

VOCABULARY: AN EPITOME OF SOCIAL REALITIES

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Abstract: *A society's attitudes are exposed in its vocabulary and speaking practices. So far as linguists know, all languages are mutually translatable. What can be said in one language can be said in any other, somehow. Hence, if a speaker of any language wants to express something, s/he can resort to morphological processes and derive new words or can resort to syntax and make up new sentences in their languages which will express that new thought. All languages are thus constructed that new thoughts can be expressed in them. Undoubtedly, it is easier to convey some ideas in one language rather than another. This is because the vocabulary of each language develops partly according to the priorities of its culture. The objects, relationships, activities, and ideas important to the culture get coded onto single words, which are often highly specialized to express subtle nuances. The present article aims at tackling this issue by analyzing certain lexical choices, euphemisms, metaphors and idioms, gender-specific lexical structures in English (mostly American English) with reference to languages like Russian, German, Yiddish.*

Keywords: *euphemism; social reality; gender; metaphor; idiom*

1. INTRODUCTION

For human beings, reality is “filtered, apprehended, encoded, codified, and conveyed via some linguistic shape” (Smitherman, 1991:117). It is the words we use for concepts that help us form our ideologies, attitudes, and behaviors. However, this does not mean as Whorf said that we are prisoners of language. It means that language reflects cultural attitudes and that we unconsciously adopt those attitudes as language is acquired; and our consciousness can be trained. We can learn to identify the biases in our language, and we can learn not to use sexist, racist, or otherwise prejudiced speech forms. Sometimes positive attitudes are instilled because of our language. For example, in Yiddish, the word *kvell*, which means “to feel joy in someone else’s good fortune or success”, leads to a positive attitude in its user. In opposition, the German *Schadenfreude*, meaning “to take joy in someone else’s sorrow”, is the expression of a negative attitude which might be undertaken by its users.

Words do not have holistic meaning. Rather, they are composed of features of meaning. For instance, *boy* is composed of features like [+human, +male, -power]. Features of one word can be transferred onto another, which represents an important way to get meaning.

The differences in the way such features are attached to words often reflect the differences in

meaning between two dialects or languages. Even within the same dialect the choice of a word over another can subtly convey an attitude. Thus, words take on the semantic features of [+good] or [+bad] according to how a particular culture feels about the item designated.

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A good example of this cultural influence is the Eskimos, to whom snow is a central feature of life. For this reason, it has been claimed, they have anywhere from eight to hundreds of distinct words for it. However, this seems to be a major myth. Eskimos have four words for snow, *aput*, *qana*, *piasirpaq*, and *qimuqsuq*, meaning respectively ‘snow on the ground’, ‘falling snow’, ‘drifting snow’, and ‘a snow drift’ (Shaul and Furbee, 1998: 29). Eskimos do have grammatical adjustments to their basic vocabulary to express different duration or conditions of snow. African languages, spoken where there is no snow, do not have a word for it. Still, they could describe it, as *white, cold flowers from the sky that turns to water when they are touched*.

Another culturally-grounded concept is friendship which is more important in Russian culture than it is in American, as witnessed by the fact that the Americans have but one word *friend*,

which can be modified by words like *best* (Weirzbicka, 1997: 55-84). In contrast, Russian has six separate words, each designating very different friendly relationships with a person: *drug*, *podruga*, *tovarišč*, *prijatelj*, and *znakomyj*. It is important to mention the fact that these words are not at all interchangeable. One is either a *drug* or is not. One is a *prijatelj* or is not. This is in sharp contrast to American English in which people can have ten best friends, one from college, one from their old neighborhood, and so on. Also, in America a friend can be someone you just met at a party or someone whom you have known for quite a long time. *Friend* in America is a very loose term.

