

SCTCMG 2019
**International Scientific Conference «Social and Cultural
Transformations in the Context of Modern Globalism»**

ROLE OF CONCEPT IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The joint study of a concept with the process of cross-cultural communication is relevant within the modern scientific study for broad understanding of the national culture, for understanding of the mindset of other people, as well as for the creation of national global landscapes. The study makes an attempt to consider the leading role of a concept in cross-cultural communication in terms of linguoculturological approach. Scholarly works on theoretical study of a concept and cross-cultural communication, as well as Russian and Chinese traditions, set expressions with the concept “*number*” served the material of the study. The methods of study include description, comparison, componential and semantic analyses. The paper analyzes diverse understanding of a concept, its relation to culture and cross-cultural communication, participation of concepts in cross-cultural communication using the example of the concept “*number*” from the perspective of Chinese and Russian linguocultures. The analysis revealed the inclusion of a key concept of “foreign” into a concept, and impact of concepts on the mentality of people in cross-cultural communication. The structure of a concept was considered, its substantial components for cross-cultural communication, which contain national cultural elements and etymological sources of culture, are outlined. The obtained results make it possible to define the role of a concept in cross-cultural communication: mutual action of concepts on different cultural backgrounds serves as a nuclear link of cross-cultural communication. The study allows students of foreign languages to learn and master concepts through cross-cultural communication, to improve translation skills, to foster their multicultural development.

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Keywords: Concept, cultural linguistics, culture, cross-cultural communication, mentality.



1. Introduction

The tendency towards diversification of social development and expansion of cooperation between different nations is observed since the end of the 20th century. Each nation has its unique culture therefore cross-cultural communication has become a necessary and widespread public phenomenon. It is known that culture is closely connected with language, through which it remains alive and passes down for generations. On the other hand, the language on its own is one of components of culture. In recent years the study of interrelation of language and culture is becoming ever more relevant, which led to a new research paradigm – cultural linguistics, “complex scientific synthesizing discipline that studies relations and interactions of language and culture through their functioning” (Vorobyov, 2008, p. 55). The most relevant subjects of this discipline include the study of concepts, which, being valuable for culture, constitute the national worldview and reflect the national philosophy. In other words, concepts represent a concentrated set of material and spiritual achievements of people. A concept belongs to everyone and nobody separately. This means that it is impossible to understand the national culture without a concept. Joint study of concepts with cross-cultural communication helps students of different nationalities not only to improve their translation skills or foreign language fluency, but also to expand their understanding of other cultures. This proves the relevance and importance of this study, which attempts to understand a concept and its role in cross-cultural communication in terms of linguoculturological approach.

2. Problem Statement

The novelty of this study is that it combines the study of a concept with cross-cultural communication and defines its role through the analysis of the concept “*number*” in the context of Russian and Chinese linguocultures. The paper makes an attempt to solve the following tasks:

1. To define linguoculturological understanding of a concept and its relation to cross-cultural communication;
2. To analyze the participation of concepts in cross-cultural communication;
3. To consider the main components of a concept influencing cross-cultural communication.

3. Research Questions

The object of study – a concept is a typical interdisciplinary term. This term is borrowed from mathematical logic, where it is considered as a complete set of features (Stepanov, 2004). In further scientific research the concept is actively used in philosophy, cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics and other scientific areas. Its cross-disciplinary nature causes complexity and ambiguity of interpretation. In this regard, the first step of conceptual study is to clarify this term. The paper only focuses on linguoculturological approach to the study of a concept.

It is known that the concept was for the first time proposed in the early 20th century by Askoldov (1997) in his article “Concept and Word” thus marking the beginning of conceptual and culturological approach in modern science. Through understanding a concept in mental and activity aspect, Askoldov (1997) believes that its main objective is to fulfill the replaceable function: “A concept is a mental formation, which replaces undefined set of objects of the same sort in the course of a thought” (p. 271).

