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Significance of Joseph Brodsky's Commencement Addresses in Linguistic Curriculum

✦ Кључне речи:
Brodsky's style, commencement address, ten commandments metaphors of identification.

Чланак покреће питање сврсисходности изучавања *Најујних њовора* И. А. Бродског у оквиру течајева „Америчке лингвокултурологије“ и „Стилистике енглеског језика“ при школовању лингвиста. Посебно је значајно да *Најујни њовори* садрже теме на које се песник у разним делима често враћао током свог живота. Примењени стилски поступци су типични за целокупни корпус текстова Бродског.

The fifth Russian Nobel Prize winner in literature J. Brodsky, who taught poetry in American colleges from 1972 until his death in 1996, gave a great number of interviews, public lectures, and speeches on different occasions, not to mention his detailed analysis of the best poems by great poets from different countries and times at his college's lectures. Surprisingly enough that being the center of attention for many people: poets, critics, journalists, general audience, who rushed to his public readings of his poetry (Брундэ-Уигли 1998: 92, Гордин 2000: 142), he persistently claimed that he was an absolutely private person (Бродский 2000: 8) who “preferred his private condition to any role of

social significance” (vi: 44)* (All quotations of Brodsky's poems are taken from *Бродский 1997–2001*). Very little of his oral heritage was included into two volumes of prose (Brodsky 1995, 1986), constituted a book of conversations with S. Volkov (Волков 1998, Volkov 1998) and was collected by V. Polukhina in a big book of interviews (Бродский 2000). Much is still unknown to the general public and as facts of the poet's biography are presented by L. Loseff in his latest monograph about J. Brodsky (Лосев 2006: 323–424).

Of the public lectures, speeches, addresses, which the poet included in his volumes of prose, the analysis of his Commencement Addresses seems to be of primary interest

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for incorporating in academic process due to the following reasons:

1. The target audience of these addresses was graduates from American colleges. The closeness of age should make it easier for modern Russian students to discuss the ideas from the addresses and to compare their experience with the one of their American counterparts.

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2. Commencement Addresses have been an integral part of graduation ceremonies in American colleges and Universities since late XIX century (Examples of Commencement Addresses can be found on www.en.wikipedia.org) and therefore are worth paying attention to in the course on *American History and Culture*, which is given to students majoring in *Linguistics and Cross-cultural Communication*. (About the role of the course in the curriculum of future English teachers see (Попова & Коган: 121–127)).

3. The limited length of addresses (usually speaker doesn't speak longer 30–45 minutes) makes them rather suitable for analysis within the course.

4. They are interesting for both contents-analysis because they give the idea about the poet's views on different subjects and linguistic (stylistic) analysis because for Brodsky as for most great poets "prose... was nothing but continuation of poetry by other means" (Brodsky 1995: 178), which makes them a valuable material for analysis in the discipline *Stylistics of the English Language*.

5. These texts might become a good introduction to the world of Brodsky's poetry for those who are afraid of the complexity of his poetic language (Верхейл 2002: 114).

6. The commencement addresses by Brodsky haven't been analysed yet judging by the materials of international conferences (Бродский 2005, Бродский 1998) and special issues of *Russian Literature* devoted to his heritage (Полухина 1995, 2000).

In this work we'll try to prove that Commencement addresses by J. Brodsky reflect the poet's views on a number of very important issues, comparing and contrasting them with his other texts. We'll draw on the three published Commencement addresses delivered at Williams College in 1984 (Brodsky 1986: 384–392), at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in 1988 (Brodsky 1995: 138–148), and at Dartmouth College in 1989 (Brodsky 1995: 104–113).

