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PART II

Ethnolinguistics
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1 Introduction

Ethnosyntax is an approach to studying grammar as a vehicle of culture. The term ‘ethnosyntax’ was introduced by Wierzbicka (1979) to reflect a new perspective on grammatical studies with a particular focus on cultural meaning. She advocated the view that grammatical constructions are not semantically arbitrary and their meanings are related to broader cultural understandings.

Since the idea of cultural meaning is important in the ethnosyntax approach, the understanding of ‘culture’ must be identified. ‘Culture’ here means people’s shared ideas, meanings and understandings. The most relevant interpretation of ‘culture’ in this regard has been offered by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. In his view, the concept of culture denotes ‘a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life’ (Geertz, 1973: 89). This interpretation of culture is sometimes labelled as ‘semiotic’ (Sarangi, 2009).

Although the development of ethnosyntax as an approach in linguistics is relatively recent, its ideological and theoretical foundations were laid in the works by Sapir and Whorf (Chapter 2 this volume). Sapir (1949) argued that language and thought are in a relationship of mutual dependence. Whorf (1956) formulated the ‘linguistic relativity principle’, which postulates that conceptual systems are relative and dependent on language; that is, speakers of a particular language share a certain world-view because their language determines the way they ‘see’ the world. Speakers of another language ‘see’ the world through the prism of this other language and, therefore, their linguistic view is different (Chapter 2 this volume). Whorf’s observations applied to lexicon and grammar.

Two senses of ethnosyntax can be distinguished – a ‘narrow’ and a ‘broad’ one (Enfield, 2002; Goddard, 2002). Ethnosyntax in a ‘narrow’ sense aims to locate and articulate cultural understandings that are embedded in the meanings of particular grammatical structures. Ethnosyntax in a broad sense studies how pragmatic and cultural rules affect the use of grammatical structures. Ethnosyntax in this sense overlaps with some studies in the area of pragmatics, such as ethnopragnmatics (Goddard 2002, 2006; Chapter 5 this volume) and ethnography of speaking (e.g., Gumperz and Hymes, 1972).

The following discussion provides examples of studies in ethnosyntax in its broad and narrow senses. It also focuses on two traditionally distinguished components of grammar – morphology (inflection and word formation) and syntax (a system of rules which describe how all well-formed sentences of a language can be derived from basic elements).
The accumulated experience of research into ethnosyntax allowed researchers to formulate methodological requirements to this kind of linguistic investigations. There is a degree of unanimity among scholars that research into cultural element of grammatical constructions involves the analysis of their meaning (e.g., Wierzbicka 1979, 1989, 2002; Enfield, 2002; Goddard, 2002; Simpson, 2002). As emphasized by Wierzbicka (1979), a key to decoding cultural meanings embedded in grammatical structures lies in a semantic approach to studying grammar. Conducting an ethnosyntactic analysis involves identifying a construction in question, investigating its meaning, and establishing connections between this meaning and some wider shared cultural assumptions or understandings (Wierzbicka, 1979, 1988; Goddard, 2002; Simpson, 2002: 291–2). Some scholars also argue for the importance of a comparative cross-linguistic and cross-cultural analysis of grammatical constructions and associated cultural understandings (Simpson, 2002; Enfield, 2002).

A significant view in ethnosyntax is that cultural specificity of grammatical structures needs to be studied with a culture-neutral methodology to avoid a lingua- and ethnocentric bias in research (e.g., Wierzbicka, 1979, 1989, 2002; Chapter 23 this volume; Goddard, 2002). Such metalanguage can be found in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM). NSM comprises 65 empirically identified universal meanings (along with a limited number of more complex meanings known as semantic molecules) which combine with each other in certain ways to form a mini-language. This metalanguage lies at the core of every language (e.g., Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002, 2014; Chapter 23 this volume). NSM is applied in semantic studies of words and grammatical constructions to formulate explications, as well as in studies of cultural and pragmatic factors underlying language use to formulate cultural scripts. Several of the examples provided in this chapter represent studies which rely on the use of NSM as a methodological tool.

This chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 provides examples of cultural meaning embedded at the level of morphology and syntax relying on examples from English, Russian, and Spanish. Section 3 illustrates variation in the use of grammatical structures due to the influence of cultural factors on the basis of ways of wording ‘requests’ in English and Russian. Section 4 concludes. Section 5 sets future directions for research in ethnosyntax.

