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**Ethnography of Communication: Some Aspects of Ethno-semantics and Ethno-pragmatics**

Abstract: The paper touches upon some topical problems of the Ethnography of Communication, in particular, those of ethnosemantics and ethnopragmatics. The author argues that cognitive competence in a foreign language requires from the speaker a complex foreign language cognitive infrastructure, including a number of culturally specific frames and themes conceptualized differently by the speakers of the English and Russian languages.

Key words: ethnography of communication, ethnosemantics, ethnopragmatics, cultural themes, frames, cultural appropriateness of an utterance.

It is a well-known fact that the role of the cultural dimension in Foreign Language (FL) education has been radically reassessed/re-evaluated in the post structuralist era of the 90s. As a consequence, in modern FL pedagogy language is seen as social practice and the non-native speaker needs to learn how language functions in society. This pedagogical ideology assigns a much more salient and significant role to culture. In fact, the current pedagogical trend is dominated by **ethno-methodology** and requires that culture becomes the very core of language teaching, so that proficiency in a foreign language is defined as “what learners can ***do*** with language, rather than what they ***know*** about it” [8, 181]. More than that, recognition of a dialectical unity of language and culture inspires many FL professionals look for methods and ways of developing not only a culturally competent learner but also what Kramsch calls “**a cross-cultural personality”** [6]**.** Put simply, it means thatFL students must be alerted to **what one may say to whom, when, and how** in a foreign language. This kind of competence also implies being knowledgeable about the communicative styles of the people in the target culture and the speech manners and behavior acceptable or unacceptable in certain situations as well as awareness of the appropriateness/inappropriateness of an utterance in L2 ethno-cultural environment.

The specific area of linguistics that focuses on those problems is known as **Ethnopraphy of Communication** [4; 9]and is aimed at alerting the speaker to distinguishing between culturally true and culturally false utterances as well as the **appropriateness** of an utterance in L2 ethno-cultural environment.

An illustrative example of inappropriateness and cross-cultural miscommunication could be the Ukrainian/Russian “aggressive hospitality” with its energetic cajoling, urging and persuading the guests to eat and drink more than is good for them. The effect is predictable: your Western visitors will almost certainly feel resentful, may take offence, and regard your behavior as imposition.

Ethnography of Communication also alerts FL learners to aspects of ethnopragmatics, such as acceptable and tabu topics for conversation. For example, it would be useful to learners of English to know that people in the English speaking cultures avoid talking about religion and politics when in company - these are sensitive and, therefore, tabu topics. An American is free to shout about his religious or political views in public – at meetings, in the media, etc., but a well-bred person would never allow himself to do so in informal sociable talk: these topics are considered controversial and therefore fraught with conflict, which would be quite acceptable in a professional situation or political debate but not at a party or informal get-together. Instead, people indulge in “small talk” - taking turns, exchanging rather short comments or remarks, never interrupting each other, never monopolizing attention by focusing on themselves. One British researcher compared small talk with a game of tennis: listening to your interlocutors, you move your head this way and that way all the time, so that your neck starts to ache. Again this is in sharp contrast with most Slavic, Latin, Jewish, and Arabic people who love to talk “big” and eloquence in those cultures is a socially approved virtue.

As distinct from the Anglo-Saxon cultures, in countries like Germany or Russia, Israel or Saudi Arabia politics and religion are pretty common, even preferred topics in informal interaction. For many people in those cultures heated discussions, passionate arguments may be said to be a favorite national pastime.

Talking about personal health is not usually regarded favourably in the Anglo-Saxon cultures. In this, they differ from some Slavic ones, in which it is quite acceptable for people to share details about their pains, aches and complaints.

The amount of information exchanged in conversation is also culturally significant: in some cultures people tend to exchange **factual** information, analyze “facts and figures”; in others the accent is on “**the emotional**”, they are better at expressing and discussing feeling and moods. American is traditionally known to be a “factual” culture. Most people there resent what they call “emotional appeals” and pressure, have no respect for mood swings, emotional outbursts and soul-baring either in professional or interpersonal relationships and situations. From primary school they are taught to “look for the facts’ and “weigh the evidence”; they are interested in “what” the other person says and not in how he feels.

Other problems Ethnography of Communication deals with are those of Ethnosemantics. Awareness of the nuances of cultural meanings requires from the speaker a high degree of the so-called ***cognitive, or conceptual competence*** (CC), i.e. “feeling at home in the target culture’s contexts of thought and knowledge” [2, p. 89]. The key point of this cognitive aspect of Ethnography of Communication is the claim that our speech behavior does not only reveal our wants, views, attitudes and emotions, but also how they all are organized in our brains/heads, how we encode the world, how we store information about it in our memory, how we prioritize – sort out primary and secondary information, how we make decisions about a future course of actions. In other words, speech behavior requires an extensive mental infrastructure.

It appears that our thinking, as well as knowledge, has a complex, elaborate cognitive infrastructure whose discrete components are the so-called **frames, or scripts, or nodes**. These in the prototypical definition by W. Dressler [3, 90] are “global patterns of common sense knowledge about some cultural concept”. According to E. Goffman [5, 128], “frames are metal representations, models or schemata of the principles by which situations are defined and sustained by experiences”. They are scripts, algorhythms or programs, along whose lines we speak and act. All this is leading to a recognition of the fact that CC in a foreign language covers the communicator’s ability not only to use appropriate L2 structures but also think within the framework of L2 conceptual system, or “framing-patterning” [7].

