

# Indecency as a Discursive Category



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**Abstract:** *The article aims to determine the status of indecency as a functional-semantic and discursive category containing the concept "indecent form" used in legal practice. The paper presents different approaches to this concept. Based on expert activities, the authors of the article define the above-mentioned concept as a discursive category with a structured functional-semantic field. Thus, the concept "indecent form" is interpreted from the cognitive-discursive perspective with due regard to communicative and pragmatic aspects of utterance/text/discourse. The functional-semantic field of indecency is presented in the paper as a set of various linguistic, speech and discursive means. Factors forming the category of indecency are as follows: communicative, sociocultural, cognitive and pragmatic.*

*The authors have clarified the status of an "indecent form", defined the correlation of this concept with the speech act of "insult" and the category of indecency, introduced the concept "indecent format", distinguished linguistic and discursive means that mark the indecent format of discourses. The study results can be used in lingual-expert activities and journalistic practice to avoid conflict situations. The article is theoretically significant since it expands the concept of indecency in general and clarifies its status.*

**Keywords:** *Indecent format, conflicting discourse, categorization, discursive means.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The category of indecency is objectified in a conflicting discourse containing the basic concept of INSULATING. Therefore, this category is connected with the so-called "indecent form".

The concept "indecent form" is quite ambiguous, which generally subjectifies lingual-expert activities. Thus, the assignment of a language or speech fact to an indecent form remains one of the most debated issues in the scientific

community. Discussions revolve around the problem of attributing an "indecent form" to moral or proper linguistic concepts. In general, the relevance of determining the status of the debatable notion ("indecent form") is beyond doubt as this knowledge can be used in law enforcement and form expert procedures for identifying indecency features. In addition, modern scholars try using cognitive and discursive methods in expert practice to study controversial texts. Therefore, it is relevant to reconsider the existing terms and clarify their status. The term "indecent form" is partially interpreted in law, while linguistic methods of legally diagnosing indecency are not systematized. Ethical and stylistic meanings of words are described in the terms "decent"/"indecent"/"improper"/"obscene"/"non-normative"/"cynical"/"expletive" that have not been clearly interpreted yet. Furthermore, the concept "foul language" has not been defined. The above-mentioned concepts somehow correlate with the category of indecency, whose status is debatable and should be determined.

Law enforcement defines an indecent form as "statements towards a citizen containing offensive or obscene language and phraseology which offends public morality, violates public decency... and is perceived by the majority as inappropriate for printed texts" [1]. This term is also characterized as "a negative assessment of an individual expressed in a form that sharply contradicts accepted communication norms" [2]. According to these definitions, an indecent form is expressed only by lexical and phraseological means. The traditional concept "indecent form" is connected with the violation of moral principles and norms of public morality [3]. For instance, I.A. Sternin uses the expression "an indecent language form" (phrasing) and provided the following definition: "it is statements addressed to the plaintiff containing obscene vocabulary and phraseology, i.e. obscene words and expressions that offend public morality and violate norms of public decency" [4]. Therefore, the scholar considers all the non-obscene vocabulary to be decent. I.A. Sternin distinguishes publically inappropriate (abusive, vulgar, substandard) and indecent (obscene) profanity and phraseology [4]. The scholar also highlights the importance of the addresser's goal that indicates the need to involve pragmatic and communicative aspects of text/discourse into the analysis [4]. Professor K.I. Brinev does not consider the concept "indecent form" from a linguistic perspective. He proposes the idea of metalanguage conventions [5]

Based on our linguistic expert practice, we have defined a linguistic or discursive means as indecent in a particular discourse and considered it necessary to expand the boundaries of the so-called "indecent form", which became possible due to the cognitive-discursive approach.

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We have already analyzed the status of indecency in one of our scientific works [6], but there is still an urgent need to clarify this concept.

### II. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

According to the research objectives, we utilized proper linguistic (component-analysis, linguistic-stylistic and linguistic-text analysis), general humanitarian (interpretational and contextual analysis), cognitive (knowledge reconstruction, conceptual integration, the analysis of presuppositions, etc.), discourse analysis. The key method was the cognitive-discursive approach.

The theoretical and methodological basis of this article consists of scientific concepts, theories and statements of cultural linguistics (N.F. Alefirenko, S.G. Vorkachev, V.I. Karasik, V.A. Maslova, M.Yu. Oleshkov, etc.), interpretation theory (G.I. Bogin, N.N. Boldyrev, A.V. Bondarko, M. Berk, K.A. Dolinin, etc.), cognitive linguistics (N.N. Boldyrev, V.Z. Demyankov, E.S. Kubryakova, Z.D. Popova, I.A. Sternin, G. Lakoff, R. Langacker, M. Minskii, J. Searle, Ch. Fillmore, W. Chafe, etc.), the theory of the cognitive-communicative paradigm of linguistics (V.I. Karasik, G.G. Slyshkin, M.Yu. Oleshkov, A.N. Prikhodko, etc.).

