

“MOTIVATED SIGNS”: SOME REFLECTIONS
ON PHONOSEMANTICS AND SUBMORPHEME
THEORY IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOCRITUS’
AND EPICURUS’ TRADITIONS

In the monograph “Ancient theories of the origin of language” Alexander Verlinsky¹ analyzed two fundamental traditions in the theory of language origin that are similar to one another in their “realistic and evolutionist nature”:² “The first one represented in the works by Diodorus, Vitruvius, and Lactantius, proceeds from the thesis about an arbitrary connection between a thing and a word and thus ... is close to ... the ideas of Democritus. The second one that reflects the ideas of Epicurus, on the contrary, puts forward a thesis about the necessary correlation between things and words...”³ Although the Epicurean tradition eventually goes back to the Democritus’ one,⁴ this discrepancy highlights Epicurus’ intention to justify as natural his own laws and principles of life as being opposed to extreme manifestations of modern civilization.⁵

Interestingly, it is from the ideas of Democritus that all modern linguistics evolved, since many centuries after Democritus, Ferdinand de Saussure put forward his thesis regarding the arbitrary (non-iconic) character of a language sign.

In comparison to Democritus, the Epicurean tradition has led merely to repeatedly reproduced “onomatopoeic” hypotheses about the origin of the language, which even forced the Société linguistique de Paris – for the lack of evidence in such hypotheses – to stop considering articles on this subject as early as in 1866. Modern linguistics addressed the problem of the origin of language only at the end of the twentieth century, when the accumulated knowledge both in linguistics itself and in related

¹ Verlinsky 2006 [А. Л. Верлинский, *Античные учения о возникновении языка*].

² Verlinsky 2006, 372.

³ Verlinsky 2006, 372–373.

⁴ Verlinsky 1997 [А.Л. Верлинский, “Возникновение речи в эпикурейской теории”], 83.

⁵ Verlinsky 2006, 375.

sciences triggered considering this problem in the framework of such areas as cognitive linguistics, neuro-linguistics, language acquisition, etc.⁶ The Epicurus' idea about the motivation of the words by properties of the denotata turned out to be resilient, encouraging linguists to look permanently for the traces of initial correlation between words and objects which in the course of historical development could become more complicated, but still discoverable within the framework of “sound symbolism” or “phonosemantics”.

The focus of phonosemantics is on the idea that sounds have inherent meanings. As R. E. Butler argues, this “small, but growing branch of linguistics lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's Theory of Signs. This theory states that a word and the object to which it refers are arbitrarily related. This, de Saussure explained, is why languages have such variety in words referencing the same object. The work of de Saussure has informed much of linguistics research; however, recent studies in phonosemantics ... have begun to challenge the ‘arbitrariness of signs’”.⁷ It is possible to point out that the differences between phonosemantics and de Saussure's Theory of Signs are similar to those between Democritus and Epicurus. In spite of the fact that de Saussure's theory is the mainstream in modern linguistics, a number of works concerning iconicity in language, sound symbolism, and phonosemantics is actually quite large.⁸ It is worth stressing that in many of these studies, the idea of the arbitrariness of signs remains unchallenged. For example, a recent study in which a statistical computer analysis was used to test a non-random connection of form and content in 106 languages, proved that “approximate effect size (measured in bits) is quite small – despite some amount of systematicity between form and meaning, an arbitrary relationship and its resulting benefits dominate human language”.⁹

Indeed, it is the non-iconicity of the language sign and its ability to “break away” from the denotatum that makes human language a unique universal sign system. At the same time, it seems improbable for language to completely exclude the use of iconicity in those cases when it allows creating signs in as simple way as possible.

⁶ The overview of modern concepts on the origin of language see in Burlak 2011 [С. А. Бурлак, *Происхождение языка. Факты, исследования, гипотезы*].

⁷ Butler 2017, 2.

⁸ See *inter alia*: Hinton–Nichols–Ohala 1994; Magnus 2001; Voronin 2006 [С. В. Воронин, *Основы фоносемантики*], and the extensive bibliography in these volumes.

⁹ Pimentel–McCarthy–Blasi–Roark–Cotterel 2019, 1751.

