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THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTION OF COMPARISONS IN JOHN STEINBECK'S "A RUSSIAN JOURNAL"

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Abstract. The article examines comparisons in John Steinbeck's travelogue A *Russian Journal* from pragmatic, semantic, and stylistic perspectives as one of the means of constructing the dialogic dimension of travel writing. The object of the study is represented by the most illustrative micro-images which, from a structural point of view, take the form of comparative constructions. The aim of the research is to identify the pragmatic potential of comparisons and determine their role in shaping the image of the Other and the author's conceptual framework. The study employs contextual, structural-semantic, and interpretative methods of literary text analysis. The findings demonstrate that, despite their relative scarcity, comparisons occupy a central position in the depiction of natural and cultural landscapes and function as a means of organizing readers' perception. It has been established and substantiated that comparisons in *Russian Journal* simultaneously perform informative, evaluative, and interpretative functions, helping to convey the author's meanings while preserving the external objectivity of the narrative. Particular emphasis is placed on the fact that this device also contributes to the deconstruction of cultural stereotypes and facilitates dialogue between different national worldviews.

Keywords: travelogue, traveler, comparison, native culture, similarity, difference, authorial attitude.

Introduction

When characterizing the genre-specific features of the travelogue, many contemporary scholars emphasize its inherent dialogic nature, assigning various meanings to this concept – from the author's ability to engage readers in the narrative of the journey undertaken and maintain their interest through the use of diverse techniques of interaction, to the broader objective of establishing a dialogue between cultures: "The reader not only observes another culture but also shares with the narrator the experience of encountering an alien/other world and its realities" [2; p. 18].

Aiming to familiarize readers with what has been observed in an unfamiliar country or region, the author naturally relies on experiences shared with the audience, resorting to the characterization of the unknown and foreign through the known and familiar, employing comparison as a means to achieve this goal. In such cases, the comparative image is shaped under the influence of "national mental categories" [4; pp. 127-128].

At the same time, comparison in a travelogue must also convey the author's individual perception of the observed, explored, and experienced world of the Other, contributing to the identification of a system of meanings and evaluations that constitute the author's conceptual framework: "Any comparison as a means of transmitting information […] significantly depends on the emitter's intention and the desire to convey the meaning of the utterance to the recipient, thereby ensuring successful communication" [3; p. 86].

It can therefore be argued that comparisons and their semantic content in travel writing directly reflect the principal strategies used to construct the image of the Other, which are characteristic of this genre and include the search for differences, the search for similarities, and

the recognition of commonality despite the fundamental non-identity of cultures and national worldviews.

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted on the basis of the travelogue *A Russian Journal* by the American writer John Steinbeck. Comparative constructions served as the object of analysis and were examined as a distinct element of poetics. Within the genre-specific framework of the travelogue, comparison was regarded as one of the most significant means of implementing the strategy of constructing the image of the Other.

The study proceeded from the assumption that Steinbeck's use of comparisons was deliberate and purposeful: through them, the author not only created an image of the Other accessible and comprehensible to readers in his home country but also conveyed his own evaluation of what he observed. The primary focus of the research was placed on comparisons employed in landscape and descriptive contexts in order to identify their implicit meanings, characterize the author's journalistic mastery, and determine the specific features of Steinbeck's journalistic style.

The study employed contextual as well as structural-semantic methods of textual analysis.

Results

Although comparisons are used relatively rarely in *A Russian Journal*, which can be explained by the journalistic nature of Steinbeck's work, this device may nevertheless be regarded as one of the principal carriers of culturally significant meanings. Their inclusion in the text serves a pragmatic function, facilitating American readers' perception of information concerning a different natural and cultural environment and the way of life of another people.

Comparisons generally occupy a central position in descriptions of key natural and cultural landscapes – valleys, rivers, mountains, and cities – as components of the broader image of the Other. They highlight the significance of other descriptive details while simultaneously revealing the principles governing their selection and inclusion in the text.

Each comparison in Steinbeck's writing constitutes an integral, concise, and informative image. Moreover, comparisons in *A Russian Journal* perform several functions simultaneously: in addition to providing information, they allow the author to preserve an appearance of external objectivity while also serving as carriers of authorial evaluation, thereby contributing to the formation of the travelogue's complex ideological framework.

Importantly, comparisons in *A Russian Journal* also function as a means of deconstructing stereotypes. While Steinbeck not only avoids the widespread clichés of Western propaganda during the Cold War period but also parodies Western and Soviet stereotypes deeply rooted in mass consciousness, comparison as a stylistic device enables him to reveal another, more ordinary dimension of life in the USSR. In doing so, it dismantles the image of a hostile and incomprehensible world and emphasizes the similarities shared by people belonging to different cultures.

Discussion

John Steinbeck's *A Russian Journal* (1947, 1948) occupies a special place within the Western tradition of travel writing about Russia. Scholars regard it both as an objective and relatively unbiased account of the initial stage of the Cold War, which divided former allies on the basis of fundamental ideological differences and strategic goals, and as an outstanding work of journalism combining profound observations on people's everyday lives and the paradoxes of the administrative system with the art of precise, concise, and expressive detail that lends the text a distinct literary quality.

