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EXPLORING CULTURAL VALUES AND BELIEFS IN ACADEMIC BACKGROUND: EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING THE SUBJECT *LINGUISTICS AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION*

Cultural values and beliefs can be explored not only by ethnographic observation of everyday communication but also in educational context. In a case like this, both lecturer and students can become participants in a process of observation, the aim of which is to explore the cultural specifics of communicative behavior in a multilingual society and their linguistic manifestation. A modern interpretation of the classic theory of relativity, called thinking-for-speaking can prove to be revealing of the way speakers of a foreign language manipulate its grammar from the point of view of their own language. Thus, what is seen as an "error" in language use can turn out to be not the result of insufficient knowledge of grammar but of inappropriate application of grammatical rules. The guiding principle in communication is getting the message across rather than displaying knowledge of grammar. In our case, the message is centred around fundamental concepts like time-cyclicity, repetitiveness and duration. Each of these concepts is encoded differently in the grammars (tense and aspect systems) of the two languages used by the target group of students observed – Russian and English. While trying to cope with the task of telling a story, a student manipulates English aspectual system from the point of view of Russian grammar. The unsuccessful use of the foreign grammar can be accounted for by the cognitive processes, involved in the process of speaking a language different from one's own.

Keywords: intercultural communication, language, thought, thinking-for-speaking, aspect.

• Introduction

The present paper explores the relationship between language and culture in an educational context. A group of university students of foreign philology at the L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University in the city of Astana, Kazakhstan, attended a lecture course that introduced to them theoretical approaches studying human communication in the context of the relationship between language, thought, cultural behavior, national and social identity, norms and rules of language use. They

followed a course *in Linguistics and intercultural communication* which comprised both theoretical input and practical seminars. The theoretical input was focused on the ethnography of communication, rooted in the Whorfian tradition of studying culture and language as relative and closely bound up with each other. The analysis of the practical output of the students made us look for alternative ways of looking at the relationship between language and thinking. The thinking-for-speaking theory made it possible for us to look at language errors in a different way. They proved to be indicative of the cognitive processes that are employed by language learners while preparing to speak or write in a foreign language.

• **Educational background**

The students were second year undergraduates of *Foreign Philology* at L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. Twelve undergraduates attended the course *Linguistics and intercultural communication* in the autumn term of the year 2018/2019. They all spoke Russian as their first language, though the majority of them were ethnic Kazakh (in fact, only one of them was of German – Belorussian origin). Those of Kazakh origin shared that they tried deliberately to use Kazakh as frequently as possible in their everyday communication in order to revive it. However, their first language remained Russian. All these students studied English as a foreign language.

• **The course in *Intercultural communication***

The course in *Intercultural Communication* was conducted in English (the target language of their university course). It consisted of 105 teaching hours, of which 60 were lectures and 45 – practical seminars.

The theoretical and practical focus of the course was on the theory of the Ethnography of communication, founded by the American anthropologist Dell Hymes and further developed by authors like M. Saville-Troike, D. Schiffrin and other authors. Within this theoretical framework, linguists and sociolinguists seek to discover communicative patterns of behaviour and to analyse them as part of cultural knowledge. D. Hymes (1977, 1986) assumes culture to be a system of assumptions and beliefs, a general world-view, which governs people's behavior. People are able to act and behave due to their knowledge of these assumptions and beliefs. Culture is knowledge (of language, linguistic rules, and norms of behaviour), but this knowledge need not be shared by all members of a culture. Members of a culture may have available different forms of this shared knowledge. D. Schiffrin (1997: 137 - 190) explains that due to the possibility of differential knowledge, neither knowledge nor behavior need to be realized by every member of a culture.

Another aspect of culture is that it is continually created and negotiated in the course of everyday communication. Cultural norms are realized through language use and they determine the way we behave. Communication is governed by culture, and at the same time, it reveals, reflects and constitutes culture.

Communicative patterns are not necessarily tied directly to language forms. The speaker of Arabic, Farsi, Indonesian or Japanese will often use English more

indirectly than a native speaker of English will (Saville – Troike 1982/2003: 30). In this way the English language, which is developed and used creatively as an auxiliary language in many parts of the world becomes "Englishes" in the enactment of different cultural values and beliefs.