In his Nobel lecture Brodsky said that a poet "seldom claims a systematic mode of thinking; at worst he claims to have a system" (VI: 45). V. Polukhina points out that many themes are common to both his poetry and his prose: "survival and mortality, faith and the lack of it, the priority of mundane over the spiritual, the life of the community over the life of the individual, withstanding the evil. The theme of the language is developed in all his essays without exceptions" (Polukhina 1997: 224). Other researchers noticed that his views on the same subject differed in different texts though within a particular text he was always consistent, "polishing them to their logical conclusion" (Polukhina 1997: 231). As a result a researcher as well as a reader have to deal with parallel worlds of the poet (Уланов 1998: 113, 114). (In the Commencement addresses Brodsky's tips on withstanding evil vary mostly). Addressing the graduates the poet also speaks about necessity of accepting life in all its aspects including negative ones such as hardships, physical or moral pain, boredom; about expediency of remembering the Ten Commandments and the seven Deadly Sins; about personal responsibility and importance of preserving individuality and avoiding cliché; about infinity of time and insignificance of person's deeds compared with this infinity; about the danger of approximation in the description of one's

feelings and sentiments as well as following misquotation in practice; about criteria of life success and failure. Depending on the speaker's mood and the main theme of the address he speaks in one key or another: either soft and lyric or sharp and denouncing, either solemn or ironic, almost sarcastic, either concrete, almost giving a guide what to do for those who would like to follow his advice or so much in the baroque style that one almost loses the subject following his breathtaking speculations (Верхейл 2002: 119). Some parts of his addresses are very poetic. He uses a lot of metaphors, sometimes paradoxically bringing together "objects and notions which can't be put together in any other case but rhetorical situation" according to Y. Lotman's remark (Лотман 1992: 176), e.g.:

Boredom is your window on time
(Brodsky: 109), *TV ... is redundancy incarnated* (Brodsky 1995: 111).

Quotations of his favourite poets and his own verses, allusions on Biblical texts, different linguistic and rhetorical devices, the structure of some of his speeches, the thematic versatility make his Commencement addresses so impressive. To illustrate this let us consider his *Speech at the Stadium* (Brodsky 1995: 138–148) in detail.

He starts his speech with a metaphor of identification, "Life is a game with many rules and no referee." A detailed analysis of metaphors of this sort in the corpus of Brodsky's texts was given by V. Polukhina. She concludes that they are metaphors of statement, not suggestion, and usually have an authoritative, at times even categorical tone. The very grammatical structure of metaphors of identification is, in her opinion, well-suited to Brodsky's paradoxical frame of mind. (Polukhina 1989: 134, 143). Brodsky

made attempts to define life at different periods but always using the same grammatical structure. Compare:

In 1968 he put it in this way:

Жизнь – только разговор перед лицом/молчанья (II: 277).
Life is only a conversation in the face / of silence.

In 1975 he gave a more abstract definition:

Жизнь – форма времени (III: 87).
Life is a form of time.

He was rather prosaic in 1977:

Жизнь есть товар на вынос (III: 183).
Life is a product for sale.

And speaks in a key close to the *Speech at the Stadium* in 1985

Жизнь – синоним/небытия и нарушения правил (III: 285–286)
Life is a synonym of / nonexistence and a breaking of the rules.

The above quotations prove that the poet had tried to define life (as well as other fundamental categories, e.g. time) all his life. These "quasi-scientific, at times contradictory or else mutually exclusive definitions" are attempts to "unearth the key to the door of being, which remains firmly shut" (Polukhina 1989: 169).

In his *Speech at the Stadium* the poet develops two definitions of life "as a game" and "a journey". Reference to the Bible in this context (the Holy Book, which graduates are presumably not familiar with) makes readers suppose that the speaker is going to speak about extremely important things. But the phonic organization of the next paragraph, in which the poet expresses his warm feelings to Ann-Arbor, makes readers just en-

joy this piece of text which is very close to a song due to various alliterations, parallel constructions and reiteration of words:

This place *looks like Ann Arbor*, goes *blue* or feels *blue like Ann Arbor*, it *smells like Ann Arbor* (Brodsky 1995: 138).

