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National Mentality: Does It Influence a Language Grammar?

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Abstract

The article shows connection between the national mentality and the formation of grammar on the example of the French, Kazakh, Russian and English languages. It highlights the usage of copular verbs and modality in the first pair of languages, and word order, imperative mood and impersonal sentences in the second. The analysis shows that while teaching grammar of a foreign language, it is essential to combine it with cultural information and to compare two cultures at that point. Such cultural dialogue will ease the conception of the foreign language grammar phenomena and help form grammar competence – one of the means of intercultural communication – assuming the ability of a linguistic persona to elicit, understand and interpret the concepts formed by grammar tools of a foreign language.

Keywords: National mentality, Grammar, Concept, Grammar competence, Intercultural communication.

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Introduction

It's common knowledge that a human, his culture, behavior and mentality can not exist beyond a language or without it. Being a means of human communication, it has a social nature and national character which results in the fact that any language reflects some characteristics of national mentality, ethic and cultural values, as well as behavioral code of a certain society. All these are reflected mostly in vocabulary of a language, but it happens in grammar as well. Some studies show that the correlation between cultural values and a language grammar system is less vivid than that between culture and vocabulary, but more significant. One of the first scientists to notice this was F. Boas who stated that the set of grammatical categories in a language determines the very experiences that are to be expressed, and the language attracts our attention to those phenomena fixed in grammatical categories (Boas, 1938: 127). The same idea was expressed later by A. Wierzbicka who proved that crucial for some culture notions are expressed both in vocabulary and grammar (Wierzbicka, 1992: 108).

Vocabulary of a language tends to change rather quickly in comparison with grammar system which forms during centuries, several generations contributing to the process. Therefore, grammar of a language is natural to reflect national mentality characteristics which also have been forming for a long time and which are determined by social and political background as well as values of a nation.

Every language has its own number and list of grammatical categories as it "chooses" appropriate ones within a long period of time. Any language grammar is most deeply-rooted and traditional part of a language structure which is long and difficult to change. Therefore, extra-linguistic events have a certain influence on a language formation. And it's grammar which most precisely reflects the mentality of a nation because it is closest to the way of thinking. As W. von Humboldt stated: "The number of words in a language shows the size of its space, but its grammar gives us a concept of the mentality inner organization" (Humboldt, 1984: 345). It was this famous German scientist who introduced the idea of "linguistic consciousness of a nation" (Humboldt, 1984: 47). Conceptual categories lie at the basis of morphological categories of a language. They are core units which constitute basic attributes of any language. These categories are imbedded in the linguistic consciousness of this or that nation. Here we can speak of language mentality which transforms from the national mentality in the language and makes up its bigger part. But it's not right to consider these two phenomena identical, as national mentality is expressed not only in a language but also in non-verbal manifestations. According to T.M. Radbil, language mentality presents "a special national way of the world presentation through signs manifested in semantic system of a language" (Radbil, 2010: 66).

Research objectives and aims

The main objective of this study is to show that grammar, not less than vocabulary, is a reflection of the mentality and world picture of any nation (the research focuses on 3 Indo-European and one Turkic language), thus teaching grammar in combination with cultural studies will promote the formation of grammar competence in students. The following aims were determined as the most important for this research project: to consider the nature of copulate verbs and their connection with mentality in French and Kazakh; to analyze some grammar phenomena from the cultural point of view for application in teaching English language to Russian students.

The importance of the issue

It's the intercultural principle in teaching grammar which helps most fully present the concepts of a nation's world picture and correlate them with the corresponding concepts of the students learning a foreign language. Many foreign language scholars and educators demonstrated that the final goal of foreign

language learners is to build up language learners' intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997: 25; Sercu, 2002: 65). Traditional thoughts of foreign language teachers tend to separate two aspects in the classroom: teaching grammar rules and teaching foreign cultural information, whereas in this study we agree with G. Neuner who states that language teaching should go beyond the level of acquiring grammatical rules (Neuner, 1997: 235). Foreign language education might give an opportunity to learners to reflect their own language and culture, through comparative experience with other foreign languages and cultures. That is, the intercultural approach is proposed to emphasize the cultural awareness in close interaction with grammar competence skills.

