

Time Perception across Russian and American Cultures

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Perception of time, its conceptualization and the representation of concepts across cultures are culture-dependent, reflecting specific cultural experience. This holds true for Russian and American cultures, which are studied and juxtaposed in this paper from the cognitive point of view. The phenomenon of time is so multilateral, multifaceted, complex, and have such a great degree of abstraction that the concepts of time form different temporal subsystems in both cultures. The author has identified a typology of temporal concepts and juxtaposed these subsystems across American and Russian cultures for practical purposes. Succinctly outlined, the typology offered comprises parametrical, monetary, ethical, juvenile-gerontological, axiological, eschatological, and activity temporal concepts. The concepts identified may completely coincide, partially coincide or be in contrast across the two cultures. Their linguistic representation may be isomorphic or asymmetrical. Specific cultural features are found in all the subsystems identified, the most contrastive being the monetary concept subsystem.

Introduction

The generally accepted and shared idea about time is that it is a determining category of human consciousness

and is defined by the culture a person belongs to. Time has amazed and fascinated people from times immemorial. Perception of time was different across nations and ages. For most ancient civilizations, time was cyclic. Ancient Greeks, for example, believed that time was a cyclic alternation of opposing forces. Early Christianity held a traditional cyclic idea of time too. Later, St. Augustine's pioneering understanding of time as inner, mental, and linear was adopted (*Encyclopedia Americana*, 1999: p. 750). The idea of time underwent a long evolutionary process: nowadays, time is regarded as a linear progression that is measured by hours and the calendar. But time is not only measured scientifically, but also is perceived on a personal level and on a cultural level. One may object to this. As Lakoff states, "We do not have detectors of time" (1990: p. 57). But Hindus underscore that "even though time cannot be perceived as a physical object it is a concept associated with change in objects and events" (Agarwal, 1993: p. 45). It is true that time is not a physical object to be perceived but still we have a sense of time. Time is conceptualized differently in different cultures. In a cross-cultural setting a lot of misunderstandings arise from differences in time perception across cultures. That is why the purpose of this paper is to analyze the concepts of time in American and Russian cultures.

The cognitive approach seems to be the most illuminating and exhaustive in the study of time

perception. Pederson and Nuyts rightly remark that the term "concept" is understood in as many ways "as there are researchers addressing it." (1997: p. 2). In the plethora of works on the concept there are conflicting views; that is why I think it expedient for the present purposes to give a working definition: *concept* is the product of the cognitive process of conceptualization of the world. It is a unit of memory, mental lexicon, conceptual system and mental language, of the worldview reflected in the human psyche (Kubryakova *et al.*, 1996: p. 90).

The phenomenon of time is so multi-aspect, multifaceted, and complex, and has such a great degree of abstraction that the concepts of time form different temporal subsystems in both cultures. Studying these, I have identified a typology of temporal concepts and juxtaposed these subsystems across American and Russian cultures for practical purposes. Succinctly outlined, the typology offered comprises parametrical, monetary, ethical, juvenile-gerontological, axiological, eschatological, and activity temporal concepts.

Parametrical Concepts

These are concepts that measure time. Human beings have always tried to measure time. As soon as the first person stuck a stick into the ground to watch the shadow and check the time s/he started measuring time. At first glance, there is nothing remarkably cultural in

the measurement of time encapsulated by parametrical concepts. Time is measured by seconds, minutes, hours, days, nights, weeks, months, and so on. But parametrical concepts are culture-specific, starting from the structure of the day and ending with differing conceptualizations of parametrical concepts. The structure of the concepts “day” and “night” in Russian and American cultures does not coincide. First, in Russian, we have one generic word for them, *sutki* (day and night). Secondly, the hyponyms of “day” and “night” are conceptualized differently: the night in English is not only the night, but also the evening, and it actually lasts until midnight. The Russian night lasts until 4 o’clock in the morning. How can this interfere with communication? There is an example in which a Russian scholar was almost late for a flight that started at 1 a.m. (in the morning). In Russian perception it is still night and it was difficult for the scholar (incidentally, with very good English) to think of a night flight as a morning one and she thought she was to take a 1 p.m. flight instead (with all the attendant consequences). The American practice uses more discrete time units in comparison with the Russian: e.g., an 18-month old baby vs. a one and a half year old baby. It takes time (though almost intangibly) to calculate how old the baby is.

