The Competence of Understanding in Intercultural Communication (Language Parallels)

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study is to present the process of understanding in communication according to the paradigm of cognitive linguistics. The views of modern linguists on the understanding as a heuristic and predetermined specific work in the on-line mode of communication are summarized. The difference with the structuralist views on the essence of this process is pointed out. The role of the words as the activators of the understanding and as a cultural frame of our experience in the semantics of the language is mentioned. The mechanism of verbalization in the language, which is culturally defined and is relevant to intercultural communication, is presented by its different traits, semantic selectivity, length of the synonym/antonym rows, conceptual categories, grammatical categories, maxims of communications, types of texts, metaphors and comparisons, cultural concepts and style of communication. This review is illustrated with specific examples from Bulgarian, Russian, English, Japanese, and Chinese language in a comparative context.

The specificity of intercultural communication as interpersonal communication is expressed through its value dimension. This important factor and its study through language is the essence of the competency of understanding in intercultural communication.

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Understanding is correlative to knowledge, but understanding in communication is not only limited to knowledge of the language.

1.   INTRODUCTION

With the development of the cognitive directions in modern linguistics, the focus on the person in the course of the communication process is becoming increasingly important, considering the primary goal of this science – to achieve an integrated picture of language, thinking and behaviour. Language is studied as a general cognitive mechanism which provides the most obvious and natural access to the cognitive processes and the cognitive mechanisms:

> *Language forms are not studied per se, independently, but from a position of how they reflect a certain view of the world by the person and his ways of conceptualization in language, the general principles of a categorization and mechanisms of processing the information, how all informative experience of the person is reflected in them, and also the influence of the social environment.*

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(Kubrjakova[2] 1994: 4-10, own translation).

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Fauconnier (1997) says that visible language is only the "top of an iceberg of invisible designs, which function when we think and we speak. This hidden, background, knowledge (cognition) defines our mental and social life. Language is one of the means of its external demonstration" (Fauconnier 1997: 1-2). The author writes about the 'amazing success' of cognitive science because for the first time (here) "most likely has started a link to an original science designing its meaning and dynamics" (Fauconnier 2002: 96).

Cognition is not "a foreign variant of the term knowledge" (Demjankov 2005:5-10). As Demjankov (2005) remarks the essence of this process consists of reception and the use of 'pre-knowledge' procedures – versions of cogitative operations that serve and accompany perception (in particular processing) and that produce both knowledge and language expressions for this knowledge:

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[2] Quotations of the works in Bulgarian and Russian language used in this article are translated by the author.

Within the limits of this module and on the basis of the internal resources of the interpreter of the dialogue, as if drawing a painting, a modelled world is constructed, which directly corresponds with the reality of the interpreter. Then, the private perception of the listener is compared with the modelled world of his own construction to establish the differences. The connections of both the modelled and internal worlds are drawn, the hypothetical interpretations for the perceived speech are verified, and the perception corresponds with the line of conduct, and the "mode" or the "key" through which speech is understood is chosen

(Demjankov 2005: 9, own translation).

Understanding has an *"anticipatory character"*, therefore, it is *hypothetical*, explains Vladimir Demjankov.

2. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the process of understanding in communication from the position of the subject's cognitive activity radically differs from the classical model of structuralism theories because understanding is not a simple "extraction of content" by exploring words and grammatical structures, or "decoding the meaning", but rather *"specific work"* (Zinchenko 1998) and *"incorporating meaning"* with the support of the signals contained in the communication, by reconstructing the memories, experiences, assessments and their "contemporization, modernization, actualization", taking into account the requirements of the current moment (not only what we are given in the text, but also the state of the subject, his environment and many other external and internal factors). Alexandra Zalevskaja (2005: 355) writes that a special role is devoted to the correlation between what transpires in the text and the readiness of the subject to counter design the meaning (for example, if in his previous experience the person has been in similar situations or has had the same moral and emotional encounters etc.).

Our experience from knowledge (which forms the basis of meaning in a language) is complex and it is also characterized by many parameters. It is perceptive, social, and cultural at the same time. This explains why many scientists point out that the essence of our experience makes the semantics of language inseparable from our knowledge of the world: the cognitive schemes and structures through which we "make sense" in language expressions do not differ from those through which we understand our existence and our actions in

the world (Zalevskaja 2005). This means that the semantics of the language, which represents the semantics (meaningfulness) of the world, is based on it; i.e. the content of our language is "given" in the form of a "picture of the world".

