frustration within the act of "whining" – *nyt'yo* (c), a long-term complaint suggesting no constructive solution exists and that the only remedy is to seek sympathy through sharing. By asserting her state, expressing needs emphasized by the modifier *prосто* – "only" (e), and revealing her wants (f), she clarifies what she expects from sharing: a need for reassurance and emotional support. This pursuit has shaped the post's style, focused on the poster's emotional state, highlighting the intimate talk based on personal experiences and relationships.

Though the discursive code in online communities seems to allow for, and even encourage greater intimacy in public social interaction than would be considered appropriate in other situations of public discourse, the post (at least for someone who is not part of the community) might create a feeling of being exposed to information that is not meant for the public ear and is to be said only in a private conversation. Private talk that presupposes sharing personal information about oneself with only a few selected close others, occurring between the communicants behind allegedly closed walls, turns out to be a public discussion taken to a virtual venue that is open to anyone.

The need of being selective in regard to what aspects of their private talk the communicants wish to make public might be the reason that the act of sharing is not obvious to all members of virtual group. The Voice of Calling for Help sometimes becomes more cautious as people tend to be reticent about sharing their private matters in a public group discussion:

(5) I'm not sure if my personal topic is quite in the spirit of the discussion here ... but I'll take a chance (March 20, 2017).

Some of the group members also exhibit a lower level of self-disclosure because of the fear of a judgmental attitude about the intimate information they are to share:

(6) It's very scary to write. Probably in this group there will be few people who can relate to my situation (November 30, 2017).

On the whole, this voice is produced by the continuum of discursive consciousness that incorporates the explicit directives for support, the acts of sharing and/or the practices of reservation and qualms. In the following sections, I will discuss other voices evoked by the discourse of seeking help and analyze how they operate in the group discussion once the chat has started.

4.2. The voice of support group

In the next stage, the community members start expanding on their peer's post through an actively unfolding discussion that interlaces voices of different

discursive rhetoric. Among them one can discern the conspicuous mode of talk that evokes encouragement and demonstrates a cooperative way of speaking, thus resembling the discourse of support groups (Carbaugh 1988, Wuthnow 1994). In the parenting forum, the voice of a support group intertwines the basics of a therapeutic approach and a group solidarity in providing a safe discursive environment where fellow parents who have common problems can be inspired by each other's journeys and share personal experiences. Concomitantly, the format of a support talk corresponds to the informal private chat "among friends" that constitutes an important channel in Russian cultural and social life. It demonstrates a very short distance in communication and is manifested in the private and informal frames of talk related to individuals and their inner emotional states. Talking to a friend includes a discussion of intimate everyday details of members' private lives (Larina 2015), involves the acts of complaints and lamentations (Ries 1997), and is based on expressions of sincerity and "speaking from the heart". It seems that communicating friendliness is already inseparable from the sharing and support mode and is built into the therapeutic approach.

To begin with, the voice of a support group is manifested in the use of SAs of acknowledgement and praise realized via different linguistic strategies, from affirmative exclamatory sentences (7) to conditional statements (8):

- (7) *You are brilliant!* (May 21, 2018)
- (8) *Your child is sensitive, and if her mother is understanding, then this is the best thing that could happen to her* (July 10, 2018).

The illocutionary force of the acknowledging acts is that of the reassurance and strengthening other parents in their adequate routine practices.

Support is mostly realized via the SA of advice whereby the post's writer expresses solidarity with support seekers and encourages their activities. The adviser believes her advice would benefit the interlocutor⁹ and signals to her peer that a future action that was previously not obvious to her could work. The act of advice can manifest linguistic strategies of directness or indirectness. Direct advice is indicated through a pragmatically transparent expression of advice, either a performative verb denoting advice "I advise you", or a noun of advice "My advice is" used in declarative sentences:

- (9) *My favorite advice is: get enough sleep, eat well, and pamper yourself. Get your 15–20 minutes a day* (June 10, 2018).

The most frequent form of direct advice in the parenting forum is the use of bare imperatives, either positive or negative:

- (10) *Try to hear yourself. Don't listen to anyone. Take your time and know that this choice is yours.* (March 12, 2018).

