The Semantic Potential of Language and the Meaning of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract—The paper is devoted to the study of intercultural communication in the light of sematic potential of language. Being a semiotic form of reflecting the objective reality, language manifests itself as a means of expressing human subjectivity. The authors rely on interdisciplinary methodological strategy, combining philosophical reflection and linguistic approaches to the study of the linguistic structures' semantic functions. The research is based on the concepts by W. Humbolt, G. Shpet, K. Marx, M. Foucault, F. de Saussure, with particular attention given to the analysis of 'the sphere of inexpressible', introduced by M. Polanyi. Language is claimed to be the means of shaping subjective time. Attempts to comprehend the temporality are reflected in 'time metaphors', namely, the geometric time-metaphor, a time-flow metaphor, a circular-time metaphor. The article invokes the linguistic analysis of the functions of tense-aspect verbal forms in the English language. The authors justify the non-existence of universal language.

Keywords—language; semantics; intercultural communication; culture code

I. INTRODUCTION

Being projected onto the sphere of interpersonal relations and intercultural contacts, an event becomes meaningful and assessed. The semantic sphere of a language appears to be an intersubjective phenomenon, dependent on both the generator of meanings and the recipient. This two-edged process gives rise to a multiplicity of interpretations, uncertainty and a distorted communication up to a communicative failure. The process of intercultural communication is largely defined by the boundaries of semantic connotations. Language serves as a mediator between the implicit sphere of cognition and the explicit domain of the objectified. In this regard a question may arise of whether language brings meanings into subjection or subjects to meanings. A variety of linguistic forms objectify meanings, but at the same time, meanings need to be adequately metalized.

Within the linguistic worldview thought and idea are interwoven with matter and substance, through which they find their expression. Sometimes two or even more forms of expression are needed. For example, software music combines an expressive language of sounds with a verbal-semantic plane of content. The names of the works of art also provide a specific semantic background, which serves as a landmark in a jungle of conceptualization. The symbolism of a theatical performance occasionally needs commenting on and translating from one figurative language to another by means of historically relevant cultural codes. This process appears to consist in construction or rather reconstruction of meanings.

The article focuses on the problems of generating meanings in a language, which combines the reflection of objective reality with a specific modality of subjective mental reality. Apart from objectivity as a fundamental requirement, intercultural communication also comprises specific conceptualization marked by subjective attitude and value judgements. In spite of the fact that collectivity patterns are defined within a language, it is the person (subject) who determines the relevance and meaningfulness of this or that linguistic construction. All states of the human mind are inclined to move into linguistic expression, up to non-verbal, para- and extralinguistic forms, which leads us to a conclusion that language as a semiotic from of reflecting reality should be viewed as the manifestation of human subjectivity.

II. METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY INTO LINGUISTIC MEANINGS

Language is aimed at understanding, which would bridge the gap between two minds or two different cultures in the context of intercultural communication [1]. Contemporary studies in the human communicative activity, as well as modern linguistic theories, tend to rely on interdisciplinary approach. Modern scholars address such issues as the structure of cognition, cognitive processes and linguistic worldview, which makes it inevitable to rethink and restructure traditional scientific paradigms and methods of research. Thus, a relatively new cognitive approach in linguistics has made it necessary to refer to various sciences for the related data, psychology, physiology, history and philosophy being among them. A functional-semantic aspect of linguistic-cultural codes is of primary importance here. On the one hand, the language contributes to shaping the intercultural understanding aimed at revealing the universal meanings, while on the other hand, it preserves and reproduces the distinctive character and unique identity of a nation.

If the language happens to be incapable of expressing a meaning, the latter, according to M. Polanyi, should be attributed to the sphere of the inexpressible. The British scholar of Hungarian descent, M. Polanyi is famous for "legitimatizing" the sphere of the inexpressible, which is dominated by the component of a silent implicit knowledge to the extent that its verbalization becomes impossible [2]. This sphere embraces emotional experiences and impressions. We cannot fail to agree that intimate experiences can hardly be translated into the social realm. This sphere has always been a domain of Art, where artistic images and plotlines are used as specific ways of penetrating a person's mindset and spirituality. Cognition, creativity, intuition are all among the phenomena which cannot be accurately described by linguistic means, however powerful they may be.

The sphere of the inexpressible goes side by side with knowledge and experiences which can be translated into verbal means relatively easily. Here an intellectual component coincides with a piece of information that can be completely decoded by a text [3]. The sphere of the inexpressible is characterized by a kind of inconsistency between non-verbal content of thought and linguistic means, preventing the content from being conceptualized.