2 Cultural meaning at the level of morphology and syntax

2.1 Morphology

Diminutives are an interesting example of a linguistic phenomenon encoding cultural meaning at the level of morphology. The term ‘diminutive’ refers to a formation of a word that conveys the idea of ‘smallness’ of the object or quality named, generally, in conjunction with an attitude of intimacy or endearment towards it. This phenomenon is found in many languages, but its scope and exact semantic content vary from language to language. Here this variation will be demonstrated using Russian, Columbian Spanish, and Australian English.

Russian has a highly developed system of expressive derivation. It applies to nouns, adjectives, and adverbs, for example:

- nos ‘nose.NOUN.MASC.SG’ – nosik ‘nose.DIM’,
- solnce ‘sun.NOUN.NEUT.SG’ – solnyško ‘sun.DIM’,
- krasivyj ‘beautiful.ADJ.MASC.SG’ – krasiven’kij ‘beautiful.DIM’,
- bystro ‘quickly.ADV’ – bystren’ko ‘quickly.DIM’.

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The system of expressive derivation in personal names is also extremely rich and is largely consistent with the one for nouns. For example, a feminine name Ljudmila has the following derivatives: Ljuda, Ljudočka, Ljudka, Ljudok, Ljudusik, Ljudasik, Ljudaša, Ljusja, Ljus’ka, Ljusik, Ljusenok, Mila, Miločka. A masculine name Jurij has the derivatives Jura, Juročka, Jurik, Juron’ka, Juranja, Juraša, Jurčik, Juraja (among others). A list of comparable length can be produced for almost any Russian personal name. Each form conveys a different meaning, and the choice of the form depends on the attitude the speaker wants to express towards the addressee. The nuances of these meaning, however, are difficult for cultural outsiders and learners of a language to decipher (Gladkova, 2007). There is a strong association between diminutives and small children (as diminutives are used to talk about and to children), but they are also used among adults in colloquial speech.

Wierzbicka (1992) argues that with a meaning-based approach to grammar one can unravel cultural information embedded in the derivative forms of personal name. She proposes semantic formulae as representations of meanings of models of expressive derivation. We will illustrate her studies on the basis of two forms in Russian, the suffixes -očka and -ik.

The suffix -očka is a relatively common way of forming diminutive forms for nouns of feminine gender. As a way of generalization, it can be said that it is used as either a diminutive-forming suffix in nouns containing a cluster of consonants or long consonants or it can be added to words already containing another diminutive suffix -k(a). The former case can be illustrated with the following examples:

- vaza ‘vase’ – vazočka ‘vase.DIM’
- zvezda ‘star’ – zvezdočka ‘star.DIM’
- kofta ‘cardigan’ – koftočka ‘cardigan.DIM’
- vanna ‘bathtub’ – vannočka ‘bathtub.DIM’.

In the latter case -očka constitutes a ‘double diminutive’ and its formation can be demonstrated as follows:

- poljana ‘clearing’ – poljanka ‘clearing.DIM’ – poljanočka ‘clearing.DIM’
- lošad’ ‘horse’ – lošadka ‘horse.DIM’ – lošadočka ‘horse.DIM’
- krovat’ ‘bed’ – krovatka ‘bed.DIM’ – krovatočka ‘bed.DIM’.

According to the Russian Grammar of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Švedova, 1980), -očka is a highly emotive formation expressing endearment and as a ‘double diminutive’ it expresses an increased degree of endearment.

The use of the forms with -očka evoke the idea of ‘smallness’ and are often used in contexts associated with children. They convey affection, love, and protection, that is attitudes associated with and directed towards children. Wierzbicka (1992: 246–7) argues that -očka has an association not just with children, but with small children and it is consistent with its function as a ‘double diminutive’.

This attitude also extends to diminutive forms with -očka in personal names. Such forms (e.g., Jurčka, Ljubočka) suggest a particularly small size and very good feelings associated with small children. Such forms are commonly used in interaction with children, however, they can also be used to address adults. As a way of illustration, the following cases from the oral
subcorpus of the *Russian National Corpus* can be quoted. In example (1) a 30-year-old mother addresses her 5-year-old daughter using the name form with -о́чка while giving her a bath:

(1) Female, 5-year-old: Xolodnaja. ‘Cold.’
Female, 30-year-old: Kak raz, kak raz. Ne xolodnaja? Govori, Svetočka. Ja mogu pogorjače. ‘It’s all right, it’s all right. Not cold? Say, Sveta-DIM. I can make it warmer.’

