

Negotiating Ethics and Aesthetics: Linguistic and Literary Perspectives on the Facebook Corpus of Russian-Language Authors

Regina Guzaerova

Justus Liebig University Giessen
regina.guzaerova@uni-giessen.de

Elena Hamidy

Justus Liebig University Giessen
elena.hamidy@uni-giessen.de

Contemporary Russian-speaking digital space is characterized by a profound shift in communicative norms. In recent years, a ‘new language for talking about feelings’ has matured and is often referred to as ‘new ethics’ (Aronson, 2022; Guzaerova, 2025). This discourse, which adapts English-language concepts — such as ‘toxic’, ‘trigger’, and ‘abuse’ — has become a site of intense ideological struggle, splitting society into those who embrace the ‘new ethics’ and those who resist it. In our presentation, we combine the perspectives of linguistics and literary studies to analyse this phenomenon both as a matter of linguistic change and as a form of aesthetic positioning, arguing that corpus-based digital methods gain analytical depth and interpretive richness when the two perspectives are brought into productive dialogue.

We use the term ‘new ethics’ to refer to a contested and ideologically charged cluster of terms and values that emerged at the intersection of therapy culture, social justice discourse, and evolving moral norms (Kobyakov, 2021; Lerner & Zbenovich, 2013). To explore how this vocabulary circulates and transforms in Russian-language digital writing, we compiled a curated corpus of Facebook posts by over 20 Russian-language poets and prose writers, published between 2016 and 2025. The texts vary widely in genre and tone — from poems and prose fragments to diary-like notes and public reflections — but share a sustained engagement with language, ethics, and emotion. The corpus is annotated for 622 word forms grouped into approximately 200 semantic clusters, covering vocabulary from therapy-speak, embodiment, identity, and decolonial discourse (Moreno-Ortiz & García-Gámez, 2023).

The choice of Facebook as a data source is deliberate. After the massive migration of Russian-speaking users from Livejournal to Facebook (Howanitz, 2020) the platform has functioned as the principal public forum of the Russian-language

literary and intellectual community, in contrast to more mass-oriented domestic platforms such as VKontakte. Although Meta’s services were blocked in Russia in March 2022, a substantial part of the writing community — much of it now in emigration — has continued to publish on Facebook. Rather than a limitation, this makes the platform a focused observation point: it captures precisely the segment of the Russian-language literary field that has maintained continuous public writing across the political ruptures of the period under study.

Our methodological approach combines core corpus methods (frequency analysis, collocations, and KWIC analysis) with a sociolinguistic approach accounting for authors’ gender, age, location, and time of publication (Zappavigna & Ross, 2024). To these established methods, we add a literary-analytical dimension that observes the linguistic transformation of categories across literary and sub-literary genres as a matter of ideological solidarization and work on a common vocabulary on the transection of personal and political.

This dual perspective opens questions that neither discipline could easily pursue alone. From a linguistic standpoint, we trace how therapy-related vocabulary infiltrates public discourses, making a large-scale shift from the microanalysis of subjective experience to the macrosocial indexing of reality. We also consider how these concepts acquire a specific ideological significance in the Russian-speaking digital environment and become instruments for constructing a new subjectivity through the selection of the ‘right words’.

From a literary standpoint, we examine how individual authors deploy this vocabulary as part of a recognizable authorial voice: how the same term (‘toxic’, ‘trigger’, ‘abuse’) can function as raw confession in one text and as ironic citation in another, how strategies of ethical articulation in literary blogging transcend the genre borders and the borders between artistic and private expression,

advocating for the dimension of the ‘New Sincerity’ (Rutten, 2017) and authenticity beyond the traditional definition of a literary persona (Schmidt, 2021).

Corpus methods allow us to detect patterns across this genre continuum at scale — recurring lexical choices, syntactic structures, discourse markers — while close literary reading allows us to interpret what those patterns mean for individual authors and their implied readerships.