• **"Doing" culture in class**

In the practical seminars included in the course, the students performed various activities whose aim was to sensitize them to the existence of cultural differences including and starting from their own culture and language. At these seminars, it became clear that, as members of a multiethnic society, the students were aware not only of the external differences between cultures, but also with the existence of the deeper beliefs and assumptions that produce them. However, at a class the purpose of which was to bring to the surface some of the norms and beliefs that govern people's behavior as members of a particular culture, the students elicited only those elements of culture that stand close to the "tip of the iceberg", namely rituals and practices. They included offering sacrifice, trying to speak their mother tongue (Khazakh), space division (e. g. what place one is expected to take in a room), the practice of bowing to elder members of the family, the need to put on the best clothes when going to the theatre, etc. It turned out that students were aware of the existence of norms and values of behavior but it was difficult for them to express them verbally and they tended to identify them with the external rituals and practices.

The students were then further encouraged to work towards uncovering the hidden norms and beliefs that govern people's behavior. They were asked to explain the cultural meaning of Baiterek Monument, a place of interest, emblematic for their city. The students all associated the monument with a popular Kazakh legend. In class, they told the story, but none of them reproduced it in its complete version. The fragments of the story as told by the students were collected and recorded. Later, for a writing activity, the following task was constructed: Students were presented the fragments of the legend they themselves had told and each had to reproduce HIS/HER OWN complete version of it imagining they were telling it to a tourist. Then, they were required to explain the relationship between the legend and the monument and, in this way, to try to find out the symbolic meaning of Baiterek, materialized in both the legend and the monument. When the task was completed, nine interpretations of the story emerged. One common characteristic they had was that none of them had a final episode; none of them suggested that the story would ever come to end. The idea of repetitiveness, which is recurrent in the legend was reflected both on the level of the narrative (no version of the story had final episode) and on the level of grammar. Particularly interesting was the attempt of one of the students to express the repetition of a durative activity set within a larger time cycle. The struggle of the students to reconcile Russian aspectual system with English progressive and non-progressive aspect directed our analysis and reflections on the course into an alternative theory about linguistic diversity and about the relationships between language, culture and thought.

• The thinking-for-speaking analysis of a language error

In the texts, which the students produced, we came across an expression, which was indicative of the way they handled the concept of time, guided by the grammars of their first language (Russian) and their target language (English). Particularly revealing was one example, the analysis in detail of which is offered below. The task was set and performed within the ethnographic framework sketched above, but the analysis of the error required a different point of view for explanation. The erroneous expression is discussed from the point of view of the theory of "thinking for speaking", developed by D. Slobin. The theory is related to but not identical with the Whorfian theory of linguistic relativity. The thinking-for-speaking theory is an alternative, focusing on the effects which grammar and linguistic structure can have on the cognitive processes involved in speech production. D. Slobin (1996: 71) suggests that we replace the terms "thought" and "language" with the terms "thinking" and "speaking". The terms "thinking" and "speaking", related to thought and language though, imply a shift from names of abstract entities to mental processes. They are dynamic terms and make us reconsider the classical relationship between language and world view (habitual thought). "Language" and "thought" are static entities. "Thinking for speaking" is a special kind of thinking "that is carried out, online, in the process of speaking" (Slobin 1996: 75). This dynamic form of thinking is closely related to communication. In the same article, the author explains that thinking for speaking is "a special form of thought that is mobilized for communication". The language-specific patterns of thinking for speaking underlie the development of rhetorical style in different languages. Thus, speakers of a particular language are guided by the set of distinctions that are grammaticized in their native language. Speakers bear in mind these features when they are speaking. They normally express categories that are grammaticized in their language and ignore such that are not grammaticised. Each language trains its speakers to pay different kinds of attention to events and experiences when talking about them. As an example, we can point out the fact that the temporal contours of events are marked by aspectual forms. This is one of the linguistically encoded perspectives that make the foreign grammar particularly difficult for learners of a second language to master.