The following example is taken from a database recorded at a GP practice. In it a 50-year-old male doctor addresses a younger female nurse as Иро́чка:

(2) Иро́чка, vy svobodny? Sxodite v registraturu za kartо́jkоj.
‘Ira-DIM, are you free? Go to the registration office to pick up the patient’s records.’

The invariant of meaning of this form can be represented in universal human concepts as they are identified in NSM as follows (Wierzbicka, 1992: 247):

[A] Лjudо́чка, Juróчка

(a) I feel something very good towards you
(b) like people can feel when they say things to small children

Another group of words to be considered in this discussion are those with the suffix -ик. According to the Russian Grammar (Švedova, 1980), words with the suffix -ик express the idea of ‘smallness’, which can often be accompanied by an affectionate attitude. This observation applies to -ик as a diminutive suffix which is added to masculine nouns ending in consonants (another variant of -ик is used to form nouns from adjectives):

lob – lobik ‘forehead’
sad – sadik ‘garden’
xвост – xvostik ‘tail’
dom – domik ‘house’
слон – slonik ‘elephant’

Some words ending in -ик can express disparagement (e.g., tipо́к < tip ‘type’, xoźjajи́к < xoźjain ‘host/owner’).

Unlike the suffix -о́чка, the suffix -ик is not a ‘double diminutive’ (Wierzbicka, 1992: 250). While both suffixes denote the idea of ‘smallness’, -ик expresses less affectionate attitude than -о́чка and it also does not necessarily evoke an association with small children.

The suffix -ик can be used to form affectionate forms for masculine and feminine names:

Mark – Marik (m.)
Jura – Jurik (m.)
Sveta – Svetik (f.)
Ljusja – Ljusik (f.).
This suffix has boyish associations, in both masculine and feminine forms, which is consistent with the fact that "-ik" originally is a masculine form and it is used to form nouns of masculine gender. Masculine forms in "-ik", compared to forms in "-očka", are less affectionate and express a 'boyish attitude'. The invariant of this meaning is as follows (Wierzbicka, 1992: 251):

[B]  
Jurik, Marik (masculine names)  
(a) I feel something good towards you  
(b) like people can feel towards small boys

Feminine forms in "-ik" are less common than masculine forms. They are playful and very informal. For example, while feminine forms in "-očka" can be used in the workplace context between people who know each other well (as in example 2), feminine forms in "-ik" can only be used among friends. Some examples from the oral subcorpus of the Russian National Corpus indicate that feminine forms in "-ik" are often used along with other colloquial expressions:

(3) Female, 18-year-old: Privet! ‘Hi!’  
Female, 18-year-old: Ne znaj, ja toka nedavno vstala. ‘Dunno, I just got up.’

In this exchange between an 18-year-old female Sveta (Svetik) and a 23-year-old male (Sasha), both interlocutors use elements of colloquial speech: privetik ‘hi-DIM’ (also rhyming with Svetik), ne znaj ‘not know.2SG’ (rather than first-person singular form), and a reduced form toka (from tol’ko ‘just’). Similar features are observed in an exchange between two teenagers:

(4) Female 1, 15-year-old: Da už! Nu ladnen’ko, Svetik! Pokedova! ‘Well. OK, Svetik! Bye!’  
Female 2, 15-year-old: Poka. ‘Bye!’

In this example the female addressing Sveta as Svetik also uses colloquial forms ladnen’ko (a diminutive from of ladno ‘OK’) and pokedova (from poka ‘bye’).

The invariant of meaning for feminine forms with "-ik" is as follows (Wierzbicka, 1992: 251):

[C]  
Ljusik, Svetik (feminine forms)  
(a) I feel something good towards you  
(b) I feel something good when I say things to you  
(c) I want to say things to you like people can say something to a small boy, not to a small girl

Formulae of this kind allow us to show overlapping components of meaning in the structures under investigation as well as their differences. Explications [A], [B], and [C] have similar components (a). Their differences lie in the fact that explication [A] has reference to ‘small children’, while explications [B] and [C] have reference to ‘small boys’ with [C] also containing reference to ‘small girls’. Explication [A] also shows that a more affectionate attitude expressed by forms with "-očka" can be rendered by the use of the prime VERY. Therefore, the attitudinal component in [A] is expressed as ‘feel something very good’, while in [B] and [C] it is expressed as ‘feel something good’.