The creating of ideophones (or onomatopoeia), for instance, is natural for language: if a certain denotatum itself is a sound form, and any linguistic signifier is also a sound form, then a complete separation of one sound form from another would be unmotivated.¹⁰

At the same time, we can point out that although animals of a certain species make the same sounds regardless of the geographical area of their habitat, each particular language uses its own phonology to express the respective animal sounds. For instance, the rooster cries differently in different languages, often preserving only a sequence of unvoiced velars, which in most phonological systems are the closest correlates of natural sounds resembling the glottal stop.

In human languages, reduplication is found to be used for expressing plurality of nouns, iterative action or intensity of attributes. However, the language is not “obliged” to use only iconic reduplication to express such values, and in many cases other (non-iconic) means are used for this.

It is also natural that languages tend to push “old” information (topic) to the beginning of the clause, while “new” information (focus) is normally brought closer to the end of the clause.

In this case, the linear character of language is iconic for the ordering of information blocks.

Nevertheless, languages have the opportunity to “get away” from such iconicity, if necessary.

Regarding the motivation of language signs, the work by Roman Jakobson is of special interest, and it is this author whose works on the topic are most widely represented in the volume on phonosemantics edited by S. V. Voronin.¹¹ Jakobson does not contrast the two trends under observation, but attempts to find the proper niches for both non-iconicity and motivation of sign: “It is not the presence or absence of similarity or contiguity between the signans and signatum, nor the purely ... habitual connection between both constituents that underlies the division of signs into icons, indexes, and symbols, but merely the predominance of one of these factors over the others”.¹²

Interestingly, Jakobson anticipated a statistical or probabilistic approach to the interpretation of the phenomena of sound symbolism: “If we ask somebody what is darker – /i/ or /u/ while considering, for example, phonological opposition of front/back vowels, some of the respondents

¹⁰ About state of the art, see Dingemanse 2012.

¹¹ Voronin 1990 [С. В. Воронин, *Фоносемантические идеи в зарубежном языкознании*].

¹² Jakobson 1965, 26.

may answer that this question seems senseless to them, but hardly anyone will say that /i/ is darker than /u/".¹³

Despite these observations, a significant part of the phenomena considered in the context of this branch of linguistics, including some of the Jacobson's studies, seems to belong to the Democritus' tradition rather than to the Epicurus' one.

Building on the assumption that human language is organized as a system of oppositions, we consider that language can semantize any formal opposition even without an explicit correlation between a sign and its denotatum, i.e. in the absence of motivation for the very form of signs in the world of denotata.

Such cases include the phenomenon of "clustering"¹⁴ or "phonesthemes",¹⁵ which represent some sound (not morpheme) combinations: "These are submorphemic and mostly unproductive affixal units, usually flagging a relatively small semantic domain. A classic example in English is /gl-/, a prefix for words relating to light or vision, e.g. glimmer, glisten, glitter, gleam, glow and glin".¹⁶ In this case, we are dealing with the motivation of the sign, but this is not the motivation associated with the denotatum, because we can hardly assume that the idea of "vision" is indeed contained in the sound combination /gl-/. We interpret such cases as rather intralingual motivation: it seems natural for a language to label both differences and similarities. Thus, if a certain basic concept related to "vision" has /gl-/, the language may use this element to mark a particular meaning, adjusting by analogy the words that pertain to the same semantic zone. The process of "analogical changes" is well-known in historical linguistics, which supports our argument.

It is to be stressed that the idea of clustering or phonesthemes is as old as Plato's *Cratylus*. One can refer to the well-known Socrates' observation on the symbolism of Greek character *rho* whose immanent idea, in Socrates' opinion, is movement:

τὸ δὲ οὖν ῥῶ τὸ στοιχεῖον, ὥσπερ λέγω, καλὸν ἔδοξεν ὄργανον εἶναι τῆς κινήσεως τῷ τὰ ὀνόματα τιθεμένῳ πρὸς τὸ ἀφομοιοῦν τῇ φορᾷ, πολλαχοῦ γοῦν χρῆται αὐτῷ εἰς αὐτήν· πρῶτον μὲν ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ "ῥεῖν" καὶ "ῥοῆ" διὰ τούτου τοῦ γράμματος τὴν φορὰν μιμεῖται, εἴτα ἐν τῷ "τρέμω", εἴτα ἐν τῷ "τρέχειν", ἔτι δὲ ἐν τοῖς τοιοῖσδε ῥήμασιν οἶον

¹³ Jakobson 1975 [Р. О. Якобсон, "Лингвистика и поэтика", *Структурализм: "за" и "против"*], 223–224.

