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## Emotions and attitudes in present day Russian through the prism of new words: Cultural semantics of *zhest'* and related concepts

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### Abstract

Contemporary Russian lexicon is characterized by rapid change which involves borrowings, the use of new words and expressions as well as the development of new meanings from the existing word forms. The new meanings are indicative of new attitudes or the reinforcement of the existing ones. In this context, the paper considers the recently emerged colloquial use of the word *zhest'* (from the primary meaning of *zhest'* 'tin' as a type of metal) and the increase of use of the words *zhestkii* 'hard/tough/firm' and *zhestko* 'firmly/toughly' as examples of 'internal' language processes. The word *zhest'* is a colloquial word mainly used in youth slang, but also infiltrating other types of discourse. We analyze its use as an interjection, as well as a noun in predicative and attributive functions. *Zhestkii* and *zhestko* are shown to rise in use and to be prevalent in the political discourse as a sign of power. The paper aims to trace the rise in frequency of the words under the analysis, study their semantics and establish links between the meaning of the words and broader Russian cultural themes. This kind of linguistic analysis with focus on cultural aspects allows us to identify culturally prevalent ideas in present day Russian. The paper uses the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) as a method of semantic analysis relying on data from the Russian National Corpus. Based on a detailed semantic analysis, the paper proposes NSM explications of *zhest'*, *zhestkii* and *zhestko*, identifies connections between their meanings and the cultural themes of 'emotionality', 'not being in control' and 'strait talk', and recognizes the increased cultural salience of these words in present day Russian. The study uncovers trends of the contemporary Russian language uses and can be applied in culture-enhanced language teaching and cross-cultural training.

**Key words:** *Russian, language change, Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), youth slang, political discourse, emotions*

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**Эмоции и отношения в современном русском языке  
через призму неологизмов:  
культурная семантика слова *жесть*  
и связанных с ним понятий**

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**Аннотация**

Современный русский лексикон подвержен стремительным изменениям, таким как заимствования, использование новых слов и выражений, а также появление новых значений у существующих словоформ. Новые значения являются проявлениями новых или усилением существующих культурных представлений. В статье рассматривается недавно возникшее разговорное употребление слова *жесть* (от первичного значения *жесть* как вида металла) и рост употребления слов *жесткий* и *жестко* как примеров «внутренних» языковых процессов. Слово *жесть* является разговорным словом и употребляется, в основном, в молодежном сленге, но также проникает в другие типы дискурса. В статье рассматриваются употребления слова *жесть* в качестве междометия, а также существительного в предикативных и атрибутивных функциях. *Жесткий* и *жестко* употребляются в политическом дискурсе как знаки власти. Цель статьи – проследить увеличение частотности анализируемых слов, изучить их семантику и установить связи между значением слов и культурными темами русского языка. Проведение данного лингвистического анализа с вниманием к культурным аспектам значения позволяет выделить культурно-значимые идеи в русском языке сегодня. Естественный семантический метаязык (ЕСМ) используется в качестве метода семантического анализа, языковые примеры взяты из Национального корпуса русского языка. На основе детального семантического анализа в статье предлагаются ЕСМ толкования слов *жесть*, *жесткий* и *жестко*, выявляется связь их значений с культурными темами «эмоциональность», «отсутствие контроля» и «откровенный разговор», и отмечается возросшая культурная значимость этих слов в современном русском языке. Исследование раскрывает тенденции использования современного русского языка, и его результаты могут быть применены в преподавании языка с углубленным изучением культуры и обучении межкультурной коммуникации.

**Ключевые слова:** *русский язык, изменение языка, Естественный семантический метаязык (ЕСМ), молодежный сленг, политический дискурс, эмоции*

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary Russian lexicon is characterized by rapid change which involves borrowings, the use of new words and expressions as well as the emergence of new meanings from the existing word forms (e.g., Gladkova 2020, Levontina 2015, 2016, Lerner & Zbenovich 2013, Krongauz 2008, 2013, Krysin 2014, Larina et al. 2020, Ozyumenko & Larina 2018). While the use of borrowings, mainly from English, is revealing of globalization processes and is consistent with the tendencies in numerous languages, the emergence of new meanings and words originating from Russian could be considered part of language- and culture-specific processes<sup>1</sup>.

A recent example of 'internal' language processes is the development of the colloquial use of the word *zhest'* (from *zhest'* 'tin' – a type of metal) and the increase of use of the words *zhestkii* 'hard/tough/firm' and *zhestko* 'firmly/toughly'. There is no unanimity among scholars on the etymological origin of these words, but some sources suggest that all these words are etymologically related (cf. Fasmer 2004 online, Krylov 2005 online).

*Zhest'* as a colloquial word is loaded with emotional attitude and is usually used as a response token in situations when the Addressee learns about some 'tough' situation the Speaker has been in. The word has become prevalent in youth jargon, however, it has already left the domain of youth slang and has penetrated official or semi-official settings. Some examples can be found in Russian political discourse.

Along with the emergence of the new meaning of *zhest'*, we also observe the rise of use of the words *zhestkii* and *zhestko*. The words are used in colloquial speech as well as in official register and are becoming prevalent in political discourse.

In this paper, we attempt to trace the rise of frequency of use of the words *zhest'*, *zhestkii*, *zhestko*, analyze their semantics and establish cultural links between the meaning of the words and Russian cultural themes. We will use the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (Wierzbicka 1996, 2021, Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002, 2014, Gladkova & Larina 2018a,b) as a method of semantic analysis, also adhering to the principles of paraphrase, semantic transcription and decomposition using a semantic metalanguage (Mel'čuk 2012, 2018), while following the principles of Cultural Semantics (Gladkova 2010, Gladkova & Romero Trillo 2014, Levisen 2012) and Ethnopragsmatics (Goddard 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> One could anticipate that post-2022 military conflict in Ukraine, de-globalization or/and 'multipolarity' processes could prevail in Russia and have their impact on language. However, this would be the matter of future research.

## 2. Cultural element of meaning in the lexicon

The idea about the interconnection between language and thought on the one hand and language and culture on the other hand has prevailed in linguistics for over two centuries (e.g., Humboldt (1971[1836], 1988 [1836], 1997) Sapir (1949) Whorf (1956)). The approach known as Ethnopragnmatics (Goddard (ed.) 2006) with its ‘sister branches’ Cultural Semantics (Gladkova 2010, Levisen 2012) and Applied Ethnolinguistics (Peeters 2015) propose a framework that attempts to underpin in detail the cultural element of linguistic meaning. Ethnopragnmatics aims to articulate culture-internal perspectives on the ‘how and why’ of speech practices in the languages of the world using universal human concepts (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014). It also describes and explains people’s ways of speaking relating them to indigenous values, beliefs, attitudes, social categories, emotions, and so on (Goddard 2006).

