

# Mental Representations of “Road” and “Path”

at the Comparative Aspect

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**Abstract**—Mental representation, as a specific cognitive model which is associated with the human perception of the world and represents a unit of such perception, reflects the existence of a certain coding format or an inner (mental) model within human consciousness. Identification of the psychological meaning of the crucial mental representations, as well as their consideration at a comparative aspect, enables students to overcome a number of ethical-psycho-linguistic difficulties in their perception of the ethical images of a foreign culture in the process of learning a foreign language. This article quotes the results of the experiment revealing figurative and emotional contents of the mental representation of the “road” in the Russian students’ mind and in that of the Chinese student audience.

**Keywords**—cognitive linguistics; mental representations; conceptual model of the world; image; association experiment

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the modern cognitive science, the notion of “mental representation” is associated with the man’s perception of the world where he lives. One uses the term “representation” when referring to a unit of such perception as a specific cognitive model which substitutes real objects or events within the man’s intellectual process [1].

Mental representation reflects the existence of an inner (mental) model or a certain coding format within human consciousness. Hence, certain researchers, for instance, A.Paivio in the theory of the world dual coding [2], allocate two independent systems of representation—figurative and verbal, each having its own features in encoding, organizing, preserving and displaying various types of information. These systems exist in the complex mutual interaction of multiple levels. The totality of all the representations forms the conceptual system, or a conceptual model of the world reflected in the linguistic worldview.

The modern cognitive linguistics lays emphasis on studying mental representations, because they not only constitute a significant part of our consciousness but, “unlike the other mental units of a character nature, they are reportable”. Anyone, even under the experimenter’s task, may easily “imagine on one’s inner ‘screen’ any object or

situation, irrespective of making part of the real objects or persons around, or of the imaginary events” [3].

Individual subjectivity of the psychological contents of a linguistic sign represented in the human consciousness is associated with the specificity of the mental images—a complex aggregate of meanings determining the man’s inner experiences and emotional world.

The difficulty in learning foreign languages is that a new system of notional units should be created in the consciousness of the student ensuring “the mental representation of the foreign characters and their integration” “acquisition of emotions and images constituting their psychological contents in accordance with the context” [4].

## II. EXPERIMENT ON MENTAL REPRESENTATIONS OF CHINESE AND THE RUSSIANS

Identification of the psychological meaning of certain mental representations inherent to the native culture and comparison with the figured and emotional contents of the corresponding perceptions of the respective native speakers allow to find optimal ways of preventing and overcoming such difficulties in the process of learning that language as a foreigner.

For that purpose, a written questionnaire (poll) survey had been carried out among the Chinese audience, among the juniors learning Russian at the Sanya University (Hainan, PRC).

In order to identify the subjective image of a separate fragment of the linguistic worldview with its various evaluative and emotional components, the word “road” has been chosen, as the universal concept “path”/“road” not only reflects the existence of a certain material object serving the movement, but also demonstrates the model of the universe’s space structure in the human consciousness and embodies the finite philosophy of the life’s journey.

Besides, throughout the several millenniums in human history, the grounds of the Chinese spiritual culture reposed on the Taoism(the national religion of China) and the ethical-political teaching of Confucianism, both based on the

notion of Tao (Path), which is one of the crucial categories of the Chinese philosophy [5].

#### *A. Process and targets of the experiment*

To identify the psychological contents of the “road”, namely, its mental representation in the Chinese students’ mind, each student questioned has been proposed to imagine him/herself as an artist painting a picture on the subject of “Road”, and then to describe verbally such a pretended reality. For the purposes of preserving the unique format of the creatively produced texts, several elaborative questions have been posed. “In which season do you imagine this road?”, “What is the weather like in your picture?”, “What color is your road, what surrounds it, what landscape do you imagine to be around the road?”, “Are there any people on the road, how many of them?”, “What is your mood when imagining such a picture?”, etc.

Similar questions aiming at identifying the national and cultural contents of words associated with the notion of “road” were also performed in Russia among the Russian students, allowing to use the obtained results for the respective comparison [6].

67 of the Chinese students at the Sanya University aging from 20 to 22, who come from various provinces of China, had been questioned. The analysis of results of the questionnaires were presented in the form of percentage ratio over the total number of students among the polled audience.