### III. RESULT ANALYSIS

#### A. Overview. Problem statement

##### From an indecent form to an indecent format

The full list of words and expressions relating to the concept "indecent form" has not been determined yet. Some scholars include only swearings, obscene and cynical vocabulary into the so-called indecent form [4], while others extend this concept to abusive, slang, coarse-vernacular, vernacular and literary vocabulary [7], [8].

Nowadays scientists use two methods to solve the "indecent form" problem – orthological and relative [9].

M.A. Osadchii suggests combining both research methods. However, proper discursive means are not considered in this case.

Nevertheless, many scholars state that context is vital to comprehend the communicative function of a word/expression. Thus, N.D. Golev believes that "the main source of conflict is the possibility of different interpretations of the initial presupposition" [10]. We believe that the concept "indecent form" is the result of the cognitive mechanism of conceptual integration. We have considered each concept separately.

The meaning of the word "indecent" in the context of law enforcement is based on the semantic dominant "offensive potential". The selected semantic dominant "offensive potential" helps categorize words and expressions as indecent in some context. Context becomes an environment where this or that linguistic and/or discursive unit manifests the property of indecency. Therefore, this article is based on the system/environment interaction. Thus, A.V. Bondarko distinguishes two aspects of the function based on the meaning of this term: objective where the function is understood as the goal and purpose of any given language element, and potential where the function is understood as a set of rules included into characteristics of the unit potencies [11].

L.G. Yatskevich identifies the third aspect (dynamic) conditioned by the third meaning of the term "function", i.e. "a phenomenon dependent on the other and changing together with it" [12]. Therefore, the term "offensive potential" is understood accordingly. A word can have an offensive potential (for example, dictionaries contain the note "contemptuous", "expletive", etc.), but this potential may not be realized in discourse.

A.V. Bondarko defines the term "environment" as "a multitude of linguistic (as well as extra-linguistic) elements that play an environmental role in relation to the original system and help it performs its function" [11]. It should be noted that not only the environment affects the functioning of any given tool, but this tool can also change the environment. The word "form" is polysemic but no dictionary meaning can be "applied" to the combination "indecent form". Indecency is an evaluation-legal category that comprises moral and legal aspects. The conceptual sphere of MORALITY shapes out the "violation" component (the incompatibility of the addresser's speech behavior with ethical standards). The conceptual sphere of LAW considers a method of harming social relations (decent or indecent). The concept FORM in combination with the adjective "indecent" actualizes the semantic component "method of influence". As a result, the word group "method of conducting communication with the purpose of influence" acquires a new meaning. The word "form" in this context becomes a synonym to the concept "format". In this article, the term is understood as a way of organizing and maintaining communication. It combines linguistic and discursive means creating conditions for communication and influencing the formation of discourse sentiment. An indecent or decent communication format becomes a tool to achieve a communicative goal. An indecent format is typical of discursive activities that take place outside conventional discursive practices and violate communication rules. Means of influence in an indecent format can be linguistic and discursive. In this case, the target object is one's honor, dignity, reputation and good name. Classification features of an "indecent format" are the following:

- Means of influence (linguistic and discursive) not corresponding to accepted communicative norms correlating with ethical orientations of society;
- The subject of the addressee's assessment and characterization;
- The attitude of the speaker/author of text/discourse to the addressee;
- The orientation of means of influence to the humiliation of the addressee's honor, dignity and business reputation, lowering of their social status, the distortion or change of the addressee's positive image, the medication of the addressee-recipient's ideas about text/discourse;
- The impact result: changed ideas about the addressee/recipient of text/discourse, the distortion of a positive image, the formation of a negative image of the addressee-recipient of text/discourse, the infliction of harm to public relations.

