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Verbal Interpretation Variables and Sociocultural Aspect of Language Variation: A New Perspective

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The article discusses issues pertaining to investigations of sociocultural aspect of language as it is represented through General verbal interpretation variable and Sociocultural verbal interpretation variable. We argue that the main function of General verbal interpretation variable is to activate collective knowledge as it is represented by language as a system. The function of Sociocultural verbal interpretation variable is to highlight a repertoire of mental models of individual knowledge that speakers activate in discourse. The article builds on our previous research in the field as well as specially devised methodology of cognitive-discursive interpretant (CDI) analysis and sheds new light on how Sociocultural verbal interpretation variable is evoked through the meta-concepts ROLES, STEREOTYPES, VALUES, NORMS, SPACE, TIME, LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE — universal knowledge structures that shape sociocultural diversity of any language. The research findings are important insights into socio-cognitive framework of Linguistics to study the interaction of society, culture, thought, language, and human mind in accord with the general, cognitive, and interpretive commitments of the cognitive approach.

Keywords: General verbal interpretation variable, sociocultural verbal interpretation variable, meta-concepts, cognitive-discursive interpretant method of analysis, interpretive function of language.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of language variation has long served as a focus for academic research interests in linguistics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis. Generally, language variety is described as “a set of linguistic items with similar social distribution” as in Hudson (1996). While building on the solid foundations of research in language variation, broader perspectives should study the processes that underpin it. It has become obvious, that linguistic variability due to sociological variables (class, ethnic origin, gender, age, social status differences, religious affiliation, professional occupation, etc.) require not only an extra-linguistic accounting but a linguistic description and explanation as well.

Many theories have been proposed over the years to explain how language represents social variables, how it functions socially and culturally as in Eckert (2000), Scollon & Scollon (2001), Ting-Toomey (1999). These theories differ in the conceptions of what language is and what they regard to be the basic mechanisms that underlie language use. Research in various aspects of mainstream linguistic analysis as well as in interdisciplinary areas, such as psycholinguistics, the study of language processing and acquisition, language and the brain, language in social contexts, computational linguistics and other language-related disciplines as in O’Grady, Dobrovolsky, Katamba (1997) has now firmly established the pivotal role of language in every day activity of man and the fundamental role of language in the interpretation process. This role becomes particularly evident in the premise that language is both social and individualistic. As a social phenomenon, language represents what speakers attend to and what they perceive as salient and collectively accepted in the processes of world understanding and world interpreting. In its individualistic aspect, language activates personal mental models with which a speaker interprets the world and the knowledge of the world, reflecting their sociocultural understanding of it as in Boldyrev and Dubrovskaya (2015).

In this work, we argue that language variation is deeply involved with interpretation which, in turn, activates knowledge a participant acquires as a member of a particular socioculture. Our central argument is built around the fundamental Cognitive Semantics premise that language as an experiential phenomenon is related to general cognitive abilities of human beings, linguistic interpretation included. Inspired by a sociocultural understanding of human thinking as in Vygotsky (1986), we suggest that interpretation involves selection, classification and evaluation and argue that *selection* provides profiling, *classification* triggers the assignment of the profiled meaning to

groups within a system of categorization, *evaluation* implies assessment within a set of norms, values, and other standards that construe a participant's world view. These selection, classification and evaluation types of linguistic interpretation comprise the CDI as in Boldyrev and Dubrovskaya (2015, 2016).

The aim of this article is to lay out some significant assumptions embodied in contemporary approaches to interpretation variables that have been worked out by the authors of this contribution within the framework of Cognitive Semantics. We present an integrated framework that is based on linguistic data, bearing in mind that language is a cognitive process that reflects:

- a) what human beings think of the world, themselves and others;
- b) how language speakers interpret the world (primary interpretation), reinterpret the collective knowledge about the world (secondary interpretation), draw conclusions about themselves and others.

Thus, the research question we are particularly interested in is “What constitutes a sociocultural aspect of language variation from the point of view of Cognitive Semantics?”

In order to address this question, we have employed the use of methodologies based on sociocultural theory and, in particular, on the Vygotskian theory of language as both a sociocultural and a psychological tool. Its application involves the CDI (cognitive-discursive interpretant) method of analysis that enables the study of both dictionary and encyclopedic meaning as well as the nature of Linguistic Interpretation, an approach that was proposed and further developed in Boldyrev (2012, 2016, 2018).

The truly original part of the paper is the design and potential of the methodology based on the holistic view of the functions of language: cognitive, communicative and interpretive. In its cognitive function language reflects how speakers conceptualize and categorize the world they live in. In its communicative function language operates as a means of activating cognitive models that the sender (addresser) thinks appropriate for effective interaction. It is the interpretive function of language that reveals verbal interpretation variables of its speakers in terms of associations, expectations and conceptual characteristics participants select; how they categorize and evaluate themselves and the world around. While our research generally follows the suggestions made in Anthropology, Psychology, Communication and Social Studies, we see our contribution in positing a sociocultural aspect of language variation as twofold within the field of cognitive studies of language: General verbal interpretation variable and Sociocultural verbal interpretation variable.