1. Copular verbs and modality in French and Kazakh

For the tense system of Indo-European languages, it's typical to have aspect and voice differences. The Indo-European verb tense system is not based on tense differentiation, as the epoch of Indo-European entity lacked formal categories whose initial function might have been the expression of relative time. The forms which are called tense forms didn't have anything to do with time. The category of tense appeared in the Indo-European language rather late. This fact supports the theory of "atemporality" which was characteristic of ancient people and reflected in the language. To express temporal idea they used, as a rule, lexical means. The verb had a modal meaning and later acquired an aspect meaning.

In ancient Romanic languages aspect was expressed by the aorist, and perfect, which is the verb grammar form characteristic for all Romanic and Germanic languages, indicating the state of the subject as a result of the previous action. Later in Romanic languages perfect began to determine the result of the action in reference to the subject as well as to the object. The meaning of the perfect was closely connected with voice as at first perfect was limited to the object, as it denoted its state as a result of an action expressed by the predicate (Smirnitckii, 1955: 67). The verb *to be* appeared before the verb *to have*, so for the ancient people it was more important to realize the fact of being. In French the verbs *avoir* (have) and *être* (be) are used to form complex verb forms. These copulate verbs participate in the perfect formation, which is regarded as a tense category by some scientists and as an aspect category by others. Link verbs *to be* and *to have* used in the Romanic and Germanic languages point to one characteristic of the national character of ancient European peoples whose society (from the times of pre-Plato democracy) was personality-oriented. A person was expected to become equal to gods and to achieve this he had to show outstanding qualities of his unique personality. *I am, I have*. These verbs remained dominant during the transfer from the nominal to the verb language structure.

If there is no verb *to be* in the language, the verbs denoting position are the only means of expressing existence and location, which is the situation with the Kazakh language. In Turkic languages we observe the aspectuality of the present tense by means of grammaticalization of the position verbs: *to sit, to lie, to stand*. The aspect character of the copular verb *to lie* tends to express more certainty of the performed action, therefore, in the Turkic languages, constructions with the verb *to lie* are more spread than with the verbs *to sit* and *to stand*. In the Russian language, there is a similar phenomenon when we say "*сидит пишет, сидит плачет, стоит курит*". In some dialectic languages of Russian we may hear "*Деревья сохнут стоят*". In such constructions, there is a certain "desemantization" of the position verb, though in general they preserve initial meaning of location. Verbs of motion and position are often grammaticalized in different languages of the world, as they denote basic and essential for humans situations description of which a human uses to describe other situations and phenomena (for example, to imagine a situation in the future through the process of moving, or to imagine a long or continuous action as the one performed motionlessly (while sitting or standing)).

In French, there is a grammar verb form with a copular verb meaning “to go” (*aller + infinitif*) which denotes a future action with a subjective certainty. Besides, the verb *faire* (to do) is frequently used in verbal and verbal-nominal constructions which also proves the anthropocentrism of the language and self-actualization of a European who was more self-confident in comparison with Turkic nomadic peoples who depended on the gods’ “wishes” for a long time.

Generally speaking, the verbs of motion and position play a special role in time expression as time is often conceptualized and expressed in a language through motion (or location): the subject is moving in time from the past to the future, and the past serves as a source of movement, while the future stands for its aim towards which it moves (Maysak, 2005: 247). This very model of “the subject moving in space” manifests itself at the interpretation of some aspect forms in French when auxiliary verbs constructions help to express a “perspective” or “retrospective” view on the continuous situation.