Today, instead of the term "picture of the world", the term "projected world" advanced by R. Jackendoff (1983) is increasingly used: "the conceptualized reality is projected into the natural language semantics, and a projected world is created in them" (Jackendoff 1983 as cited in Dimitrova 2009: 178, own translation).

> *It differs from the real world because of the differences in cultures influencing its perception and evaluation as well as the specifics of human perception (for example, people can see the light, the colors but cannot see the ultraviolet rays, cannot hear all the sound vibrations, etc., and therefore are unable to conceptualize in their minds their immediate perception and give it a linguistic form.*
>
> (Dimitrova 2009: 178, own translation)

It is Maya Pencheva (1998) who expresses a profound view on the conceptual picture of the world as a part of a "cognitive system of the highest rank of generality and systematic arrangement". This cognitive system is a "set of several systems: conceptual, linguistic, mythological, scientific, etc." (Pencheva 1998: 30, own translation). Each of them is considered by the author as a specific way of storing, processing and representing the cognitive experience. "The conceptual system is realized in the way of conceptualizing real and fictitious situations, actions, perceptions, etc., involving different types of thinking, including the non-verbal" (Pencheva 1998: 31, own translation).

Although language has its roots in the experience from which the meaning and linguistic form are designed, the relationship between language and experience in the categorization process, as it has become clear, is not unambiguous; it is not a relationship of identity, but rather a similarity, an approximation. The main idea behind prototype semantics is that our processes of categorization (and hence the construction of lexical meaning) are based on the principle of similarity and analogy rather than identity (Rosch 1975).

Therefore, the logical question is what activates the possible insights, the reception of the new meaning and thus directs the interpretation, the understanding of the speech? This particular role is "performed" by the words as

suggested by A. Zalevskaja (2005: 258, own translation). According to the Russian scholar's attractive explanation the role that the word has for the individual can be compared to a peculiar "hook", "fishing rod" or "flashlight" through which different levels of awareness "draw" or "illuminate" a particular fragment from the previous (verbal and non-verbal) experience of the individual, which acquires meaning according to the "I - Here – Now" principle, updated in line with the available pragmatic factors. "This hidden, background, cognition determines our mental and social life. Language is one of the means for its external manifestation" (Zalevskaja 2005: 258, own translation). In his wonderful scientific research on the cognition of Bulgarians Burov (2004) points out that both the material and the ideal are presented in words as objects of thought, hence the language semantics is characterized by a close connection between the sensible and the rational (Burov 2004: 231, own translation).

The questions about the significant role of the word as a means for accessing the unified "information base" of people - their memory, the multitude of insights, experiences, evaluations, are related to the word as the storage of the different formats of knowledge in various cognitive structures, such as frames, scripts, schemes, propositional structures, scenarios, concepts, gestalts, etc. (see Wittgenstein 1973), Rosch 1975, Minsky 1977, Lakoff 1981a, 1981b, 1988, 1996, Lackoff & Johnson 2003, Langacker 1999, Kubrijakova 1994, Wierzbicka 1996, 2001 among others).

Zalevskaja (2005) argues that since words are "semantic condensates" with a certain degree of synchronous stability, they can be considered as reference points in our activity to obtain insights. They are relatively fixed points from where we "go" to formulate hypotheses in the process of understanding and attributing meaning to a particular text in an 'on-line mode' according to many different pragmatic factors influencing the interpretative process. From the point of view of cognitive linguistics, comprehension processes are defined as "complex abductive procedures in which the regularity, which organizes the semantic system, forms the basis and prerequisites for cognition" (Zalevskaja 2005: 260). Thus, according to her the cognitive basis of the understanding the process that based on the prototype models of semantics has the following characteristics: cognition, regularity, procedure, similarity, analogy, abduction, inferential knowledge, acquisition processes, openness and dynamics. This view differs substantially from the positions of structuralism and structuralism-oriented linguistic models that view the processes of comprehension as an application of, and compliance with, pre-existing rules:

equivalence, code, rule, correspondence, identity, deduction, decoding, closure, and consistency (Zalevskaja 2005: 260, own translation).