Cultural Semantics and Ethnopragnmatics postulate that certain words are culturally more salient than others (e.g., Gladkova 2010, Levisen 2013, Wierzbicka 1997). Wierzbicka (1997: 15–16) calls such words ‘cultural keywords’ and defines them as “words which are particularly important and revealing in a given culture.” Cultural keywords are salient in the collective psyche of a society and their meanings resonate with meanings of other linguistic units and cultural practices. The cultural keywords are commonly characterized by relatively high frequency, relation to other culturally important concepts, and use in culturally prominent discourse (proverbs, songs, among others).

Goddard (2018: 165) further elaborates that the borderline between cultural keywords and other types of culturally salient vocabulary is not always easy to identify:

A cultural key word is a kind of focal point for cultural ways of thinking, acting, feeling, and speaking. I must admit that there are many culturally important words in any language, and that sometimes it is hard to draw a strict line between cultural key words and other very important cultural words. I am not even sure that there is an absolutely strict line there. But the concept of “cultural key words” is still a useful concept, a way of directing attention to the fact that some words are tremendously important to a culture.

While the research on cultural keywords has successfully identified words of this kind in different cultures (e.g., Levisen 2012, Levisen & Waters 2017, Wierzbicka 1997), the question of the dynamics of meaning among cultural keywords and cultural themes has not been explored in depth before. This article attempts to study the meaning of the words *zhest’*, *zhestkii* and *zhestko* and identify their cultural role. Adhering to the principles of Ethnopragnmatics and Cultural Semantics, we will explore the meaning of the words in question using the universal human concepts as they are identified within the Natural Semantic Metalanguage.

### 3. Data and methodology

The paper relies on data available in the Russian National Corpus – an open access online resource with over 1.5 billion words. For the purpose of our study, we will draw examples of use from three subcorpora: main (written sources), oral and newspaper. We will mainly rely on examples of use after the mid-1980s to record the linguistic change after the collapse of the Soviet Union which marked a significant economic and social turning point in the country’s history. Therefore, the amount of analyzed material is around 915 mln. words.

To trace the dynamics of frequency of use we will rely on the data from Google Books as reflected in the Google Books Ngram Viewer. We acknowledge limitations of the Google Books data as they are restricted to books and, consequently, have limited representation of spoken data. However, we believe that these data are still useful in understanding the prevalent tendencies in the frequency of use.

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage is an approach to studying natural language meaning relying on universal human concepts. It originates from Leibniz’s idea that linguistic meaning can be explained in terms of a set of irreducible concepts available in natural language. The empirical research of identifying primitive meanings by Anna Wierzbicka, Cliff Goddard and colleagues has resulted in a list of 65 semantic primitives and their syntactic properties. They are believed to be identifiable in all languages (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014). Russian and English exponents of the primes are listed in Table 1.

*Table 1. Exponents of semantic primes in English and Russian (from Gladkova and Larina (2018a))*

YA, TY, KTO-TO, CHTO-TO~VESHCH', LYUDI, TELO	substantives
I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	
ROD~VID, CHAST'	relational substantives
KINDS, PARTS	
ÉTOT, TOT ZHE, DRUGOI	determiners
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	quantifiers
ODIN, DVA, NEKOTORYE, VSE, MNOGO, MALO	
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW	
KHOROSHII~KHOROSHO, PLOKHOI~PLOKHO	evaluators
GOOD, BAD	
BOL'SHOI, MALEN'KII	descriptors
BIG, SMALL	
ZNAT', DUMAT', KHOTET', NE KHOTET', CHUVSTVOVAT', VIDET', SLYSHAT'	mental predicates
KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	
GOVORIT'~SKAZAT', SLOVA, PRAVDA	speech
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	
DELAT', PROISKHODIT'~SLUCHAT'SYA, DVIGAT'SYA	actions, events, movement
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE	
BYT' (GDE-TO), BYT'~EST', BYT' (KEM-TO/CHEM-TO)	location, existence, specification
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	
MOI/MOYA/MOE	possession
(IS) MINE	

ZHIT', UMERET'	life and death
LIVE, DIE	
KOGDA~VREMYA, SEICHAS, DO, POSLE, DOLGO, KOROTKOE VREMYA, NEKOTOROE VREMYA, MOMENT	time
WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	
GDE~MESTO, ZDES', NAD, POD, DALEKO, BLIZKO, STORONA, VNUTRI, KASAT'SYA	place
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH	
NE, MOZHET BYT', MOCH', POTOMU CHTO, ESLI	logical concepts
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	
OCHEN', BOL'SHE~ESHCHE	intensifier, augmentor
VERY, MORE	
KAK~TAK	similarity
LIKE~AS	

Apart from the 65 primitive meanings, the NSM toolkit includes semantic molecules, that is intermediate concepts consisting of semantic primitives and, possibly, other semantic molecules which are required for explications.

NSM as a tool of semantic analysis involving semantic paraphrase, semantic transcription and decomposition using a semantic metalanguage (Mel'čuk 2012, 2018) allows us to arrive at explications of meaning, which are precise, substitutable and comprehensible (Goddard 2018).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *Zhest'* as a colloquial word

#### 4.1.1. An overview of current uses

I will start with illustrating the use of the new meaning of *zhest'* with several examples from the Russian National Corpus:

- (1) – *Nu / na samom dele / glaza ochen' sil'no bolyat / potomu chto nu vot u menya byl den' – ya sela v desyat' utra / ponyatnoe delo s pereryvami / no vse ravno zakonchila v chetyre utra.*  
– *Zhest'!*  
‘– Well, indeed, the eyes are really aching because what a day I had – I started at ten in the morning, with breaks of course, but finished at four in the morning anyway.  
– *Zhest'!* (Rough!)
- (2) – *[...] i ya v pyat' utra prosypayus' prosto v kholodnom potu.*  
– *Zhest'!*  
– ‘[...] and I wake up in the morning all in cold sweat.  
– *Zhest'!* (Rough!)
- (3) – *Nu / koroche u menya nogi potom tak otvalivalis' / eto zhopa.*  
– *Ty na kablukakh byla?*  
– *Konechno / na kablu ... Tok na ... Da / na kablukakh / na vot etikh / sapogakh.*  
– *Zhe-e-est'!*

- Well, my feet were falling off after that ...
- Were you wearing heels then?
- Of course, heels. Yes, heels, these high boots.
- Zhest’! (Rough!)

As these examples demonstrate, the word is prevalent in youth jargon, however, it has already left the domain of youth slang and is being used by older people in official or semi-official settings at times. It has even infiltrated the Russian political discourse. One of such examples is a notorious slogan by Valentina Matvienko “*Sport – èto zhest*” ‘Sport is *zhest*’. According to Fontanka.ru, the then governor of St. Petersburg Valentina Matvienko used this slogan during her annual address to the deputies of the Legislative Assembly in 2007. When explaining why she was using a term from the youth slang she said that she had heard this word and got interested in its meaning. Upon learning that it means something like ‘breakthrough, boiling and moving ahead’ she decided that the word *zhest*’ can be applied to sport.<sup>2</sup>

There is also an example of use of *zhest*’ by Maria Zakharova, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson, as listed in the Russian National Corpus. According to *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*, Maria Zakharova commented in her Telegram-channel on a large-scale disruption in the work of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram in 2021 as follows:

- (4) *Zhest*’. *K voprosu o tom, nuzhny li nam svoi sotsseti i internet-platformy.*  
 ‘Zhest’’. To the question whether we need our own social networks and internet platforms.’