To prove that General verbal interpretation variable and Sociocultural verbal interpretation variable are universal, our data include samples in the English and Russian languages.

Discussion

Towards a sociocultural approach of language variation: General Verbal Interpretation Variable and Sociocultural Verbal Interpretation Variable

Since words provide access to knowledge and lexical concepts concern purely linguistic knowledge, whereas a cognitive model is a large-scale body of non-linguistic knowledge which lexical concepts provide access to as in Evans (2009), it becomes evident that what linguistic means a speaker chooses is dependent on his/her knowledge of the world which is related to interpretation as cognitive ability of human beings. Linguists have always tried to identify the nature and typology of the knowledge that underlies language use and discourse construction in general. Within the framework of generative grammar N. Chomsky reported evidence for the distinction between competence vs. performance and internal language vs. externalized language as in Chomsky (1986). In his terms, internal language encompasses the knowledge that resides in the speakers' mind and underlies performance whereas externalized language is encountered in the world as behavioral habits shared by a community. However, recent work in Cognitive Linguistics suggests that knowledge of language includes lexical concepts and cognitive models as in Evans (2009) within which speakers interpret the world, see also in Boldyrev (2016).

Highlighting the ability of speakers of language to organize their minds in culturally specific ways, we believe that knowledge has its origin in two primary sources: cultural models and personal mental models. Cultural models are constructs that represent mutual understanding of the world as it is constrained by language. They function as sociocultural constraints on what language speakers attend to and what they perceive as salient and collectively accepted in the processes of world understanding and world interpreting. For example, in the process of language use, the word *university* activates the sociocultural knowledge of a particular speaker: for the driver it activates *a point in space* as in (1) and for the architect — *a piece of art* as in (2), for the child — *sad experience* as in (3):

(1) to the passenger: *Can I stop the car at the University?*

(2) *The University is in need of a refurbishment.*

(3) *I am lonely when my mother goes to the University.*

Thus, sociological variables for the driver and the architect (*occupation* and *social status*; the latter is higher in case of the architect) lead to verbal interpretation variables (within the domains SPACE and ART for the driver and the architect, respectively). *Age*, *community contact* and *community dependence* on a parent as sociological variables for the child in the above example (3) presuppose the child's verbal interpretation variable of *university* within the domain FEELINGS and EMOTIONS. Overall, one and the same word *university* due to diverse sociological variables activates different verbal interpretation variables: the driver, the architect and the child select, classify and evaluate the world (the university, in the examples) differently.

On the one hand, the word *university* gives access to the collective knowledge that is activated by the majority of speakers of English: an institution for higher learning; with departments to study Humanities, Natural Sciences, Math. This knowledge is indicative of General verbal interpretation variable that speakers activate when they speak the English language.

The study of personal mental models has been the major focus of research within mainstream cognitive psychology. Personal mental models are constructed by individuals of different sociocultural backgrounds as a result of their unique experiences of life activity, reflecting their sociocultural understanding of the world, i. e. world interpreting and world construal. Thus, for a taxi-driver *university* is a place where to stop his car as in (4); for a child *university* is a source of income to supply basic needs as in (5):

(4) *The road is blocked. You can get off at the University.*

(5) *Mom will earn enough money at the University to buy a toy for me.*

The two-dimensional nature of Sociocultural approach to language variation introduced in this article is foregrounded in numerous examples in which a symbolic form represents shared knowledge and mutual understanding of a phenomenon that discord with the knowledge that language speakers activate due to specific sociocultural experience, for instance, lack of knowledge or attracting attention of a potential client in the following examples. The Russian word *monopoliya* which is translated into English as *monopoly* is associated with *a single seller, single market controller, single price market, no competition*. This dominance over goods, however, is violated by issues of market economy as is in the name of a bag store in Russia:

(6) *Монополия сумок.*

'Monopoly of bags'.

The bag store is not a market structure with one seller of a product; it is not the industry itself either. There are other bag stores where bags are available as in:

(7) *Мир сумок.*

‘A world of bags’.

(8) *Пани сумка.*

‘A bag for a madam’.

(9) *Бэглэнд.*

‘A land of bags’.

This interplay of conventionalized language and individual interpretation supports the idea that General verbal interpretation variable and Sociocultural verbal interpretation variable are activated by these Russian lexical units.