"Distinctions of aspect, definiteness, voice, and the like, are, par excellence, distinctions that can only be learned through language, and have no other use except to be expressed in language. They are not categories of thought in general, but categories of thinking for speaking. It seems that once our minds have been trained in taking particular points of view for the purposes of speaking, it is exceptionally difficult for us to be retrained". Slobin 1996: 91

It becomes clear from the quotation above that one of the aims of the theory is "to study ways in which one's native language shapes one's mastery of the grammatical categories of a foreign language", as the author points out in an earlier article (Slobin 1987: 436). Following Slobin, Jeanine Treffers-Daller expresses an interest in "how second language learners (L2 learners) construe situations at the sentence

level and in longer stretches of discourse when using their second language" and in "how L2 users refer to complex interrelated sets of events in longer pieces of discourse" (Treffers-Daller 2012: 2). The author discusses the notion of "conceptual transfer" from the L1 on the L2, a notion which explains "the influence of conceptual distinctions made in one language on those made in another, rather than with the effects of language on non-linguistic cognition" (2012: 4). These reflections further direct our interest to the cognitive processes that are involved in preparation for communication. Treffers writes that it is in preparing to speak (write or translate) that a language can influence thought processes. Under this influence, "a language user selects those characteristics of the object or event s/he needs to describe which are readily encodable in his/her language (Slobin 1987: 435).

In the same vein, two other authors Panos Athanasopoulos and Emanuel Bylund explain that according to the TFS hypothesis, speakers of different languages think differently while in the process of mentally preparing content for speech (Athanasopoulos and Bylund 2013: 92). The authors point out that in the past decade there has been a steady interest in studies conducted within the thinking-for-speaking framework, with a special focus on different types of bilingual speakers.

"The rationale underlying the TFS framework is that human beings are most of the time engaged in preparing, producing, or interpreting verbal messages, and therefore research into language and thought is incomplete without attention to the thought processes that relate to speech production" (2013: 93).

Reasearch into the sphere of thinking for speaking can be carried out in two main areas. In the first place, we could investigate how people think about and construct conceptual representations of objects, events, spatial and temporal relations, and the like as a function of their native or their second language. Secondly, the focus could be on the thought processes taking place during speech production, trying to work out the way speakers develop strategies of encoding and organising information during online speech production (or comprehension).

• **Cyclicity, repetitiveness and duration**

In one of the students' essays, we read the following:

"The bird was laying on the golden egg. Each year bird called Samryk deposited a golden egg."

Although the two sentences make sense as a text, we cannot deny that there is a grammatical error in the first of them. Identifying it, however, or saying where exactly the error lies may present a problem. Once we have identified it, we will see that the "real" mistake does not lie in the lack of knowledge of the grammar of the foreign language, but in its use. The "wrong" use could more fairly be explained as the result of the conscious effort of manipulating the foreign language grammatical resource from the point of view of one's first language.

The story requires the expression of three aspects of time – cyclicity, repetitiveness and incompleteness. The backbone of the narrative is a cycle – a metaphoric representation of the change of seasons and life cycles. This necessarily presupposes

the repetition of the same events – the laying of the golden egg, the sitting on it, the coming of the dragon, and the stealing of the egg. A cycle will never come to end, therefore the story itself is bound to be incomplete. The activities that are repeated during this cycle are of different nature – some of them are transitional (like the laying of the egg, the coming of the dragon, the stealing of the egg), others imply the duration of a process (the sitting on the egg, the fight with the dragon).

The two languages (English and Russian) offer different resources for expressing these temporal configurations. Russian has the system of perfective and imperfective verbs. The meanings of continuousness and of repetitiveness are encoded in the imperfective verbs and these meanings are expressed both semantically and morphologically. The perfective verbs denote a wider range of meanings. They include the meanings of completed action and result. Sometimes they may focus on the beginning of an activity or express single actions or actions of short duration (Shcherbakova 2008: 15-16; Kostomarov, Maksimov 2003: 436 – 442; Dimitrova 2002: 129 -137). In addition, Russian perfective verbs have no present tense, since they can denote only complete actions.

English offers a different tool-kit of grammatical resources. In the first place, there is the semantic distinction between stative (state) and dynamic (non-state) verbs (Leech, 1971/1989: 23 - 24, Quirk, 1972: 93 - 97, Jackson 1990: 8-16). Stative verbs include verbs of perception and cognition and relational verbs, while dynamic verbs are further subdivided into activity verbs, process verbs, verbs of bodily sensation, transitional event verbs and momentary verbs. Then, there is the distinction between simple and progressive verb forms, which has a morpho-syntactic expression. Progressive forms encode the meanings of duration (usually limited duration) and incompleteness. Repetitive and habitual meanings are expressed through the simple forms. Simple forms can also express the meaning of "timeless present" to denote activities that have neither beginning nor end. Finally, there comes the distinction between perfect and non-perfect forms that denote the meanings of completeness and result. Non-progressive and non-perfect forms are treated as habitual, while the progressive forms are non-habitual, but F. Palmer (1988: 60 - 61) explains that this statement is misleading. Both simple and progressive forms may be used in habitual sense. This is unlike the Russian verb system where a verb can belong to only one of the categories, and almost every imperfective verb has its perfective counterpart.