#### B. The correlation of the concepts "indecent format" and "verbal abuse"

The metalinguistic aspect of the concept VERBAL ABUSE consists in the fact that the system of interpersonal relations is built around the modal component of the conceptual essence of words objectifying an insult, namely the speaker's viewpoint on the object under consideration. Publicistic discourse connects the basic concept ABUSE with the addresser's intention to assault the addressee-recipient's honor and dignity, change its perception by the addressee-reader. Reference situations objectified by the addresser are associated with negative social phenomena (corruption, moral portrait, incompetent officials, the violation of moral or legal norms, etc.). Reference aims to modify cognitive structures of the addressee-reader (beliefs, notions, positions) or to violate them and cause moral harm. The mode-related characterization of this discourse is negative-evaluative (irony, sarcasm, mockery, ridicule, debunking, accusation, etc.). It explains the addresser's negative axiology in relation to the addressee-referent. The addresser's fixation on the negative perception of the addressee-referent determines the use of an indecent form. Thus, indecency is an acquired discursive property of a linguistic and/or discursive means with offensive potential (the realization of this potential).

While studying discursive features of the concept VERBAL ABUSE, we highlighted the significance of such cognitive parameters as the orientation of insults towards the moral sphere of a person (honor, dignity, reputation, good name, social appearance, etc.), the result of the impact on the addressee-referent (mental disorder, shame, humiliation, depression, etc.), the result of the impact on the addressee-reader (the distortion of ideas about the addressee-referent, decrease in social status, the formation of a negative image, the distrust of the addressee-referent, etc.), the actor's goal (to offend the addressee-referent, cause moral damage, change a positive attitude towards them, etc.). The last parameter includes the following features: the change or adjustment of ideas about the addressee, i.e. the modification of cognitive structures (attitudes, notions, viewpoints and positions), the creation of the addressee's negative image or the distortion of a positive image, a decrease in the addressee's social status. We believe that a method of harming the addressee-referent is linguistic and/or discursive means that violate taboos and communicative norms correlating with the moral and ethical criterion of the admissibility of these means in mass media or public places (for instance, speech strategies of confrontation, ridicule tactics, disclosure, mockery, etc. [13]. These cognitive parameters of the concept ABUSE correlate with an "indecent form" since the latter becomes a way to implement certain features of the concept. We call indecent those linguistic and discursive means that realized their meaningful potential of offensiveness, i.e. the humiliation of one's honor, the impairment of dignity and business reputation. Mass media can use discourses whose ideological content aims to change the consciousness of readers or viewers and alter their ideas about the object or the subject under consideration. Such discourses contain categories of the addresser, addressee, communicative goal, intention, means and methods of accomplishing the goal, modality, the author's axiology, etc. A method of influence plays a special role among these discursive categories. Thus, conflicting newspaper discourse publicly transfer negative information about the addressee using linguistic and discursive means with the property of indecency, i.e. violating

norms of constructive communication and characterizing the addressee-referent as a violator of moral or legal norms.

It is evident that classification features of an indecent format somehow correlate with cognitive parameters of the concept VERBAL ABUSE as an indecent format objectifies this concept. In general, an indecent format is the combination of linguistic and/or discursive means marking the violation of sociocultural norms of the person's verbal behavior aimed at harming the social attractiveness of another person.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

##### A. Linguistic and discursive means aimed to objectify the category of indecency

The traditional method of objectifying an indecent form is linguistic means. This study has demonstrated that discursive means are also used in the objectification of an indecent discourse format.

We share the opinion of E.I. Sheigal who defines discourse as "a communication system with a real and potential (virtual) dimension" [14]. The potential dimension comprises communicative, cognitive and pragmatic means of influence that characterize communicative behavior, communicative attitudes, communicative acts and genres. An indecent format is marked by cultural codes (including linguistic) which objectify cognitive, pragmatic, communicative and sociocultural components of discourse.

Communicative means marking an indecent format should include discourse orientation (communicative goal) towards destructive communication, the deterioration and rupture of relations between communicants, the formation of the addressee's negative image, the distortion of a positive image, the change of positive ideas about the addressee, etc.

Pragmatic markers of an indecent format are strategies and tactics of aggression, confrontation, communicative perversion; intentions aimed at humiliating honor, impairing dignity and reputation, lowering the individual's social status. V.I. Zhelvis emphasizes that the system of communicative strategies and tactics aimed at creating conflict communication utilizes rudeness as a regulator of communicative behavior [15]. V.I. Karasik considers "striving for agreement, compromise or conflict" among the main features of the category of discourse sentiment [16]. Therefore, sentiments should be taken into account when determining pragmatic meaning (the author's intention).

Cognitive markers of an indecent format are speech scenarios of ridicule, mockery, accusation, debunking, exposing, taunting, etc., as well as presuppositions and propositions that implement confrontation strategies. These structures of knowledge interact with sociocultural and communicative aspects of discourse. For example, the addresser in conflicting discourse can invade the cognitive space of the addressee-reader imposing a negative attitude towards the addressee-referent and violating principles of respect for sociocultural norms and communicative codes.