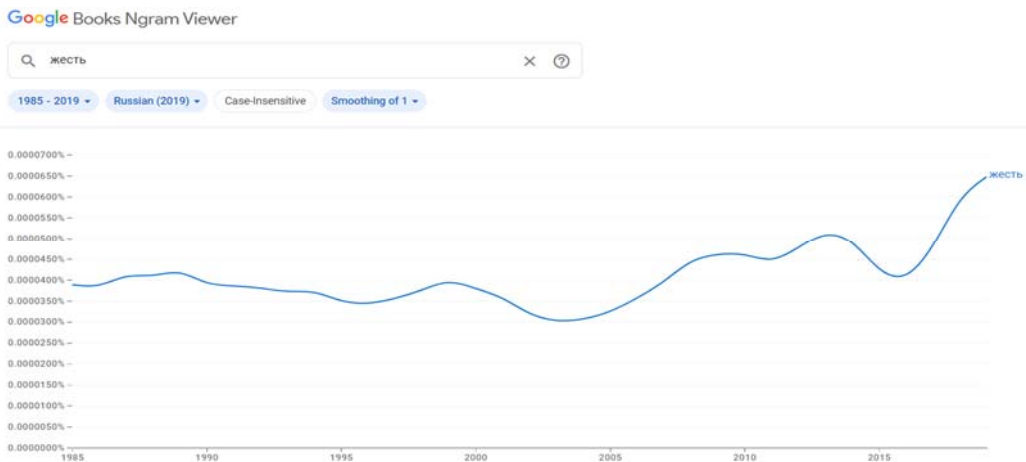


Figure 1. The frequency of occurrence of *zhest*’ in Russian Google Books for 1985–2019

<sup>2</sup> The quote is from <https://www.fontanka.ru/2007/05/23/067/>. As our analysis further demonstrates, this use of *zhest*’ by Matvienko is not consistent with the majority of uses because the word normally has negative connotations. However, this example dates to 2007 when the new meaning of *zhest*’ was just emerging. Therefore, it is possible that Matvienko’s use coincided with some initial uses of *zhest*’ which did not prevail over time.

Google Books Ngram Viewer reports a more than two-fold increase in usage frequency of the word *zhest'* in the Russian language sources since 2004 (see Figure 1). While in this data it is impossible to differentiate between the use of *zhest'* in the original and the derived meanings, we hypothesize that this tendency is indicative of the development of the new meaning of *zhest'* and its increase in use.

Let us now delve into exploring the origins of the word and analyzing its meaning in greater depth.

#### 4.1.2. Possible origins

In the original meaning *zhest'* 'tinplate' refers to sheets of steel coated with a thin layer of tin to impede rusting which are widely used in the manufacturing of tin cans. According to Fasmer's Etymological Dictionary (Fasmer 2004 online), *zhest'* as a name for a type of metal originates from Turkic or Mongolian *žes* meaning "copper, brass". This dictionary also relates the second outdated meaning referring to frozen soil to the words *zhestokii* 'cruel' and *zhestkii* 'hard/firm'. Krylov's Etymological Dictionary tentatively links *zhest'* with Turkic languages (*zhes*) and suggests that it changed its form under the influence of the Russian word *zhest'* 'frozen soil/hard soil' with the same derivational base as *zhestkii* (or *zhestyi*) 'hard/firm' (Krylov 2005 online). *Zhestkii*, in its turn, is listed here as a borrowing from Old Slavonic *zhestyi*, possibly related to German *kes* – hard soil. Krylov also links *zhestokii* 'cruel' to *zhestkii* and notes a close link between these notions. Therefore, there is likely to be an etymological link between *zhest'* as a type of metal which is hard with the word *zhestkii* (etymologically relating to hard or frozen soil) as well as the word *zhestokii* 'cruel'.

The Russian National Corpus oral subcorpus records the first uses of *zhest'* as a colloquial expression in 2006. Here is one of the examples dating 2006:

- (5) – *Na her èti shtuki krutyatsya?*  
– *Nu /akkordy vybiraesh' / to est' / ty smotrish' / dopustim / fa... Ty vidish' / na kakom ladu èto vse zazhimaetsya...*  
– *Zhest'! Kto èto pridumal?*  
– *Ya dumayu / umnyi chelovek pridumal ...*  
'– Why are these things rolling?  
– Well, you select the chord, that is you see, say F... You see on which harmony it is gripped.  
– *Zhest'! Who came up with it?*  
– I think a clever person did!'

In this example *zhest'* is used to express astonishment and awe at the complexity of the object the Speaker encounters.

The emergence of colloquial use of the word *zhest'* could be associated with the release of the film with the same title by the Russian producer Denis Neimand in 2006. The film is a psychological thriller where a journalist Marina joins a police inspector in the search for a maniac teacher as part of her last task for the newspaper



she decides to quit. The action takes place on the vast territory of the abandoned summer house estate next to a large industrial city Azovstal' with no mobile connection and locals living according to their own laws.

The title of the film creatively interprets the use and the etymology of the original meaning of the word *zhest'* as a metaphor for human life. The film is not about 'tinplate' as sheets of steel, but rather human life which is, as tinplate, hard, flexible (changeable), and sharp at the ends. The title also highlights the link of *zhest'* with the words *zhestkii* 'hard' and *zhestokii* 'cruel' as the film contains numerous scenes of cruelty and violence. It is worth noting that several other Russian films released at about the same time – *Zhara* (2006) 'Heat' and *Zhmurki* (2005) 'Blind man's buff' – also used the new word in their scripts.

#### 4.1.3. Meaning analysis

Krysin (2014: 550–551) describes *zhest'* as an evaluative jargon word expressing different emotions – delight, surprise, etc. in the role of an interjection. In our analysis we will divide the use of *zhest'* into two groups – one as an interjection (*zhest'*<sub>1</sub>) and the other one as a noun in a predicative or attributive function (*zhest'*<sub>2</sub>). We will demonstrate that the meaning of *zhest'* in both uses is not limited to emotions only and entails more complex attitudes.

##### 4.1.3.1. *zhest'*<sub>1</sub>

In the first use *zhest'* is used as a response token in a conversation. It is normally used after the Speaker talks about some unusual situation, often involving experiencing of hard conditions (from the point of view of the Speaker). The Addressee replying with *zhest'* demonstrates emphatic understanding of the toughness of the situation the Speaker had to endure and the resultant emotion. An element of surprise is also being conveyed.