⁹ Following Searle's (1969) theory of directive speech acts, by giving advice the speaker attempts to change the hearer's actions and believes that the advice serves the interest of the recipient "telling you what is best for you". For further discussion of the act of advising, see also (Bach & Harnish 1979, Locher 2006, Locher & Limberg 2012).

Indirect advice can include the linguistic realizations of probability signaled by the phrase “It would be better” (*luchshe by*):

- (11) *It would be better to say goodbye to the feeling of guilt* (March 15, 2018).

It is also expressed in rhetorical questions (12) or by sharing the adviser’s own experience (13):

- (12) *Is it fine to pass the baton to the dad when your emotions run high?*
(13) *With my elder child, only the articulation of his feelings works, the ability to listen to him and just accept him as he is.* (May 6, 2017).

The nature of friendly advice in online communities can be attributed to the close distance between I and the Other in Russian culture. The advice-giving is a culturally embedded behavior in Russian communication, traditionally offered “out of the best of motives” (Larina 2020) in private and public realms of interaction. It is perceived as readiness to help, demonstrating closeness and the importance of communication and contact (Wierzbicka 2012). In the frame of the supporting Voice, advice often comes from the position of a “family member” or a close friend, demonstrating a significant degree of involvement:

- (14) *Take care of yourself to begin with. Check thyroid hormones, go to a psychologist, if necessary, to a psychotherapist for pills. Get yourself into some kind of sports for relaxation and release. You are not alone, believe me.* (March 16, 2017)

The advice pertains to the interlocutor’s deeply private sphere of her physical and mental state. The possible imposition is neutralized by expressing empathy and solidarity in admitting that the others have the same or very close experiences with the advisee: “you are not the only one”. The imperative “*believe me*” (*pover’te mne*) operates at the perlocutionary level Austin (1962: 101) and adds to the chain of imperatives a convincing dimension of advancing the realization that something can really be done and is well worth the effort.

At the content level, the post suggests a therapeutic logic that advances the idea of “working on oneself”. Drawing on popular psychology self-help discourse, the message offers a specific pragmatics for change and a new language for understanding the self by shifting the focus toward keeping one’s own life under control. Therapeutic talk is deeply anchored in the language of self-care, articulating emotions and condition of self while borrowing from psychological postulates and concepts.

The new therapeutic language is offered as a means of managing not only the communicants’ private and emotional experience, but also their parenting approach. The psychological emotional content based on consideration of the child’s personal needs may be implicit advice (13) or explicitly expressed within imperative acts that entail a repertoire of new emotional language.

- (15) *Observe how to give your child the feeling that everything is fine with your connection, that he is dear, loved, and has a place in your life! ... talk to him, play, walk, read. When he asks for help - help, and don't help if he doesn't ask for it.* (October 7, 2019)

Providing positive reinforcement, maintaining the emotional bond with the child, and addressing her personal choices appear to be an integral part of the online supporting Voice.

Last, but not the least element of this voice, are the acts of well-wishing and reassurance, both directed to the future. The encouraging messages demonstrate a desire to provide confidence wishing the best for what lies ahead:

- (16) *Get great strength! Good luck and patience to you!* (May 16, 2019).

The statements of reassurances, routinely contain the lexis of certainty, thereby offering a friendly “guarantee” to the addressee. This guarantee can be understood in terms of a speaker’s desire not only to remove her peer’s doubts or fears, but also to offer a future credit to the fellow-parent:

- (17) *You will succeed, do not even hesitate! You will be all right!* (May 26, 2017).

To conclude, the Voice of Support Group exhibits interaction patterns for positive responding and sharing and creates the dynamics of encouragement by combining discursive practices that reinforce the interlocutor in her parenting role. The performative language of this format of talk is governed by the use of direct and indirect acts of acknowledgement, implementing various advice strategies, and recruiting different levels of therapeutic emotional expression oriented to the discourse of self-needs.

4.3. The voice of authoritative knowledge

This voice reveals another format of advice that arises from the adviser’s position of presupposed authority and expertise. The authoritative dimension of the advice is based on the stylistics of fundamental universal postulates on how things “should be” within parenting or life in general. The expertise-related advice is rarely realized via personally directed performatives. Instead, it is performed through the impersonalized form of infinitive addressed to a generalized subject, is of considerable demonstrative importance and as such carries more persuasive force than a direct act.

