Concept vs Notion and Lexical Meaning: What is the Difference?

Dinara Khairullina[1]

Abstract

This paper analyzes a series of terms – "concept", "notion", "meaning", which are closely related to each other and constantly interact in modern linguistics. The applicability of this work is apparent, since its matter is characterized by a certain terminological ambiguity. Distinction of these terms is necessary to ascertain their roles in the acquisition, comprehension and expression of knowledge about the real world.

The article reviews the main theoretic issues of cognitive and cultural linguistics and reviews the Russian and foreign literature on the subject of the study. Researchers observe both unifying and distinctive characteristics of these concepts. The author's opinion is that "lexical meaning", "notion" and "concept" are different terms. They are interrelated, but not equivalent. It seems reasonable that they belong to similar categories of thinking but are taken in different systems of relationships.

The article is addressed to linguists, lecturers of linguistic disciplines, postgraduates and students of relevant specialties.

Keywords: Word, Lexical meaning, Concept, notion, English language, Russian language, Tatar language.

[1] Candidate of Philology, Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Naberezhnye Chelny Institute (branch) Naberezhnye Chelny, Russia. E-mail: dinara0406@mail.ru

1. Introduction

The term "concept" is one of the most complicated ideas in cognitive linguistics; it is quite difficult to be defined. In recent years, the term has been broadly interpreted and regarded as ambiguous in the social sciences and humanities. It was introduced with a certain degree of pathos and sometimes through a cognitive metaphor: it was called "a multi-dimensional cluster of sense", "a semantic slice of life" [10], "a gene of culture" [31], etc. Today, the term "concept" is widely used in various fields of linguistics. It has entered into the notional system of cognitive, semantic, and cultural linguistics [11].

Any attempt to understand and explain the essence of a "concept" leads to the realization of the fact that there is a number of related conceptions and terms, which are often used as synonyms, replacing each other in order to avoid monotonous repetition in real texts. Therefore, the majority of linguists (V. Demyankov, V. Karasik, V. Maslova, S. Vorkachev, M. Pimenova) point out the need to differentiate the terms "concept", "notion" and "meaning", because differentiation is necessary for establishing their roles in the processes of acquisition, comprehension and expression of knowledge about reality.

An analysis of literature on linguistics suggests that there is no consensus on this problem among researchers, which leads to the existence of different approaches. There are both distinctive and unifying properties of these structures. To get the most objective picture of this issue, it seems appropriate to consider the following relations: "concept – word", "concept – meaning" and "notion – meaning – concept".

2. Methods

The methodological base of this paper included mainly theoretical methods: analysis of the scientific sources, comparison and generalization, systematization and interpretation of facts, etc. All of them were chosen in accordance with the specificity and purpose of the material under study and allow detecting hidden regularities and correlations in objects and scientific facts, distinguishing between the general and particular, essential and non-essential.

The materials of the study were lexical items selected from different types of dictionaries (translation, etymological, explanatory dictionaries, encyclopedias, thesauri, etc.) in the English, Russian and Tatar languages.

The theoretical basis of the study are the monographic works of domestic (Russian) and foreign scientists working in the field of cognitive linguistics (R. Jackendoff, G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, G. Fauconnier, L. Talmy, A. Babushkin, E. Kubryakova, N. Boldyrev, V. Postovalova, I. Sternin, Z. Popova, and others), cultural linguistics (N. Arutyunova, V. Maslova, A. Vezhbitskaya, S. Vorkachev, V. Karasik, N. Krasavsky, G. Slyshkin, Y. Stepanov, R. Zamaletdinov, and others.), comparative linguistics and contrastive linguistics (V. Gak, B. Serebrennikov, R. Khairullina, L. Bairamova, and others).

The practical value of this paper is connected with the possibility to apply its findings in further studies in the sphere of conceptology, in teaching theoretical and practical subjects such as lexicology, semasiology, general linguistics, cultural linguistics, in students and postgraduates' research work, in lexicography – while preparing cognitive, associative, translation dictionaries.

The theoretical importance of the study is determined by its contribution to solving the general linguistic problem of the correlation of language and thinking units, by the need to distinguish the terms "concept", "notion" and "meaning".

3. Results

1. A concept, being a unit of conceptosphere, may or may not have a verbal expression.

2. It is impossible to capture and describe all means of the language and speech representation of a concept.

3. A word is understood as a semantic content reflected in a lexical form and revealed in a dictionary entry; a concept is the cognitive content reflected in the same lexical form.