Socio-cultural markers are the violation of accepted communicative behavior, failure to comply with norms of social speech conventions, disregard of its values or their use to realize the above-mentioned goals, the actualization of such anti-value as hostility connected with the ethical category of evil.

Since event-related phenomena are ontologically primary in relation to linguistic, an indecent format is defined by communicative events and conceptualized in linguistic consciousness, which is then reflected in discourse. Therefore, this format as a method of organizing the process of communication is typical of discourse (environment) that is formed by the addresser for implementing any given communicative purpose. It should be noted that newspaper conflicting text/discourse is defined and controllable. The addresser intentionally chooses a particular method of influence, i.e. deliberately violates conventional norms of communication.

Cognitive, sociocultural, pragmatic and communicative means act as discourse-forming factors forming an indecent format. For instance, presuppositions, communicative tactics and scenarios can actualize the addresser's communicative goal, i.e. to compromise the addressee-referent. If the addressee-referent is characterized as a person who violated norms of morality and law, then the axiological code of communication is violated in discourse (negative information may be presented tendentiously or redundantly).

The formation of an indecent discourse format implies the violation of legitimacy in communicative interaction, the non-observance of social speech conventions and the discrepancy between the stylistic justification of discursive and proper linguistic means. For example, a conflict communicative situation can be marked by the transfer from the subject of discussion to relationships. At the same time, the mismatch and inconsistency of communicants lead to "the collision of illocutionary intentions and modal reactions" [17].

Linguistic means of an indecent format are based on vocabulary and phraseology, whose content includes offensive potential realized in discourse. We believe that words and expressions negatively evaluated under the influence of discourse (environment) can also be included in this category.

The correlation between the category of an indecent discourse and indecent format is due to the fact that an indecent statement/discourse format becomes a form of representing an indecent category. In the process of discursive activity, linguistic and proper discursive means interact, while properties of linguistic and discursive means in discourse become the object of legal regulation.

### B. Field structure of the category of indecency

We have shown the interaction of linguistic and discursive means based on a specific example.

The newspaper article "Verbal nightmare" [18] contains the following statement: *Even a felon (for example, Krupchak is a figure in a dozen of criminal cases) can take an administrative post.* The phrases "to be a felon" and "to be a figure in a dozen criminal cases" are not synonyms. A "felon" is a lawbreaker who committed (commits) a criminal offense [19]. "To be a figure in criminal cases" means to be the object of attention or discussion in criminal cases. Of course, it is possible "to be a figure" in different situations in the status of a felon, victim, witness, etc. However, there are occasional (author's) motivational connections between the single-root words "ugolovnik" ("felon") and "ugolovnyi" ("criminal"). As a result, a semantic shift is formed in the meta-expletive word, whose meaning can be formulated in the following way: "For instance, Krupchak is a felon". This meaning is updated

by the position of the introductory sentence (immediately after the word "felon") and by the fact that the words "felon" and "criminal" belong to the same family of words. The text occasional semantics of the word "felon" (*a person involved in criminal cases*) does not coincide with the common one (*a person who committed or is committing a criminal offense*). When connecting units that are not in motivational relationships, they get an extraordinary interpretation in context. In this case, conceptual spaces of the word "felon" and "criminal case" interact. Their intersection becomes the idea of a criminal offense. This idea in everyday consciousness is connected with the violation of the current legislation, which gives grounds for asserting a new meaning of the sentence because of the interaction of words and combinations. The word "felon" as the dominant component of the utterance not only realizes its own (dictionary) meaning but also actualizes the situation as a whole, influences the meaning of the introductory part and predicts its new meaning: *for example, Krupchak is a felon since he is a figure in a dozen of criminal cases.* This meaning is formed in everyday consciousness. Thus, the birth of a new meaning in some context and its interpretation occur at the level of interaction between conceptual entities objectified by words and phrases. The author deliberately violates verbal presuppositions, thereby exerting emotional pressure on the reader who forms the image of the addressee-referent (Krupchak) as a felon. The meaning revealed by the cognitive-discursive method testifies to the strategy of speech aggression which has a special focus. In general, the above-mentioned statement is interpreted in the following manner: *Even a felon, like Krupchak, can take an administrative post.* The author implements the strategy of discrediting Krupchak deliberately using the tactics of prosecution and violating postulates of successful communication. The author's communicative goal is to discredit the addressee-referent (Krupchak) and cause an emotional negative attitude towards him. Therefore, the statement should be considered aggressive and the format of discourse can be called indecent. The perceiver would form an image of the addressee-referent (Krupchak) as a person who violated social norms of role-playing behavior.

We have developed the following field structure for organizing indecency.