The following advice is an example of a universally applicable assertion, introduced through the use of the linguistic form “one should + infinitive” (*sleduet*) as a way of referring to anyone, not someone specifically:

- (18) *One should look after one's children and set an example for the rest of what a family should be!* (February 20, 2017)

In this format, the advisory act carries the illocutionary force of an admonitive instruction and a critical comment that teaches interlocutors about right and wrong (Zbenovich 2023, Zbenovich et al. 2024). The normative belief is clothed in the form of a concrete image (looking after one's own family, thereby setting the example for others), with compliance or non-compliance serving as a principle for such moral judgement. Moreover, this format of advice echoes advising practices about children in Russian discourse in general,¹⁰ where personal experience automatically qualifies one to give unsolicited guidance (Zbenovich & Lerner 2013).

Common truth knowledge can also be conveyed through declarative assertions similar to proverbial phrases. These statements appear as traditional sayings based on common sense or experience, performing a hortative moralistic function and using formulaic language. This is evident in the following example of indirect advice that illustrates the preceptive nature of folk wisdom:

- (19) *If one doesn't punish children in childhood, one will be punished by them in old age.* (May 24, 2018)¹¹

The illocutionary potential of the utterance is that of the admonition, presented through the syntactic structure and stylistics of a prophetic wisdom that pertains to a standard expression of a conventional proverbial slogan. In this framework, the realization of the first phrase shapes essential condition for the future and emphasizes sequencing of educational actions and their interdependence. Though the advice lacks the metaphorical nature of a true proverb, it represents the moralizing prescript of adhering to the proper “cause-consequence” progression in parenting and suggests a ready-made philosophy of life.

In transmission of the normative universal beliefs an important role is played by the rhetoric of persuasiveness – arguing by means of using peremptory language that doesn't leave a shadow of a doubt (Lerner & Zbenovich 2013, Zbenovich & Lerner 2013). The author's confidence in her own righteousness is manifested in a rigid style of categorical judgments and in the use of evaluative vocabulary to strengthen her position, e.g., “it is clear that” and “there can be no two opinions”. Some patterns of unequivocal knowledge are demonstrated in the following example:

- (20) *It is clear that children must learn to understand the boundaries of their own space and that of others. There can be no two opinions. Without respecting someone else's boundaries, one won't be able to defend her own later!* (December 10, 2018)

¹⁰ In the Russian cultural context, fostering advice regarding children can be attributed to the fact that childhood is viewed as a common social responsibility in both private and public spheres where a third person's opinion on the questions of education and discipline is generally considered acceptable. This can also be accounted to cultural models of social relationships in Russia that promote unsolicited advice due to the relative absence of a minimal zone of personal autonomy in public spaces.

¹¹ Compare this, for example, with the same structure of a customary proverb “Without feeding the horse, one won't go far” (*Ne nakormiv loshad', daleko ne uyedesh'*).

The fact that the statement concerns categorical language is obvious. What is interesting, however, is that the therapeutic matter emerges within the authoritative form. The authoritative advice becomes psychologized through articulation of one's "space boundaries", which refers to a baseline level of general fundamental truths. Though the use of authoritative language seems to be conditional upon many factors on the individual level such as gender, age and position within the social hierarchy (Andreeva 2008), the recruited categorical lexis along with the psychologized content in the parental post attests to the current manner of talking about children in the public space in Russia. This often aligns with the psychological language used by parents, as they learn to self-reflect and manage their emotions and relations with their children.¹²

Conversely, the categorical form of impersonalized advice emphasizes even more the harshness of the language when it lacks a therapeutic approach and is hostile in its content:

- (21) *With a strap on the butt, once but hard! Or make one stand in the corner! We all were standing... And all these conversations with the psychologist, and mother's monotonous moral teaching will flow away forever without leaving anything in memory [...].* (April 19, 2018)

What immediately attracts attention in this post, is the cancellation of the function of "talk" in general, including therapeutic talk, combined with the encouragement of authority and power of physical acts, directed to and evocative of physical experience. In this sense one discerns a non-acceptance and even a critique of therapeutic talk. The act of advice gets a dual illocutionary force (Searle 1975), both direct and indirect. While it drives its force from the explicit directive to foreground rough disciplinary practices, the indirect call for the abolition of therapeutic approach framed within the SA of a prediction ("will flow away forever"), is equally important. In effect, the advice acquires an additional negative connotation of disrespect for a third party as it employs rhetoric of irreverence towards children, insisting on views based on categorical accusations of children and corporal punishment (partly reflecting the author's childhood experience). The attitudes toward family and school educational policies in Russia, however, have changed greatly in recent decades, providing clear evidence of higher tolerance and consideration regarding children.¹³ Disciplinary measures as were used in the past have been gradually substituted by new therapeutic modes of talk to a child and talking about children in general.