In our previous works we posited that language speakers activate selection, classification and evaluation as three basic processes of the function of language which has recently been claimed “the interpretive function” as in Boldyrev (2012). In general, interpretation “serves to activate part of the semantic potential (cognitive model profile) that each lexical concept provides access to” (Evans, 2009: 25). For example, we can select either *doctor, nurse, physician, surgeon* for someone who pursues a career in medicine, depending on our knowledge of part of the world connected with MEDICINE. Further, we can classify people into different categories: among *doctors* we identify dentists, cardiologists, pediatrician, etc.; there are types of *nursing* positions as well as in (10):

(10) *Registered Practical Nurses; Registered Nurses, Nurse Practitioners.*

Evaluation implies a broad scale of assessment valuation standards as in (11):

(11) *I am the wife of doctor Smith who cured you of pneumonia last year* (positive contextual evaluation and identification of the doctor).

In this article, General verbal interpretation variable is theorized as a conceptual structure comprising the knowledge of the world as it is represented through language. Different languages comprise different knowledge. Compare, for example the pairs *fingers — toes* as two different words in English referring to two different parts of the body and one word in Russian *palcy* which corresponds to *either fingers or toes* in English and is referred to either *upper limb* or *lower limb* depending on the next word it collocates with: *palcy nog* vs. *palcy ruk*. General verbal interpretation variable tends to unite speakers of one language, whereas Sociocultural verbal interpretation variable illustrates differences in terms of different interpretations of the world that speakers possess. It represents knowledge structures that reflect sociocultural experience in terms of selection, classification and evaluation.

Put another way, General verbal interpretation variable profiles similar conceptual characteristics or refer to cognitive models that in other languages are hardly thought of as being simultaneously activated. It is an example of General verbal interpretation variable that can be considered culture-specific in case of two different languages. For example, the cognitive models HAPPINESS and COFFEE are activated in (12); INJURE and GOOD PHYSICAL CONDITION are evoked in reference to a person who has just stepped on a banana skin and is flat on the floor as in (13):

(12) *Are you happy with your coffee?*

(13) *Are you all right?*

In English:

(14) *My money is sitting in the bank.*

In Russian:

(15) *dengi lezhat v banke.*

Money *lie* in bank.

‘The money is in the bank’.

One can *have a good level of education* or *be highly educated*: the statements (16, 17) identify a speaker as a non-native speaker of English (other ethnicity in 16) or illiterate speaker (poor level of education in 17).

(16) **He has a high education.*

(17) **Mr Day is a very appreciated member of staff.*

To sound like a fluent speaker of English one should activate the cognitive model INTELLECTUAL CONDITION as in (18) or POINT IN SPACE as in (19) rather than the cognitive model of POSSESSION as in (20); the cognitive model VERTICALITY as in (21) rather than INTENSIFICATION and RECOGNITION as in (22).

(18) *He is highly educated.*

(19) *He has a good level of education.*

(20) **He has a high education.*

(21) *Mr Day is a highly valued member of staff.*

(22) **Mr Day is a very appreciated member of staff.*

Speakers identify themselves as British (American / Russian) not because they speak one and the same language, but when they share the knowledge represented by it (them).

It is the Sociocultural verbal interpretation variable that distinguishes native and non-native speakers, as well as individuals who speak English, for instance, but represent various social groups (age groups, as in the following examples) to refer to both the message and the process in the context of mobile or social media communication.

(23) *I just got a text.*

(24) *I'll text Susan right now.*

B. Nahod's research showed that "experts from different fields of knowledge often perceive the same concept in a slightly different or completely different manner" (Nahod, 2015, 111). The method of CDI analysis reflects Sociocultural verbal interpretation variable activated by language speakers. For example, conventionally assumed sociocultural knowledge that is encoded by the world *director* includes: 1) his / her social status (manager) and 2) types of organizations: firms, schools, institutes. The Sociocultural verbal interpretation variable is evoked in the following samples:

(25) *I can't become manager of the firm. I have four children and my mom is seriously ill.*

(26) *Those that got good grades at the University hold a position of a street cleaner; those whose grades were poor are managers now.*

In (25, 26) the sociocultural knowledge is related to the speakers' experience they obtain in the process of socialization. The CDI in (25) is activated by: i) the selection of the lexical concepts [=BIG FAMILY], [=SICK MOM] providing access to the cognitive model FAMILY MATTERS IN DECISION-MAKING ABOUT ONE'S CAREER; ii) categorizing the position of manager as a great responsibility and duty; iii) evaluating it in terms of burden. The CDI in (26) is activated by: i) the selection of the lexical concepts [=A-students], [=D-students] that give access to the cognitive model STUDENT'S LIFE; ii) categorizing those who have poor grades as most successful in life; iii) evaluating it as unfair.

