

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 ethno-semantics and ethno-pragmatics. The author argues that cultural competence in a foreign language requires from the non-native speaker a complex cognitive infrastructure, including a number of culturally specific frames and themes. It is shown how differently some of those cultural themes are conceptualized by the speakers of English and Russian.

Key words: ethnography of communication, ethno-semantics, ethno-pragmatics, cultural themes, frames, cultural appropriateness of an utterance.

It is a well-known fact that the role of the cultural dimension in foreign language education has been radically reassessed in the post structuralist era of the 90s. As a consequence, in modern Foreign Language 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 Foreign Language Teaching professionals to look for methods and ways of developing not only a culturally competent learner but also what E. Kramersch calls “**a cross-cultural personality**” [6]. Put simply, it means that foreign language 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 **Ethnography of Communication** [4; 9] and is aimed at alerting the foreign language learner to distinguishing between culturally true and culturally false utterances.

An illustrative example of cross-cultural miscommunication which may result from such inappropriateness could be the notorious Russian “aggressive hospitality” with the hosts 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, regarding your behavior as imposition.

Ethnography of Communication also alerts FL learners to various aspects of ethnopragmatics, such as acceptable or 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 topics. An American may be free to shout about his/her religious or political views in public – at meetings, in the media, etc., but a well-bred person would never allow himself/herself to do so in informal sociable chat: 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 an informal get-together. Instead, people prefer to indulge in “small talk” - taking turns, exchanging rather short comments or remarks, never interrupting each other, never monopolizing attention or focusing on themselves. “Small talk” is sometimes compared 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 many of whom love to talk “big” and eloquence in those cultures is a socially approved virtue.

As distinct from the Anglo-Saxon cultures, in countries like Russia, Ukraine or Israel politics and religion are quite acceptable, even preferred topics for informal interaction. For many people in those cultures heated discussions, passionate arguments over controversial issues 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*”, people there 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 an early age 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 foreign language 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, 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 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 include 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 mental representations, models or schemata of the principles by which situations are defined and sustained by experiences”. They are scripts, algorithms or programs, along whose lines we speak and act. All this is leading to the 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 and are often depositories of folk wisdom and morality. An in-depth study was done (J. Shamayeva [1]) of the conceptual infrastructure of a cognitive model of “joy” in American English, which yielded some interesting insights into the American cultural values. It appears that *joy* is predominantly conceptualized by Americans as material rewards for the efforts made to achieve goals. The analysis 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 version of this model. To the speakers of those languages the concept of joy is often associated with grief and tears («со слезами на глазах»): *смех сквозь слезы* (*laughter through tears*); *смейся, смейся – как бы потом плакать не пришлось* (*laugh while you can - you may want to cry soon*); *слезы радости* (*tears of joy*); *тихая радость* (*quiet joy*); *любишь кататься, люби и саночки возить* (*if you like to sledge – learn to enjoy dragging the sledge uphill*); *не было счастья, так несчастье помогло* (*where there was no happiness, unhappiness helped*); *"где смех, там и грех*. (*where there is laughter, there is sin*). These and similar proverbs contain a culturally indoctrinated moral: laughter may not be sinful in itself, but it surely provokes sin.

The notion of cognitive/conceptual competence is being intensely developed by the American social linguist 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 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» (*the boss is always right*); «Я начальник – ты дурак, ты начальник – я дурак» (*I am the boss – you are a fool, you are the boss – I am a fool*); «Прав тот, у кого больше прав» (*He is right who has more power*).

In M. 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 different contexts. For the people in the US, according to A. Wierzbicka, one of the most popular and culturally marked themes is “**food**”. 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 American culture are “**Time**” and “**Money**”. Actually, they seem to be two facets of one and the same thing. It is a well-known fact that Americans value time and punctuality, are obsessed with deadlines and schedules. The American catch phrase “Time is money” is proverbial, indicating a busy culture that puts a high priority on financial gains and uses money as an important gauge 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 works of fiction 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*”, “*It sounds like a very marketable idea*”; “*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. Speakers of English pay: a visit, a compliment, respect, homage, attention, consideration, an arm and leg for something, lip-service to smb/smith., 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 “**wealth**”. In the US? For example, 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*» (*money does not bring happiness*); «*не имей сто рублей, а имей сто друзей*» (*you do not need a hundred roubles, if you have a hundred friends*)... ; «*бедность – не порок*» (*poverty is no sin*); «*бедный гол как сокол – поет и веселится*» (*a poor man is naked and broke, but is singing merrily*), etc. In the Russian cultural tradition 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 powerful cultural theme for the speakers of Russian is “**Fate**”/ “**Doom**”, which is predominantly conceptualized from the point of view of the individual’s helplessness and insignificance in the face of it. This is reflected in numerous proverbs and sayings: *чему быть – того не миновать* (*one cannot avoid what is bound to happen*); *куда кривая вывезет* (*you cannot know where the curvy line of your life will take you*); *как карта ляжет* (*you are not to know what cards you will be issued*); *будь что будет* (*come what may*); *что суждено, то сбывается* (*everything that is bound to happen, will happen*); *человек предполагает, а Бог располагает* (*man makes plans, God makes decisions*); *все под Богом ходим* (*everything is God’s will*); *Бог дал, Бог взял* (*God gives, God takes away*); *как бы веревочке ни виться, все равно конец найдется* (*no matter how the rope twists and knots, it will come to an end*), etc.

To most Americans of utmost importance is the theme of “**Work**”, it is 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 – compare with the Russian: «*Работа не волк, в лес не убежит*» (*work is not a wolf – it won’t run away into the woods*); «*Работа дураков любит*» (*work loves fools*); «*Ты, работа, нас не бойся, мы тебя не тронем*» (*work, don’t you be afraid, we are not going to touch you*), etc.

To sum up: both frame patterns and cultural themes reflect the traditional values and the priorities people of different cultures set for themselves, which makes ethnography of speech a fascinating field of linguistic and exploration. Lack of cognitive competence in this area accounts for a great number of 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, usually require maximum cognitive restructuring, reorganization and adaptation when a person is transplanted from one linguo-culture to another, and for that reason alone, they certainly deserve a special attention from second language teaching and cultural studies professionals.

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