On the other hand, in Russian, a person's *druz'ja* "form this person's life support" (Weirzbicka, 1997: 59). A *drug* is a person you can rely upon for help and support. Seeing one's *druz'ja*, talking with them, confiding to them, and spending time with them is an important part of Russian's life, but this is not true of the other categories. *Tovarišč*, for example, refers just to someone one has gone through an experience with. *Podruga* can be a temporary relationship. *Prijatelj* refers to someone who is friendly but not intimate. This does not mean that such differences cannot be conveyed in English, it means that English does not easily codify them.

Russians have to categorize these distinctions in relationships every time they go to mention another person with whom they have a relationship. There is no cover term like *friend* in Russian. In the United States friends are made, found and lost. They are not permanent features in life, but in Russia they are of vital importance, they are durable and consistent, and this is reflected in the careful terminology for friends in that language.

People make their language say what they want it to by having many vocabulary items referring to different aspects of a concept, or to allow speaking of taboo things by never directly naming them.

If it were possible to say certain things in one language but not another, then we would have the problem that people who speak one language could know things that those in another could not. Bilinguals might have the problem of being able to know something in one language but not another. In fact, although it may be more difficult to express a given idea in one language rather than another, it is not, however, impossible.

Unquestionably, this does not mean that there is a one-to-one correspondence between languages. If there were, it would be possible to translate any language into any other by machine. Computer translations are still limited after three decades or

more of intensive research. They fail on the fact that any word in any language potentially has many meanings, and that the same idea can be expressed by grammatically different sentences. Computers cannot match words to the cultural context or even to the context of utterance the way any human can do.

The major problem is that, although all languages can potentially say the same things, the way they say them is consistently different. Each language builds up the semantic universe (i.e. all things which can be possibly said) in a different way. Even when two words mean the same thing in two different languages, the entire semantic load of those words differs. For example, in English *climb* can be used in:

Mary climbed the tree.
 Mary climbed out on a branch.
 Mary climbed out of bed.
 The airplane climbed 20,000 feet.
 Mary climbed to the top of her company.
 What a social climber Mary is!

We may suppose that all of these meanings of *climb* would be combined in one word in any other language, as we may as well assume that there might be separate words, each with its own semantic load.

Prototype theory and modern theories of metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; MacLaury, 1989) have shown that cultural models underlie the variable meanings of words such as the English *climb*. For instance, in English, the prototype of *climb* consists of:

- vertical movement
- use of hand in grasping position
- use of legs, bent a knee, in sequence
- purposeful activity

It is not necessary that all of these features be present in all usages of *climb*, but all exploit some combination of them. For instance, "climbing up in a tree" uses all of these features. "Climbing out on a limb" refers to the prototypical hand and legs movements, but to horizontal motion, rather than vertical. Climbing out of bed uses vertical movement and perhaps leg movement, but not the grasping hands. The airplane's climb is vertical motion without hands or feet. The metaphor for climbing up the corporate ladder depends on the entire picture of climbing, including the prototypical motion of hands. This last adds a picture of grasping, of ruthlessness, so that the metaphor "climbing to the top of a corporation" indicates a determined person who grasps at opportunity.

In another language *climb* might be conceived of solely as an animate activity, so the equivalent of the word *float* might be used for the airplane rising. In our society, we often treat social structures metaphorically as if they were objects, so that we see corporations as ladders. Therefore, we go up or down them; hence the metaphor for social or business climbing. In another culture, one which conceives of power as being a hidden entity in the centre of things, instead of a metaphor for climbing up in the business world, the metaphor for success might be based upon an image of burrowing to the centre of something.

Such prototypes help explain why semantic loads of words differ cross-linguistically and why there are often differences in metaphor in different languages.

2. EUPHEMISM

When a culture frowns upon an activity or situation, usually it creates euphemisms to refer to it. Euphemisms generally occur in sets of several words, none meaning exactly the thing referred to. When one euphemism becomes too directly associated with the disvalued meaning, it is replaced by other euphemisms.