We will quote some examples from the Corpus. In the following example a young person is telling about her experience of being exposed to the behavior of older people in a café or a restaurant which is different from her expectations and her friend replies with *zhest'*:

- (6) – ... *My sideli v "Kul'te" / i tam znaesh' / takoe / kak budto iz kakogo-to sosednego ofisa prishla kompaniya lyudei / i lyudi let po tridcat' pyat' / po sorok / takie teti-zhaby / i odna iz nix sidela bosikom / a kogda shla kuda-to / odevala takie plastikovye tapochki prosto. i onu chetyre raza stavili svoyu lyubimuyu pesnyu "Disko-partizany" / znaesh'?*  
 – *Gospodi / zhest' kakaya-to!*  
 – *My tak ugorali vashche / da.*  
 – 'We were sitting in 'Cult' and there, you know, a company of people came from a nearby office, and they were thirty-five or forty, women-toads, you know. And one of them was sitting barefoot and she put on plastic slippers when she went somewhere. And they played their favorite song "Disco partisans" four times, you know?'

- Oh my God! What a *zhest'*!
- Yeah, we were laughing.'

The following example is about a young person complaining about the unexpected change of exam materials two weeks before the exam, which warrants the response *zhest'* from a friend:

- (7) – [...] *za dve nedeli do ékzamena pomenyali voprosy. Vmesto 57 voprosov / 70 / drugie voprosy / drugie proizvedeniya ... Ne znayu / kak mne teper' sdavat' literaturu ...*  
– *Zhest'!!! Razve tak mozžno?*  
– 'Two weeks before the exam they changed the questions. 70 questions instead of 57, different questions, different books ... I don't know how I can pass Literature now...'  
– *Zhest'!!! How can one do it?'*

Telling about enduring psychological pressure from another person also calls for the response *zhest'*:

- (8) – *Da vse tak zhe ... slava bogu / my s nei redko teper' vidimsya.*  
– *Ona prodolzhaet gruzit' émocional'nymi problemami?*  
– *Estessno / kuda tam bez nix.*  
– *Zhest'.*  
– 'It's the same... Thanks God we meet rarely with her these days.'  
– 'Is she continuing to load you with emotional problems?'  
– 'Of course. How else?'  
– *Zhest'.'*

In the following example *zhest'* is used two times to respond to a radical haircut. The person who had the haircut is also called *zhestkach* – another noun derived from *zhest'* which can be used to refer to tough situations or people.

- (9) *S1 – Chego-chego / postrigli.*  
*S2 – Zhest' / obkromsali nereal'no/*  
*S3 – Da ty posmotri na ego chelku / ussat'sya mozžno.*  
*S2 – Kha / zhest'! Ty tipa pod Natal'yu Oreiro kosit' nachal / zhestkach!*  
*S1 – Ty voobshche by pomolchal [...].*  
*S1 – 'What? I had a haircut.*  
*S2 – Zhest'! They cut your hair radically.*  
*S3 – Look at his fringe! You can piss yourself!*  
*S2 – Ha, zhest'! Do you want to look like Natalia Oreiro? You are a tough guy!*  
*S1 – Shut up! [...].'*

Having to queue for a long time also invites the response *zhest'*:

- (10) – [...] *Che / gulyali potom eshche?*  
– *Ne / v ocheredi do polvdenadcatogo pocti stoyali.*  
– *Zhest' kakaya. Skol'ko vas bylo?*  
– *Ya / Bob i Diman. No vzyali na semerykh biletu.*  
– [...] 'Did you walk after that?'

- No, we were standing in the queue till 11.30 almost.
- What a *zhest'*. How many were you?
- Myself, Bib and Diman. But we bought tickets for seven people.'

As we can observe in the above quoted examples, the situations when *zhest'* is used are the following:

- having to work for a day without rest,
- having to run in boots on high heels,
- having to share space with people of different age group, habits and interests,
- having to interact with a person who has psychological problems,
- changing exam questions two weeks before the exam,
- having a radical haircut.

Most examples are limited to youth conversations and therefore embody the views of this age group. Experiencing discomfort, pressure, hard work, unfair treatment are regarded as disturbing everyday experience and trigger the response *zhest'*.

We will propose the following explication:

*Zhest'!*

- (a) I now know: something happened
- (b) I think: things like this don't happen at many times
- (c) when this happened, you felt something very bad
- (d) I know how you felt
- (e) I don't want you to feel like this
- (f) when I think about it now, I can't not feel something
- (g) I want you to know this
- (h) because if this, I say this word {*zhest'*}

This explication follows the patterns for explicating interjections as presented in (Wierzbicka 1992, Goddard 2014, 2015, Gladkova et al. 2016) and contains the elements of (a) awareness of the situation, (b) – expression of the unusual character of the situation, (c) – demonstration of the awareness of the consequent negative feeling of the interlocutor, (d) – emphatic expression of the awareness of the feeling of the other person, (e) – expression of support or pity to the interlocutor in relation to this situation, (f) – an emotional response to the situation, (g) – summary of the communicative effort, and (h) – the word utterance component.

#### 4.1.3.2. *zhest'₂*

*Zhest'₂* is used in the predicative or attributive function as a colloquial word. However, unlike *zhest'₁*, it does not necessarily function as a response token, but it is used by the Speaker to express surprise or astonishment about some 'tough' conditions.

As *zhest'₂* is also prevalent in the youth slang or conversational discourse, it is common in discussions relating to studies. In example (11) the teacher is described

as *zhest'* as she was very strict and in (12) – the homework (voluminous and challenging).

- (11) – *A u vas strogaya uchitel'nica?*  
– *Nea ... dobraya.*  
– *A u nas voobshche Vera Vanna vo 2 shkole prosto zhest' byla zhenshchina. Znaesh' / na fizike dazhe spisat' nel'zya. Znaesh' / esli povernesh'sya zatyikom vo vremya kontrol'noy / vse / ona libo podoidet i postavit minus ball / potom minus dva / a potom i vovse mozhnet zabrat' listochek. Voobshche / spisat' slozhno bylo.*  
'– Do you have a strict teacher?  
– No ... a kind one.  
– And our Vera Vanna in school number 2 was simply *zhest'* woman. You know, it was impossible to cheat during Physics class. You know, if you turn your head during a test she would come over and deduct one point, then two points, and then she could even take away the paper. It was difficult to cheat.'
- (12) *Oдно mogu skazat' / to / chto ona zadaet – zhest'! Osobenno to / chto nam kakie-to referaty nado gotovit'. Uzhas!*  
'I can say one thing – the homework she gives is *zhest'*! Especially the term papers we need to prepare. Crazy!'

Very cold conditions outside are described as *zhest'* in the following two examples:

- (13) *Slushai / smotri / blin / tam takoi sneg / takaya zhest' prosto / belki ne mogu ... Poshli v snezhki igrat'? Belki ne mogu zhit' v takom kholode.*  
'Look at the snow outside. It is simply *zhest'*. Squirrels can't ... Let's go and play snowballs? Squirrels can't live in such cold.'
- (14) – *Blin ... da gde zh avtobus-to / a?*  
– *Da heze! A che / speshish'?*  
– *Da dubak – vashche zhest'! [...]*  
– *Ta zhe fignya!*  
'– [Swearing]. Where is the bus?  
– I don't know. Are you in a hurry?  
– The cold is *zhest'*. [...]  
– Same crap here.'

