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## **Lingvocultural Perspective of the Russian and Chinese Expressions for the Concept of TIME**

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*Human beings are the only species that can perceive the existence of time. However, each culture has its own conceptualization of time, and thus there are different models and attributes for a particular time concept. This paper tries to identify and analyze the Russian and Chinese expressions for the concept of time, so as to establish the linguistic differences in both cultures respectively.*

*Keywords: time concept, time expression, language worldview, comparative lingvocultural analysis.*

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### **Point**

Time is one of the most important aspects of human experience. Since pre-Socratic times, philosophers and researchers have studied the nature and structure of time. They tried to explain the importance of time in human life, observing that from birth to death, the human body undergoes several changes under the impact of time. Since the existence of human beings is structured and shaped by the rhythms of days and nights, the living conditions vary and modify people in various ways.

Time has remained one of the most mysterious aspects of the world in which we live. The beginnings of civilization on Earth required knowledge of the seasons, and the mysteries surrounding the length of the year, the length of the day and the length of the month began to be studied. All the world religions gave time a central role, be it in astrology, stories of creation, cyclical world histories, notions of eternity, etc.

Philosophers have tried to come to grips with the concept; some have argued that time is a basic property of the universe while others claimed that it is an illusion or a property of the human mind and not of the world.

The first Greek philosophers to view time systematically were Plato and Aristotle. Plato argued that time was created when the creator fashioned the world from existing material, giving form to primitive matter. According to Plato then, time was created at the same instant as the heavens. Aristotle, however, argues against Plato's idea that time was created. His ideas relate time to motion. In a sense this is reasonable since to Aristotle time was measured by the motions of the heavenly bodies so a period of time was represented by the movement of the sun across the sky. Other ways of telling time such as the water clock and the hour glass also identified time with movement, in these cases movement of water or sand. There is an argument, claims Aristotle, to

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say that time does not exist, for the past no longer exists and the future does not yet exist. Having looked at this argument, he rejects it and defines time as motion which can be enumerated (Rubino, 1987).

St. Augustine, around the end of the 4th century AD, was responsible for bringing much of Plato's philosophy into Christianity. Plato's version of the creation does not quite fit the Genesis account since in that God creates the world from nothing, while for Plato the world was created by bringing order to primitive matter. However, St. Augustine agrees with Plato that time begins with the creation. He answers the question of why the world was not created sooner by stating clearly that there is no *sooner*.

Like Aristotle, St. Augustine questions whether the past or future really exists. Surely only the present actually exists and this is instantaneous, only measured by its passing. Yet, like Aristotle, St. Augustine says how it can be that past and future time does not exist. He tried to answer the apparent contradiction by claiming that past time can only be thought of as past if one is thinking of it in the present.

St. Augustine reached conclusions that time does not exist without an intelligent being who is able to think in the present about things past, present and future. Certainly St. Augustine was right to feel that his ideas are less than satisfactory, yet that said, he thought more deeply about time than anyone seems to have done before him including the greatest of the Greek philosophers, and more deeply than anyone else seems to have done during the following one thousand years. If his ideas are less than satisfactory, at least St. Augustine has appreciated for the first time what a complex and puzzling concept time is.

At the end of the 18th century, Kant suggested a subtle relationship between time and mind – that our mind actually structures our perceptions so that we can know a priori

that time is like a mathematical line. Time is, on this theory, a form of conscious experience, and our sense of time is a necessary condition of our experience or sensation. In the 19th century, Ernst Mach claimed instead that our sense of time is a simple sensation, not an a priori form of sensation. This controversy took another turn when other philosophers argued that both Kant and Mach were incorrect because our sense of time is an intellectual construction (Whitrow, 1980).

Therefore it can be noticed that various methods and approaches to categorize time were implemented. However universal this category seems to be, the perception of time as well as attitude to it in different cultures do vary a lot.

Our culture's sense of time is based on how that culture views the past, present or future. Americans have a very different sense of time compared to China and France, our view of time is time is important and should not be wasted on trivial things. Americans believe deadlines are more important than building relationships or getting comfortable with big decisions. China has a very different point of view on time, it is to be cherished and used to build relationships and to make better decisions. The French have a similar point of view as they treat time as the way to enjoy life and work to have more time, not work to fill time.

Polychronic cultures tend to perform multiple tasks simultaneously with a higher commitment to relationship building than to task completion or meeting deadlines. Tasks are accomplished through building strong relationships rather than creating detailed plans. Punctuality is defined in looser terms as some delays are expected and deadlines can be adjusted. Whereas *soon* to a North American usually means in the next few minutes, hours or days, *soon* to an Asian may mean three months,

a year, or whenever they are ready. Time is not fixed but rather an organic, flowing process. Asian, Arab, and Southern European cultures are polychronic.