¹² The psychologized content of the posts resonates with the child-oriented therapeutic emotional language of support group. Articulating therapeutic practices in online public space on two different discursive levels that pertain either to the personalized friendly encouragement or to the authoritative discourse of normative beliefs, highlights the idea of the growing emotional psychological awareness among Russian parents.

¹³ For new tendencies in Russian parenthood see Kukulin & Maiofis (2010), among others.

The language associated with a coarse attitude towards a child, both in form and intent of the message, is perceived by other forum members as inappropriate verbal behavior that arouses disagreement in the context of today's increasingly psychologically directed educational policies. The "different speaking" thus evokes meta-controlling acts on part of the interlocutors' posts that counteract the discursive style of the original message within the boundaries of expected suitable ways of talking. In the next section, we will consider in detail such instances of monitoring the style of communicants' speaking as it is reflected in the responses to their posts.

4.4. The voice of discourse monitoring and management (Meta-talk)

In the discursive texture of the parenting forum, one can recognize the voice that departs from the actual development of discussion and provides feedback on the manner of the interaction. The control over the interaction is revealed in communicants' evaluations and comments that suggest what kind of communication should be used in the context of the forum debate and serve the discursive indicators on non-acceptability of the interlocutors' way of posting.

The following responses to the preceding post (21) illustrate the idea:

- (22) *Your inappropriate style of talking falls out of bounds of the community.* (April 19, 2018)
- (23) *Here is ridiculous and incompetent nonsense, starting from the first phrase.* (April 19, 2018)
- (24) *As it is written, it's some kind of blather.* (April 20, 2018)

The fact that each of the above concerns speech monitoring is obvious in (22) and apparently more forthright in (23) and (24). The first response reveals the most frequent metapragmatic strategy of disapproval regarding the interlocutor's discursive behavior: the post's inappropriateness is signaled by a critical remark. This judgment serves an instructive purpose, directing the discourse according to virtual talk norms. Although the metapragmatic comment does not explicitly command a response, performing such control acts (Blum-Kulka 1983) requires addressees to consider them and encourages cooperative reactions.

In the next two examples, the metapragmatic voice conveys unmitigated and even harsh disagreement with the interlocutor's manner of writing the post, undermining her intention with disparaging remarks about the form of the message. In assessing the discursive style of the post as clearly flawed, the authors of these meta-comments themselves sound impolite. It's interesting to note that the concepts of "nonsense" and "blather" used in the response and indicating foolish talk without real substance, conveyed in a silly and annoying way, bring the form of talk and the content to work together. The coarse vocabulary used in the response doesn't attempts to mask its offensive nature – we see no motive to maintain face for the interlocutor in the interaction. Responding in a way that brands the post as unacceptable, inadequate and even absurd hardens a serious charge against its

author for not meeting the criteria of therapeutic talk considered normative in the current parenting debate.

The analysis of the metapragmatic mode of discussion in different genres has traditionally referred to the flow of discourse, focusing on the comments as signals for conversational appropriateness (Silverstein 1993: 34–42) and the discursive conditions that make language use understandable and effective¹⁴. In the Russian virtual parenting space, metapragmatic discourse addresses various issues, primarily how language associated with emotional therapeutic way of talking is interpreted and negotiated by others. It furthermore highlights other voices by taking a stance towards them. While each voice represents a discursive position indexed by specific language, the meta-voice targets another's discourse, and is indexed by critique language to language. For example, the interlocutor uses the comment in a critical way, positioning herself against the message that the other voice, say, the Voice of Authoritative Knowledge has communicated conceptually. From a Bakhtinian perspective then, this refers to a basic dialogue opened by the use of the meta-comment where any speaker almost inevitably enters into a dialogue of social positioning when commenting on ongoing discourse, and implicitly providing a relative representation of what another said (Bakhtin 1984: 185).