In both cultures repeating exact time references several times is very expressive and connotes tension: e.g., “At 8:15, he started getting angry; How was he supposed

to make it to Cicely’s by 8:30? At 8:35, the phone rang. From 8:40 to 9:15 Ian walked Daphne around and around the living room” (Tyler, 1991: pp. 41-43).

In both cultures the violation of the usual order of parametrical concepts is very emotional: e.g., “Half of me wanted him to get that box tomorrow, even yesterday if it could be arranged, but the other half was counting pennies” (Tyler, 1991: p. 5). In Russian culture, we also say, in answer to the question “*Kogda eto nado sdelat’?*” (When am I supposed to do this?) “*Vchera*” (Yesterday) meaning that it is very urgent.

Thus, one might conclude that parametrical concepts are culturally loaded reflecting cultural experience, habits, way of life.

Monetary Concepts

These are concepts which embody the idea of time as money. It is noteworthy that the monetary concepts have idiomatic verbal representations in American culture. There are thirteen proverbs and proverbial sayings, with some of them originating in the U.S.A.: e.g., *time has a wallet; an inch of time is an inch of gold; don’t waste five-dollar time on a five-cent job* (recorded in Missouri); *time is capital: invest it wisely* (recorded in California); *seconds are the gold dust of time* (recorded in Illinois) (*Dictionary of American Proverbs*, 1992) ; *time is a limited resource; time is a valuable commodity* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: p. 8).

The monetary concepts are so typical of American culture that many authors are convinced that the proverb “Time is money” was first introduced into use by Benjamin Franklin and was later borrowed into British English (Kunin, 1972: p. 87). There is an opinion that the concept *time is money* originated during the industrial revolution (Strauss & Quinn, 1997: p. 151). I would object to this view. The study of American proverbs shows that the concept appeared much earlier on British soil: the first recording dates from 1572 (*Dictionary of American Proverbs*, 1992). In 1736 it appeared in the U.S.A. At the same time it is clear that no matter what the source may be, monetary concepts are an inherent feature of American culture. The fact that the most popular concept *time is money* is ascribed to Americans (contrary to its history) speaks for itself: the wider cultural context explains this. One of the greatest American values is achievement. Both achievement and success are measured by material wealth; that is why Americans are considered to be materialists. “Possessions are often treated as inalienable in their society...they are the major cultural exemplars, in our world, of things that typically last” (Strauss & Quinn, 1997: p. 146). Americans are workaholics who value time that is tangible for them. I would like to draw attention here to the fact that work, time, and payment are often encapsulated in one concept: e.g., *time and a half*, meaning “a rate of pay for overtime work equal

to one and one half times the regular hourly wage” (*Random House Dictionary*, 1988). There are other monetary concepts represented on different linguistic levels. Being popular, the monetary concepts are reified by the cultural belief that “time is money.” Comparing Russian and American cultures, only one monetary concept, *time is money*, borrowed from American culture, is found in Russian culture. The general cultural context explains this fact: *dusha* (soul) is one of the most important values. The monetary concepts form a contrast in American and Russian cultures reflecting different types of time perception.

Ethical Concepts

These are concepts that give prescriptions for behavior; they teach not to waste time, to use it rationally, thriftily. What does verbalization of concepts tell us and why should we study them for practical purposes? Comparing Russian and American cultures, I paid attention to different ways of verbalization: Why do Americans put “time” first (*Time and tide wait for no man*) and Russians put “people” first (*Semero odnogo ne zhdut* (seven people do not wait for one)) in proverbs expressing the same idea - “to be late is rude.” I theorize that the clue is the different time orientation of our cultures. In American, monochronic culture the focus is on time; in Russian, polychronic culture it is on people. Studied in their respective cultural contexts,

the concepts reveal a different focus. I postulate that the focus is cultural. For monochronic cultures, time is sacred, to be late is very rude, almost abusive, deadlines are fixed, etc. In polychronic cultures the man is more important than time, deadlines are flexible, etc. (Hall & Hall, 1990: p. 13). Being late is perceived as abusive in American culture and as not a “sin” in Russian culture.