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(Reading this one can hardly believe that very first impressions from this place where poet arrived in 1972 were rather depressing and he described them in a short poem *Осенний вечер в скромном городке*, (An autumn evening in a modest town) which features the following:

*В шесть вечера ... не встретишь
ни души, / и Здесь утром, видя
скисшим молоко, / молочник
знает о вашей смерти... (III: 28).*
At six p.m. you can't meet a single
person, / and The milkman con-
cludes that you died when sees in
the morning that milk went sour [in
front of your door].)

The critics have long noticed that J. Brodsky likes transforming idioms, proverbs and sayings (Верхейл: 49, Ранчин 2001:61). In this address the poet used this device to connect paragraphs 4 and 5, introducing a metaphor of life as a journey at the same time.

(4)... *in the long run* one is better off...
(5) Since your run is most likely to
be fairly *long*...

(We'd like to notice that the translator managed to keep the play on words in Russian: (4) ... в *"итоге человек богаче"*...; (5) ... *"вам еще рано подводить итоги"* (VI: 112), but the image of a long journey was lost.)

For this journey remembering the list of seventeen items – “those commandments and sins” – might be useful. Breaking the rule of capitalizing the words ‘commandments’ and ‘sins’ and using informal expression “to do worse than to acquaint yourself” J. Brodsky lowers a bit the lofty things he speaks about. At the end of the introduction he pessimistically doubts the possibility of passing any experience from an older generation to the younger one because of “a transparent wall”, “an ironic curtain”, “a see-through veil” which separate them. His statement that “the Ten Commandments themselves were a commencement address – literally so” is to be commented. This is an example of metonymy if we consider the Ten Commandments as the beginning, “commencement” of History. The phonetic assonance of the words *commandments* and *commencement* and semantic similarity of the words’ collocations “the Ten Commandments” and “a commencement address” resulted in such a paradoxical view.

Another device Brodsky often uses in his poetry is the expansion of words’ polysemy, using the word in more than one meaning at the same time (Полухина & Пярли 1995: 12, Ранчин 2001: 62). He uses the word *tips* here in this way combining two meanings of it: “a pointed end” and “a useful suggestion”.

The concluding paragraph of the introduction contains a number of antitheses:

Tips of iceberg – Mount Sinai;
I – Moses;
You [graduates] – biblical Jews;
a yellow pad with scribbled jottings
– tablets.

The second parts in these antitheses are allusions on biblical symbols. Parallel imperative constructions “ignore them, ... doubt them, ... forget them ...” tell readers that

they are free to respond to what they are going to hear as they wish in contrast to biblical Jews for whom the Ten Commandments were imperative. Is this opposition another antithesis?

Despite the poet's denial the reader can suppose that his tips will somehow be related to the Ten Commandments. The tips are contained in the following six numbered pieces of the text, with five of which consisting of only one paragraph. The structure *try to do* or *try not to do*, which is repeated 21 times in them, creates a specific rhythmical pattern. It is no wonder at all that the first paragraph, which has to correspond to the First Commandment:

*I am the Lord thy God: though shalt
have no other gods beside Me*
(Ex. 20: 1),

deals with language. As David M. Bethea put it, "Central idea to any understanding of J. Brodsky as poet and thinker is his myth of language. ... If God exists then He exists through language and through what language does to those who accept its divinity. No other idea comes closer to an article of faith on Brodsky's part than his conviction that the human is being acted on, through and by words that choose him" (Bethea 2000: 289). The only way for ordinary people to worship language is to "build and treat their vocabulary". Otherwise, "sentiments, nuances, thoughts, perceptions being unvoiced or dissatisfied with approximations can explode or implode" inside their host causing psychological imbalance of the individual. To give them names, which correspond to the individual's experience, Brodsky recommends the graduates to read dictionaries and books of poetry regularly. This piece of advice is in a good agreement with M. Haydegger's maxim stating that "Where there

isn't a name there isn't a thing. Only name brings something into being" (Хайдеггер 1993: 303). Following this way one risks becoming a bookworm. But "the symptoms of a dictionary junkie" are less dangerous than the symptoms of neurosis.

