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THE LINGUISTIC RESOURCES OF
ESSENIN'S POETICS: THE LEXICON

1. Introduction

Esenin's poetry has been studied insufficiently in the West, and even the few studies devoted to him generally neglect his language, perhaps because of the enormous problems of translating his poetry into any foreign language, the difficulties involved in reflecting the various language levels of the original, its styles, peasant vocabulary, dialectal features, and Church Slavonicisms. Esenin's language has been studied more intensively in Russia, but no comprehensive work on the lexicon of his poetry has yet appeared.

The present study provides an overview of my lexico-stylistic analysis of Esenin's lexicon on the basis of his complete poetic works.1 At first glance a lexico-stylistic analysis of Esenin's poetry might seem to be a narrow topic. But the seemingly transparent texture of his poetry conceals a complex system of imagery, and the goal of my research has been to determine the key to this transparency. The key to Esenin's unique, quintessentially Russian style is precisely his vocabulary: the selection and individual usage of words.

In determining the stylistic features used by a poet in one poem, one cycle of poems, or even in his entire works, it is necessary to identify the characteristic and most prominent stylistic features which permeates his entire oeuvre and most clearly conveys his individual stylistic manner (idiostyle). It is especially important to identify the stylistic chords which stand out from the expected and ordinary. Certain themes tend to dictate the use of certain vocabulary. Thus, if a poem deals with peasants, we expect to

1. All references will be cited from two editions, in the following order: 1. С.А. Есенин, Собрание сочинений в 6-ти т-х (Москва, Художественная литература: 1977–80); this is the most recent finished multi-volume edition (on the basis of this edition a computerized concordance has been compiled; see the Fowler article in this volume); 2. С.А. Есенин, Полное собрание сочинений в 7-ми т-х (Москва: Наука–Голос, 1995– ). This is the new academic edition of Esenin's works which is being published for the Centennial; as of this writing, volumes 1, 2, 4, and 5 have already been published and the remaining volumes are scheduled for publication in 1998. Because of the numerous corrections in this edition, if a given work is included in volume 1, 2, 4 or 5, page number, spelling and punctuation will follow this edition. In cases when the Esenin work is not included in these volumes, I supply the latest version from other sources.
encounter terminology associated with the peasantry (for example *pashni* 'plowed fields', *oves* 'oats', *seno* 'hay', *pakhat'* 'to plow', etc.). But when we encounter an unexpected stylistic device (for example *ovsianoi lik* 'oat visage'), we know that it represents the poet's conscious decision and contributes to his individual style. If this device is repeated many times in various works and predominates over other devices, then we are justified in regarding it as the predominant feature.

One of the most prominent characteristics of the poetic style of Esenin is his selection and use of individual vocabulary words. Lexicon, like any other level of the Russian linguistic system, harmonically combines communicative and aesthetic functions in poetic discourse.

Esenin's poetry is not generally described as "difficult." In part, this is because the reader gets an vivid image of the poetic content right away, without conscious effort. Almost all of Esenin's poems have an apparently transparent level which engenders primary communication; this is often the level of lexicon and imagery, or the level of intonation and rhythm (recall the folk-poetic content and the musical quality of his poetry). However, this superficial simplicity conceals a complex system of imagery. The decoding of Esenin's poetry requires analysis of its lexico-semantic nature one of the keys to its hidden intricate complexity.

One fundamental aspect of poetry is the poet's selection of lexemes from the common vocabulary of the language, together with the organization and reevaluation he imposes by weaving them together in keeping with his individual style. Esenin's poetry is characterized by two principles of lexical choice: 1) stylistically colored vocabulary which is especially important with respect to neutral vocabulary: a) Church Slavonicisms and b) dialectisms; and 2) among neutral vocabulary, two semantic fields stand out: words associated with: a) the rites of the Russian Orthodox Church and b) the Russian peasantry. Also crucial for his style is the use of nonce coinages (*novooobrazovaniia*), based partially on literary vocabulary, and partially on Church Slavonicisms, dialectisms, and other stylistically colored lexicon.

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2. Without discussing the terminological controversy in my research I use one blanket term to span both Old Church Slavonicisms and Church Slavonicisms, which is appropriate not in a genetic sense, but rather in a stylistic and semantico-functional sense, especially because of their use in combination with vocabulary, semantically connected with religion and the Church.

3. The term "nonce coinage" reflects the Russian term *novooobrazovanie* which is not to be confused with the term "neologism" (Russian *neologizm*). The basic distinction between them is that neologisms are primarily identified relative to the literary language, and nonce coinages - relative to artistic language. Neologisms appear in the language to denote new objects or concepts, and eventually become available for all