The therapeutic logic not only represents the authority in meta-pragmatic comments, but can also embody a set of moral guidelines. The offending verbal act can be turned back to the interlocutor, instructing her about the need to learn adequate attitude reflected in her language as a condition of remaining part of the group:

- (25) *As a moderator, I ask you to refrain from disparaging remarks addressing kids, otherwise it is better to leave the group. When you learn to express yourself reasonably, come back.* (April 19, 2018)

Though ascribing therapeutic content to the act of making moral judgements is mostly typical of the group moderator, the emotional therapeutic modes of interaction are also discussed by other participants. The following meta-comment explicates that things should be said with the adherence to a proper tone (*tonal'nost'*) in communication in order to allow others to feel secure in the discursive environment:

- (26) *It is very important to choose the right tone. It is very important that the group remains a truly safe space.* (January 25, 2017)

This statement takes two facets of the advisory act: it implicitly reflects on the problem and attempts to benefit the other party, advising her about the need to abide by the appropriate style of interaction. Here the concept of 'safe' for all is

¹⁴ For meta-linguistic means for registering objection to a previous utterance see Horn 1985: 121–74; for communicative impact of metalinguistic commentaries used in court see Jacquemet 1994: 299–321.

accentuated as a condition of being included in communication and protected from humiliation for speaking up.

The metapragmatic discourse also specifies under which conditions the interaction in forums should occur. The participants comment on whether an anonymous communicative option best fits the context of the online discussion. The issue of anonymity in the virtual public interaction is controversial, and evokes discontentment in the author of the following comment:

- (27) *Is it just me starting to get annoyed by the number of anonymous questions? We don't give anonymous answers, after all.* (April 12, 2018)

The speaker points out the asymmetrical linguo-pragmatic nature of the encounter: while the verbal acts of a party seeking for help cannot be traced to a specific person, the response of other party who provides judgements comes from a real person like her. By contrast, the author of the next comment implicitly supports an anonymous forum community member and believes that a person seeking advice opts to stay impersonalized because of her vulnerability:

- (28) *The author is in a vulnerable position enough as it is, asking us for advice, and the post's anonymity further emphasizes this.* (November 18, 2017)

It is interesting, that negotiating anonymity goes in both directions: even though insecurity underlies the anonymous way of posting to a forum, what's more important is that the issue of anonymity stresses the emotional state of vulnerability ("enough as it is") and thus opens an implicit call facilitating consideration. Although both comments do not explicitly link the appearance of the post to the language use, they undeniably signal pragmatic implications of anonymity on the emotional language touching on how the way of posting generates the way of talking about emotions.

In discussing parenting issues, the meta-pragmatic voice ostensibly stands alone since meta-control acts switch the focus to the verbal behavior and hinder the discussion. At the same time, however, the comments employed by the interlocutors reveal pragmatic norms that govern socialization in forum discussion, create alternative discursive relationships between the communicators, and emphasize new therapeutic emotionality.

5. Discussion

Speakers' voices, or the formats of their talk, shape the discussion of private and personal matters and are predetermined by the very structure of the public forum debate, where a certain voice is necessarily tied to the speaker's stance and is indexed by the use of particular communicative pragmatic acts. The forum discussion illustrates the simultaneous presence of different such voices that pertain to informal friendly communication constituted in the private and interpersonal

sphere, to discursive practices of categorical language based on authoritative knowledge and common truths, as well as to the meta-regulation and monitoring of conversational appropriateness. Recognizing these formats in a parenting forum is essential for understanding current discursive condition of Russian public debate in general, where the division of speakers' discursive roles is not only repeated, but also strengthened and sharpened by today's Russian political and social context. I believe that the formation of the ways of talking about personal experience in the virtual public space along with the articulation of emotional expression that has been emerging in recent years, has already functioned as a germ and forerunner of what makes today's harsh personal language possible in public. Through the mechanism of voices, we can more vividly see how in today's arena we are entering a political and very personal debate about the war and conflict.