A direct quotation from the Old Testament *Honor thy mother and thy father* at the beginning paragraph 2, which follows the above spoken and a bit comic expression, is stunning. But a similar combination of different lexical layers within a paragraph or a stanza is typical of the whole corpus of Brodsky's texts. This was repeatedly pointed out by researchers. The reality of modern life is such that this commandment turns into the requirement not to rebel against them. But such lowering the requirements results in replacement of the Biblical *that it may be well with thee and thy days may be long upon the earth* (Ex. 20: 12) by Brodsky's warning about being able "to spare yourselves from this source of guilt if not grief". The key thematic word *rebel* and its derivatives being repeated seven times in eight sentences of the paragraph cause almost physical feeling of a sharp hit which Brodsky categorically rejects. The word *bourgeois* from Marxists' lexicon has a very negative connotation in this context where "bourgeois sort of thing" and "mental bourgeois" are synonyms of "mental comfort" and antonyms of such characteristics as "skeptical, doubtful, intellectually uncomfortable". Brodsky thinks that rebel against parents under the motto "not-a-single-penny-from-you" aims at getting "the entire fortune intact". Economic terms such as "a form of savings", "crippling interest", "bankrupting" are used here both literally and metaphorically but with definitely negative connotation. It is interesting to note that the call for careful building up one's vocabulary in paragraph 1 he clarifies through the simile "to treat your checking account",

and “increase your earnings” which have a positive connotation. Nevertheless, the fact that Brodsky resorted to such clear material images while speaking about things of primary importance proves that he didn’t have illusions about true values of his listeners.

In ideas the poet discusses in paragraph 3 one can distinctively see the central thesis of the Calvinist’ Doctrine about personal responsibility of an individual for his deeds to God. Karl Verheil thinks that Brodsky’s adherence to the Calvinist’ Doctrine might account for ethics of absurdity so typical of his writings (Верхейл 2002: 151). The following speculation from paragraph 3 illustrates this statement:

No matter how substantial an improvement [made by a politicians] may be, ethically speaking it will always be negligible, because there will always be those – *say just one person** – who won’t profit from this improvement. (*Italized by us).

Developing a traditional metaphor “wealth is a pie” the speaker calls listeners to start “home cooking”, i.e. “managing the world themselves”. It is interesting to notice how J. Brodsky transforms a well-known idiom “in light of that” playing on opposites “light–dark”. Parallelism makes the deviation from standard grammar acceptable due to a more intensified image. But as most structures of the kind it is difficult to translate adequately. So, the translation of this phrase “В свете этого – или, скорее, в потемках – ...” (VI: 115), can be improved. We’d like to offer:

*В свете этого – или, скорее, во
мраке этого – ...*

“Home cooking” is contrasted with “bargaining on politicians”. Doubting if he managed to convey the message while discussing problems related to “home cooking” the

speaker, in conclusion, calls on the graduates to permit the homeless in heated and policed premises where they are going to work. A Dutch classic of the first half of the XX c. Martinus Neihoff, who belonged to “a narrow circle of favourite J. Brodsky’s poets” (Верхейл К. 2002: 131) spelled out aphoristically an important principle of poetry:

*Глянь, тут написано не то, что
тут написано (Верхейл 2002: 229).*
Look, here is written not what is
written here.

Applying it to J. Brodsky’s call one can hear the paraphrase from the New Testament verse *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself...* (Jas. 2: 8).

In paragraph 4 the poet goes on describing the gloomy image of the world which is bound to become more crowded without increase in size. He uses such expressions as “the human sea”, “come in billions”, “come in throngs”, “the multitudes”. (In word, as in his poem “...наваждение толп,/ множественного числа” (III: 256); “Flooding with numerous crowds”). He advises graduates not to stand out, to be modest though he is not against their getting rich and famous with one reservation: “not to make meal of it”. (In another Commencement address he warned the audience about danger of turning “zeros in bank accounts into their mental equivalents” (Brodsky 1995: 107). Biblical “to covet” following this informal expression sounds strange a bit, but he continues to speak about necessity to preserve one’s uniqueness, defend individuality, and to avoid clichés. He repeats the idea of not discomfoting one’s neighbour too much while trying to become famous. This looks so complete that one can hardly expect that the author will go on to discuss other sins, namely, adultery.