Propaganda is a kind of euphemism, calling unpleasantness by another name. The difference is that propaganda is euphemism used by governments and political organizations. The term *ethnic cleansing* was intended as propaganda. It really meant 'genocide: massacring a group of people with a shared identity'. The seemingly innocuous word *apartheid*, literally 'apart-hood', 'the state of keeping something apart', really meant 'keeping blacks in South Africa in poverty and servitude'. The only 'apart' for them was being herded into special, poverty-ridden townships apart from the white folks.

In the United States, all one need to do to justify almost any action is to speak of "freedom" and "rights." The National Rifle Association has successfully kept gun-control laws to a minimum on the grounds that they would violate "freedom" and "rights", despite the fact that every other free society in the world has strict gun controls, and far fewer murders from shooting. The kicker is that the "rights" are "constitutional", another potent word in American politics. The word itself is used as a justification.

Sometimes propaganda and common euphemisms coincide. An example in this respect is *death*, another phenomenon with which the American culture is uneasy and which governments have to discuss. Again, we can tell

that English speakers are uncomfortable with death by the number of euphemisms for it. People do not die, they "pass away", "pass on", "go to sleep", "go to the other side", "meet their Maker", "go to rest", "go to their final reward", "croak", "kick the bucket", "buy the farm", "buy it", and become "traffic fatalities", not corpses. Also, they "lose" their relatives, as in "I recently lost my favorite aunt". Their pets "are put to sleep", "put away", or "put down", not killed. Gangsters "deep-six", "waste", or "off" their victims rather than "murder" them.

The uneasiness about mentioning death is in conflict with the military's need to talk about it. The military is an extremely difficult position, for if we cannot talk directly of natural death, how can we talk of unnatural death? Yet soldiers must deal with both killing and being killed. Death must be mentioned in their training, but if it were mentioned too straightforwardly, soldiers would be too often reminded of their mortality and of the true awfulness of what they are supposed to do.

Robert Sellman, a ROTC (Reserved Officers' Training Corps) student, examined military euphemisms for death in a field manual, *The Combat Training of the Individual Soldier and Patrolling*. He showed that the manual is written in a highly impersonal, distant style which is "designed to negate the psychological impact of killing and destroying." This style is achieved by the use of the modal auxiliary *may*, as in "A nuclear explosion may cause heavy casualties among your leaders" and "may even completely destroy your unit's chain of command." Nuclear explosions will cause these disasters. There is no "may" about it. By using *may*, the field manual makes it much less certain, much less frightening. Also, referring to "heavy casualties" as a cover term, rather than elucidating with direct words like *the dead*, *the burned*, *the wounded*, or *radiation sickness* belittles the true horror. The stress on the leaders' being destroyed is especially interesting, as nuclear bombs are not selective. Anyone around gets dead. By overtly citing "leaders" and "chain of command" but not actually mentioning enlisted persons or peers, the potential deaths of the ordinary soldiers are backgrounded. It is not so much that the manual lies; it just mentions part of the truth.

Sellman focused on two other terms: *fire for effect* and *engage the enemy*. The first is the command to the artillery to destroy an area with its explosives. Sellman points out that the emptiness of *for effect* matches that in the euphemism *do it*. He feels that this emptiness minimizes the personal involvement of the artillery observer who has to

give the command. The second term also does not mean what it says. It means 'fight, shoot, kill.' It says "take part in an activity with the enemy." The soldier has no difficulty extrapolating the meaning, but the meaning is never explicitly given. The reason is simple. If the field manuals were explicit, if they directly reminded soldiers what they were training for, to kill and to be killed, getting soldiers on the battlefield could become more difficult.

Both of these terms illustrate a common factor in euphemism: circumlocution, which means spreading meaning over several words rather than using a single one. This weakens meaning and is one way to avoid confronting an unpleasant issue head-on. *Kill* is not only more semantically direct than *fire for effect*, it is more powerful because meaning is concentrated on one word. In the same way, *engage the enemy* is weaker than *fight*. A beautiful example of the semantic weakening by circumlocuting is the U.S. Army's statement of intent, "the management and application of controlled violence", that is *war*.