"Different cultures, different ways of conceptualization" – points out A. Wierzbicka (1996: 395, own translation) – which comes to suggest that the values which are the most fundamental characteristics of each culture and the highest leading parameters for peoples' behaviour take a special place in the structure of the communicative personality (participating in a specific communicative act) (Karasik 2005). They deeply affect the intercultural communication which is predominantly interpersonal. The focus on the most typical forms of verbalization is particularly important when teaching foreign languages since the absence of direct contact with representatives of another culture imposes the need to acquire knowledge of the values in the respective culture primarily through the linguistic code. That's why we will consider examples from different languages with the aim to present situations that can lead to cognitive dissonance in intercultural communication.

Some examples of the mechanisms of verbalization, which vary among the different linguistic cultures, will be listed below without going into too much detail. In this part we use the criteria proposed by Grishajeva & Tsurikova (2006, 198-250),which we have examined under new headings. The examples we give are selected subjectively on the basis of our own judgment and when they are to another author, this is indicated in the appropriate order:

1. **The different features which the speakers of different languages select as important in the nomination** – for example, the presence of opposing signs that motivate the different names of the same phenomenon in Bulgarian, Russian and English language:

   (1)

   a. ***puten vuzel*** (in Bulgarian)

      road knot

      'junction road'

   b. ***dorozhnaya razvyazka*** (in Russian)

      road knot

      'junction road'

   c. *junction* road

2. **The semantic selectivity of language units** - cf. the combination of the words 'difference', 'rain' and 'coffee' in the following Bulgarian, Russian and English expressions:

(1)

  a. *Ne   vizjdam   goljama razlika* (in Bulgarian);

     Not   see I   big   difference.

     'I don't see a big difference'

  b. *Ja ne vizju bol'shoi raznicy   / rezkogo razlichija* (in Russian);

     I not see   big   difference / sharp difference

     'I don't see a big difference'

  c. *I do not see a big difference*

     I do not see a big difference / a sharp distinction

     I cannot see much difference' (in English)

(2)

  a. *silen dujd* (in Bulgarian)

     strong rain

     'heavy rain'

  b. *sil'nyi* dozhd (in Russian)

     strong rain

     'heavy rain'

  c.   heavy rain (in English)

(3)

  a. *silno kafe* (in Bulgarian)

     strong coffee

     'strong coffee'

  b. *krepkij kofe* (in Russian)

strong coffee

'strong coffee'

    c. *strong coffee* (in English)

3. **The length of the synonym / antonym chains** – if we compare the synonyms and antonyms of words such as: *success, failure, generosity, true, false, love, beauty etc.* in different languages and cultures, we will find out that they differ due to variety of evaluations and prototypes of meaning;

4. **The presence of different functional means that refer to the same conceptual sphere** – e.g. *they walked – they were walking in silence – they were silent – silent walk – silent walking.*

5. **The conceptual categories and ways of their expression** - cf., for example, the category of determination of nouns in the three quoted languages (for the Russian language this is a semantic category, for English and Bulgarian – it is grammatical; in English, for example, the category of gender of nouns is a semantic category, etc.).

6. **The number of grammatical categories and their constructive grammatical meanings** (for example, the case category of nouns in Russian, Bulgarian and English);

7. **Metaphors, metonyms and comparisons** – It is a well-known statement made by Lakoff (1981a, b) that our everyday conceptual system which controls the ways in which we think and act is "metaphorical in its very essence" (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 387). That's why the concepts governing our thinking are not at all confined to the intellect. As Lakoff & Johnson (2003) claim these concepts also manage our daily activities including the most ordinary things we do. The examples are numerous and well-studied (Lakoff 1981a, b; Lakoff & Johnson 2003).

We will quote a part of a Bulgarian TV commercial (2017) in which a bottle of beer is presented with military vocabulary because of its form which can be associated with a bomb and which is the main reason for using wordplay:

(4)

    a. Beshe lyatoto na 1966. *Studenata voyna* beshe v razgara si. *Pusnaha* ya bez preduprezhdenie. *Bombichkata*! Efektat beshe *porazitelen*! Shtom ya *pusneha* nikade ne ostavashe *zhiv chovek* na ulitsata. Vleze *na vaorazhdenie* v *aviatsiyata*. Stana zadalzhitelna chast ot *arsenala*

na uzhavavashtia sebe si uhazhor. Beshe kakto sega mu kazvate: *Bum*! (in Bulgarian)

It was the summer of 1966. The *Cold War* was in its height. They *released* it without warning. The *bomb*! It had a *striking* effect. As soon as they *released* it somewhere, there were *no living people* in the street. It joined the *aviation industry* as well. It became an obligatory part of the *arsenal* of the *womanizer*. It was like as you say today: *Boom!* (in English, own translation).