¹⁴ Magnus 2001.

¹⁵ Pimentel–McCarthy–Blasi–Roark–Cotterel 2019.

¹⁶ Pimentel–McCarthy–Blasi–Roark–Cotterel 2019, 1753.

“κρούειν”, “θραύειν”, “ἐρείκειν”, “θρύπτειν”, “κερματίζειν”, “ρύμβειν”, πάντα ταῦτα τὸ πολὺ ἀπεικάζει διὰ τοῦ ῥῶ. ἑώρα γὰρ οἶμαι τὴν γλῶτταν ἐν τούτῳ ἤκιστα μένουσαν, μάλιστα δὲ σειομένην· διὸ φαίνεται μοι τούτῳ πρὸς ταῦτα κατακεχρησθαι. (Plat. *Crat.* 426 d–e).

Well, the letter *rho*, as I was saying, appeared to be a fine instrument expressive of motion to the name-giver who wished to imitate rapidity, and he often applies it to motion. In the first place, in the words ῥεῖν (flow) and ῥοή (current) he imitates their rapidity by this letter, then in τρέμος (trembling) and in τρέχειν (run), and also in such words as κρούειν (strike), θραύειν (break), ἐρείκειν (rend), θρύπτειν (crush), κερματίζειν (crumble), ῥύμβειν (whirl), he expresses the action of them all chiefly by means of the letter *rho*; for he observed, I suppose, that the tongue is least at rest and most agitated in pronouncing this letter, and that is probably the reason why he employed it for these words (transl. by H. N. Fowler).

It seems of great importance that the correlation between a sound cluster and a meaning is not obligatory the same in different languages, since Socrates associates the sound combination /gl-/ in Greek with something glutinous, sweet or gluey, while in English this sound combination has quite a different semantic value of “vision”:

ἢ δὲ ὀλισθανούσης τῆς γλώττης ἀντιλαμβάνεται ἢ τοῦ γάμμα δύναμις, τὸ “γλίσχρον” ἀπεμιμήσατο καὶ “γλυκὺ” καὶ “γλοιῶδες” (Plat. *Crat.* 427 b).

Where the gliding of the tongue is stopped by the sound of gamma he reproduced the nature of γλίσχρον (glutinous), γλυκὺ (sweet), and γλοιῶδες (gluey) (transl. by H. N. Fowler).

There is another concept that can be treated as “intralingual” (or “intraparadigmatic”): this is the concept of submorpheme, or submorphemic neutralization which also dates back to R. Jakobson¹⁷ and was further elaborated in the work of K. Pozdniakov.

Pozdniakov has drawn a considerable distinction between the morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations.¹⁸ As regards the morphemic neutralization, there are many examples of this phenomenon in the world

¹⁷ Jakobson 1985 [Р. О. Якобсон, “Морфологические наблюдения над славянским склонением”, *Избранные работы*].

¹⁸ Pozdniakov 2003 [К. И. Поздняков, “Микроморфология или морфология парадигмы?”, *Язык и речевая деятельность*]; Pozdniakov 2009 [К. И. Поздняков, “О природе и функциях внеморфемных знаков”, *Вопросы языкознания*].

languages. Thus, in Swahili, the object case in the pronominal paradigm has the same form *wa* for the second and the third person plural pronouns. The German personal pronoun *sie* is used for the third person singular feminine, the third person plural and the second person plural honorific. The English personal pronoun *you* is used for both the second singular and the second plural. Such phenomena are often treated as homonymy or syncretism, but Pozdniakov considers them as morphemic neutralizations. It is worth stressing that the neutralization is not a destructive process which could eliminate meaningful differences between elements of a paradigm, nor is it an occasional realization of “the language economy principle”. On the contrary, a neutralization that reduces the opposition in a given semantic feature may, in turn, create another semantic feature, which can be very important for the language.