Sellman also studies the slang terms used for death by soldiers. He underlines the fact that these allow soldiers to talk about the unpleasant aspects of their job while still maintaining their courage and morale up so that they can function as soldiers. The euphemisms for death are oddly explicit, but they keep soldiers at a distance from the true horror by denying the humanity of the corpse. For instance, *die* is "get iced" or "get waxed." Dead fish are usually put on ice, and mannequins are made of wax. "Dog tags" are really death tags, used to identify dead soldiers, but who would put them on if they were constantly being reminded of that? Sellman suggests that "Making the dead seem inhuman allows the individual to say it can't happen to him. This is the attitude that the soldier must have in order to throw himself in front of bullets."

Euphemism is also accomplished by understatement, using words which have combined semantic features that do not add up to the meaning intended. For instance, saying that children are "nutritionally deficient" when you mean 'starving' is an example. Sellman also gives one from soldier slang: *zap* rather than *kill*. *Zap* can also mean 'strike a blow' that is not fatal.

3. METAPHOR AND IDIOM

The previous section argues that things people are uncomfortable with have many euphemistic names and phrases. These all mean roughly the same thing, although typically they do not mean quite what they say. Metaphors and idioms are

very common as euphemisms, perhaps because they are the embodiment of circumlocution, of not calling a spade a spade.

A metaphor is a word used so that its central meaning cannot be taken. Rather, one must extend its meaning. For instance, *that old bag* in the right context means 'the old, unpleasant, unattractive woman.' The extension of *bag* to mean 'woman' is a metaphor.

Idioms are different from metaphors in that a mere extension of meaning of the words used will not give the intended meaning. Frequently, idioms consist of whole parts of sentences, typically a complete predicate. The meaning of the idiom is not given by an examination of its parts. Rather, the entire group of words has a meaning as if it were one word (Chafe, 1968). For instance:

| <i>Idiom</i> | <i>Literal Word</i> |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| put X's foot in X's mouth | blunder |
| shake a leg | hurry |
| pull X's leg | deceive |
| chew the fat | talk |
| shoot the breeze | talk |
| kick the bucket | die |

Because the actual meaning of idioms is so remote from the meaning of the sum of their parts, idioms are the epitome of skillfully indirect reference. It follows, then, that one way to uncover the attitudes of a culture is to examine its idioms and other euphemisms.

As said in the introduction, a culture has multiple terms designating items or activities that are important to it. There is a difference between these multiple terms and euphemisms. In euphemism, all the terms mean the same thing. In contrast, multiple terms for culturally important referents all refer to slightly different aspects of the same activity, object, or concepts. Consider the synonyms of *talk*:

chatter, gab, prattle, gossip, jabber, nag, babble, clack, yakkety-yak, yada-yada-yada, jaw, jibber-jabber, B.S., shoot the breeze, shoot the shit

All of these refer to idle talk or ordinary sociable talking with no intellectual or business purpose. People who talk a lot are:

talkative, gabby, wordy, glib, bigmouthed, fatmouthed, full of hot air

or are:

gossips, nags, shrews, chatterboxes, windbags

Although there is no noun that specifically means 'a person who does not talk a great deal,' there are many adjectives to depict such a person:

quiet, laconic, reticent, taciturn, reserved, closemouthed

Just about all the words used for idle talk have the connotation of 'not desirable' and 'stupid.' Some, like *prattle, babble, and chatter*, also bear the connotation of 'childish' and 'feminine.' Besides the feminine *gossip* and *nag* with their connotations of 'nastiness' and 'triviality,' the only phrases for idle talk that do not bear bad overtones are those that refer to the casual speech of men, *chew the fat* and *shoot the breeze*. In other words, all words for talking which have semantic features of [-good, -important] also have one of [+female]. Likewise, the adjectives listed above denoting people who talk a lot are not only demeaning but feminine. The semantic features of these words allow us to state that the speech of men seems to be more valued in nowadays society than that of women. Notice that there are few common words to describe someone who does not talk very much and those that do are somewhat literary. In contrast with the words for talking too much, none of these is exclusively feminine.