4. The inner content of a word is its semantics plus connotations. The inner content of a concept is a set of meanings.

5. Structure and content: a concept has layers, lexemes have sememes; concept includes components (conceptual signs), sememes – semantic features (semes).

6. There is only one notion in one word but it may have multiple meanings. Any notion is universal for all mankind; lexical meanings belong to specific nations.

7. A concept is richer and semantically deeper than a notion; it is close to the human mental world, culture and history.

8. A concept is a kind of hyperonym for a notion, image, meaning; it may include associations, emotions, and evaluations.

4. Discussion

4.1. Concept and Word

The representation of a concept in a language is usually attributed to a word, and the word itself gets the status of the concept name – the linguistic sign reproducing the concept content in the fullest and most adequate way (e.g., the word *freedom* in English denotes the concept of freedom in this culture). The connection of concepts with the verbal means of expression is noted in almost all cognitive and linguistic-cultural definitions: "the notional (significative) image reflecting a fragment of the national picture of the world, summarized in a word" [26, p. 81]; "any discrete unit of the collective consciousness, which reflects an object of the real or ideal world, and is stored in the national memory of the language in a verbally designated form" [4, p. 11], and others. However, researchers have not yet agreed on the specific meaningful language units, which concepts are related to.

Regarding the problem of concept verbalization, two statements deserve special attention. The first statement is that a concept always has its verbal expression, it is always identified by a word, and otherwise it is impossible to talk about the concept existence (G. Slyshkin, S. Vorkachev, A. Babushkin and others). There is an opinion about absolute identity of a concept and a word [21, p. 177]. Any path to understanding always goes through denotation – "the mind has no empty forms, and it has no concepts without names" [5, p. 92], "for a man, every object exists only when it is comprehended by him, when it enters his mind and is expressed by a word" [7, p. 173].

The second statement is as follows: "in the human mind, many fragments of reality are presented by images; many things can come in his view and be seen (and understood) without a special designation to him. Whole episodes unrelated to language often emerge in the human memory, which stores a variety of prints of the past – faces, objects, entire scenes" [20, p. 305]. Sharing this viewpoint, we believe that a "concept" is a mental unit, able to actualize a set of different attributes. At the same time, it is independent of language, which confirms that verbalization is not a prerequisite for the concept existence.

Indeed, a concept sometimes has no direct correlates in the natural language (in this case, the term "lexical gap" is used). Then people have to use detailed descriptions, free combinations and explanations, which may denote the concept later. Such verbal gaps can be easily detected by comparison and analysis of lexical and phraseological paradigms in different languages [30]: for example, in the Russian and Tatar languages,

there are no identical names for such concepts as *pet* (a beloved animal that is kept at home for fun), *fortnight* (a two-week period of time), *accident* (an unfortunate incident that happens unexpectedly and unintentionally, typically resulting in damage or injury) and others. On the other hand, the English language has no such Russian and Tatar concepts as *rovesnik / yashtash* (a person of the same age), *zemlyak / yaktash* (a person from the same place as someone else, a fellow countryman), etc. In English and Russian, relatively Tatar, there are no notation for the concepts of *darya* (a big river), *mong* (a melody to indicate melancholy, lyricism, heartfulness). Interlanguage gaps are divided into motivated ones, explained by absence of a corresponding object or phenomenon in the national culture (for example, the Russian concept *lapti* (bast shoes) and the Tatar concept *balesh* (a baked pie with potatoes and meat) have no direct equivalents in English), and unmotivated ones that cannot be explained by the absence of the phenomenon or object in other languages (for example, the Russian concept *imeninnik* – a person celebrating his name day or birthday).

If a concept has no name, that does not mean it is absent in the national consciousness of native speakers – that indicates its communicative irrelevance for the nation. Thus, concepts can function, serving as units of thought without any reflection in the language and communication, as some of them are just not meant for a discussion with other people. In this regard, there is a distinction between the relevant concepts (regularly verbalized, necessary for both thinking and communication) and irrelevant concepts (rarely expressed in a language and required mainly for thinking), as well as between the verbalized and non-verbalized ones [30].