Comparisons are also very interesting for analysis because they contain prototypical and culturally conditioned standards for conceptualisation and also embody the figurative metaphorical thinking of people: for example, the prototypes of face differ from one to another culture. A person's face is the focus in a very recent (2016) comparative study of Chinese and Russian. The author – Yuy Fenin points out that the most important signs in both languages are the colour, shape and size of the face, as well as the hair and eyes. He states that the basic ideographic categories of the comparisons describing a person's face coincide in Russian and Chinese but in some of the categories there are discrepancies caused by the absence of some characteristics in one of the languages – for example, in Russian the oval and square face are not compared to anything, while in Chinese there are no comparisons describing a dirty, stained or swarthy face. There is also a difference in quantity: the comparisons describing a person's face in Russian are reported to be twice as large in number as those in the Chinese language and the characteristics of the facial complexion are marked differently. An example given by the author is that the black (dark) hair colour in the Chinese culture is not a relevant sign as it is the dominant hair colour in the Chinese ethnic group, while in the Russian culture the colour, length, and softness of the hair represent the standard of beauty or ugliness. For the same reasons the comparisons describing black eyes are not formulated in the Chinese dictionaries. Yuy Fenin points out that the characteristics of blue and green eyes are generally not relevant to the Chinese mentality and therefore, they are not traditionally described. Attention is also drawn to the insignificance of the characteristics of the nose, beard and lips in contrast to the very representative and significant characteristic of the shape of the eyebrows. Fenin comments that if in Russian 5 lexical units are used to describe the eyebrows, in Chinese there are 14 units. Small eyes are evaluated negatively in both cultures

and are compared to the eyes of animals or objects of everyday life. For instance:

(5)

    a. like two cranberries, like fish (in Russian);

    b. like a button hole, like a mouse, like a shrimp, like the seeds of a watermelon (in Chinese) (Fenin 2016: 163).

It is interesting to note that the eyes are also considered ugly in both cultures. Therefore, the following words are used to refer to the eyes in the two languages:

(6) colourless, dead, immobile, cold, unfeeling, sick (Fenin 2016: 169).

A lot of nation specific units were noted by the author to refer to the eyes and to the face in Chinese, namely:

(7)

    a. with positive connotation: eyes calm like autumn water; eyes narrow as the moon when it laughs; the eyes are kind, beautiful like that of a Phoenix; eyes green like fireflies, etc. (Fenin 2016: 169, own translation);

    b. with negative connotation: eyes that are colourless, dead, immobile, cold, emotionless, sick (Fenin 2016: 170, own translation);

(8)

    a. the face is as white as frozen fat; powdered face; a face as red as bard; a face emotionless as decayed ash, etc. (Fenin 2016: 170, own translation).

8. **The rules of communication** – One of the different 'axioms of communication' (relevant to the Russian culture is the 'axiom of sincerity' (do not tell lies) as stated by Glovinskaja (2003:47, own translation), unlike the Anglo-Saxon culture, in which more important is the 'axiom of tolerance' (do not give judgments that are unpleasant to the addressee). In Japanese culture the relevant point is 'not to lose face' ('mentsu wo ushinau' which means to disagree with someone in public, thus causing them embarrassment) (Ivanov 2017: 176, own translation) etc.

9. **The types of texts which are primary in the performance of one or another communicative function** – The information obtained through non-linguistic and linguistic means correlates and reflects the culturally specific way of conceptualizing reality according to Grishajeva & Tsurikova (2006: 198-250). So it is legitimate to note that the final product of the reflective activity – the text – is one of the mechanisms of verbalization of non-linguistic reality. Behind the typology of texts there is always a significant layer of morally ethical, socially important values relevant to a particular society (Grishajeva & Tsurikova 2006: 198).