Two things should be especially mentioned. Both *gossip* and *nag* are considered feminine activities. However, men do both things and do them all the time. For example, male "shop talk" is gossip. It involves talking about people who are not present and making judgments of their behavior or business tactics. Men gossip about who has just bought an expensive car which he couldn't possibly afford, who is cheating on his wife, who is gambling, and so on. Men also nag their wives about losing weight, not spending money, their poor cooking, and even their clumsy housecleaning. The point is, if women do it, it is gossiping and nagging. If men do it, it is not.

However, talking per se seems not to be a highly valued activity in the general American culture. There is no term in English that is the equivalent of the Yiddish *shmuesen* 'social talking for the purpose of enjoying each other's company,' a word applied equally to adults of both sexes and which has very pleasant connotations.

4. GENDER AND LANGUAGE

How women are valued in society can be observed in the fact that so many words for

unpleasant talk have the semantic feature [+female]. Gender is indeed pervasive and an important part of society that is why it lexicalizes clear attitudinal differences in its references.

A great deal of research has been carried out into these differences. Gender-biased language affects everyone, both males and females. Women and their treatment are an inextricable part of society. There is no way to investigate human and cultural behavior without considering women. Nor can we ignore attitudes toward men. Studying speech and other social behavior has been largely a study of male activities. Yet, all-male-centered accounts of society are sadly incomplete and inaccurate. Speech about and by women is an excellent example of how language behavior mirrors social attitudes and facts. English vocabulary does reveal attitudes toward women.

It seems to be common knowledge nowadays the fact that *man* includes *woman*, and that *he* can refer to *she*, but the opposite is not possible and acceptable. In Old English, the word for a male was *wer* and *man* meant 'human.' In time, the word for human, then, became the word for a male, but there was no corresponding change for *woman*, originally *wifmann*. Many people, even women, defend the practice of using *man* to stand for women nowadays because of its historical origin. However, that such usage makes women invisible can be shown by usages of other terms for human beings. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (2003:243-246) quote an anthropologist as saying something like:

When we woke in the morning, we found that the villagers had all left by canoe, leaving us alone with the women and children.

The women and children were also villagers. The insidious thing is that this implies that women (and children) are not full members of this human category, that of being villagers. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet also cite an NPR broadcast on January 14, 2000: "Over a hundred Muslim citizens were killed, and many women and children." This implies that Muslim citizens do not include women and children. In both instances, which should be not considered singular examples, males are taken as the default people, not females.

These authors add that it is not only male humans who are the default category of humans, but heterosexual males, as shown in the following quote:

Language as it is used in everyday life by members of the social order, that vehicle communication in which they argue with their wives. (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 244)

5. CONCLUSIONS

The vocabulary of a language indicates what is important to its speakers. It also mirrors the attitudes of a culture: what is taboo, what is valued, and what is not. Speaking practices themselves tell us what position people have in their societies. As long as women's speech is chattering, nattering, babbling, and chit-chatting, clearly their speech is not valued. So pervasive is our social attitude that women are inferior that even female scholars blame women for their own subjugation, saying that men are dominant because women encourage them to be so. This ignores the fact that society does not allow women not to be encouraging to men.

Nonetheless, as Janet Holmes and Maria Stubbe (2003) have shown, women can be direct when their position needs them to be, but, more importantly, they can take the very forms of speech which have long signaled their weakness and use them to exert authority. They retain their power, but by their cooperative, facilitative, nonthreatening language allow corporations, teams, and committees to function smoothly with minimum damage to the face of coworkers. In fact, women's style may well be the style of the future: cooperation instead of raw competition.

Examination of a vocabulary can reveal a good deal about a culture. The lexicon of a language is a mirror of its speakers' attitudes and ideas; a mirror which reflects and which does not determine; it does not hold prisoners. As Kay and Kempton (1984) underline, Whorf himself could not have thought that we cannot break out of our cultural mode, since his works imply that we should do just that.

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