Monochronic cultures are highly committed to doing one task at a time and meeting set deadlines. Devising and then adhering to a detailed plan or schedule is highly valued. Punctuality is defined precisely and time is sliced into fixed categories such as seconds, minutes, and hours. One's time is scheduled and managed in great detail at work and at home and *wasting time* is unethical. Individuals focus on tasks rather than relationships. Germany, Switzerland, the USA, and Scandinavian countries are very monochronic.

Indeed, time is the most fascinating phenomenon for human beings and for human beings only, since no other animals have the concept of time. Time is intriguing because everyone knows it exists, in one way or another, but no one can perceive time as they perceive other entities as objects or temperature. Human beings are equipped with all kinds of specialized sensory device for various physical stimuli. However, there is no such a specific organ on human body designed for the perception and measurement of time. Since time in itself is both intangible and imperceptible, we can only perceive its existence and flow through its tangible consequences. "Time is one of the fundamental bases on which all cultures rest and around all activities revolve" (Hall, 1990: 179). Nowadays time draws even greater attention of numerous scholars and is studied from various perspectives.

Linguists have also been quite interested in the issue of time, focusing on the linguistic notions of time, because "the manner in which temporal concepts are elaborated, which is to say structured by conceptual content from other (i.e., non-temporal) domains, provides important

insights into the nature and structure of time" (Evans, 2003: 5).

The concept of time has occurred in a wide range of linguistic approaches, variously associated with morphology, finiteness, a (discourse) pragmatic or semantic definition, or with a combination of these. General linguistic theories about temporality often concentrate heavily on morphosyntactic markings of temporality, i.e., tense and aspect. However, one of the most serious consequences of concentrating exclusively on tense and aspect is the risk of missing the most essential and interesting aspects of time expression: the interplay between implicit (contextual information), lexical (temporal adverbials, henceforth adverbs), and morphosyntactic devices (i.e., verbal auxiliaries and affixes).

All the attempts to categorize time are relatively connected to the great number of time models present in people's mind both ego-centered and time-centered. Initially the category of time originates in the mythical picture of the world and is mainly reflected in the phraseological system of the language thus constituting the phraseological picture of the world peculiar to a given nation.

The problem of phraseological unit cultural peculiarities has attracted much attention in the works of modern linguists. V.N. Telia, for instance, points out that the typical feature of phraseological units is their image-based motivation, which is directly connected with the nation world outlook (Telia, 1996). V.A. Maslova stresses the close connection of expressions with the cultural-historical traditions of people speaking the language (Maslova, 2001). D.O. Dobrovolsky distinguishes between cultural-historical associations and national-cultural specific character of phraseological units (Dobrovolsky, 1997). Though they all agreed on the predominate role of national peculiarities in the phraseological picture of the world.

### Example

The present paper sets the aim to shed the light on the concept of time from a lingvocultural perspective thus investigating, on the basis of language data, the ways time is mentally represented in two unrelated languages Russian and Chinese. Since the emergence of the cognitive linguistics several studies have been carried out on conceptual analysis of the expressions with time. However, so far no single study has provided a systemic comparative analysis of time expressions in Russian and Chinese. The present paper purports to bridge this gap, at least partially. The main sources of conventional expressions of time considered in this paper are: dictionaries, newspapers, literary prose texts (the total number of the expressions analyzed is: 140 Russian and 85 Chinese). Given that dictionaries are records of the lexicon of a language compiled by expert lexicographers, they constitute a reliable and rich source of conventional expressions. Newspapers and literary texts, on the other hand, allow for the collection of naturally-occurring written data in the two languages. The choice of these particular text sources is motivated by two factors: the need to ensure a very close equivalence of text between the two languages and the need to have balanced data containing different registers.

The comparative analysis of time expressions in two genetically unrelated languages has shown the similarity in the ways of defining time in both cultures: by the movements of the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, natural phenomena, by the habits of domestic animals, etc.: *“кто рано встает, тому бог подает”* – 早起的鸟儿有虫吃 (“an early bird catches a worm”).