When a concept acquires its linguistic expression, the linguistic means used for this purpose act as means of verbalization, language representation, linguistic objectification of the concept. In language, a concept can be verbalized by existing lexemes, free phrases, phraseological and paremiological units, structural or positional sentence schemes and even whole texts. It is important to bear in mind that a phenomenon name or designation is not equivalent to a concept. Concepts as elements of consciousness are quite independent in the language. According to V. Evans, concepts are intermediaries between the words and extralinguistic reality [13]. Only those phenomena of the reality can become a concept, that are relevant to and valuable for a particular culture, which have a large number of language units for their fixation, are the subject of proverbs and sayings, poetry and prose texts, i.e. they are considered to be the bearers of the national cultural memory.

Although words and concepts materialize in the same sound (literal) complex, we must distinguish between these terms. We understand a word as a semantic content reflected in a lexical form and revealed in the dictionary entry, a concept – as a cognitive content in the same lexical form. Therefore, a word is the central conception of the lexical semantics and a concept – of cognitive semantics. Studying lexemes involves finding causes and ways of evolution in their semantics, as well as understanding of cross-relation with other lexemes, analysis of the lexical meaning structure and semantic classification. Studying concepts aims to explore the language consciousness of native speakers.

One of the most important differences between a word and a concept is related to their inner content. The inner content of a word is its semantics plus connotations, i.e. the set of semes and lexical-semantic variants plus expressive, emotional-evaluative and stylistic characteristics. The inner content of a concept is a set of meanings, the organization of which is significantly different from the structuring of semes and the lexical-semantic variants of a word: a concept has layers, lexemes have sememes; a concept includes components (conceptual signs), sememes - semantic features (semes) [8, p. 173].

Another noticeable difference of a concept from a word lies in its antonymous character, i.e. in the combination of two mutually contradicting judgments about the same object, present in its content. Besides, the formation of concepts largely depends on the role of the subjective bases, which is quite

unusual for words. The subjective factor provides a concept with one more distinctive feature: a concept is a more dynamic phenomenon, changing more rapidly comparatively with a word. It cannot have a strict framework, as it "functions, actualizes in its various parts and aspects, connects to other concepts and respells from them" [27, p. 33].

Finally, a word reveals itself in verbal contexts; a concept is formed in "the texts of the culture". The sources of information for the comprehension of concepts are the artistic definitions and precedential texts (phraseological units, proverbs and sayings, ethno science, riddles, aphorisms, etc.).

4.2. Concept and Lexical Meaning

Any phonetic word has a meaning. The problems of the word meaning were studied by L. Wittgenstein, L. Bloomfield, F. von Humboldt, F. de Saussure, L. Weisgerber, L. Shcherba, V. Gak, N. Alefirenko, A. Ufimtseva, N. Boldyrev and other linguists. N. Alefirenko defines "meaning" as "a historically and socially fixed link between the acoustic sense of the word and the mental "copy" of the denominated object reflected in the mind" [2, p. 200]. Appearing as a unity of three components – the sound and graphic form, the object itself and the phenomenon or conception of it, any lexeme, spoken or written, is known to be the key that "opens" concept for a human being. The issue of the relationship between the concept and meaning of a word is a part of the problem of correlation of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge, conceptual and lexical-semantic information; it remains one of the most complicated problems in modern linguistics.

Both phenomena – concept and meaning – are of cognitive nature, both are the result of reflection and comprehension of reality by human consciousness. But these two terms should not be mixed. They are the products of activity of different consciousness types. The lexical meaning, which has several aspects – significative, denotative and connotative, is a unit of the language semantic space. This term is used in the contexts associated with the word as a language sign. The concept, which is a generalized perception of an object or phenomenon, is a unit of conceptosphere. It differs from denotation in the fact that it is not part of the language system, because it has specific characteristics going beyond its scope. The difference of a concept and a referent is that a concept consists of mental fragments of the picture of the world and becomes a referent only in the process of the speech reference [19, p. 335]. The term "concept" is preferable when we talk about cultural representations and idealized cognitive models as knowledge representation structures.

Some linguists (V. Karasik, S. Askoldov) believe that a concept is much broader than a lexical meaning; others (D. Likhachev, V. Moskvin) surmise that a concept is related to a word in one of its meanings. According to J. Dillon, a concept is typically associated with a corresponding representation in a language such as a single meaning of a term (12, p. 53). We recognize the fact that language means reproduce, through their meanings, important conceptual features but this is only a part of a concept. A concept is connected with a world more directly than a separate meaning. In addition, it includes not only the entire content of the keyword, but also incorporates the meanings of other lexical units that verbalize it (for example, researchers often study the paradigmatic, syntagmatic and derivational connections).