The conditions or situations that can be characterized as *zhest'* are numerous and diverse and include, among others, the negative effect of divorce on children in the 1970s (example 15), violence in detention centers (example 16), unhuman conditions in public transport (example 17), tourist's being cheated by locals (example 18), lack of medical help (example 19). In such examples we can observe the resonance between the new meaning of the word *zhest'* and a similar-sounding word *zhestoko* 'cruel'. One could tentatively argue that there is an element of cruelty in the following situations:

- (15) *Vy pomnite vot razvody / naprimer / semidesyatykh? Nu / èto / èto byla krovavaya zhest'. Kakie deti? Kogo interesovali chuvstva detei?*  
'Do you remember, for example, divorces of the seventies? Well, it was bloody *zhest'*. What children? Who was interested in children's feelings?'
- (16) *Ta, kak seichas govoryat, zhest', kotoraya tvoritsya v tsentrah zaderzhaniya, – v novinku dazhe dlya tekh, kto uzhe sidel ran'she. [...] Situatsiya pomenyalas' v khudshuyu storonu, i estestvenno, chto èto politicheskij zakaz, a ne prosto sledstvie èkonomicheskogo krizisa. Seichas centry izolyacii pravonarushitelei v Minske prevratilis' v takie pytochnye, kak gestapo vo vremya voiny.*  
'The *zhest'*, as they call it now, that takes place in detention centers is a novelty even for those who have had sentences in the past. [...] The situation has changed for the worse and, naturally, it is a political order and not simply consequences of the economic crisis. Now isolation centers in Minsk turned into torture rooms like *gestapo* in war times.'
- (17) *Ranee èta zhe turistka opisala otpusk v Egipte slovami "dikii stress" i "èto kakaya-to zhest'" iz-za togo, chto mestnye zhiteli vse vremya pytalis' ee obmanut'.*  
'Earlier the same tourist described her holiday in Turkey with the words 'utter stress' and 'it is some *zhest'*' because locals were always trying to cheat her.'
- (18) *Ikh vid privel ee v uzhas. Po slovam Manek, èlektritchka bol'she napominaet transport dlya perevozki skota. Na snimkakh vidno, chto vagony pokryty rzhavchinoi, kraska oblupilas', a okna potemneli ot gryazi. "Rebyata, nu èto real'naya zhest'! Nu kak na vot takom mozžno vozit' lyudei?"*  
'Their [trains] look made her terrified. According to Manek's words, the train looks more like transport for animals. It is clear from the shots that the wagons are covered in rust, the paint is peeling off and the windows are dark from the dirt. 'Guys, this is real *zhest'*! How can one transport people in it?'
- (19) *U nas v gorode s naseleniem 150 tysyach chelovek vsego odna detskaya poliklinika. Èto zhest'.*  
'In our town with the population of 150 thousand people there is one children's policlinic. It is *zhest'*'.

We will attempt to generalize that calling something *zhest'* involves recognizing that the event or the situation is not a typical experience, but a negative one. It causes negative emotions of the person who has to go through it. By using the word *zhest'* the Speaker marks his or her negative attitude to the situation and the desire for it not to happen. The explication looks as follows:

*Something X is zhest'<sub>2</sub>*

(a) this something is like this:

(b) something happens, it doesn't happen at many times

(c) when other people think about it, they can know that this is something very bad

- (d) they can feel something very bad because of this
- (e) they don't want to feel like this
- (f) they don't want things like this to happen

To summarize, *zhest'* is an emotional and attitudinal term expressing attitude relating to the previous proposition. It underlies the unusual character of the event (component b) and it is negatively evaluated (component c). The event causes a negative feeling (d). The explication also includes a natural want of people not to feel like this (e) and for things like this not to happen (component f).

We will now turn to the analysis of the words *zhestkii* and *zhestko* as conceptually related to the colloquial use of the word *zhest'*.

#### 4.2. *Zhestkii* and *zhestko*

Along with the emergence of the new meaning of *zhest'*, we also observe the rise of use of the words *zhestkii* and *zhestko*. The words are used in colloquial speech as well as in official register and are becoming prevalent in political discourse. The data from the Google Ngram Viewer suggest that the words *zhestkii* and *zhestko* have experienced a steady rise in use after 1985 with a temporary decline in 2008–2014 (see Figure 2).

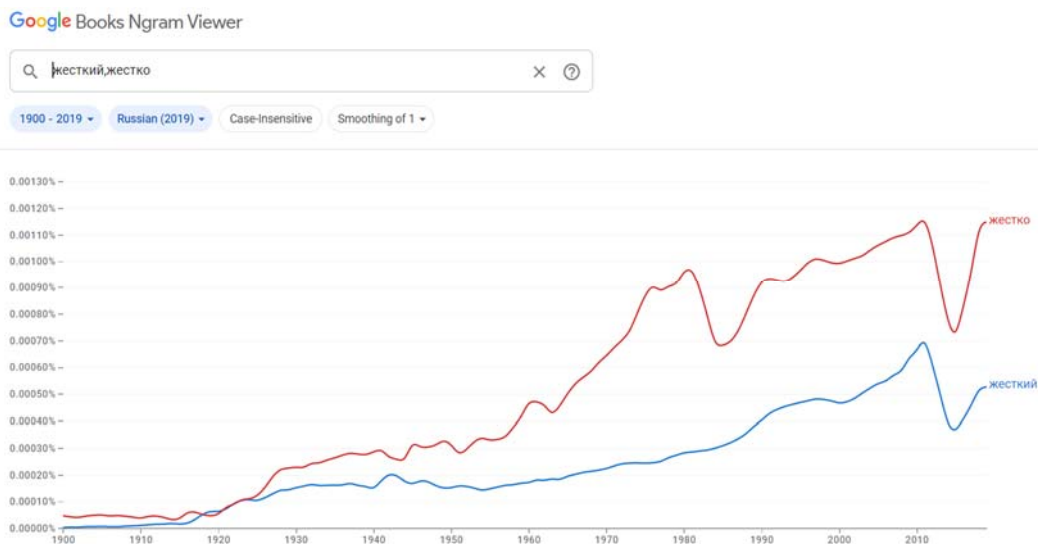


Figure 2. The frequency of occurrence of *zhestkii* and *zhestko* in Google Books for 1900–2019

##### 4.2.1. *Zhestkii*

###### 4.2.1.1. *Zhestkii*<sub>1</sub>

In the context of our study, we are most interested in the metaphorical use of *zhestkii* ‘hard/firm’, that is *zhestkii*<sub>2</sub>. However, its meaning cannot be understood without the analysis of its original meaning as a word describing physical property (*zhestkii*<sub>1</sub>).