However, the life of Russian people is significantly affected by the Christian calendar (*“до морковкина заговенья”* (“until the first day of the Lent”), *“адамовы веки”* (“Adam’s lids”), etc.), while religious influence is not as evident in Chinese time expressions. The differences

in seasonal conditions are also reflected in the languages: the Russian words *“зима”* (“winter”) and *“снег”* (“snow”) have a predominant function in time measuring: *“по первому снегу”* (“on the first snow”), whereas in China winter with occasional snow does not last long and the Chinese domain of time is mapped with words *“солнце”* (“the sun”), *“луна”* (“the moon”) и *“дождь”* (“the rain”) – 雨后春笋 (“as bamboo sprouts after the rain”).

As for the ways to measure time, it might seem at first, there is nothing remarkably cultural in measurement of time encapsulated by parametrical expressions. In both languages time is measured by seconds, minutes, hours, days, nights, weeks, months, etc. Albeit, Russian people tend to the better use of the parametrical expressions: *“ни на секунду”* (“not for a second”), *“делу время, а потехе час”* (“time for business and an hour for having a rest”), *“один день год кормит”* (“one day feeds the year”), *“на веки вечные”* (“for centuries”). Besides, Russian time expressions compared to Chinese are more space-related and conceptualized into the spatial domain, usually in the form of the combination with spatial terms and body-part nouns, nature or landscape nouns, which are spatial in the essence: *“изо дня в день”* (“every single day”), *“сквозь годы”* (“through the years”), *“на носу”* (“on the nose”), *“за плечами”* (“behind the shoulders”), *“не за горами”* (“not behind the mountains”), etc.

In contrast, while measuring the time Chinese people pay more attention to natural phenomena, emphasizing the close connection of time with the sun, the moon, the water, the lightning etc.: 时光如流水 (“stream of time”), 晴天霹雳 (“like a bolt from the blue”), 昙花一现 (“to blossom out and to fade away”), 似闪电一样 (“lightning quick”).

Thus, based on the aforementioned examples, one might conclude that parametrical

concepts are culturally loaded reflecting cultural experience, habits, the way of life.

The other essential finding of the research conducted was the idea that both languages conceptualize time as a moving entity, though with different speed and pace, as reflected in the following examples: 机不可失失不再来 – “не упустить шанс, не пропустить удобный случай” (“not to miss a chance”); “потерянного времени не воротить” (“wasted time cannot get back”), 寸阴是竞 – “короткий миг” (“an instant”), 寸金难买寸光阴 – “деньги не могут купить короткий миг” (“money cannot buy an instant”), 时不我待 – “дело не терпит отлагательства (промедления)” (“you cannot postpone things”), “время не ждет” (“the time does not wait”), 前人栽树后人乘凉 – “предки сажают деревья, потомки наслаждаются прохладой” (“fathers plant the trees, sons get the fruit”), 王八万万年也有到头的一天 – “и для черепахи, которой десятки тысяч лет, наступит последний день” (“one thousand-year-old turtle will have the last day”).

The difference in time perception can be attributed to the broader notion of time in the Russian worldview. Here we can render the idea of time through activity, events and things, as Lakoff affirms: “Time is understood in terms of things (i.e. entities and locations) and motion” (Lakoff, 1990: 55). It is true that in the Russian mentality time acts as a person: “время не терпит” (“time cannot stand”), “время торопит” (“time makes you hurry”), “время не ждёт” (“time cannot wait”); it might be regarded as a criminal and offender or a partner: “время убило” (“time has killed”), “время крадёт” (“time steals”), “время работает на нас” (“time works on us”), “время работает против нас” (“time works against us”); time can be apprehended as a victim, a sufferer or a loser: “убить время” (“to kill the time”), “побеждать время” (“to win the time”);

time might crawl or fly: “время ползет как черепаха” (“time crawls like a turtle”), “время летит как птица” (“time flies like a bird”); time could also be presented as an obstacle to clear or a barrier to take: “ограничены во времени” (“restricted by the time”), “преодолеть время” (“to overcome the time”); finally, time might be viewed as a piece of fabric: “выкраивать время” (“to tailor the time”).

The axiological aspect of time perception is present and evident in Russian and Chinese cultures, where there are expressions that give prescriptions for behaviour, they teach not to waste time, to use it rationally, thriftily. For both cultures, time is sacred, to be late is very rude, almost abusive, deadlines are fixed, etc. Nevertheless, the notion early is more valued by Chinese people, reflecting their orientation to hard work and prosperous and successful life: 夙兴夜寐 (“to aspire to day”), 靡有朝矣 (“days and nights are equally important”), 早起的鸟儿有虫吃 (“an early bird catches a worm”), 披星戴月 (“early to rise and late to bed”), 稍纵即逝 (“moment is important”), 一寸光阴一寸金 (“time is gold”), 一年之计在于春, 一日之计在于晨 (“year plans are made in spring, day plans – in the morning”), 一日之计在于晨 (“sleep on it”). Being late is perceived as abusive in Chinese culture and as not a “sin” in Russian culture.