Preliminary analysis of the corpus indicates that these borrowed concepts follow distinct trajectories of appropriation rather than a uniform pattern of expansion. ‘Trigger’ undergoes visible morphological naturalisation — the English noun progressively acquires Russian derivational and inflectional morphology — while its reference migrates from the interpersonal toward the socio-political register. ‘Abuse’ develops a labelling function, extending from the description of interpersonal relationships toward the naming of social actors. ‘Toxicity’ shows a parallel process of normalisation accompanied by explicit metalinguistic reflection on the term itself. Close reading of selected authors further suggests that the choice of register — sincere, ironic, or polemical — operates as a marker of aesthetic and political positioning.

A methodological finding cuts across these cases. Several therapy-related items that appear highly frequent prove, on close reading, to be artefacts of individual idiolect or lexical homonymy rather than markers of a shared vocabulary: raw frequency alone is misleading, and only the combination of corpus measures and close reading reliably distinguishes community-wide semantic change from the usage of one or two authors. This exemplifies our central claim — the interpretive value of the corpus emerges precisely where quantitative pattern and literary reading are made to test one another.

These observations support our broader claim that the corpus under study is not merely a linguistic dataset but a literary archive of a specific historical moment: the years spanning Russia’s deepening authoritarianism, the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, and the mass emigration of cultural figures. In this context, the vocabulary of ‘new ethics’ functions simultaneously as a discursive resource for negotiating moral norms and as a literary-aesthetic medium through which authors construct, perform, and contest their identities as writers, moral subjects, and political beings.

More broadly, this paper contributes to method-

ological discussions about how computational approaches in the humanities can benefit from interdisciplinary integration. We argue that corpus linguistics and literary studies are not competing frameworks but complementary ones. The combination of quantitative patterns and close readings from both disciplines across the annotated corpus offers a richer account of how ethical vocabularies are reshaped — aesthetically as much as linguistically — in contemporary Russian-language digital discourse.

Keywords: Ethics and Aesthetics, Russian-Language Authors, Facebook Corpus, Discourse Analysis, Digital Humanities, Political Correctness

References

- Aronson, P. (Ed.). (2022). *Složnye čuvstva. Razgovornik novoj real’nosti: Ot ab’juza do toksičnosti* [Complex feelings. A phrasebook of the new reality: From abuse to toxicity]. Individuum.
- Guzaerova, R. (2025). The concept ‘new ethics’ in Russian media discourse: A corpus-based analysis. *Scripta & e-Scripta*, 25, 61–78.
- Howanitz, G. (2020). *Leben weben: (auto-)biographische Praktiken russischer Autorinnen und Autoren im Internet*. transcript.
- Kobyakov, A. V. (2021). New ethics in the grammar and lexicon of Russian media. In D. Y. Krapchunov, S. A. Malenko, V. O. Shipulin, E. F. Zhukova, A. G. Nekita, & O. A. Fikhtner (Eds.), *Perishable and eternal: Mythologies and social technologies of digital civilization* (Vol. 120, pp. 403–411). European Publisher. <https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2021.12.03.54>
- Lerner, J., & Zbenovich, C. (2013). Adapting the therapeutic discourse to post-Soviet media culture: The case of *Modnyi Prigovor*. *Slavic Review*, 72(4), 828–849. <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.72.4.0828>
- Moreno-Ortiz, A., & García-Gámez, M. (2023). Strategies for the analysis of large social media corpora: Sampling and keyword extraction methods. *Corpus Pragmatics*, 7(3), 241–265. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41701-023-00143-0>
- Rutten, E. (2017). *Sincerity after communism: A cultural history*. Yale University Press.
- Schmidt, H. (2021). From samizdat to new sincerity: Digital literature on the Russian-language internet. In D. Gritsenko, M. Wijermars, & M. Kopotev (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of digital Russia studies* (pp. 255–275). Palgrave Macmillan.

Zappavigna, M., & Ross, A. S. (2024).
Innovations and challenges in social
media discourse analysis. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003257516>