The nucleus of the functional-semantic field of indecency is constituted by linguistic means that contain offensive potential in their semantics. The main condition for the formation of an indecent format is the realization of offensive potential in discourse. According to the lowering degree of indecency, linguistic means can be classified as follows: 1) obscene, cynical and indecent vocabulary; 2) words and phrases with a socially marked evaluation (slang, coarse, vernacular, derogatory, contemptuous, vulgar, rough and abusive); 3) words with a denotative negative evaluation (homo, grabber); 4) words with a general negative evaluation (scum, bastard). The nucleus is formed by the following discursive means: communicative strategies and tactics to discredit some person used to reduce their social status (pragmatic aspect). The following linguistic units are positioned close to the nucleus: 1) words focused on the addresser's intentions and aimed at lowering the addressee's social status (words with a figurative or adopted meaning, occasional words,

case names and images used for comparison, words and expressions with an offensive potential in the address function); 2) linguistic and discursive means with a negative-evaluative inner form. Presuppositional statements about the violation of the current legislation or moral norms should be included in this group.

The periphery consists of discursive and speech means, whose evaluative illocution is secondary. They are the speaker's intentions, speech genres of mockery, ridicule, taunting, debunking, accusation, etc., speech scripts containing communicative attitudes to lowering the individual's social status.

## V. CONCLUSION

The functional-semantic discursive category of indecency consists of heterogeneous components (linguistic, speech, communicative, pragmatic, cognitive and sociocultural).

As a method of organizing the process of communication, a format is the characteristic of discourse (environment) formed by the addresser to realize some communicative purpose.

An indecent format is the combination of linguistic and/or discursive means marking the violation of sociocultural norms of the person's verbal behavior aimed at harming the social attractiveness of another person. An important aspect of indecency is the demonstrative orientation of linguistic and/or discursive means to the violation of communicative norms. Objectives of an indecent format are as follows: denigration of honor, dignity and business reputation, changing the addressee's positive image, forming a negative image, insulting the addressee, disharmonizing the addressee's psychological state, causing moral harm to the addressee, finding the addressee involved in the violation of moral, ethical and/or legal norms, manipulation of public opinion (adjustment and alteration), expression of one's hostility towards the addressee, improvement of one's social status through lowering the social status of another. All these objectives determine the correlation of an indecent format with the linguocultural concept of VERBAL ABUSE.

The category of indecency is basic for conflicting discourse since it marks the dynamic nature of the discursive activity and interprets discourse as a potential zone of conflicts. Conflicting discourse realizes special intentional conditions: the speaker (sender) deliberately or unintentionally breaks some taboo and implements strategies to discredit an individual to lower their social status, degrade honor, diminish dignity, harm reputation, change the addressee's image, creates a negative image or distort the existing positive, exposes the individual and forms distrust of them. Conflicting discourse reflects sociocultural practices related to conflictive communicative situations. Therefore, its main component is the category of indecency characterized as regulative. National consciousness preserves "the idea of honor, dignity and reputation as a value, and any attempt to violate this value is condemned by society" [20].

The boundaries of nuclear and peripheral means of expressing the category of indecency are not stable and depend on the type of discourse, genre, the speaker's intention, the subculture of the addressee and the addresser.

While studying the category of indecency and classifying particular means as an indecent format, we consider it necessary to refer to the metaconcepts NORM, VALUE, STEREOTYPE, EVALUATION, ROLE and STATUS as

evaluation regulators. The need to refer to these metaconcepts is determined by the main criterion of indecency as a discursive category, i.e. the violation of communicative norms. They are represented as "communicative behavior common to linguistic consciousness and adopted in a certain society, and the understanding of who, when and how should or should not behave in the process of communication from the descriptive viewpoint. From the prescriptive viewpoint, it is rules and requirements for appropriate behavior" [21].

Markers of violated communicative norms are as follows: aggressive types of speech behavior, the violation of general communication principles, the deviation from communicative stereotypes of constructive speech behavior and traditional verbal-thinking mechanisms of communicative activity; aggressive sentiments in discourse; the deviation from social values; violated standards of socially significant interaction and norms of its language representation; violated general norms of moral and ethical aspects of communicative behavior, norms of genre-related personal behavior, norms of role-playing personal behavior; the conflict modality of discourse, violated axiological code of communication.

Some statement or discourse can be regarded as indecent if they comprise the above-mentioned markers of violated communicative norms. The formation of an indecent discourse format implies the violation of legitimacy in communicative interaction, non-observance of social speech conventions and the discrepancy between the stylistic justification of linguistic and discursive means.

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