Askoldov's (1997) ideas on the concept were later continued by Likhachyov (1993) who suggests considering a concept through "algebraic expression of meaning". In our opinion, the difference in the understanding of a concept is that Likhachyov (1993) believes that "a concept exists not for a word, and for every main (dictionary) word meaning separately" (p. 153) since depending on personal education, experience and social environment a person cannot capture all meanings as a whole.

Relying on the ideas of S.A. Askoldov and D.S. Likhachyov, many scientists suggest to understand a concept in its combination with human thinking and culture. In cultural linguistics the concept is usually considered as a certain mental formation reflecting national consciousness and serves a unit of linguistic view of the world. Vezhbitskaya (1996) confirms this: a concept is "an object from the "Ideal" world, it has name and reflects culturally-based human understanding of the world "Reality" (p. 59). According to the scientist, concepts have national specifics and demonstrate national language consciousness.

Arutyunova (1999) treats concepts as a notion of "practical philosophy", which "is developed as a result of some factors: national tradition and folklore, religion and social ideology, education and life experience, ... systems of values, temperamental attributes and social environment, way of life and images of art" (p. 48). This confirms the national and personal nature of concepts fixed in a language and ensuring the transfer of spiritual culture of the people.

Following Stepanov (2004), we understand a concept as a main cumulative unit of culture, which represents "the culture clot in human consciousness" (p. 73), i.e. the concept bears the imprint of spiritual image of a person in certain culture. Stepanov (2004) points out that as concepts the culture is included into mentality of a person, on the other hand, the concept still serves as means of a person (an ordinary person, not the creator of cultural values) for his participation in culture, and in certain cases – the influence on it. Zusman (2001) supports the opinion of the scientist: "a concept is a micromodel of culture, and culture is a macromodel of concept. The concept generates culture and is generated by it" (p. 40).

4. Purpose of the Study

The study makes an attempt to consider the leading role of a concept in cross-cultural communication in terms of linguoculturological approach and highlights its main components influencing cross-cultural communication.

5. Research Methods

Linguoculturological approach to the study of a concept and scientific works on cross-cultural communication formed the methodological basis of the paper. The paper also utilized the methods analysis, description and comparisons, componential and semantic analyses.

6. Findings

From diverse definitions of a concept it is clear that concepts are necessary for culture, they act in the mentality of a person as paradigms of cultural information. Due to the national, cultural and human experience, the concepts may reflect both personal knowledge of the world of a person, the system of its values, and the attitude of all people to the real world.

The culture and a person coexist with each other because the difference of a person from an animal is in existence of civilization, which definitely forms the culture. Culture is presented as the environment “penetrated” by a person. “This penetration is more definite and structured: it functions as mental formations – concepts” (Akhmetzhanova, 2012, p. 85). A person as a carrier of concepts of culture is in continuous state of communication. Effective communication requires not only exchange and acquisition of linguistic signs, but also exchange and perception of mental information, in particular cultural. Concepts are present in communication as paradigms of cultural information in mentality. In modern life a special type of communication between people is cross-cultural communication, therefore it requires the involvement of concepts.

Similar to “concept”, the term “cross-cultural communication” is also cross-disciplinary. For the first time it was introduced for scientific use by G. Treyger and E. Hall in their work “Culture and communication. Model of analysis” in 1954 (as cited in Krasilnikova, 2015). They consider cross-cultural communication as “the ideal purpose that a person strives towards in his desire to better and more efficiently adapt to the surrounding world” (Arutyunov, 1989, p. 67). As a result of further numerous studies it is widely accepted that the idea of cross-cultural communication relates to the aspiration to understand a foreign culture, i.e. it requires the affiliation of participants of communication to different cultures, which provides for the dialogue of cultures – “understanding of another culture through yours, and the understanding of through another via cultural interpretation and adaptation of these cultures to each other in the conditions of semantic discrepancy of the majority of both” (Grushevitskaya, Popkov, & Sadokhin, 2003, p. 45).

In cultural linguistics cross-cultural communication is most often considered as the “exchange of culturally significant information between people, each of which has life experience and his personal understanding of the world (ethnic, linguistic, social)” (Shaklein, 2012, para. 7). Understanding and perception of cultural information within concepts is very important for cross-cultural communication, and hence, concepts are necessary for communication.