Brodsky's relations with women were complicated enough in different periods of his life. His close friends and he himself indirectly in interviews, more directly in his poems speak about this (Верхейл 2002: 32, 36; Полухина 2006: 306–322, 351; Бродский 2000: 205). So he couldn't afford to quote the Bible: *Though shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife*.

He could only remind listeners about from how far away "came the request not to do this". Hyperbolic description of this distant site:

How far away – from the stars, from the depths of the Universe, perhaps from its opposite end is an auto-translation of poetic lines from *Rozhdesvenskaya Zvesda* of 1987:

...издалека, / из глубины Вселенной,
с другого ее конца, ... (IV: 10).

The transfer of whole chunks of poetry into prose and vice versa is typical of other Brodsky's works as well (Polukhina 1997: 225). The metaphor *stars [are] coveting eyes* is the poetic climax of the speech. Having revised this paragraph once more you understand that "to covet what somebody else has" is generalization of the Tenth Commandment: "thy neighbour's house, his land, his manservant, ..., anything is thy neighbour's" (Ex. 20: 17). Not following this Commandment in every day life a person risks losing his individuality. And one's individuality is "the surest defend against Evil", as the poet put it in 1984 (Brodsky 1986: 385).

In paragraphs 5 and 6 the poet speaks about what one should do and what one should avoid doing while facing the dark side of life. He requires that the graduates avoid granting themselves the status of victim. According to the principle of personal responsibility J. Brodsky urges that nobody or

nothing should be blamed for an extremely difficult situation one can find himself in. He blames the 'the victim culture' for lowering one's expectations from the threshold, when "a measly advantage could be perceived as a major breakthrough", and for enlarging the "vacuum of irresponsibility". In the interview to N. Russell in 1986 J. Brodsky stressed that he had never allowed himself to be a victim. Neither there nor here. ...

I prefer to be a fake brave man than
a genuine failure (qtd. in Полухина
1995: 356).

Developing the metaphor "life is a game" he states that hardships are a part of the game. K. Verheil and other researchers pointed out that Brodsky's philosophy is rather gloomy. But the poet faces the Universal Negative with courage and prepares others for meeting it (Верхейл 2002: 116).

What's good about a hardship is
that it is not a deception, that's life
speaking to you the only language it
knows well (Brodsky 1995: 145).

In another commencement address *In Praise of Boredom* the author uses the same formula "it is not a deception" to describe other unpleasant instances of life, namely, boredom, anguish, and the sense of meaninglessness. The same is true for pain, especially physical (Brodsky 1995: 111). For a person who had suffered three heart attacks during his life the pain must have been life constant. In both poems and prose he wrote about how to resist it:

Поскольку боль – не нарушение
правил: / страдание есть
способность тел, / и человек есть
испытатель боли. / Но то ли свой

ему не неведом, то ли / ее предел.
(II: 362)
In as much as pain is not the breaking of the rules / suffering is / the capability of bodies, / and man is the endurer of pain, / But whether his own limit is unknown to him, or / its limit (translated by V. Polukhina, 22: 143).

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*Твори себя и жизнь свою
твори / всей силою несчастья
своего.* (I: 127)
Create yourself and your life with all the power of your misery.

*Могу назвать это философией
стойкости, возможностью
выстоять* (Бродский 2000: 22).
I would call it a philosophy of endurance (qtd. in Polukhina 1995: 356).

And quoting M. Aurelius:

On pain: What cannot bear removes us from life, what lasts can be borne (Brodsky 1995: 297).