According to Polanyi, the meaning of scientific statements largely depends on the implicit context of a 'hidden' knowledge, the latter being instrumental in character. Being rooted in physicality, the instrumental knowledge tends to remain non-verbal. Meanings are generated in the process of inner articulation, when the text is taking shape, coupled with the attempts to objectivize them through the linguistic means [4]. Thus, the author claims that the meaning is inseparable from the personal commitment to the scientific statement made by the subject of speech.

M. Foucault suggests relating generation of meanings to structural organization of language from a historical perspective. The author shows that ever since the Stoics, the system of signs in the Western world had been a ternary one, containing the significant, the signified, and the 'conjuncture'. Since the 17th century, the disposition of signs turns to a binary one, being defined by the interconnection between the significant and the signified. Language in its most original form, thought to be a certain and transparent sign of nature due to immediate resemblance with the designated things, gives rise to two more forms. Above the initial layer there lie commentaries using the existing verbal signs in new meanings. Below lies the text, which is superior to commentary. The 17th century raised the question of how the sign could be connected with the signified. The classical era tried to find the answer in analyzing mental representations, while the modern era analyses meanings and semantics. Thus, the language appears to be a specific form of mental representation for the people of the classical era and of meaning for us [5].

F. de Saussure defined a linguistic reality as a unity of opposites: sign and meaning, language and speech, the social and the individual. The dual nature of language indicates its concreteness and objectness. The object 'is captured' by verbal signs and thoughts are materialized, which is the function common to all languages, including artificial ones [6].

In this regard, the work by a Russian philosopher G. Shpet "Phenomenon and Meaning", seems to be essential [7]. Through the analyses of W. Humboldt's concepts, the author comes to a conclusion that language aims at understanding, constantly striving to reveal the meaning.

If we fall back on the methodological principle of sociocultural determination and W. Humboldt's linguistic ideas, we have to admit that language is a work of the spirit of the nation. A well-known Marx's statement claims that «neither thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own, they are only manifestations of actual life» [8]. Thus, various human conditions are inevitably reflected in the language, which undergoes modifications under the influence of specific natural, socio-economic processes and practical needs. We can refer to a textbook example showing that native peoples of the Far North have a large number of lexemes referring to snow and ice in the language to describe their frosty surroundings, and an extremely poor flower vocabulary [9]. Thus, the principle of sociocultural determination testifies to the utopian nature of the idea of a universal language. Nowadays there still exist native tribes using unique specific communication patterns. A network of cultural codes, starting with greeting patterns and up to expressing a full range of emotions, symbolically manifests linguistic and communicative diversity. Although it is hard to imagine the modern world without the English language, dominating intercultural communication (due to historical and civilizational reasons), reducing linguistic diversity to English would be wrong and hardly possible. An integrating function narrowed down to one single language, would lead to linguistic expansion. A dialectical relation between form and meaning, the principles of unity and diversity, historicism and development appear to be essential for studying semantic configurations of language.

III. LANGUAGE AS THE MEANS OF SHAPING SUBJECTIVE TIME

The category of time is the central element of the linguistic worldview. We cannot fail to see the global changes in linguistic sphere brought about by information civilization and technological revolution in the modern age. A number of linguistic novelties has got integrated into our lives destroying traditions and giving rise to situational identity.

Speaking about temporal aspect in linguistics, it should be mentioned that Time as the category of being has a long and elaborate historical background. It has always been a subject of much controversy. Disputes over objectivity, outwardness of time itself go back to the Ancient World. However, in the context of our research we will consider some of the results of a centuries-long reflection on Time reflected in the so-called time-metaphors, which are used within a number of disciplines. One of the classical concepts is a geometric time-metaphor, which describes time by

analogy with spatial dimensional characteristics as vectors – straight lines that are homogeneous, one-directional and continual. A geometric time-metaphor is believed to be suitable for the description of physical time.

A time-flow metaphor provides a completely different concept, ascribing three essential features to time: the dynamic character, discontinuity, inhomogeneity, since a flow   wears away the surface.   A   time-flow   metaphor contributes to conceptualization of subjective psychological time. We cannot fail to agree that the main feature of the stream of consciousness is its dynamic character and constant variability of the psychological present. A circular-time metaphor, depicting time as running laps, is also of interest.

