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THE INTERRELATION OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: THE NOTION OF GESTALT

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**ABSTRACT**

The article examines the interrelation of language and culture as a central problem of modern humanitarian knowledge and traces the role of the gestalt as an analytical unit within this problematic field. The paper outlines the historical-theoretical foundations of the language-culture nexus from the Humboldtian tradition through Sapir to contemporary linguoculturology and cognitive linguistics, demonstrates how the originally Gestaltist principle of holistic perception has been adopted and reinterpreted in linguistic theory, and shows that the notion of the gestalt provides an effective conceptual tool for the description of culturally specific holistic structures of meaning. Particular attention is paid to the function of the gestalt in the structure of the linguistic personality and to its potential for contrastive analysis. The findings argue for the productive integration of the gestalt approach into the methodological apparatus of contemporary comparative linguoculturology.

Keywords: language and culture, linguoculturology, gestalt, linguistic worldview, cognitive linguistics, linguistic personality, conceptual metaphor, holistic meaning, contrastive linguistics.

Introduction

The interrelation of language and culture is among the most enduring and most contested problems of the humanities. From the very inception of linguistics as an autonomous discipline, the question of whether language is a passive instrument for the transmission of an extralinguistic cultural content or, on the contrary, an active formative principle shaping the very perception of reality has occupied the centre of theoretical discussion. The contemporary stage of this discussion is marked by the consolidation of linguoculturology as a separate discipline (Vorobyov, 1997; Maslova, 2001) and by the productive convergence of linguoculturology with cognitive linguistics, which has supplied a new descriptive apparatus and, in particular, the notion of the gestalt.

The aim of the present article is twofold. First, the paper outlines the principal positions on the language-culture interrelation as they have developed in the European, American and Russian linguistic traditions. Second, the article examines the notion of the gestalt as a unit of analysis that allows the holistic, integrated character of culturally specific meaning to be captured in linguistic description. The gestalt, which originated as a category of perceptual psychology, has been adopted in cognitive linguistics and in

the theory of the linguistic personality as a tool capable of representing knowledge that is irreducible to discrete componential analysis. The integration of the gestalt approach into linguoculturology constitutes a significant methodological advance, the implications of which are still being explored.

The interrelation of language and culture: theoretical foundations

The modern understanding of the language-culture interrelation rests on a long intellectual tradition that may be traced back to W. von Humboldt, who argued that every language carries within itself a particular worldview and that the diversity of languages corresponds to a diversity of cognitive perspectives on reality (Humboldt, 1984). For Humboldt, language is not a finished product (ergon) but an activity (energeia), and through this activity the spirit of the people is continuously realized. This Humboldtian intuition was developed further in the American anthropological tradition by E. Sapir, who maintained that language is a guide to social reality and that the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached (Sapir, 1921, pp. 207–220). The principle of linguistic relativity, as it later came to be known, gave a strong formulation to the idea that linguistic categories pre-structure perception, thought and behavior.

In the Russian linguistic tradition the language-culture problem received a systematic treatment within linguoculturology, a discipline established at the intersection of linguistics, cultural studies and cognitive science (Vorobyov, 1997; Maslova, 2001; Vereshchagin & Kostomarov, 2005). Linguoculturology operates with the central notions of the linguistic worldview, the concept, the cultural code, the cultural script and the linguocultural type, and treats language as the principal medium through which culture is created, stored and transmitted across generations (Telia, 1996). The basic theoretical claim of linguoculturology is that culture is encoded in linguistic units of all levels — lexical, phraseological, grammatical, discursive — and that an adequate description of these units must include their cultural component as an integral part of their semantic structure.

Contemporary cognitive linguistics has reinforced this position from a different angle by demonstrating that the conceptual system in terms of which we think and act is fundamentally metaphorical in nature and that conceptual metaphors are grounded in shared bodily and cultural experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The cognitive turn has thus transformed the language-culture problem from a question about external correspondences between two systems into a question about the internal architecture of human conceptualization, in which language and culture are inseparably interwoven.

The notion of gestalt: from perceptual psychology to linguistics

The term gestalt entered the humanities through the work of the Berlin school of psychology in the early twentieth century. The fundamental claim of Gestalt psychology was that perceptual experience is organized into wholes possessing properties that cannot be derived from the sum of their parts; the whole is prior to, and explanatory of, its components. This principle of perceptual holism was subsequently extended beyond psychology and entered linguistics in the second half of the twentieth century as a means of describing the holistic character of meaning and cognition.

In cognitive linguistics the notion of the gestalt was reinterpreted by G. Lakoff and M. Johnson as an experiential gestalt — a multidimensional structured whole through which we make sense of recurrent experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 81–85). According to this view, experiences such as conversation, argument, journey or love are not perceived as collections of independent features but as integrated

configurations possessing internal coherence. These experiential gestalts then serve as source domains for conceptual metaphors and structure the way abstract concepts are understood. The notion of the experiential gestalt is therefore both cognitive and cultural: the configurations on which it relies are shaped by the specific cultural environment of the speaker.