In the Kazakh language as well as in all Turkic languages, all verb forms have a modal element which specifies the process of the action. Such modal factors, as veracity / non-veracity, seemness / non-seemness, evidence / non-evidence, possibility / impossibility of the action, readiness / non-readiness for the action, awareness, obligation to perform this or that action, accompany any verb which denotes an action and are expressed by grammar affixes *қараймын* («likely to do»), *болмақ* («may happen»), *жолықпашимен* («must meet»), *салмақши* («is likely to build»), *айағамын* («would like to recover»), *Ол ертең сабаққа бара ма екен?* – I wonder if he will come to classes tomorrow? etc. In Russian these factors are not grammatically relevant and are used only if necessary by means of modal words (*likely, possible, definitely, turns out*, etc.).

For a Turkic native speaker, these language modal elements have a special psychological meaning. Even if he is sure that the event will definitely happen, he will never claim it unconditionally. In our opinion, this fact has deep religious roots, as a Turkic native speaker has always been a passionate believer and he has always relied on God in terms of probability of some action, or realization of his dreams, as, to his mind, everything happens upon the God’s will, and he (as a human being) can’t decide if the event will take place or not. Even when he speaks of the event or fact that took place in the past, he always specifies its veracity/non-veracity. He can definitely claim something only when he has witnessed it. If not, he uses a special verb form for reporting about the events according to the information provided by a witness (*қорыптур, жолугуптур, барыптыр* etc.). In the mentality of a Turkic person it is innate to be careful in sayings, not to take responsibility for the rendered information, and to refer to somebody else.

So, we see that in French, as well as in other Romanic and Germanic languages, aspect-tense characteristics dominate in spite of the presence of modal verb system, which can be explained by the earlier awareness of the man of his place in the world, his wish to decide equally with the God and nature: to be, to have, to do. In the Kazakh language as well as in other Turkic languages, the modal-aspect characteristics dominate, while the tense factor remains secondary. This fact is explained by the great role of the nature in activities of the nomadic peoples and god’s powers prevailing over human’s powers.

2. Syntactic structures in English and Russian

There is a fundamental structural difference between Russian and West European languages. It lies in actualization of rationality and causation in English and irrationality in Russian mentality. Irrationality is grammatically marked in Russian by impersonal sentences. In Russia kids usually say “*Игрушка сломалась*” (*The toy broke*) meaning that the object has done something itself and a person is not to blame, whereas there is a strong connection between causation and rationality with human will in English: *X made Y do something versus X had something done*. Thus, the loose usage of tenses in Russian discourse serves as a linguistic symbol of Russia’s rejection of an over rationalist way of ordering all events as either past, present

or future and in the frequent absence of a grammar subject they perceived a way of expressing the collective and existential tendency of Russian spirituality.

Russian linguists regularly address the problematic issue of impersonality. Z.K. Tarlanov attempted to compare some sentences (*Светает – It dawns; Холодно – It is cold*) and noticed that impersonal sentences demonstrate progressive tendency to objectivization (Tarlanov, 1999: 11-14). As S.G. Ter-Minasova writes “the reason behind this might be explained in Russian collective mentality and wish not to be responsible for actions. An Englishman usually takes responsibility for the action whereas a Russian individual is ‘dissolved’ in the group, nature and unknown forces and the action and responsibility are impersonal (Ter-Minasova, 2000: 528-529).

According to the syntactical language typology, languages can be agent-oriented (e.g. English), and patient-oriented (e.g. Russian) (Wierzbicka, 1996: 34). In the syntax of the first group nominative constructions prevail (the subject is used strictly at the beginning) since the native speakers see the world in the way when the subject of the action dominates (*I like, I want, etc.*). On the contrary, Russian represents the world where events happen beyond the subject’s will and do not depend on him (Therefore, this language abounds with Dative case constructions *Мне нравится, мне хочется* which are Russian equivalents of the above examples in English). This discordance causes problems with impersonal sentences usage by non-native speakers. For that reason, it is productive to include value system of the English speaking people into the grammar teaching process, as such grammar phenomena as impersonal and passive constructions can be explained by the passive perception, fatality and collectivism of the Russian people, whereas the lack of such grammar constructions is due to the dominance of active actions values as well as self-control of the speakers, their personal responsibility and autonomy in English-speaking cultures.