*Zhestkii* is an adjective referring to a physical property of objects which display resistance to touch. The most prototypical use of the word in its primary sense could be considered the characteristics of objects that a person could lie or sit on: *krovat'* 'bed', *lozhe* 'bed' (lit. 'place for resting in a lying position'), *koika* 'bunk', *pastel'* 'bed', *meditsinskaya kushetka* 'medical couch', *matras* 'matrass', *divan* 'sofa', *kreslo* 'armchair', *stul* 'chair'. As a way of extension, the word is also applicable to supporting constructions that have a firm structure and that prevent things they are intended for carrying or supporting from moving, such as *karkas* 'frame', *tara* 'container', *konteiner* 'container', *kabina* 'cabin'. Another group of words that *zhestkii* is applicable to is human hair – *volosy* 'hair', *resnicy* 'eye lashes', *kudri* 'curls', *brovi* 'eyebrows', *usy* 'moustache', *shchetina* 'bristle', *boroda* 'beard', as well as parts of body, such as *pal'cy* 'fingers' and *ladon'* 'palm'. *Zhestkii* could also refer to some types of food, such as a cooked piece of meat or an apple, as well as fabric and shoes – *kosynka* 'head scarf', *kanva* 'canvas', *obuv'* 'shoes'.

To generalize, *zhestkii* refers to a property of objects that could be identified if a person comes in contact with the object. Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014) in their analysis of *hard* argue that the property of *hard* is identified by a person touching an object by hand. Extending on their approach and taking into account the prototypicality of lying or resting on things that are described as *zhestkii*, we suggest that this quality is identified by parts of human body. A hand is one of such parts, but it could also be the back or the bottom (in case of sitting or lying). We would propose the following explication:

*Something is zhestkii, (krovat' 'bed', stol 'chair')*

- (a) this thing is like this:
- (b) if someone's part of the body touches this thing
- (c) this someone can feel something in this part of the body because of this
- (d) because of this, this someone can know something about this thing
- (e) because of this, this someone can think like this:
- (f) if someone's part of the body touches this thing,
- (g) this part of the body can't move as this someone's wants
- (h) because of this, this someone can feel something bad in this part of the body

Some of the examples suggest a lengthy lasting effect of contact with a *zhestkii* object if a person sits or lies on it for some time:

(20) *Takaya krovat' zhestkaya, vse telo bolit.*

'The bed is so hard, the whole body is aching.'

However, given that this effect can happen due to coming in touch with objects by sitting or lying on them and might not apply to things one could get in touch by hand (e.g., hair), we will not propose the component 'for some time' as an invariant of meaning.

#### 4.2.1.2. *Zhestkii*<sub>2</sub>

As Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014) rightly note, the metaphoric use of words of physical properties could be more frequent than the use of the words in their original meaning. It is the case with *zhestkii*<sub>2</sub> which builds on the meaning of *zhestkii*<sub>1</sub> and applies to a wide range of situations where a person has some sort of restrictions in his/her actions. Such uses include: *ramki* ‘framework’, *grafik* ‘schedule’, *kontrol* ‘control’, *pravila* ‘rules’, *konkurenciya* ‘competition’, *ogranicheniya* ‘restrictions’, *usloviya* ‘conditions’, *kriterii* ‘criteria’, *trebovaniya* ‘requirements’, *dieta* ‘diet’, *davlenie* ‘pressure’, *poryadok* ‘order’, *reshenie* ‘decision’, etc. Some examples from the corpus:

- (21) [...] *bez zhestkoi konkurencii vryad li mestnye proizvoditeli stremilis’ by k tomu vysokomu urovnyu, kotorogo dostigli segodnya.*  
 ‘It is unlikely that the local producers would have aimed at this high level without tough competition.’
- (22) *U togovykh setei sushchestvuyut zhestkie grafiki postavki produktov, i im ne nuzhny zapasy, poskol’ku ikh prosto negde skladirovat’.*  
 ‘Retail chains have strict delivery schedules, so they do not need reserves because they have nowhere to store goods’.
- (23) *On principial’no otkazyvalsya rabotat’ v zhestkikh ramkakh sotsrealizma, vpolnyat’ sotsyal’nyi zakaz.*  
 ‘He categorically refused to work within the rigid framework of social realism and deliver social order.’

We propose the following explication of *zhestkii*<sub>2</sub>:

*Something X is zhestkii*<sub>2</sub>

- (a) this thing is like this:
- (b) when this thing happens,
- (c) it is like someone touching something *zhestkii*<sub>1</sub>[m]
- (d) because of this, this someone can think:
- (e) I can’t do many things as I want
- (f) because of this, this someone can feel something bad

This explication embeds the meaning of *zhestkii*<sub>1</sub> as a derivational molecule. At the same time, it reinforces and builds on the components present in *zhestkii*<sub>1</sub> – the prototypical cognitive scenario involving a person realizing that s/he is restricted by something (I can’t do many things as I want, although the ‘move’ component is absent) and a consequent negative feeling.

We hypothesize that this meaning is growing in use by ordinary speakers as a reflection of the challenging reality. At the same time, it is commonly used by officials to ‘justify’ their ‘tough’ actions in the challenging conditions.

The metaphoric use of *zhestkii* is common in the current Russian President’s discourse as reported in mass media (newspaper) subcorpus. An example from the New Year 2022 President’s address to the nation:



- (24) *Vsekh nas seichas ob''edinyayet nadezhda na dobrye peremeny, no my ponimaem, chto ikh nevozmozžno otorvat', odelit' ot sobytii ukhodyashchego goda. My stolknulis' s kolossal'nymi vyzovami, no nauchilis' zhit' v takikh zhestkikh usloviyakh, reshat' slozhnye zadachi, i smogli èto sdelat' blagodarya nashei solidarnosti.*

‘We are all united by the hope for good changes, but we understand that they cannot be separated from the events of the previous year. We have faced colossal challenges, but learned to live in such tough conditions, solve complex problems and we have been able to do it due to our solidarity.’

Another example is from the Address to the Federal Assembly regarding accepting the law on financial responsibility of producers for their ecological harm:

- (25) *Takoi podkhod ochen' prostoi. Kak on zvuchit: poluchil pribyl' za schet prirody – uberi za soboi. Zdes' nuzhno deistvovat' zhestko. Rosprirodnadzor, drugie kontroliruyushchie organy dolzhny vypolnyat' vozlozhennye na nikh obyazannosti.*

‘This approach is very simple. It sounds like this: if you have gained profit at the nature’s cost, clean after yourself. One needs to act firmly here. Rosprirodnadzor and other controlling organizations should perform their duties.’

Some other examples as reported by other politicians:

- (26) *Peskov zayavil, chto Putin zhestko otreagiroyal na slova Sokurova.*  
‘Peskov stated that Putin reacted firmly to Sokurov’s words.’
- (27) *[...] prezident predupredil o zhestkom otvete na kakie-libo provokacii.*  
‘The President warned about a firm response to any kind of provocations.’
- (28) *“Èto zhestkoe poruchenie prezidenta RF”, – napomnila spiker [...].*  
‘It is a firm task by the Russian President,’ the Speaker reminded.’
- (29) *“Prezident osobo podcherknul, chto stoimost' etikh uslug ne dolzhna byt' zavyshennoi, nuzhno ee zhestko kontrolirovat'”, – otmechal ranee prem'er-ministr Mikhail Mishustin.*  
‘President especially emphasized that the cost of these services should not be inflated, it needs to be controlled firmly’, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin noted earlier.’
- (30) *“[...] Potomu chto poruchenie prezidenta bylo konkretnoe, zhestkoe, pravil'noe, i nado, chtoby ljudi èto pochuvstvovali”, – otmetila predsedatel' Soveta Federacii.*  
‘Because the President’s task was concrete, firm and correct, and it is important that people feel it’, – Chairperson of the Federation Council noted.’