Being an intermediary between words and the extra-linguistic reality, a concept "requires numerous lexical units – or many meanings – for its full explication" [28, p.18]. Such vision of the problem can be seen in the works of N. Boldyrev, who claims that meanings represent a part of our knowledge about the world and the main amount of that knowledge "is stored in our minds as a variety of cognitive structures" [6], and in the works of A. Potebnya, who differentiates the well-known, "popular", "immediate" meaning of a word and the "further", private one, including emotional, sensual, scientific and cognitive symptoms [15, p. 37]. According to Z. Popova and I. Sternin, when examining the relationship of the dyad "concept – meaning", it is also interesting to consider the psycholinguistic meaning of concepts [29, p. 53-54]. The linguists explain

that it is much broader and larger than its lexicographical variant, which is entirely included into a psychologically real content.

4.3. Meaning, Notion, Concept

Any word expresses the notion of the subject called. It is significant that notions, with which the words of a language are somehow related to, are not necessarily scientific, logically refined conceptions corresponding to the modern level of human knowledge about the world. Ordinary everyday words are associated with the notions of "household", often pre-scientific, emerged in ancient times and based on the practical human experience of many generations. Even if the coincidence of a scientific and an everyday notion is apparent, closer examination reveals that they contain non-identical signs. For example, in everyday communication, the notion expressed in the meaning of the word *water* will be not the notion of the well-known chemical composition of hydrogen and oxygen (H_2O) but the notion of a colorless transparent liquid used for drinking or washing. In usual life, a *product* is something sold and bought in shops, in science; it is the product of labor with a cost that satisfies some human needs due to its properties. For common people, a word is just a sound or spelling, in linguistics – the unity of sound and meaning, etc.

In this case, it is customary to use the terms "scientific" (logical) notion and "naive" (everyday) notion. A scientific notion is clear and accurate, it includes all essential features of an object and, as a rule, is recorded in encyclopedias; a naive notion is approximate, it implies only a general idea, it is mentioned in dictionaries and included in the structure of the word meaning under the name of the significate.

A scientific notion is objective (it is based on the essence of phenomena comprehended by scientists through hard work after years of learning), and a naive notion is anthropocentric (it is based on practical experience of humans). Every day and scientific notions are sometimes in direct conflict with each other. For example, in everyday speech, anyone would talk about sunrise or sunset, without mentioning the rotation of the Earth around the Sun, about warm clothes, but not about the things that retain heat, etc.

Speaking of the relationship between a notion and a lexical meaning, it is important to remember that a word has only one notion but it can have several meanings. A notion is universal to all mankind, and lexical meanings are national. For example, the English words *hand* and *arm*, *foot* and *leg* denoting different parts of the human body correspond to only one word for each pair in the Russian and Tatar languages – *ruka / kul* and *noga / ayak* (the limbs consisting of hand and arm or foot and leg), their meanings include the signs divided between the words of the English language. There is one more similar example – the words *toe* and *finger* and their Russian and Tatar translations *palets / barmak* (just one word, irrespectively the exact part of the body – foot or arm). It is interesting that the Tatar language has one more lexeme *tapi* (little foot, baby's foot), which has equivalents neither in Russian nor in English. In Russian and Tatar, there are two words denoting the shades of blue: *siniy / zangar* and *goluboy / kuk*; English-speaking people have to use word combinations: *light blue, pale blue, sky-blue*. These examples are related to differences in the lexical systems of the Russian, Tatar and English languages, rather than to differences in the peoples' understanding of the world. They show that real-world objects and phenomena are very much varied and versatile that each language has an opportunity to select a specific line for the formation of notions and then, through them, lexical meanings.

Finally, a meaning can be broader than a notion in terms of its content and include a judgment component or other components. In terms of volume, i.e. correlation with the objects of reality, a meaning can be also narrower than a notion – in case it reflects only certain features of objects, and a notion comprises more profound and essential features of objects. Talking about the identity of words and notions is not correct, as well as it is not correct to talk about their complete difference. Upon becoming an integral element of the language structure, the lexical meaning of any word ceases to be a logical category and turns into a

linguistic phenomenon. The notion and the lexical meaning differ from each other in the way they are formed – the first one involves the object and thinking, the second – the object, thinking and the language structure.