Such culturally marked frames are often encoded in folk sayings, proverbs, mottoes and recurrent expressions, because they reflect the mentality of a nation, are depositories of folk wisdom and morality. An in-depth study was done by J. Shamayeva [1], of the conceptual infrastructure of a cognitive model of “joy” in American English which yielded some interesting insights into American cultural values. It appears that joy is predominantly conceptualized as material rewards for the efforts made to achieve goals. The analysis thus highlights the pragmatic “enterprising” nature of the American national character and the American ethno-semantic personality as distinctly action and achievement oriented.

The research also contains some comparative observations as to the Russian and Ukrainian versions of this model. To the speakers of those languages the concept of joy is often associated with tears («со слезами на глазах»), it seems to be inseparable from pain and suffering. Joy is also perceived as sinful and inevitably followed by punishment: *смех сквозь слезы; смейся, смейся – как бы потом плакать не пришлось; слезы радости; тихая радость; любишь кататься, люби и саночки возить; смех и грех, не было счастья, так несчастье помогло.*

The notion of cognitive/conceptual competence is being intensely developed by the A. Wierzbicka who argues [10; 11] that our speech behavior (both in L1 and L2) is regulated by what she calls “cultural scripts” or “cultural themes” existing at the level of national sub-consciousness and ethno-psychology. Cultural themes are certain stable concepts that dominate in the national psychology of the people who share a common linguo-culture. Cultural themes are also indicative of a culture’s norms, values and priorities. They are “culturally shared ideas”, key cultural concepts, views and attitudes historically developed and traditionally important in the life of the given cultural entity. A nationally specific system of such scripts/themes constitutes, according to this scholar, an unwritten subconscious “cultural grammar of speech”, whose rules are imperative for all the members of the given speech community. Examples of cultural scripts/themes are: male dominance (Middle Eastern and Oriental cultures); cult of authority developed in many collectivist cultures, e.g. the Russian *«Начальник всегда прав»;* «*Я начальник – ты дурак, ты начальник – я дурак».*

For the US, according to Wierzbicka, one of the most powerful and culturally marked themes is **“food”.** In Danesi’s [2] view, CC also means the speaker’s capacity to use L2 specific metaphorization mechanisms (hence - also the term *metaphoric competence).* Cultural themes apparently provide the needed vocabulary which is then extensively used **metaphorically** in other contexts. Because food takes such a prominent place in the lives of Americans, they make a wide metaphoric use of culinary terms: *she is a cupcake, the icing of the cake, you look good enough to eat; you’re my sweetie, sugar pie, honey, we’re in the same soup, to swallow an insult, not my cup of tea, to stew in one’s own juice, to eat out of one’s hand,* etc.).

But even more prominent cultural concepts in the Americans culture are “**Time”** and **“Money”.** Actually, they seem to betwo facets of one and the same thing.It is awell-known fact that Americansvaluetime and punctuality**,** are obsessed with deadlines and schedules.TheAmerican catch phrase “Time is money” is proverbial, it indicates a busy culture that puts a high priority on financial gains and uses money as an important gouge against which other virtues are measured. Money is the major cult, “Money makes the world go round”. All the following examples have been taken from books and real-life conversations*: “I wouldn’t put my money on this method, I don’t think it’ll pay feedback wise; John’s first suggestion – that’s where my money is”, “My money is not on his plan”, “My check-book is not on him”; “I cannot say for money what he sees in this girl”; You look like a thousand/million dollars*; you “buy” an argument, you “sell” a theory. Americans PAY: a visit, a compliment, respect, homage, attention, consideration, an arm and leg for something, lip-service to smb/smth., court to smb., they expect a pay-off for their efforts. Every day you hear or read utterances like: “It doesn’t pay to argue with your teacher; it is a million-dollar question, it feels like payback ”, etc.

Very heavy with cultural message is the concept of **“wealth**”. In the US a rich man is a virtuous, “good” person, a lazy one – a sinner, “white trash”. It is the rich ones that are respected as bearers of high moral values, Americans have been taught for generations that riches is God’s reward to you for you hard work. This seems to be in sharp contrast with the Russian/Ukrainian conceptualization of “wealth” - cf. : *“Не в деньгах счастье; не имей сто рублей... ; бедность – не порок; гол как сокол – поет и веселится“,* etc. Poverty is regarded as a virtue – you are respected for being poor, you are thought to be highly moral and saintly, victimized by the “bad rich guys”.

A very culturally significant theme for the speakers of Russian/Ukrainian is “**Fate**”/ “**Doom**”, which is predominantly conceptualized from the point of view of the individual’s insignificance in the faced of it. This is reflected in numerous proverbs and sayings: *чему быть – того не миновать; куда кривая вывезет; как карта ляжет; будь что будет; что суждено, то сбудется; человек предполагает, а Бог располагает; все под Богом ходим; Бог дал, Бог взял»; что будет, то будет; пан или пропал; как бы веревочке ни виться…,* etc*.*

“**Work**” is of utmost importance to Americans, one of the major cultural concepts: sayings like*“We live to work”*, “*It’s an early bird that catches a worm”* point to a culture, that values initiative, diligence, and reflect the “get-up-and-go” American spirit – cf. with the Russian: *«Работа не волк, в лес не убежит»; «Работа дураков любит»; «Ты, работа, нас не бойся, мы тебя не тронем»* etc.

To sum up: both frame patterns and cultural themes reflect the traditional values and the priorities people of different cultures set for themselves. No wonder, lack of cognitive competence in this area causes maximum communication failures and breakdowns in cross-cultural interaction. Being highly ritualized and culturally shaped, those fragments of our world view, of our national picture of the world, they usually require maximum cognitive restructuring, reorganization and adaptation when a person is transplanted from one linguo-culture to another.

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