It is also common in the speech of other government officials:

- (31) *Gref schitaet, chto vlasti strany budut priderzhivat'sya "ochen' zhestkoi makroekonomicheskoi stabil'nosti" i narashchivat' usiliya dlya smyagcheniya investitsionnogo klimata.*  
'Gref believes that the country's government will follow "a very strict macroeconomic stability" and increase efforts for softening the investment climate.'
- (32) *Popova otmetila, chto ne vezde soblyudaetsya poruchenie, v sootvetstvii s kotorym rezul'taty PCR-testa na COVID-19 dolzhny predostavlyat'sya klientu v techenie sutok, i rasporyadilas' zhestko reagirovat' na zaderzhki.*  
'Popova noted that not everywhere the instruction to provide the client with the COVID-19 pcr-test result within 24 hours is followed and ordered to react firmly to the delays.'
- (33) *Èl'vira Nabiullina skazala, chto Centrobank budet provodit' zhestkuyu denezhno-kreditnyu politiku.*  
'Elvira Nabiullina said that Central Bank would follow a strict monetary and credit policy.'
- (34) *Po mneniyu Matvienko, neobkhodimo "zhestche trebovat' s sobstvennikov investirovat' v sodержanie teplovykh setei, chtoby snizhat' poteri tepla pri teplosnabzhenii".*  
'In Matvienko's opinion, it is necessary to "firmly demand owners to invest into maintenance of heating network to reduce the losses of heat in heat supply".'

#### 4.2.2. *Zhestko*

*Zhestko* is an adverb derived from the adjective *zhestkii*. Its use in the 'original' physical properties meaning (*zhestko*<sub>1</sub>) is even more limited than the use of the adjective. We will quote only a couple of examples from the corpus:

- (35) *V zatylok zhestko upersya stvol avtomata.*  
'The barrel of the machine gun rested hard on the back of his head.'
- (36) *Ne sleduet razbirat' korpusnyu mebel' [...], esli ee chasti zhestko soedeneny (s pomoshch'yu kleya).*  
'Do not disassemble cabinet furniture if its parts are rigidly connected (with glue).'

The extended use of *zhestko* (*zhestko*<sub>2</sub>) prevails over the use of its original meaning. The predominant group of words collocating with *zhestko* is speech act verbs – *skazat'* 'say', *govorit'* 'say/speak', *konstatirovat'* 'state', *otzyvat'sya* 'say/evaluate', *zayavit'* 'declare', *sprosit'* 'ask', *proiznesti* 'say/announce', *otchitat'* 'reprimand', *velet'* 'order', *otvetit'* 'respond'. It also actively collocates with verbs of action which control or restrict actions of others, such as

*kontrolirovat* ‘control’, *ogranichivat* ‘restrict’, *regulirovat* ‘regulate’, *prinyat* ‘resheenie’ ‘decide’, *konkurirovat* ‘compete’. Some examples from the corpus:

- (37) *Nas zhenskije podrobnosti ni s kakogo boka ne interesuyut, tovarishch prokuror, – zhestko obrezal Nejman.*  
‘We are not interested in women’s details from any side, Comrade prosecutor, – Neiman cut off harshly.’
- (38) *Posemu vsyakogo roda nauchnaya deyatel’nost’ po issledovaniyu chelovecheskogo mozga budet vseгда zhestko kontrolirovat’sya.*  
‘Therefore, any kind of research activity on human brain will always be strictly controlled by the state.’

The explication would be the following:

*Someone X did something Y zhestko*

- (a) someone X did something Y to someone else Z
- (b) when X did it, someone else Z could think about it like this:
- (c) it is like touching something *zhestkij*[m]
- (d) because of this, this someone could think:
- (e) I can’t do many things as I want
- (f) because of this, this someone can feel something bad

The explication refers to the explication of *zhestkii*<sub>1</sub> and repeats some of the components of *zhestkii*<sub>2</sub> explication.

## 5. Discussion

As Levisen and Waters (2017: 6) argue in their introduction to the book *Cultural Keywords in Discourse*,

One of the truisms of traditional pragmatics was that meaning sits in contexts and intentions, and not, as such, in words. But words, and especially cultural keywords, have context-governing potential. Of course contexts can influence meaning, but the opposite can also be true – words can create contexts. [...] Once invoked, words can activate and guide people’s interpretations and direct their conversations and discourses.

These words can be applicable to the current use of the Russian words *zhest*’, *zhestkii* and *zhestko* which are examples of how words are both influenced by and at the same influence the reality.

The emergence and the rise of the new meaning of the word *zhest*’ in the colloquial sense reflects attitude to the reality full of rapid change, unpredictability, lawlessness and, at times, cruelty. Once emerged, the meaning got stabilized and is now experiencing rise in use and gradual spread in other conversational domains. Its uses started creating a reality on its own where events and people get characterized as *zhest*’.

It is intriguing to realize that the existing meanings *zhestkii* and *zhestko* undergo a similar rise in use which underlies close conceptual links between these

three words. Their current spread in the political discourse is also revealing. On the one hand, it reflects the reality of ‘tough’ conditions and, on the other hand, it implicitly serves as a justification for political actions that ‘create’ such reality (cf. Ozyumenko & Larina 2021).

Conducting a detailed semantic analysis of the words in question and developing their explications in universal human concepts following the principles of semantic decomposition, allow us now to hypothesize about the relation of their semantics to several cultural themes. Firstly, they are linked with the theme of emotionality (Wierzbicka 1999, Zalizniak et al. 2005) and the emerging emotionalization of discourse (Lerner & Rivkin-Fish 2021, Alba-Juez & Larina 2018, Zappettini et al. 2021). As Lerner and Rivkin-Fish (2021: 5) put it, many contemporary theorists stress “the pervasive presence of emotionality in contemporary culture where emotions become more important and formative than anything else”. We can observe the trend of ‘emotionality’ in the meanings of the words under question, especially the new meaning of *zhest’*. *Zhest’* is a word involving an emotional response to another person, who is also recognized to be experiencing strong emotions. Therefore, the meaning of this word is highly consistent with the tendency to focus on one’s emotions, analyze them, discuss them, and relate to them.

Secondly, the use of the words reinforces the idea of ‘not being in control’ which was previously proposed by Wierzbicka as a Russian cultural theme (Wierzbicka 1992). The words *zhestkii* and *zhestko* have the elements of meaning ‘not being able to do something as one wants’ and it is intriguing to see them becoming prominent in political discourse.