10. **The cultural concepts** – It is said that cultural concepts 'accumulate', preserve and relay the most important elements of the cognitive experience of the representatives of a given linguistic society. Cultural concepts act as symbolic signs in people's activities because they contain the significant, essential, models of categorization and rationalization of the world arranged in a certain format according to their value for the people. "Concepts essential to spoken communication in a given language are value signs," said the Russian scientist Vladmir Karasik, "they are landmarks and symbols and are phenomena of culture" (Karasik 2004: 211, own translation). The actual linguistic research of the cultural concepts is carried out in the form of observation and experimentation (excerption of lexical and collocation units from dictionaries, books, the press, etc. on the one hand, and questionnaires containing different evaluation judgments related to certain subject areas, on the other). Data from other scientific disciplines is also attractive, making linguistic research of cultural concepts thorough and fruitful. The prototype meaning which is derived from a certain word through its dictionary definition involves also the image and value components (Karasik, 1996). For example, the concept of success, although having a 'universal' character at a conceptual level like need, good, life strategy and philosophy, happiness and satisfaction from life which is embodied in the dictionary definition, acquires a different meaning in the spoken practice (discourse) of different languages. The main reason for this are the various evaluation elements which are both positive and negative in Bulgarian and Russian and which are only positive in American and British culture (in Andrienko & Ivanova 2013: 180, own translation). The attitude towards success provokes the creation of many auto-stereotypical (reflexive) notions that seek to promote or overcome certain aspects of the collective national identity:

(9)

    a. an American dream, a Russian idea, a European dream – with positive connotation;

    b. a Bulgarian paradox, a Bulgarian syndrome, a good job but done by Bulgarian job, a Bulgarian dream – with negative connotation.

Success as a cultural concept is considered a value within the framework of culturally-based national ideological models (Ivanova 2012: 97).

Because of the value dimensions the cultural concepts exhibit differences in the lexical-semantic fields in different languages. The findings reported by a research performed by Izotova (2012) on the ways in which the conceptual component of the concept of *happiness* reveal the following: *love / passion* are not clearly expressed conceptual components of this concepts and belong to the the periphery of its lexical-semantic field. The core of the concept includes *duty, self-sacrifice, mutual aid* (Izotova 2012: 7, own translation).

> *Happiness in the Japanese cultural and historical tradition does not serve as a value criterion for the life of the individual; in society it is not customary to declare the obligation to achieve happiness; there is a 'fear" of happiness and a tendency to "downplay".*

(Izotova 2012: 7, own translation).

11. The style of communication – There is no such language "in which everything that the speaker thinks and suggests to the listener is assertively (explicitly) expressed. The plan of expression associated with assertion is always more reduced than the content plan including the verbal part semantics and the presumptions (presuppositions)" (Dimitrova 2009: 74, own translation). Dimitrova distinguishes four elements of the presuppositions: "they are the unconditional terms of speech acts; the extralinguistic knowledge behind linguistic expressions; the classifiers of the experience; the conditions for the adequate use of sentences" (Dimitrova 1984: 5, own translation). Therefore, she claims that the components of the meaning of speech can be misinterpreted due to the differences in the viewpoints of the speaker and the listener.

In describing cultures on the basis of how explicit the messages exchanged are and how much the context means in certain situations, the American anthropologist Edward Hall (1976) spoke about high-context cultures

(carrying implicit meanings with more information than the actually spoken parts) and low-context cultures (where the messages have a clear meaning, with nothing implied beyond the words used). For example, Japanese culture is a high-context culture because it relies mainly on non-verbal, implicit communication (the concept of "Wa") (Nechayeva 2016: 394, own translation).

3. CONCLUSION

The provided analysis of the understanding in intercultural communication adds two more elements to the fundamental ontological paradigm 'Man – Language – World' which may be restated in a more definitive manner: 'Man – Language – Culture – World (projected world)'. The questions about the axiological dimension of knowledge, personality and identity in the cultural and intercultural space need to be addressed in the global modern society. The specificity of intercultural communication as interpersonal communication is expressed by its value dimension.

The cognitive basis of understanding is constituted by prototype models of semantics and it is the words that direct the interpretation of speech, activate the possible insights, experiences, evaluations.

In foreign language teaching, special attention should be given to the cultural concepts: the words that accumulate, preserve and relay the most important of the cognitive experience of the representatives of a given linguistic society. The cultural concepts contain the significant, essential models of categorization of the world, arranged in a certain format according to their value for the people.

In this article we examined the mechanism of verbalization (adding a focus on cultural concepts), which is culturally defined and is relevant to intercultural communication. The proposed review is illustrated with specific examples from Bulgarian, Russian, English, Japanese, and Chinese language in a comparative context.

The comparative context is an important part of developing the competence of understanding that we all need in intercultural communication.

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