• **Real and imaginary acts**

In our story, the narrative consists of activities that belong to the world of imagination. It is told in the past tense. We could say that the function of the simple past here is to indicate the meaning of "unreal past" (both on the level of the discourse and on the level of the particular events included in it). The meaning of unreality in this context, however, is different from the grammaticalized conception of the unreality of the past tense forms, which is associated with conditional and subjunctive forms (Quirk 1972: 77; 747 – 749). The unreal meaning of the past tense forms in the story is constructed on the level of discourse as a parallel use of time-

less present. We can notice that most of the activities the story contains are habitual, repetitive and incomplete and the story as a whole does not have a final episode. Hence, the activities referred to in the legend can be visualized as "eternal truths" (expressed by "timeless past forms"), as similar to the truths expressed in statements like "The sun rises in the East", but happening in an imaginary world.

• **Identifying the error**

The error in the sentence mentioned above can be analysed on two levels. On the first level, the error lies in the spelling. It could be said that this is the "real" gross linguisitc mistake. The blunder can be accounted for by the lack of knowledge of the semantic meaning of the appropriate verb. The student confused the verbs "to lay" (in the sense of "to lay an egg") and "to lie on" (probably wanting to say that the bird was brooding the eggs). The spelling mistake is also rooted in the confusion of the grammatical forms of two different verbs. The progressive forms of the two verbs will respectively be "to lay – laying" and "to lie – lying". Had it not been for the use of the preposition "on", it could have been plausible to accept the form "was laying the golden egg" as an attempt to express the meaning that every year the bird came and lay a golden egg. In such case, however, the expected correct form should have been "the bird laid the golden egg". The progressive form would have been wrong, because recurrent activities expressed by the past continuous tense in English have specific connotations (Palmer: 1988: 44 - 46).

The second sentence introduces another verb – "to deposit": "each year bird …. deposited a golden egg" and this verb appears in the past simple form. Semantically, both these verbs fit the context, but the reader is left to decide about the writer's use of the first verb – whether the bird lays an egg each year or whether she sits upon it to brood it. The puzzling sequence of the two verbs reveals the student's struggle to reconcile the Russian perfective/imperfective verbal system with the English grammatical progressive/non-progressive opposition. Obviously the student made an analogy between the Russian pair of verbs "снести" – „снёс" and „нести" – „нёс" and the corresponding English paradigm "to lay" – "laid" and "to be laying" – "was laying". But the two pairs of verb forms have different grammatical meanings and evoke different contexts of use in the two languages. The introduction of the verb "to deposit" creates a context, which clearly indicates that in the first sentence the student wanted to say that the bird was sitting on or brooding the egg, which she deposited each year. It is here that we can analyse the error at a second level – the level of usage and grammar. At this level, we cannot account for the mistake as lack of knowledge only, because the knowledge is, in fact, there: The student demonstrates knowledge and awareness of the grammatical tenses – the progressive form "was laying on" is contrasted with the past simple form "deposited". The first form denotes duration and incompleteness, while the second one expresses a single completed act.

Seen in this light, the inappopriate use of tenses in the analysed pair of sentences can be interpreted in the following way. Both express habitual activities that