Concerning cross-cultural communication Shaklein (2012) outlines two main aspects: idea of “foreign” and violation of expectation. The author considers that the “foreign” is a key concept to the understanding of cross-cultural communication. In the situation of cross-cultural communication “different culture-specific views on the world encounter each other”. In this case each participant considers his knowledge of the world normal without realizing cultural differences of the interlocutor, thereby “not challenging something self-evident, and more eagerly thinks of nonsense, ignorance or malice of his partner” (Shaklein, 2012, para. 12). Hence, being unique in one culture, the “foreign” in the consciousness of a communicant of another culture seems strange and unclear. Therefore, only accepting “foreign”, a person can gradually come to understanding of inadequacy to the situation of communication and accomplish cross-cultural communication. We believe that the meaning of “foreign” are certain nonequivalent or partially equivalent cultural elements contained in concepts in comparison one culture with another. This may be explained by the difference between a concept and a notion. The “notion” is used in logic and philosophy, defines general features of reality, which are usually objective and standard for all people of different cultures. The “concept” is more extensional in comparison with the “notion”. Stepanov (2004) considers that the structure of a concept “includes everything that belongs to the structure of a notion,

and it includes everything that makes it the fact of culture” (p. 51). These cultural preconceptions of a concept include individual national elements, i.e. “foreign”. Thus, during cross-cultural communication mutual understanding and perception of the “foreign” represent the interaction of concepts of different cultures. For this reason, the role of concepts in cross-cultural communication seems quite clear.

Let us take the concept “*number*” as an example, which in Russian and Chinese linguocultures refers to different national traditions and associations. In two national linguistic consciousnesses the concept “*number*” does not only bear its literal meaning – figures and quantity of objects, but also national and cultural ideas generating the “foreign”. The difference of digital culture of two nations is first of all demonstrated by the preference of even/odd numbers. For Russian people odd numbers usually symbolize happiness, and even – devilish things (Kirillin, 2000). For example, number “*three*” means completeness, expresses “trinity of time” and “tridimensionality of space” (Cong, 2016), which is reflected in set expressions: “*Good things come in threes*”, “*The house is not built without trinity*”, “*To travel three seas away*”, etc. The number “*two*” usually characterizes both sides of a thing with negative meaning in such Russian phraseological units as “*between the devil and the deep sea*”, “*two-edged sword*”.

On the contrary, Chinese people admire even numbers, which determine happiness, wealth and good luck. For example, “*two*”, “*pair*” in Chinese philosophy means “*Yin yang*” (meaning of “symmetry”), “*sky-earth*”. For Chinese people a typical phraseological unit with number “*two*” is “*双喜临门*” (“*double joy*”) designating great piece of luck. This understanding is also reflected in the ideogram of a wedding celebration “*囍*”, which repeats the Chinese hieroglyph “*喜*” (“*si*”) with the meaning of joy, happiness.

Comparing Russian and Chinese digital cultures the cultural ideas of even/odd numbers seem strange or unclear to each other, i.e. “foreign”. But all these cultural elements, along with literal meanings, form the concept “*number*”. The situation of communication with numbers between Chinese and Russians requires mutual understanding and acceptance of cultural elements of numbers, i.e. perception of the concept “*number*” in both cultures.

The second important aspect of cross-cultural communication is the violation of expectation. In the course of communication transfer and obtaining a message are preceded by coding and decoding, which usually bear national and individual features. Quite often “a recipient of a message attributes another meaning to symbols and signs used in the message than a sender and interprets and understands this message differently than the sender” (Shaklein, 2012, para. 5). The answer of the addressee of the message cannot meet the expectations of the sender. Such discrepancy causes misunderstanding, or even the feeling of uncertainty, concern or discontent for participants of communication. We suggest explaining the reason of discrepancy of expectations by influencing the consciousness of a person with concepts.