The grammatical tense is traditionally considered by linguists to be the reflection of objective time in language, thus being a referential grammatical category [10]. That is the reason for applying the geometric time-metaphor to the analyses of meanings and functions of tense-aspect forms. Time appears to be a vector directed from the objective past into the objective future containing reference points with respect to which grammatical tenses are used, with the moment of speech (the objective present of the speaker) being a point of reference for the grammatical present tense. Reference point is the central notion in grammar research, being a tool for describing meanings and functions of tense-aspect verbal forms in the English language [11] [12]. Structural linguistics developed a system of invariant categorial meanings of tense-aspect verbal forms based on the correlation between the action expressed by a certain verbal form and the reference point on a temporal axis of coordinates. However, the linguistic factual material testifies to the fact that narrow bounds of the above mentioned correlation place rigid limitations on the scope of linguistic analysis [13]. Moreover, there has recently appeared scientific evidence that a man does not directly perceive objective time as something outward and material affecting his sensory organs, but rather through subjective experience of his self. Let us take the present tense as an illustration.

The majority of linguists claim that the grammatical present tense is referential to the moment of speaking, which has to be a part of its semantic interpretation. A typical function of the Continuous tense must be the most vivid illustration of this statement: *1. He is busy, he is talking on the phone!* We can't fail to agree that the time of the action expressed by Continuous coincide with the moment of speaking, although it goes beyond its limits – we do not know (or do not care) when the action began or when it will be completed. However, the medial stages of the depicted action coincide with the speaker's objective present, namely the moment of speaking.

On the other hand, having analyzed other occurrences of the Present Continuous, we have to admit that some actions expressed by these forms go far beyond the moment of speaking as the speaker's objective present. For example: *2. I'm doing a designer course now.* We can see that the action expressed by the verb in Continuous and the moment of speaking do not match. Moreover, as it is clear that the

utterance is made outside the classroom, the moment of speech does not coincide with any of separate segments of a repetitive action. At the same time, we may assume that the speaker has already attended a couple of classes, hence the grammatical present in this case includes a relatively long segment of the objective past. Besides, the grammatical present here may also involve the objective future perspective, as the speaker is likely to go on with his studies.

The semantic interpretation of the following Continuous verbal form does not involve the objective present either: *3. I'm going out with my friends tonight.* The grammatical present here does not denote the objective present of the speaker. The present Continuous form «absorbs» the objective future perspective.

Paradoxical   examples   of   Continuous   forms   in combination with the adverb *always* look vivid in this regard: *4. She is always nagging!* Here the grammatical present may have nothing to do with the moment of speaking, as the speaker rather focuses on the objective past perspective and refers to his experience of her behavior which is relevant for him at the present moment.

Thus, we cannot fail to see that the objective present in the form of the moment of speaking is by no means always reflected in the semantics of the grammatical present verbal forms. At the same time, we can find examples of the grammatical past tenses referring to the objective present moment: *5. I was wondering if you could help me.* In this example, the grammatical past tenses do not actually denote the objective past. By using past tenses, the speaker is trying to articulate his request in the most polite and mild form, but the request itself is sure to be relevant for the speaker's objective present.

Having considered occurrences of the present Continuous tenses, we may come to a conclusion that, although being a theoretical grammatical reference point for all the present tenses, the moment of speaking as the objective present is not always reflected by these forms. Rather, on the contrary, the grammatical present often goes beyond the objective present, involving both objective past and future into its scope of meaning. Apparently, in this regard we should speak of a subjective experience of time reflected in a language, rather than the objective physical time expressed by grammatical forms. Tense-aspect forms of the verb subjectify time. We can see that the geometric time-metaphor, traditionally used for the analyses of the grammatical tense, places considerable obstacles to studying the extensive potential of tense-aspect forms. In the light of the modern linguistic tendencies aimed at studying cognitive processes and tracing them in language, it is the time-flow metaphor, used in the analysis of psychological time, which seems to be more appropriate and meaningful. The subjective psychological time perspective is characterized by a potential detachment from the physical time, provided by such   cognitive   processes   as   memory,   imagination, contemplation. The English subjective present is very variable and flexible, its shape is largely influenced by prior experience: it can be limited to the moment of speaking, i.e. the objective present (example 1); embrace the objective past

and future adjacent to the objective present (examples 2, 3); and even be formed by the segments of the objective past (example 4). Thus, the examples given above clearly show that the duration of the subjective present is defined by the duration of an event perceived at a particular moment.

IV. CONCLUSION

The main conclusions of the study consist in the following. To be capable of reproducing cultural codes the linguistic worldview is in need of the combination of several linguistic forms, based on conceptual, figurative-emotional as well as non-verbal means of expression. The spheres of the inexpressible in the process of communication are also essential. Semantic identifications are realized in texts, speech and comments as well as our mimics, body language, laughter and mourning, and the symbolism of human behavior. The symbolic diversity of linguistic and communicative sphere testifies to the fact that an integrating function cannot be narrowed down to one single language, which would lead to linguistic expansion. Language as the factor of shaping the subjective time refers to linguistic time-metaphors. Modern linguistics states the multimeaningful and multifunctional character of tense-aspect verbal forms.

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