As for the submorphemic neutralization, the concept was first introduced by Jakobson who called this phenomenon “primeta” (*примета*, ‘mark’ in English) and applied it for the analysis of Russian declension. According to Jakobson, the dative, instrumental and prepositional cases in Russian adjectives are marked with a special semantic feature of “peripherality” that distinguishes them from all other cases. The formal marker of “peripherality” in the surface structure of adjectives can be seen in that all inflections in the dative, instrumental and prepositional cases (and only in these ones) in the singular forms of masculine gender have a common formal feature [m]: *-omy* [-omu] in the Dative, *-ym* [-ym] in the Instrumental, *-om* [-om] in the Prepositional.¹⁹ Thus, we are dealing with a sign: there is a meaning – “peripherality”, and there is a formal carrier of this meaning – [m], and there are no other ways to express the semantics of peripheral cases. Most intriguingly, the carrier of this value is formally (segmentally) smaller than a morpheme, which, therefore, loses its status of a “minimal linguistic sign”. These considerations open up an opportunity to introduce a new level of linguistic description, although the intra-paradigmatic “motivation”, or marking the semantics of peripherality with the nasal sonant is in a crucial contradiction with the traditional viewpoint that the meaning (semantics) cannot show up in the segments which are smaller than morphemes. For this new level K. Pozdniakov has coined a term “submorpheme”, with the process of neutralizing the semantic differences of the dative, instrumental, and prepositional cases under the common meaning of “peripherality” being called “submorpheme

¹⁹ The same feature can also be observed in the singular masculine forms of the numerals as well as of the demonstrative, possessive and anaphoric pronouns (but not in the noun declension or in the plural number).

neutralization”, a labial nasal sonant [m] being the formal carrier of this meaning.

This approach was applied by Pozdniakov to various languages and allowed him to conclude that submorphemic neutralization is used for “gluing” together the elements with a common component of meaning in the same way as morphemic neutralization does, but the former seems to be more convenient for language than the latter, since submorphemic neutralization allows to preserve the distinctions between the elements of a paradigm that cannot be preserved in case of morphemic neutralization. Pozdniakov points out the two important generalizations concerning these phenomena: first, elements of a certain paradigm may undergo both morphemic and submorphemic neutralization, while elements of other paradigms may keep their distinction without being affected by this process; second, the morpheme and submorpheme neutralizations tend to be in a complementary distribution.²⁰

Another important issue discussed by Pozdniakov is the relation of the submorphemic neutralization to the notion of iconicity of linguistic sign and sound symbolism. He believes that the submorphemic neutralization and iconicity have nothing in common. Indeed, the fact that [m] expresses the common meaning of “peripherality” for several cases in the singular adjectival paradigm of masculine gender has nothing to do with iconicity. This common feature is meaningful only in a certain linguistic paradigm and has no reference in reality. This can be proved by the fact that in another paradigm, [m] may have no meaning at all or absolutely different one.

The submorphemic level as an instrumental device for linguistic analysis was also supported by W. Dressler who presented Latin pronoun system as a sort of morpheme-submorpheme continuum.²¹ In Dressler’s opinion, “submorphemes can be classified as signs on signs, which can be operationalised as minimal meaningful elements within another sign”.²² The scholar contributes greatly to the theory of submorphemes, in particular, by distinguishing between inflectional submorphemes that have very precise meanings and phonaesthemes whose meaning is usually rather vague.²³

As regards Latin personal pronouns, Dressler ascribes a submorphemic status to the elements *no-/vo-* in the personal pronouns *nos/vos* and *nobis/vobis*, and also makes an important remark about the fundamental

²⁰ For more detail, see Pozdniakov 2009.

²¹ Dressler 2016, 55–65.

²² Dressler 2016, 59.

²³ Dressler 2016, 59.

difference between the first and second person pronouns, on the one hand, and the third person pronouns, on the other: the stems of the former begin with consonants (e.g., *me*, *te*, *nos*, *vos*), while the stems of the latter – with vowels (*illum*, *istum*, *hunc* etc.).²⁴

Building on these findings and drawing upon our own observations, we will demonstrate to what extent the submorphemic level is involved in the Latin paradigms of personal pronouns.

Indeed, the submorphemic neutralization of the first and second person pronouns both in the singular and in the plural marks the semantic feature “locutor +” (i. e. speech act participant + someone else) and occurs in various pronominal systems, for example, in French pronouns *nous* [nu] / *vous* [vu], *notre* [notr] / *votre* [votr], Russian pronouns *мы* [my] / *вы* [vy], *нас* [nas] / *вас* [vas], etc. We also observed a similar submorphemic neutralization in a number of pronominal paradigms in Latin, i. e., not only in *nos/vos* forms, but in the whole paradigm of personal pronouns in plural (*nostri/vostri*, *nostrum/vostrum*, *nobis/vobis*).