Juvenile-Gerontological Concepts

These are concepts that encapsulate the temporal constituent in an explicit or implicit way in lexemes the meaning of which is not temporal. The temporal component is embedded into the meaning of the word: e.g., *toddler*, “a person who toddles, esp. a small child roughly between the ages of one and three” (*Random House Dictionary*, 1988). One can see the temporal constituent of the meaning from the definition. The Russian correlates *malysh*, *malyshka* are not limited by years but express the general idea of a very young child, with diminutive connotation.

It is worth pointing out that in both cultures there are concepts embodying the ideas of different stages of one’s lifetime. More numerous are the concepts encapsulating the beginning of one’s life that correspond in both cultures: e.g., *baby* and *mlsdenets*.

The concepts *teenager* and *podrostok* do not coincide. *Teenager* covers all teen years, but the concept of a teenager in Russian culture has three word

representations: *podrosrok* which is limited in years (from 13 through 16); *yunosha* (a young man), *devushka* (a young female). The concepts rendering the idea of the final period of one’s lifetime are an *old man (woman)* and *starik* (an old man) and *starukha* (an old woman). The temporal meaning may be expressed explicitly (old man) and implicitly (toddler). The temporal constituent is embedded into the meaning.

Axiological Concepts

These are concepts that evaluate the time, mostly implicitly, through a temporal component built into their meaning. These concepts have different language representations on different linguistic levels. The temporal component most often gives a negative evaluation: e.g. to *loiter* has an embedded meaning “to waste time or dawdle over work,” “to pass (time) in an idle or aimless manner.” Synonyms representing similar concepts are *dally*, *dawdle*, *idle*, *trifle*, *to saunter*, *delay*, *linger*. The Russian correlates have the same idea and are similarly structured: *bezdel’nicat’*, *boltat’sya*, etc.

The temporal component may be inferred though the meaning of axiological nouns (where the noun itself is evaluated) does not have atemporal constituent. The implied temporal component is one of the most important: e.g. *lazy bones* and its correlate *lentyai* do not have time in the meaning but it can be inferred from the context.

Eschatological Concepts

These are concepts that pertain to the system of doctrines concerning last, or final, matters like death or the afterlife. These concepts are represented explicitly and implicitly on different linguistic levels (lexical, grammatical, idiomatic, paremiological, mythological, folklore prescriptions). In most cases these concepts are represented in theological, religious context. Since 90% of Americans say they are believers and religion plays a great role in American culture it is very important for EFL teachers to be familiar with the main concepts. Attitudes toward religion are presently changing in Russian culture. Religion was denounced as the opiate for the masses and officially there were no believers in the Soviet Union, but it was alive through forbidden underground activity. After *perestroika* things changed greatly. But still far too many people are ignorant of religious doctrines and concepts. Strongly depending on the denomination, the respective concepts are similar in both cultures. Here there is more unanimity than in any other types of temporal concepts: e.g., *afterlife*, also called *future life* and its Russian correlate *zhizn' posle smerti* embody the same idea of life after death.

Activity Concepts

These are concepts that render the idea of time through activity, events, and things. I agree with Lakoff who

affirms, “Time is understood in terms of things (i.e., entities and locations) and motion” (1990: p. 55). It is true that time is sometimes “measured” by books or plays or anything: in both juxtaposed cultures it is possible to say: “Two books later...” “A couple of contracts later...” In the naïve worldview time is perceived personally by events, activity or the results of activity. On being asked what happened on a concrete day, people in both cultures would try to remember what they were doing, where they were, how important this or that date was for them personally. In this respect these concepts are close to parametrical ones. It is noteworthy that all parametrical concepts may be conceptualized by activity: e.g., evenings after 7 o'clock may be filled with phone calls from salespeople in the U.S., but not in Russia yet. But parametrical concepts are not equal to activity concepts. This connection only shows the fuzziness of concepts.

Conclusion

The conceptualization of time and verbalization of concepts in American and Russian cultures may be similar, partially similar, or contrastive. The contrast may be tangible, in which case the communicator can easily see specific features and avoid misunderstandings in communication. It may be subtle, almost intangible, in which case specific features of one culture are substituted

by one's own native culture and misunderstandings emerge. To be familiar with different temporal conceptual systems is very important for the EFL teacher.

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