Inspired by a sociocultural understanding of human thinking (L. Vygotsky), we argue that Sociocultural verbal interpretation variable in language use is evoked through the meta-concepts ROLES, STEREOTYPES, VALUES, NORMS, SPACE, TIME, LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE — universal knowledge structures all human beings possess irrespective of their nationality, ethnicity, language group, or any other group division or social variable as in Boldyrev and Dubrovskaya (2016). The term meta-concept suggests that they refer to some extra-linguistic context of knowledge and as certain guiding lines ensure the adequate interpretation of the meaning of language units used by the speakers. The linguistic evidence provides support for the assumption that meta-concepts structure our knowledge of the world and are indicative of Sociocultural verbal interpretation variables (represented through language) of its representatives. For example, for speakers of Russian the cognitive model VREMYA (corresponds to the English word *time*) is structured by the following lexical concepts,

at the very least, that give access to it: [SEKUNDA (corresponds to *second*)], [DEKADA (corresponds to *ten days* in English)], [UTRO, which corresponds to *morning*], [SUMERKI (corresponds to *twilight* in English)], [DETSTVO (corresponds to *childhood*)], [VSEGDA, which corresponds to *always*], [CHASTO (corresponds to *often*)], [NOVYI GOD (corresponds to *New Year*)], [OTKLADYVAT' (corresponds to *postpone*)], etc. General verbal interpretation variable — that of a speaker of Russian — is represented by these lexical concepts that are encoded by the corresponding symbolic forms. In the following discourse sample (27), however, the lexical concept [BRANYE which corresponds to *woven tablecloth*] gives access to the cognitive model VREMYA which corresponds to *time* in English:

(27) *Посадила она их за столы дубовые, за скатерти браные.*

'She invited them to sit down to the tables made of oak that were covered with woven tablecloths'.

The speaker (the narrator of a fairy-tale in this example) structures his/her discourse through the meta-concept VREMYA (corresponds to *time* in English) activating sociocultural knowledge of Russian fairy-tales and evokes his/her Sociocultural verbal interpretation variable as an indicator of a speaker who is familiar with Russian folklore and knows Russian fairy-tales. Put another way, the speaker structures the cognitive model VREMYA and interprets the world by activating the sociocultural knowledge of peasant Russia of the past.

Conclusion

The empirical findings illustrate that language variation is dependent on the knowledge of its speakers. On the one hand, it represents what speakers collectively accept in the processes of understanding and interpreting. On the other hand, language variation activates personal mental models with which speakers interpret the world in terms of different sociocultural backgrounds as results of unique experiences of life.

The results of the article are captured by verbal interpretation variables of two types: General verbal interpretation and Sociocultural verbal interpretation variables which contribute to research in interdisciplinary fields that has firmly established the importance of language in our lives. We therefore provide the first evidence that a sociocultural approach to language variation should be theorized in terms of these variables. Despite the similarity in some basic premises, the approach reveals practical and theoretical differences. Language variation is claimed to represent a

two-dimensional unity that comprises General verbal interpretation and Sociocultural verbal interpretation variables. We claim that this understanding and approach to language variation, on the whole, offers a complementary account of traditional view on language as a sociocultural phenomenon.

We have shown that speakers use a variety of language recourses in communication and represent knowledge that underlies it.

We have taken the cognitive paradigm for the study of language variation as basic for two reasons. First, it provides a relatively coherent and interdisciplinary approach to basic linguistic phenomenon. Second, the cognitive approach has been widely influential in its application to a broad range of phenomena over the past three decades, including the interpretive study of language.

The interpretive function of language recognizes language variation as it is revealed through linguistic means and which is twofold. In particular, speakers of the same language share collective knowledge of the world that is represented by language and identify themselves as either belonging to a particular sociocultural group or not. Finally, there are mental structures — meta-concepts — that refer to a broader interpretive context of knowledge profiled by the CDI and thus influence language variation and represent speakers as individuals with unique Sociocultural verbal interpretation variables.

The approach provides important insights about the nexus between what we say and who we are. Methodologically, the analytic process highlights how the meta-concepts manage language variation.

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Социокультурный аспект вариативности языка и варианты языковой интерпретации: новый подход

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В статье рассматривается проблема общей и социокультурной вариативности языка с позиции когнитивного подхода. Авторы утверждают, что общая вариативность связана с разными способами активации коллективных знаний о мире, представленных в системе языка. Социокультурная вариативность определяется активацией индивидуальных когнитивных моделей в дискурсе. Предлагается новая методология исследования, основанная на когнитивно-дискурсивном анализе метаконцептов, передающих социокультурную специфику языка. Полученные результаты служат дальнейшему развитию представлений о взаимодействии общества, культуры, мышления и языка в процессах языковой деятельности.

Ключевые слова: вариативность языка, социокультурная специфика, анализ когнитивно-дискурсивной интерпретанты, интерпретирующая функция языка.

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