The last of the six numbered paragraphs is about resistance to the Evil. All his life J. Brodsky was a non-conformist, which inflicted serious problems with the state when he lived in the USSR, and with a number of influential people later in the West. So he knew well enough those “in the official capacity, or state-sponsored” as well as “the self-appointed, or autodidact oppressors” who would do their best to make people’s life miserable. His advice is not to be talkative, not to tell stories about the unfair treatment, but “to steal or still the echo” of the event. He compares oppressors of all sorts with traffic lights and recommends the graduates to rush or pass them as if they were

yellow not red lights. Unlike his favourite poet R. Frost, who said, “to be social is to be forgetting” Brodsky teaches listeners to forget their oppressors as soon as possible. In his poem he formulated this in the following way:

*Свобода – /это когда забываешь
отчество у тирана.* (III: 144)
Freedom is when you forget the tyrant’s patronymic.

Resistance to the Evil was the key theme in his 1984 commencement address. He advised then graduates to render evil meaningless through exaggeration, making it abundant. To illustrate how it might be realized he told a true story from his youth when he was a prisoner. Prisoners were called for a socialist competition with guards in chopping the wood in the prison yard. He did it for 12 hours without any breaks noticing the range of different feelings on the guards’ faces, with horror being final. Never again were the prisoners called for a ‘socialist competition’. Making oppressors feel uncomfortable is rather different from forgetting them. Probably, both tactics are worth trying in appropriate situations. The thing is that this theme was very important for Brodsky and he tried to prepare less experienced audience to resist evil in any possible way.

In the concluding part of the *Speech at the Stadium* the speaker traditionally wishes luck to the graduates. Though life is “no picnic” there are at least two optimistic things about it. The first one is that “you were born, which itself is half the battle”. The idea of life as a divine gift was developed by Brodsky in poetry, too:

*И, взгляд подняв свой к небесам,
/ ты вдруг почувствуешь, что
сам / – чистосердечный дар* (I: 118)

And looking up into the heavens,
/you'll suddenly feel that you are a
sincere gift.

The second thing is that they live in democracy, which is "halfway house between nightmare and utopia". He introduces an important criterion of graduates' success as human beings: the warmth coming on them at the mention of the name of Ann-Arbor. It differs from what he offered in the introductory part: fatigue of a lot of things which caused aspiration in youth.

The detailed analysis of the *Speech at the Stadium* in comparison and contrast with other poet's works proved the following:

- 1 It reflects the poet's views on a wide range of issues he repeatedly spoke about in a number of his works.
- 2 The diversity of lexical devices exploited by the poet demonstrates that for him even "the speeches on occasion" were "continuation of poetry by other means". This means that the study of the text in the course on *History and Culture of the USA* might become a good preparation of future linguists for such later courses as *Stylistics of the English Language*.
- 3 When the book of essays by J. Brodsky *On Grief and Reason* was first published one critic from *The Washington Post* wrote, "His prose has the energy and precision of a master and at times, a moral authority of a prophet". I think that his *Speech at the Stadium* corresponds to the highest possible standards.

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summary

Σ Significance of Joseph Brodsky's Commencement Addresses in Linguistic Curriculum

The article points out the practicability of studying Joseph Brodsky's Commencement Addresses in Linguistic Curriculum of students majoring in Linguistics, namely in such courses as *American History and Culture* and *Stylistics of the English Language*. Addressing the graduates of American colleges the poet touches upon the issues he repeatedly dealt with in his poems, essays, and interviews, such as themes of survival and mortality, faith and the lack of it, the priority of mundane over the spiritual, community life as compared to individual life, withstanding the evil, the role of the language, etc.

This fact allows us to consider Brodsky's Commencement Addresses as reflection of the poet's views. The limited length of addresses and the age of his listeners make them especially suitable for analysis in the classroom within the courses and might become a departing point for further exploration of the author's heritage. Stylistic analysis of "Speech at the Stadium", which is a good example of linguistic variety, is especially recommended for educational purposes.

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