The same explanation can be applied to the word order in English which is always a problem for the Russian students. The idea finds its proof in the work of a Russian linguist A.A. Melnikova who sees unconscious and deeply rooted feeling of “unstructured peace” in the free word order in Russian sentences (Melnikova, 2003: 117). She believes that Russian vision of irrational and unpredictable world in which everything can happen to a person is vividly reflected in syntax.

3. Morphological phenomena in English and Russian

Another example of actualization of cultural values in grammar constructions is imperative mood. This category is differently expressed in Russian and English and can provoke a lot of misunderstanding. Let’s consider some examples. In Russian such signs as «Вход запрещен!» (=Entrance prohibited!), «Не курить!» (=Can’t smoke here!), «Ходить по газонам строго воспрещается!» (=Walking on the grass is forbidden!) etc. look like commands and seem to the English speakers rather rude. Thus, it is a problem for them to use them, but the problem is not linguistic – it is cultural.

The reason of misunderstanding lies in the fact that in English speaking societies individual autonomy plays a great role among cultural values. And no one can force one’s will on other people. In English speaking cultures such kinds of signs are in the form of descriptions, not order. They do not contain words, like *forbidden, can’t, banned* (as they are associated with some control over a personality): *No smoking area. Thank you for not smoking! etc.* And only the individual himself can decide how to behave in this situation. The word *prohibit* can be used only if the sign warns of some danger like in *Petrol station. Danger. Smoking Prohibited*. In oral speech English speakers try to avoid such imperative constructions and substitute them with *Why don't you do it?* When a Russian speaker hears it, he/she, not knowing the rules of concealing the command, does not follow it assuming it is an offer to reflect and take a decision. Such situation can lead to intercultural misunderstanding because representatives of both cultures do not get the same semantics of the structure.

Another explicit proof of the need to teach culture alongside with grammar is the system of prepositions. Let's consider English and Russian prepositions representing concept Space. English speaking people see a tree crown as 3D space, therefore, the position of the bird will be inside this space, and so, preposition *in* is used, whereas in Russian the bird is *on* the tree, as it is seen as sitting on the surface of the branch. These examples show the discordance of the space objects characteristics as well as of their actualization in the language in different cultures due to ethno-cognitive aspects of space sense. So, it is efficient to analyze lingvo-cognitive concepts to compare mentalities as well as cultural values of different nations (Kaftailova, 2010: 6). Thus, the students will be able to elicit, apprehend and interpret correctly the concepts of their foreign language culture and to use the knowledge in intercultural communication.

Conclusion

The results of the study indicated correlation between language grammar structure of three Indo-European and one Turkic language and cultural values of these nations. The findings of the study demonstrate that the dominance of aspect-tense factoring the Romanic and Germanic languages and modal-aspect characteristics in the Turkic languages might be explained by cultural and religious factors as for ancient European humans it was important *to be*, *to have*, *to do* due to their self-actualization and awareness of the place and status in society. On the contrary, there is a strong dominance of modal-aspect characteristics in Kazakh (as an example of Turkic languages) as ancient Kazakhs, nomadic tribes fully depended on God's will and Nature forces, which influenced every aspect of their life and still are reflected in behavioral norms and mentality of Turkic peoples.

The comparative analysis of grammatical structures of English and Russian language showed the opposition of English (agent-oriented) and Russian (patient-oriented) types of thinking and active and passive attitudes to reality. It also demonstrated irrationality, grammatically marked in Russian by impersonal and passive constructions and strong connection between causation and rationality with human will in English. The reason behind this is explained in Russian collective mentality and wish not to be responsible for the actions and in Englishmen's perception of the world in which they are personally responsible for the active actions.

The results of the study highlight the importance and necessity to incorporate value system of a nation into grammar teaching process. Special emphasis should be placed on individual autonomy concept and concept of Space. Further research is not only possible, but is demanded as the limitations of this study are clear: the findings of the study are restricted to four languages and a broader outlook on the topic should be taken.

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