Thirdly, the use of the words *zhestkii* and *zhestko* could be linked with the cultural theme of ‘direct and forceful talk’ and expression of opinion. Multiple scholars note this tendency of Russian discourse and contrast it with Anglo-Saxon speech practices of more ‘subtle’ and ‘indirect’ expression (e.g., Gladkova 2015, Larina 2005, Wierzbicka 2012, Prohorov & Sternin 2002). We will quote Yale Richmond, a former US Foreign Service Officer who spent twenty years in Russia, and characterizes the manner of speaking which he finds specifically Russian as follows:

Straight talk is appreciated, even when it leads to disagreement. When disagreement does occur, Russians appreciate honesty rather than attempts to paper over differences. It is far better to level with them and be certain that they fully understand your position. They respect adversaries who are straightforward and sincere in expressing views that diverge from their own. (Richmond 2003: 143)

The use of the word *zhestkii* and *zhestko* with speech acts reveals similar tendencies in Russian-specific ways of talking.

Finally, the emergence of the new meaning of the word *zhest’* could be considered in the light of metaphorical use of words referring to metal. Other names of metal and their derivatives that are used metaphorically in Russian are *zheleznyi*

‘iron’ (as well as *zhelezno* ‘for sure/firmly’, also its variant *zhelezobetonnyi* ‘reinforced concrete’), *stal’noi* ‘steel’, also *zolotoi* ‘gold’, *serebryanyi* ‘silver’, *titan* ‘titan’. It is particularly interesting to consider the extension of the meaning *zhest’* against *zheleznyi* ‘iron’ and *stal’noi* ‘steel’, all of them being hard metals or alloys.

Both *zheleznyi* and *stal’noi* are productive in their metaphorical use. *Zheleznyi* collocates with the words *ruka* ‘hand’, *distsiplina* ‘discipline’, *kontrol’* ‘control’, *zanaves* ‘curtain’, *volya* ‘will’, *zhenshchina* ‘woman’, *tverdost’* ‘firmness’, *rukopozhatie* ‘handshake’, *paren’* ‘guy’. *Zhelezno* (adverb) has only metaphorical use as a colloquial word to emphasize the definite character of something:

(39) *V obshchem èto chas obeda / ikh ne otryvat’ / èto voobshche zhelezno.*

‘It’s lunch time and they shouldn’t be distracted; it is like iron.’

(40) – *Kos! Tebe ekhat’!*

– *Ya odin ne poedu / zhelezno!*

‘– Kos, you are to go!

– I will not go alone, that’s for sure’.

(41) – *Ty chto / ne predupredil?*

– *Da predupredil / zhelezno!*

‘– What? You haven’t warned them?

– I have! Dead sure!’

Google Books Ngram Viewer

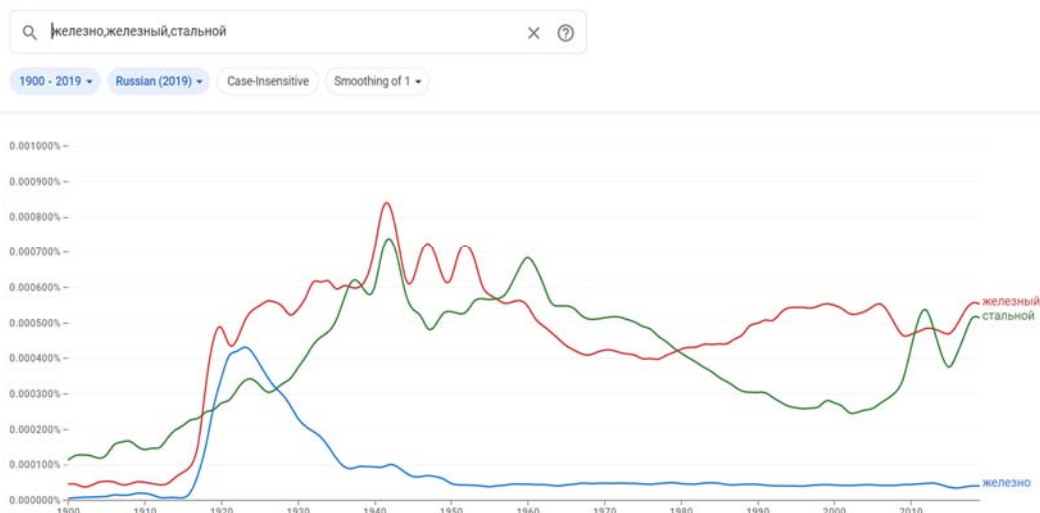


Figure 3. The frequency of use of *zheleznyj*, *zhelezno*, *stal’noj* in Google Ngram View in 1900–2019

The graph in Figure 3 indicates a significant rise in use of the words *zheleznyi* and *stal’noi* from the pre-revolution time with the steady use till around the 1960s. The rise is consistent with the industrial production of the materials. After the 1960s the variation in the frequency of use is not that significant. At the background of frequency of the words *zheleznyi*, *stal’noi*, the rise of frequency of *zhest’* in the recent years is more dramatic (see Fig. 1). This rise could coincide with the rise in

the demand and the production when tin packaging for food and beverages became widespread. At the same time, it is interesting to observe the change in the type of material and, consequently, qualities that are associated with the different types of metals. Iron and steel are very strong metals which are very durable and hard to bend. Consequently, the metaphorical use of the words emphasizes stability, firmness, and ability to stick to one's principles and words. Tin, on the other hand, has different qualities and use from iron and steel. It is characterized by flexibility and sharpness. It is the effect of emotional and psychological pressure and the ability to withstand it that is reflected in the meaning of *zhest'* as a colloquial word.

To sum up, the emergence of the new meaning of *zhest'* suggests, on the one hand, a certain lacuna in the Russian lexicon which has been filled. On the other hand, it also indicates the sufficient accumulation of the experience embedded in the word *zhest'* (unfair, sometimes, cruel treatment causing a strong emotional reaction and a desire to oppose it) that 'requires' being 'recorded' in language. The new meaning of *zhest'* is semantically and conceptually linked to the existing notions *zhestkii* and *zhestko* 'firm/hard', and it is also linked to the notion *zhestokii* and *zhestoko* 'cruel'. The sound similarity and symbolism might be playing a role in strengthening this connection. At the same time, we also observe a rise in frequency of use of the words in question. This overall situation suggests that the conceptual field relating to '*zhestkost'*' 'firmness' seems to be reinforced in contemporary Russian. It is not a new semantic field, but in our days, we observe the rise of its cultural salience.

## 6. Conclusion

The word *zhest'* has been used in a new meaning for more than a decade in Russian. While being mainly limited to youth jargon, it is already leaving this domain and infiltrating the official or semi-official speech. A detailed analysis based on data available in the Russian National Corpus using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage demonstrates that two major uses of the word can be distinguished – as an interjection and a noun. In the first use, the meaning has the components of realisation of something very bad happening to the interlocutor, emphatic understanding of the emotional condition of the interlocutor and the communication to the interlocutor of this realisation and a consequent feeling. In the second use, the word has the components of realisation of something very bad happening, the unusual character of such events, the desire not to feel like this and for things like this not to happen.

A detailed semantic analysis also identifies semantic components of the words *zhestkii* and *zhestko* and demonstrates their conceptual relation to the new meaning of *zhest'*. The increase of frequency of use of the words can be hypothesized to correlate with the increase of the cultural significance of the words.

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