#### *B. Results of the experiment*

##### *1) Differences between the Chinese and Russian people in the emotional contents of their mental representations of “Road”*

The result of the poll shows that members of the Chinese audience would rather describe the picture of a real road and of a real situation they witnessed in their life (townsman’s view). ----They imagine a large (70%), crowded (58%) and long (63%) road. Besides, the emotional component of the mental representation of the “road” proves to be mainly positive (“cheerful, gleesome mood” – 74%).

As for the Russian audience, the emotionally-evaluative contents of such an image is not so univocal. The “happiness” associated with the road does not assume the most outstanding and dominant position within the associative array of the linguistic worldview of the Russian people, which is supported by the associative dictionaries and the reference to the precedential texts of the Russian culture. For instance: “Down the long, boring road, the brisk troika runs...” (A.S. Pushkin); “Oh, the roads, dust and fog, Cold, anxiety, yes prairie weeds...” (Folksong); “Alone I set out on the road; The flinty path is sparkling in the mist...” (M.Yu. Lermontov), etc.

A significant part of the Russian informants describe a country road running among golden fields reaching the horizon under the high blue sky, in the mood of “A Rye Field” by I.Shishkin or the film frames from the “Ballad of a Soldier” (dir. G.Chukhrai), showing a mother longingly looking at the endless field road, waiting for her son back from the war. It

demonstrates that the psychological contents of the mental representation of the “road” with the Russian audience is mediated to a large extent by the general influence of the Russian culture.

##### *2) Similarities between the Chinese and Russian people in the emotional contents of their mental representations of “Road”*

The fact that the image of an endlessly long/lasting road common to people of both countries originates from the vast spaces of both country. Yet in the Russian mentality, the road is mainly wasted and deserted.

##### *3) Disparities between the Chinese and Russians in the figurative contents of their mental representation*

As for the season to choose, both Chinese and Russian informants prefer the pictures of summer and autumn. The Chinese respondents place other seasons, apart from the summer (42%), into relatively equal groups. Meanwhile, in the Russian respondents’ questionnaires, spring or winter road make rare cases. This allows us to make a conclusion that the climatic environment of a country considerably influences the associative orientation of the Russian people in the process of creating figurative images.

In the definition of the time of the day when describing a road, none of the informants from both countries imagined a picture of a night road, which forms a point in common for our cultures. However, the Russian audience mostly prefers to imagine the road in the daytime, and never in the evening, while the Chinese informants mainly refer to the morning road (49%), although they mention day (27%) and evening (24%) as well.

In accordance with the gleeful “roadish” mood, the Chinese students mentally paint the road with a rich palette: black color 28%, white – 22%, yellow – 19%, gray – 18%, green – 8%, red – 3% and pink – 2%.

Certainly, the Russian informants do not demonstrate such an abundance of bright when describing the roadway color. At the same time, in their descriptions of the soil road we observe references to the brown color which is not indicated by any of the Chinese respondents. In this context, it should be understood that color specifications in the Chinese language require particular comments because their subject contents are considerably different from the perceptions of the other cultures’ bearers.

The “Chinese road” is mainly surrounded by flowers (25%), flowers and trees (22%), houses and trees (15%), trees (10,5%), buildings (14%), cars (3%) etc. At this point, domination of the “flower” group is obvious (47%), which corresponds to the reality of the Southern China roads, where the bushes with bright leaves and flowers are planted for many kilometers along the routes, preserving their expressivity throughout the years.

It must be noted that the words “road” and “path” are represented by the students in different ways. For instance, the Chinese students answered the question about the difference between the notions of “road” and “path” by giving various figurative characteristics such as: “the road is large, and the

path is thin (60%) and beautiful (9%)”; “the road is noisy (6%), and the path is quiet (16%) and small, short” (11%), etc. Other contradistinctions sometimes appear as well, such as: “the road can be seen, and the path is uncertain”, “the road is concrete, and the path is abstract”, which better matches to the Russian audience’s answers.

### III. CONCLUSION

In summary, the emotionally-figurative contents of the human inner world may demonstrate not only the subjective, but also nationally-specific and universal particularity of such perceptions. Consequently, the comparative aspect of studying mental representations associated to the crucial notions of the existing or virtual reality allows to identify the common and the distinct ones in the corresponding fragments of the linguistic worldviews, which enables the foreign language teachers to promptly make adjustments to probably transpose the corresponding perceptions of the students’ native culture to the cultural context of the studied language.

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