are repeated every year. Habitualness and repetition are rendered in English with the use of the Past Simple Tense form. The two specific activities of laying the egg and brooding it, however, require further morphological differentiation from the point of view of the Russian verbal system. Such differentiation is not needed in English, since it is encoded in the semantics of the two verbs. They denote a contrast between an activity which implies duration (to sit on an egg) and an activity which denotes a single, momentary event. According to the classification of English lexical verbs as discussed by R. Quirk (Quirk et al: 1972: 93-97), we distinguish between stative and dynamic verbs. Stative verbs, including verbs of inert perception and cognition and relational verbs, do not normally occur in the progressive. Dynamic verbs, which can take the progressive are further subdivided into several subgroups, of which of interest here are process verbs and transitional event verbs. Regarding this, 'sitting on the egg' could be classified as a process verb, with which the use of the progressive would imply an incomplete event in progress. 'Depositing the egg', or 'laying' it could be interpreted as a transitional event verb, which can occur in the progressive, but with a change of meaning in comparison with the simple forms (it implies inception). In Russian, the same distinction lies in the morphological distinction between perfective/imperfective verbs. Therefore, the language user had to choose between a verb form which expresses duration and incompleteness (the sitting on the egg is an activity which lasts for some time, but never comes to an end because the dragon eats it) and between a verb that denotes a single, transitional and completed act (the bird lays the egg). The inappropriate use of the progressive tense here (if we assume that the intended meaning was "to brood", "to sit on eggs") is an attempt to render the difference between perfective and imperfective meaning as required by the morphology of the Russian verb. The contrast of the two verb forms "was laying on" (meaning "to brood) and "deposited" expresses namely this distinction. The student needed to emphasize the fact that the activity of brooding was never brought to an end so she exploited the simple/progressive contrast to indicate this. This use was inappropriate, however, because the progressive tense in English implies "period of time under focus" (Jackson 1990: 88 – 89). Since the present narrative is built on series of successive events, focus on a period with limited duration is inadequate. Foregrounded in the story is the succession of events, not their completeness or incompleteness. Guided by her first language grammar, the student makes an unsuccessful effort to express a contrast between an activity that is transitional and complete and an activity that has duration and is incomplete. The student automatically maps the distinction between perfective/imperfective verbs on the English aspectual system disregarding the fact that progressive/non-progressive opposition operates in a different way. The result was an awkward use of the progressive, in the attempt to express the idea of incompleteness, which obviously did not bring about the desired effect here. The English progressive is usually used in descriptions, while the whole discourse here is built on narration. It consists of successive events and that is why a suggested expression like "the bird began sitting on the egg", containing a past simple tense form, would have been more appropriate.

• Conclusion

The analysis of the error above made us focus on alternative theories concerning language diversity. It showed the necessity to discuss the relationship between language and thinking from a dynamic perspective. Through this, it became possible to observe and analyse the interdependence not only between thought and one's first language but also between one's first language and the foreign language that one is trying to learn. From this point of view it becomes possible to analyse linguistic errors in a different light – not as lack of knowledge but as more or less successful attempts to manipulate foreign grammar to achieve specific communicative ends. This throws light on the cognitive processes that are involved in preparing to speak in a foreign language. As one is inclined to focus on those characteristics of the events that are most readily encoded in one's own language, this can lead to unusual and unexpected uses of the foreign grammar.

The purpose of the analysis above was not to generalize on what kind of grammatical errors concerning the use of tenses are likely to be expected from learners of English who speak Russian as their first language. Its aim was to provide an account of a specific unsuccessful attempt to use foreign language grammar. In the first place, the attempt is unsuccessful not because the learner has insufficient knowledge of the foreign code but because she tries to manipulate it from the point of view of the first language, which she uses. The language learner had to tackle fundamental time concepts like cyclicity, repetition, completion and duration, grammaticalized in the two languages on different levels – in Russian basically on the morphological level and partly on the semantic level, while in English on three different levels – semantic, syntactic and morphological. The manipulation of time concepts is not a task *per se*; it is subordinated to the communicative task of telling a story, the narrative of which belongs to the world of the imaginary and has neither beginning nor end. The English language offers a uniform device of presenting this idea – the past simple detaches the narrative from the reality of the present moment and implies repetitiveness (or perhaps "timeless truths" like laying the golden egg or fighting the dragon). The language learner manipulates this device successfully but she fails to grasp the fact that it is unnecessary to differentiate the nature of the individual acts that make up the story; it is not important to indicate grammatically whether each single act is complete or incomplete.

We will refrain from making generalizations that this will be a typical error, which other learners with the same first language background will also be likely to make. The present analysis throws light on the cognitive processes that took place before the act of speaking/writing was performed. The language learner is at a certain stage of mastering the foreign language and she exploits it by subordinating its instrumentalities to the specific communicative task she is performing and to the form of thinking which her language has imprinted on her mind. Since language learning is a process, learners are not supposed to stay at the stage where they are. Maybe in the course of time the student will learn how to handle time concepts expressed through grammatical tenses more successfully. However, another communicative task may

present a new challenge and the language learner will have to settle the problem again by adapting the foreign grammar to her or his own way of thinking.

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