In the Russian linguistic tradition the gestalt acquired an additional theoretical function within the theory of the linguistic personality developed by Yu. N. Karaulov. According to this theory, the linguistic personality is organized into three levels — the verbal-semantic, the cognitive (thesaurus) level and the motivational level — and the cognitive level is populated by units of a generalized, holistic character that Karaulov designated, among other terms, as gestalts (Karaulov, 1987, pp. 171–182). A gestalt in this sense is a complex unit of knowledge in which conceptual, evaluative and affective components are fused into an indivisible whole, accessible through linguistic introspection but not reducible to lexical-semantic decomposition. The gestalt thus represents the way in which a particular fragment of cultural experience is preserved in the mind of the speaker as a coherent integrated structure.

Gestalt as a linguocultural unit

The notion of the gestalt is particularly productive for linguoculturology because it captures a property of cultural meaning that is otherwise difficult to formalize. Many culturally salient phenomena — the Russian *dusha*, the English privacy, the Uzbek *mahalla* — cannot be exhaustively described through a list of semantic features, since their content is organized as a holistic image with affective, evaluative and behavioral dimensions tightly interlinked (Telia, 1996; Vorobyov, 1997). The classical methods of componential analysis lose much of the meaning of such units, while the gestalt approach preserves their integrity.

Several characteristics distinguish the gestalt as a linguocultural unit. First, it is holistic: its components do not exist independently of the whole, and any attempt to extract a single feature changes the configuration. Second, it is culturally specific: the gestalt is shaped by the values, norms and historical experience of a given community and may possess no full equivalent in another culture. Third, it is multimodal: alongside the conceptual core, the gestalt incorporates emotional colouring, evaluative orientation and behavioral expectations. Fourth, it is dynamic: the gestalt is continuously activated, modified and transmitted in concrete acts of speech and is therefore inseparable from the speaker's communicative practice (Karaulov, 1987; Maslova, 2001).

The methodological consequences of accepting the gestalt as a unit of linguocultural description are considerable. The analyst is required to attend not only to the lexical surface of an expression but also to the cluster of associations, value judgments and prototypical scenarios attached to it within the host culture. Phraseology becomes an especially rich field in this regard, since phraseological units typically encode cultural gestalts in a compressed form: their meaning cannot be deduced from the meanings of their components precisely because it inheres in the whole (Telia, 1996, pp. 198–234). Conceptual metaphor likewise reveals its full theoretical importance only when the source and target domains are recognized as gestalts rather than discrete sets of features (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Gestalt in contrastive and bilingual perspective

The contrastive perspective renders the gestalt-based approach especially valuable. When two languages and two cultures are juxtaposed, the differences between them frequently manifest themselves not

at the level of isolated lexical items but at the level of underlying gestalts that organize entire conceptual domains. Two cultures may share a denotative referent while diverging radically in the gestalts through which that referent is conceptualized: time, family, hospitality, work, friendship, honour, modesty are domains in which such divergences are particularly conspicuous (Wierzbicka, 2003). Contrastive linguoculturology therefore has the task of identifying the culturally specific gestalts of each contact language and of describing the points at which they diverge, overlap and interfere.

In the situation of bilingualism this task acquires an additional dimension. The bilingual speaker possesses two systems of cultural gestalts and continually negotiates between them. Code-switching, calques, semantic shifts and pragmatic transfers in bilingual speech can frequently be explained as the activation of a gestalt from one culture within the verbal envelope of another. The notion of the gestalt therefore links the static analysis of cultural content with the dynamic study of bilingual communicative behavior and provides a unified framework for both.

It should be emphasized that the gestalt does not stand in opposition to other units of linguocultural description — the concept, the linguoculturema, the cultural script. On the contrary, the gestalt complements these units by capturing precisely that dimension of holistic integration which they leave underspecified. The concept articulates the abstract conceptual core; the linguoculturema fixes the conventional pairing of a linguistic form with a cultural content; the cultural script describes the sequential structure of culturally conditioned interaction. The gestalt, in turn, provides the integrating wholeness within which these components cohere as a single experiential structure (Karaulov, 1987; Vorobyov, 1997).

Conclusion

The interrelation of language and culture is not an external relation between two autonomous systems but an internal relation of mutual constitution: language is the principal medium in which culture exists, and culture is the matrix that gives linguistic form its meaningful substance. The Humboldtian intuition, the Sapirian principle of linguistic relativity, the linguoculturological synthesis developed in the Russian tradition and the cognitive turn associated with the work of Lakoff and his collaborators converge in this fundamental insight, even though they describe it in different conceptual idioms.

Within this broad theoretical landscape, the notion of the gestalt occupies a specific and important place. Originating in perceptual psychology, the gestalt has been productively reinterpreted in cognitive linguistics as an experiential gestalt and in the theory of the linguistic personality as a holistic unit of cultural knowledge. As a linguocultural unit, the gestalt captures the irreducibly integrated character of culturally specific meaning and provides an effective methodological instrument for contrastive analysis and for the study of bilingual communication. Further research is required to refine the typology of cultural gestalts, to develop systematic procedures for their identification and description, and to integrate the gestalt approach more fully with the established categorical apparatus of linguoculturology.

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