In cognitive and linguistic study, the concept is understood as a mental formation reflecting the content of experience and knowledge and participating in process of world cognition. Thus, A.P. Babushkin understands concept as “any discrete substantial unit of collective consciousness reflecting the subject of real or ideal world stored in the national memory of native speakers in the form of learned substrate” (Tokarev, 2000, p. 37). Based on this idea, it is possible to trace the presence of concepts in human knowledge. When a person perceives some message, first he tends to use similar concepts kept in his consciousness to process this message. However, different people understand the world differently, and hence, different nations have different outlooks thus defining individual and national nature of a concept.

Therefore, when a recipient of a message codes and decodes the obtained information during cross-cultural communication, those concepts with national or individual specifics influence the mental operation of the addressee. This results in the violation of expectations.

An interesting example is number “seven”, which is considered ceremonial and mystical in the Russian culture. “Seven” occurs in many phraseological units: “in the seventh heaven” (very high as paradise), “seven on benches” (many children), “wise as Solomon” (clever), “you must measure seven times before you start cutting” (it is necessary to consider and weigh everything), etc. In general, number “seven” in the Russian belief symbolizes “big”, “blessing”. In Chinese linguoculture the number “seven” is often connected with “death”, “ghost”. In Chinese funeral tradition the relatives shall commemorate the dead person every seven days after his death, in total five or seven times. In this regard, in the communicative situation of giving flowers if a Russian young man gave seven flowers to a Chinese girl, she can be dissatisfied, or even angry. According to Chinese tradition, there shall be nine or ninety nice flowers because number “nine” in Chinese sounds the same as the word “久” (“jiu”) meaning “long”, “eternal”, “strong”. In this case the expectation is not met since in the consciousness of a Chinese girl the message (seven flowers) is perceived in terms of Chinese linguoculture of the concept “number” (“seven” and “nine”), which contradicts Russian, and as a result the reaction of discontent does not meet the expectation of a Russian young man. It is clear that the concepts participate in the thinking process of the participants of communication and affect their consciousness. Thus, the study of concepts taking into account their linguocultural background is very important to remove the discrepancy of expectations in cross-cultural communication.

The above analyses show that the concept has complex structure, it has “much wider notion than a mere lexical meaning in general and system meaning of a word in particular” (Jaber, 2018, p. 89). This was indicated by Stepanov (2004) that defined three main layers of a concept:

1) “main, actual feature”. This layer is known and important to all carriers of any culture. For a concept “number” the first layer is “figures”, “quantity”. 2) “additional or several additional passive features, which are not relevant, but historical” (Stepanov, 2004, p. 24). Therefore, the second layer is available for representatives of a certain social group of Russian or Chinese people. For example, this layer includes such special ideas of Russian people as “completeness” of number “three”, “big” and “blessing” of number “seven”. Respectively, this also includes unique Chinese cultural values: “joy” and “happiness” for number “two”; “death”, “ghost” – “seven”; “long”, “eternal” – “nine”.

3) “internal form, which is usually not realized at all, imprinted in external verbal form” (Stepanov, 2004, p. 34). It is the etymological feature of a concept, which is the least relevant for the carriers of any culture. For example, Russian digital culture is closely connected with national mythology and religion, and Chinese – with ancient Chinese philosophy and tradition.

By means of the analysis of a concept “number” we can claim that out of three main layers of a concept the most relevant for cross-cultural communication are the second and third layers since the second layer contains national and cultural knowledge, and the third – sources of national culture.

7. Conclusion

Having considered the relation and role of concepts within cross-cultural communication through the analysis of a concept “number” with regard to Russian and Chinese linguocultures, it is possible to conclude the following.

First, in cultural linguistics a concept is usually considered together with culture, it is understood as a paradigm of cultural components in human mentality. Reflecting national outlook, concepts are present in cross-cultural communication.

Second, the key concept “foreign” is included into concepts, which perception is necessary for cross-cultural communication.

Third, as mental formations concepts participate in the thinking process of participants of communication and affect their consciousness.

Fourth, the second and third layers, which contain national and cultural ideas and sources of culture are the most critical elements in the structure of a concept.

Thus, it is possible to define the role of a concept in cross-cultural communication: interaction of concepts at different cultural backgrounds is a nuclear link of cross-cultural communication.

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