Apart from that, there are time categories in both languages that evaluate the time, mostly implicitly, through a temporal component built into their meaning. The temporal component most often gives a positive evaluation: 有志者事竟成 – “кто хочет, тот добьется, было бы желание будет и успех” (“he who wants that will get”), 只要功夫深铁杵磨成针 – “терпенье и труд все перетрут” (“patience and hard work mill everything over”), 马到成功 – “лошадь пришла – пришел успех” (“the horse which has come first has brought success”); though negative connotation could also be identified

through the following correlations: 饱食终日 – “вдоволь есть целый день” (“to eat enough all day long”).

It should be also noticed that in both cultures time expressions could be emotionally colored (could bear emotional coloring) with rush or a lack of restrain: “с бухты барахты” (“off head”), “с наскоку” (“at full speed”), “в один миг” (“in no time”), “пикнуть не успел” (“no time to peep”), etc. Velocity and rapidity in doing things under the certain circumstances is crucially important in both languages, though expressed more vividly in Chinese: 脚打后脑勺 (“very quickly”), 接踵而至 (“to arrive one by one”), 争分夺秒 (“to fight for every minute and second”), 转瞬即逝 (“in a flash of light”), 千钧一发 (“to hang by a hair”). The results of the comparative analysis of time expressions with the meaning “quick – slow” can serve as the evidence for the association of “being slow” with “being thorough, persistent and shrewd”: “Москва не сразу строилась” (“Moscow was not built in a day”), “медленно, но верно” (“slowly but truly”), “поспешишь – людей насмешишь” (“if you hurry people will laugh”). Still, in the Chinese culture with its perspective to weigh everything up and to speculate and predict the possible outcomes and repercussions, both short- and long-term, the notion *slow* is more applicable: 胖子不是一口吃的 (“everything takes time and efforts”); 细水长流, 细吃常有 (“thin waters run long, though occasional waters last long”); 心急吃不了热豆腐 (“you cannot eat hot pot quickly”); 步迈不到天上 (“you cannot reach the sky with no efforts”); 刀剃不完一个脑壳 (“you cannot shave the head with only one movement of it”); 斧子看不倒大树 (“you cannot cut down the tree with only one chop of the axe”); 声哭不出泪来 (“sobbing is not weeping”); 眼看不清两行书 (“you cannot read two lines with only one glance”). Russian people are better characterized for their well-known

ability to postpone and defer things or actions: “тянуть ляжку” (“to drudge”), “только за смертью посылать” (“to send for the death”), “отложить под сукно” (“to put under the cloth”), “тянуть волынку” (“to pull bagpipe”), “тянуть время” (“to stretch the time”).

### Resume

Many scholars have studied time from different perspectives. Linguists are interested in time because human beings’ cognition is expressed via language. From the cross-linguistic study of the concept of time, specific cognition of time of people from different cultural backgrounds can be revealed. By focusing on time expressions in Russian and Chinese and analyzing in detail their potential from a lingvocultural perspective, it has been found out that perception of time, its conceptualization and the representation of concepts across cultures are culture-dependent, reflecting specific cultural experience.

This holds true for Russian and Chinese cultures, which have studied and juxtaposed in this paper. The phenomenon of time is so multilateral, multifaceted, complex, and have such a great degree of abstraction that time expressions form different temporal subsystems in both cultures, comprising parametrical, axiological, ethically-emotional and activity temporal attributes.

The use of time expressions identified may completely coincide, partially coincide or be in contrast across the two cultures. Their linguistic representation may be isomorphic or asymmetrical. Specific cultural features are found in all the subsystems identified, the most contrastive being the activity subsystem. The conceptualization of time and verbalization of concepts in Chinese and Russian cultures may be similar, partially similar, or contrastive. The contrast may be tangible, in which case the communicator can easily see specific features and avoid misunderstandings in communication.

It may be subtle, almost intangible, in which case one's own native culture and misunderstandings specific features of one culture are substituted by emerge.

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## **Лингвокультурологические особенности выражения времени в русской и китайской идиоматике**

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*Статья посвящена лингвокультурологическому анализу русских и китайских фразеологических единиц, отражающих время; определены универсалии и национальные уникальности фразеологизмов в языковой картине мира двух народов, выявлены элементы национального менталитета.*

*Ключевые слова: время, фразеологические единицы, языковая картина мира, лингвокультурологический анализ.*

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