There are two main directions to consider the relations "notion-concept". The representatives of one tenor tend to equate these terms and to regard them as interchangeable synonyms. This view of the problem is presented in the works of G. Lakoff, V. Postovalova, N. Shvedova, M. Nikitin, A. Babushkin, A. Khudyakov and others who claim that a notion and a concept are close phenomena; "nowadays, linguists hardly use the term "notion" in its classical sense and prefer to speak of mental structures referred to as "concepts" [3, p. 14].

"Concept" and "notion" are not equal to each other: the first term is much wider in its content than the second term, as the whole is always more voluminous than its part. Such understanding can be traced in the works of P. Abelard, M. Pimenova, I. Sternin, V. Karasik, G. Slyshkin, L. Cherneiko, V. Maslova and others. Thoughts about the relationship of concept and idea as a whole and a part can be found in the works of Pierre Abelard (1079 - 1142), the founder of conceptualism. In his view, the scope of manifestation of concept is more diverse, it includes emotions, intuition, affects, feelings, etc. [24, pp. 63, 85, 118-120; 25, p. 24]. While a notion is a thought of a certain object or phenomenon, a concept is an individual sense showing the internal features of an object (they may be not very important): images, symbols, feelings, evaluations – in other words, it is "the idea involving not only abstract, but concrete-associative and emotional-evaluative characteristics" [16, p. 5].

A concept is the content of a notion, i.e. the same as internal sense. A notion is one of the structural components of a concept. From the standpoint of cognitive linguistics, a concept is understood as a substitute for a linguistic notion, as "an allusion to the possible meaning", "a response to the previous language experience of mankind" [15, p. 111, 116]. Thus, a concept may go beyond the corresponding notion and relate to a number of many other concepts. For example, the concept "water" may be related to the concepts "money", "life", "information", "consciousness" and others.

A concept is semantically deeper, richer than a notion; it is close to the human mental world, culture and history; therefore, it has a specific character. The content of this mental structure can be continuously enhanced via new characteristics [6, p. 27], thus leaving room for guessing, imagining, creating an emotional aura around a word. Concepts may be characterized as idealized cognitive models [23], cognitive metaphors [22], and frames and scripts [14] that are proposed to represent organizations of our experience and interaction with the world. One of the essential features of a concept, in which it differs from a notion, is the presence of associative-imaginative layer – that is associated with a different principle of cognition and reality reflection within these categories. Another optional component of the semantics of the language concept is the "etymological" memory of a word, i.e. the semantic characteristics of a linguistic sign, linked to its original purpose, history, mentality and the value system of native speakers.

In comparison with concepts, notions have a simpler structure, they are characterized by "iron principles", "pure rationality" [32, p. 98], logical basis. A concept is a "sub-logic" unit [9, p. 75] – a quite conditional, complex, less systemic, multi-dimensional and therefore semantically vague unit, the one with no clear boundaries. I. Kobozeva defines concept as something "naive, trivial, everyday" [1, p. 48]. Our position is that the content of one and the same concept can include both naive and scientific notions – as its semantic elements.

Summarizing linguists' views on the nature of meanings, notions and concepts, we can say that the lexical meaning reflected in the sound envelope of the term is a component of such a complex whole as scientific concept, which includes notions, conceptions, objective contents, associations, emotions and estimates [17, p. 73]. A concept is a kind of hyperonym for notions, images, meanings; it is a synthesizing linguistic-

mental formation that has methodologically come to replace them and absorbed their brief, reduced forms [18, p. 122].

5. Conclusion

The raised issue of the difference between the terms "concept", "notion" and "meaning" can have the following conclusions. The problem of these terms differentiation is still one of the most pressing and intractable problems in modern linguistics. Researchers observe both unifying and distinctive characteristics of these words. The author's opinion is that "lexical meaning", "notion" and "concept" are different terms. They are interrelated, but not equivalent. It seems reasonable that they belong to similar categories of thinking but are taken in different systems of relationships. A concept is a mental unit, considered in terms of the correlation of the cognition, meaning and grasp of the notion in its structure. It arises in the human mind as a reflection of a notion, as a result of close interaction between the word meaning and the content of the notion expressed by the word. Besides, a concept is not a mere set of encyclopedic knowledge – it represents only the information relevant to content of the notion.

Footnotes

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