Another feature – “locutor only”, in our opinion, can be also expressed by means of the submorphemic neutralization, but in the Accusative and Ablative only: *me/te* (cf. Russian *меня* [menia] / *тебя* [tebia], French *moi/toi*, German *mir/dir*).

To sum up, the submorphemic level is an observable linguistic phenomenon that is effectively used to express such an important semantic opposition as “locutor vs. non-locutor”. Importantly, it is the submorphemic neutralization that allows to combine the speaker and the addressee and thus to contrast locutors and non-locutors in the languages which are lacking inclusive/exclusive opposition in the “overt” pronominal morphology.²⁵

It is worth noting that in two cases (the Genetive and the Dative), in addition to submorphemic neutralization of the first and second person pronouns, there is also submorphemic neutralization of the second and third persons (*tui/sui*, *tibi/sibi*) which marks the semantic feature “speaker

²⁴ Dressler 2016, 61. Zheltov 2008 [А. Ю. Желтов, *Языки нигер-конго: структурно-динамическая типология*], 135 points out a similar pattern for Russian pronouns in the nominative case: the syllable structure CV (*я*, *ты*, *мы*, *вы* [ja, ty, my, vy]) is a marker of the feature “locutor is included”, and VC (*он*, *она*, *они* [on, ona, oni]) – “locutor is excluded”.

²⁵ There are languages (e.g. some languages of the Niger-Congo family) that express the opposition “locutor vs. non-locutor” by means of the “overt” morphology, i.e. they have the opposition “inclusive pronoun vs. exclusive pronoun” in the overt morphology. The inclusive pronouns, in turn, are the first person plural pronouns that obligatorily “include” the second person singular pronoun in their semantics as well, while the exclusive pronouns do not have such semantics.

is excluded”, and it is with this means that the Latin language contrasts the addressee and non-locutors to the speaker. Importantly, this opposition can be expressed by no other means except for this one.

It is also possible to observe a certain submorphemic adjustment in the verbal inflections which are segmentally even much shorter than those of the pronouns: [m] in the inflections of the first person singular and plural (-*m* and -*mus*) creates the semantic feature “speaker is included”, [s] in the second person singular and plural (-*s* and -*tis*) – “addressee is included”, and [t] in the third person of both numbers (-*t* and -*nt*) – the semantic feature “non-locutor(s)”.

One can see that [-s] is found not only in the second person singular and plural inflections (-*s* and -*tis*), but also in the first person plural (-*mus*), that at first glance is in conflict with our assumption about [-s] as a marker of the feature “addressee is included”. In fact, it can be assumed that [-s] in the endings (-*mus*) and (-*tis*) creates the feature “addressee is not excluded”, which means that the ending (-*mus*) allows inclusive interpretation and, being the morphological correlate of the pronoun *nos*, indirectly indicates the possibility of inclusive use of the first person plural pronoun in Latin.

Comparing the meaning of the verb *vivamus* in *Petron.* 72. 3 to that in *Catull.* 5. 1, one can see two different meanings of the ending (-*mus*): when saying *vivamus*, Trimalchio addresses the whole company of his guests in which the speaker is included too, while in the Catullus’s *vivamus*, only Lesbia may be the addressee of the poet that implies “inclusive” interpretation of (-*mus*):

Immo iam coeperam etiam ego plorare, cum Trimalchio ‘ergo’ inquit ‘cum sciamus nos morituros esse, quare non vivamus?’ (Petron. 72. 3)

I had even begun to lift up my voice myself, when Trimalchio said, “Well, well, if we know we must die, why should we not live?” (transl. by M. Heseltine)

Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus... (Cat. 5. 1)

Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love! (transl. by L. C. Smithers)

To sum up, the common element [-s] in the endings (-*mus*) and (-*tis*) creates the feature “addressee is not excluded”.

To conclude, the arbitrariness of signs as one of fundamental language properties which was discovered by ancient philosophers and confirmed by modern linguists, dominates indeed human language. Nevertheless, the linguistic signs of each particular language possess various techniques of

intralingual “motivation” based on the oppositional nature of the language system that seeks to mark both semantic differences and similarities. Therefore, although Democritus’ trend in linguistics is evidently greatly influential and productive, Epicurus’ interest in “the motivation” of language signs is not senseless: the search for such a motivation is still alive, although the most productive findings in this field seem to belong to the “intralingual motivation” rather than denotatum-oriented motivation.