Steinbeck's ability to formulate broad generalizations and communicate their essence in a concentrated and outwardly impartial manner under the conditions of close supervision by the

host country, while combining vivid imagery with deep subtext, is reflected, among other things, in the comparisons employed throughout *A Russian Journal*.

Occupying a central place within descriptive contexts, Steinbeck's relatively few but highly original comparisons are capable of replacing extensive descriptions. They correspond to the stylistic dominants of the work – brevity, restraint, and strict documentary precision – and, like a lens, guide and focus the reader's imagination and thought. These comparisons may be based both on universal knowledge and on the traveler's culturally specific experience. Below, several examples of comparisons in *A Russian Journal* will be examined.

In the preface to the new translation of Steinbeck's travelogue, S. Shillinglaw notes the cinematic quality of the author's perception of the world of the Other and the harmonious combination of journalistic narrative with photographs taken by Steinbeck's companion, photographer R. Capa [5; pp. 19-20]. In constructing the image of the country, Steinbeck repeatedly reproduces landscapes viewed from the height of an airplane. Such panoramas often become the reader's first introduction to a particular region (for example, central Russia or Georgia) and frequently provide an emotional and figurative conclusion to its depiction.

The purpose of such descriptions extends beyond making the unfamiliar comprehensible through reference to the familiar; they also establish a direction of thought corresponding to the author's intended perspective. For example, Steinbeck's first impressions of Georgia convey a sense of calmness, which becomes particularly significant in light of his remarks concerning Rostov, a city almost entirely destroyed during the war, while exotic landscapes are mediated through comparison with scenes familiar to American readers: "It might have been the coast of California, except that the Black Sea is not turbulent and violent like the Pacific, and the coast is not rocky. The sea is very blue, and very tranquil, and the beaches are very white" [6; p.145].

An entirely different impression is conveyed through the comparison used in the aerial description of the areas surrounding Leningrad: "Some areas where strong fights had taken place were pitted and scabbed like the face of the moon. And close to Leningrad was the greatest destruction. Trenches and strong points and machine-gun nests were very visible" [6; p.12].

In this example, comparison constitutes one element within a chain depicting the horrific consequences of war, arranged according to increasing intensity (scars – deep scars – the lunar surface – enormous destruction). The comparison between land disfigured by explosions and the surface of the moon, on the one hand, creates vivid visual imagery and, on the other, foregrounds not only the scale of destruction but also the lifelessness of once inhabited territories surrounding a major cultural and administrative center.

Through a single comparison Steinbeck is able not only to help readers visualize the observed scene but also to convey the atmosphere of a place, as well as its rhythm and pace of life. This can be seen in the comparison concluding the panoramic description of the Volga: "It is a lovely, wide, placid river at this time of year, and in this place, and it is the road for much of the transportation of the area. […] On the river there were huge rafts with little towns built on them, sometimes five or six houses, and little corrals with cows, and goats, and chickens. […] The life on the river was very rich, and it reminded us of Mark Twain's account of the Mississippi of his day" [6; pp.123-124].

According to literary scholars, in Twain's works the Mississippi functions as a mental map of America, embodying the oppositions East-West and North–South while simultaneously representing a symbolic model of the development of the American nation [1, pp. 8, 11-12]. Likewise, the Russian river in Steinbeck's depiction acquires symbolic artistic meanings that fully justify the use of the conventional metaphor of a "transportation of the area."

The Volga emerges as a complex symbolic image of life itself, incorporating memories of wartime sacrifice, traces of destruction, large-scale economic activity, the labor of thousands of

people, everyday routines, and signs of a return to peaceful existence. Particularly noteworthy is Steinbeck's careful attention to the enormous timber rafts drifting down the river, transporting materials intended for rebuilding war-damaged settlements. He portrays them both in panoramic perspective and close-up, emphasizing that these rafts are inhabited by ordinary people engaged in everyday activities: one woman milks a cow in a small enclosure, while another does laundry.

In doing so, Steinbeck consistently realizes the intention articulated at the beginning of *A Russian Journal*: to portray the life of ordinary people – a life that endures despite the irrational forces of war, rational ideological systems, and organized propaganda. Yet the Volga scene functions not merely as a realistic depiction but also as a representation of one of the book's central themes connected with Steinbeck's visit to Stalingrad: however resilient and determined ordinary people may be, they nevertheless require assistance, including technological support, while the victorious country is rebuilding itself alone.

The parallel between the "Volga in the mid-twentieth century" and the "Mississippi in the nineteenth century" is based, among other things, on a deliberate emphasis on the slow yet continuous return of peaceful life. The people living on the rafts have sufficient time to construct household structures and establish a domestic routine while traveling toward their destination, and the vessels navigating the Russian river are described by Steinbeck as old, heavy, and awkward ("little side-wheelers," "heavy, clumsy boats even moved under sail").

Thus, by comparing the Volga with Mark Twain's Mississippi, Steinbeck not only helps American readers imagine the everyday life of Soviet citizens but also conveys his own interpretation of what he observed, thereby shaping the ideological framework of the book.

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