On the digital discursive scene, the emotionality of the debate language is increasingly apparent. As the realm of parenthood is in itself an emotionally loaded issue, constructing and negotiating voices in the context of online discussion is thus accomplished mainly through emotion-related communication. With the culture of social sharing that calls into question earlier conventional distinctions between private and public, emotional sharing in the public parenting debate appears to be a linguistic behavior, a mode of participation and a type of therapeutic talk that supports the expression of self and maintains public intimacy.

Though different formats of talk reveal different levels of emotionality, all the voices are governed by the emotional therapeutic interaction that prevails in the discussion. The forum debate incorporates the logic of a therapeutic consultation and adopts psychological emotional language in merging the formats of asking for help, teaching self-help and providing support from the group, as well as inculcating authoritative knowledge. All of these act as structural communicative and discursive positions; they are intrinsic to this type of forum and to any forum discussion of personal issues.

Thus the Voice of Calling for Help embodies the act of emotional sharing, while the Voice of the Support Group reveals the dynamics of the global discourse of group therapy. This discourse is based on acts of affirmation and positive reinforcement on the one hand, and the language of counselling on the other. Similarly, the Voice of Authoritative Knowledge provides forum participants with a therapeutic psychological agenda. Although the expertise here is foregrounded by the position of authority on the issue of parenthood, this voice clearly demonstrates that the therapeutic logic can be articulated either by the form of the utterance or by its content. Interestingly, the unconditional language of common truth knowledge doesn't undermine therapeutic logic – instead, it strengthens and reinforces it by the authoritative form of the utterance.

The structure of therapeutic consultation in parenting forums coexists with other voices. The pragmatics of this coexistence can be clearly seen in the criteria for conversational appropriateness revealed by the Meta-Pragmatic Voice of Discourse Monitoring and Management. This voice undermines any discursive

formats which do not belong to the therapeutic logic, situates them on a differential position, identifies their dissonances and shows how they should be sanctioned or removed. In the case of the parenting forum, the meta-voice considers which practices of talking to a child and about children in general are those that determine the type of verbal behavior that would be considered appropriate for the parenting debate.

I suggest that the interaction in the forum discussion is for the most part built within the framework of the act of therapeutic advice. Its content and structure may be different, however it will always be formed by the discursive position of the speaker – that of emotional consultation and counseling. In generating private personal talk, the SA of advice creates different dynamics in discussing parenting and individual experiences, and acquires a different illocutionary force. More specifically, the advice in a support group is realized via explicitly performed acknowledging acts that reinforce an interlocutor in her position of parenting. Contrary to this mode of discursive sharing, the impersonalized formal advice given to instruct other parents within the context of debate, implies or overtly suggests the interlocutor's parenting inadequacy.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, a pragmatic analysis of virtual talk, along with its reading via the application of Bakhtin's concept of *voice*, has provided a tool for examining the polyphonic discursive state of online parenting communication in Russian social media. First, the voices jointly construct the fabric of the discussion and orient a speaker's intent toward the others – prospective interlocutors who play at least as important a role. Furthermore, the existing discursive formats of talking about private issues in the public virtual discussion are mostly organized by therapeutic emotional language. The polyphonic interplay in forum communication, however, is not limited to the discourses that underlie the emotional therapeutic approach. These voices are frequently heard in combination with non-therapeutic formats of talk that may contest the messages of the therapeutic discursive logic in the parenting debate. The understanding of how the latter will coexist with the emerging emotional therapeutic formats, and which other voices will be activated in the private-public Internet debate in Russian virtual space, is closely connected to the speakers' intentions in performing a specific communicative act within the cultural and social context underlying Russian Internet communication.

The findings contribute simultaneously to three research fields: Russian studies, studies of media linguistics and sociolinguistics. By exploring the emerging public talk about private matters and tracing its presence in the Russian cultural reality, the study contributes to the understanding of change in Russian emotional language and culture. The study also elucidates the significance of communicative acts and their pragmatic implications in virtual talk and reveals how various linguistic strategies such as emotional therapeutic language and non-therapeutic formats coexist and contest each other in online discourse. Moreover, by presenting

the analysis of the roles and voices in the parenting forum the research sheds light on dynamics of sociolinguistic interactions in contemporary digital communication – social behaviors, norms, and the ways individuals negotiate their identities and experiences in a digital public space.

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