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The article attempts to trace how the difference in approaches to the question of language origin in the Democritus' and Epicurus' traditions is reflected in modern linguistics. According to the monograph by Alexander Verlinsky (2006), Democritus insisted on the arbitrary connection between objects and words, while Epicurus insisted on a necessary correlation between them. At first glance, Democritus' tradition has ultimately won, being reflected in the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure that remain of crucial importance for modern linguistics. If looking further, however, the research on motivation or iconicity of language sign is still quite alive, with a number of relevant studies. This paper argues that the majority of studies on the motivation of language signs still follow the Democritus' tradition rather than Epicurus' one. They tend to find the motivation based on purely intralingual data rather than in the “world of denotata”, the works by Roman Jakobson being of especial importance in this sense. Jakobson offered the idea of paradigmatically motivated signs that are segmentally smaller than morphemes, and this idea was further developed by Konstantin Pozdniakov and other linguists into the theory of submorphemic signs and submorphemic neutralizations. In support of this theory, this paper illustrates how the submorphemic level of the language can be used for the description of Latin personal pronouns.

В статье делается попытка проследить, каким образом различие в подходах к вопросу о происхождении языка в демокритовской и эпикурейской традициях отражается в современной лингвистике. Как указывает в своей монографии А. Л. Верлинский (2006), Демокрит настаивал на произвольной связи между предметами и словами, в то время как Эпикур – на необходимой

корреляции между ними. На первый взгляд, традиция Демокрита полностью победила, что нашло отражение в идеях Фердинанда де Соссюра, которые по-прежнему имеют решающее значение для современной лингвистики. В то же время интерес к исследованию мотивации и поиску иконичности языкового знака все еще актуален, что находит отражение в достаточно большом количестве работ по этой тематике. В данной статье приводятся аргументы в пользу того, что значительная часть исследований мотивации языковых знаков следует скорее традиции Демокрита, а не Эпикура. Их авторы склонны находить мотивацию, основанную на внутриязыковых данных, а не связанную с “миром денотатов”. В этом контексте особое значение имеют работы Р. О. Якобсона, предложившего идею парадигматически мотивированных знаков, которые сегментно меньше морфем. Эта идея получила дальнейшее развитие в трудах по теории субморфемных знаков и субморфемных нейтрализаций К. И. Позднякова и других лингвистов. Опираясь на эти идеи, авторы демонстрируют, как субморфемный уровень языка может использоваться для описания латинских личных местоимений.

CONSPECTUS

CARLO M. LUCARINI	
Zur Entstehung der griechischen Chorlyrik	215
MICHAEL POZDNEV	
Aias und Athen: Zur Geschichte einer Polemik	244
DMITRY CHISTOV, NATALIA PAVLICHENKO	
Lead Letter from the Excavations of Area ‘O-Western’ at the Berezan Settlement in 2017	259
BERND SEIDENSTICKER	
Sprecherbezeichnungen im <i>Kyklops</i> des Euripides	278
DAVID SEDLEY	
Etymology in Plato’s <i>Sophist</i>	290
NINA ALMAZOVA	
Recognition Based on Paralogism (Aristot. <i>Poet.</i> 1455 a 12–16)	302
EKATERINA DRUZHININA	
On the <i>Curiosity</i> of Philocrates (Ep. <i>Arist.</i> 1)	328
DENIS KEYER	
Inscription on a Roman Stylus from London	340
MARTIN FERGUSON SMITH	
A New Look at Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fr. 157 Smith	351
ELENA ZHELTOVA, ALEXANDER ZHELTOV	
“Motivated Signs”: Some Reflections on Phonosemantics and Submorpheme Theory in the Context of Democritus’ and Epicurus’ Traditions	363

ELENA ERMOLAEVA

Neo-Hellenic poetry in Russia: Antonios Palladoklis (1747–1801)
and Georgios Baldani (about 1760–1789) 375

ТАТИАНА КОСТЫЛЕВА

A Note to Vladimir Beneševič (1874–1938) Penned by
Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1848–1931) 387

Keywords 394

Правила для авторов 396

Guidelines for contributors 398