Reference to small children has not been shown to apply to all forms of expressive derivation in Russian as it is not relevant in the forms with the suffix "-en’ka" (e.g. Katen’ka, Miten’ka) and with the suffix "-uška" (e.g. Nikituška, Annuška) (Wierzbicka, 1992). This fact suggests that
reference to children cannot be claimed to be an invariant of meaning for all forms of diminutives in Russian.

Linguistic elaboration in the domain of expressive derivation in Russian has a significant cultural importance. In particular, this elaboration can be related to two important cultural themes of Russian. First, it is reflective of a general cultural value placed on open and spontaneous display of emotions. Second, it relates to the value of displaying affectionate feelings in intimate personal relations (Gladkova 2013a, 2013b). These cultural rules can be formulated in the form of cultural scripts as follows (Wierzbicka, 1999):

[D] [many people think like this at many times:] it is good if other people can know what someone feels

[E] [many people think like this at many times:] if I know someone well when I feel something good towards this someone it is good if this someone can know it when I say something to this someone

[F] [many people think like this at many times:] if I know someone well when I say something to this someone it is good if this someone can know what I feel towards this someone when I think about this someone

Spanish, like Russian, is also rich in expressive derivation. However, there is no complete overlap between the two systems. Travis (2004) employs Wierzbicka’s approach in analysing a diminutive suffix -ito/-ita in Columbian Spanish using spoken data of Colombian Spanish. According to Travis’s data, this suffix is much more frequent and productive than other diminutive suffixes in Spanish -illo/a and -in/a. Travis identifies several uses of the suffix -ito/-ita on the basis of a corpus study and demonstrates that this suffix serves several functions – from its core uses in relation to children to expressing affection, contempt, and hedging speech acts. For each of the uses Travis proposes a semantic formula in universal concepts. Travis argues that the use of diminutives in Colombian Spanish is based on the prototype of using a diminutive when speaking to children and, therefore, implies feelings of the kind that can be felt when speaking to children. However, she also notes that the meaning of the suffix is generalized in situations when contempt is expressed or when someone expresses requests or offers and reference to children is lost.

The use of -ito/-ita is very common in expressing affection when speaking to and about adults. Such uses can be demonstrated with the following examples from Travis’ data (2004: 259):

(5) – Cómase una arepa también, oyó? ‘Have an arepa [Colombian pancake] too, you hear?
– Bueno, mijita. Gracias. ‘OK, my daughter-DIM. Thank you.’

In this example mijita ‘my daughter-DIM’ is used as a diminutive fictive kin term by a cleaning lady to the owner of the house (who is her boss). In example (6) a phonological variant of the suffix -ito (that is -ico) is used jokingly by a woman when addressing her husband (Travis, 2004: 260):

(6) tú eres un monstrico … Un monstruo come pancakes.
‘You are a monster-DIM. A pancake-eating monster.’
The prototype of use of \textit{-ito} to express affection when talking about an adult can be formulated in the form of a cultural script as follows (Travis, 2004: 261):

\begin{itemize}
  \item [G] [many people think like this at many times when they say something about someone:]
  \begin{itemize}
    \item when I say this about this someone, I feel something good towards this someone like people can feel towards a child when they are saying something to this child
  \end{itemize}
\end{itemize}

The Spanish script [G] can be compared to the Russian explication [A] in that both contain reference to children. However, there are also differences in that Russian forms with \textit{-očka} make reference to small children and also express a greater degree of affection (‘feel something very good’) than the Spanish forms with \textit{-ito}. Moreover, explications [B] and [C] contain reference to small boy and small girls, but not small children. Travis notes that semantic and pragmatic functions of the diminutive in Spanish differ from those in Russian in that a Spanish prototype of a diminutive is child focused, while Russian is not.

English also has diminutive forms, but their use is much more rare and less versatile than the use of diminutive forms in Russian and Spanish. Australian English has a distinctive diminutive form, such as \textit{Chrissy prezzies} (Christmas presents), \textit{barbie} (barbeque), \textit{salties} (salt-water crocodiles), \textit{freshies} (fresh-water crocodiles), \textit{Brissie} (Brisbane), \textit{Tassie} (Tasmania). The following are some examples from the Australian subcorpus of \textit{Collins Wordbanks Online}:

\begin{enumerate}
  \item[(7)] What Chrissie presents did you give your loved ones last year? More CDs?
  \item[(8)] Captain Jason chucked a few steaks on the barbie and opened a cask or three.
  \item[(9)] A billabong cruise is just one of the many things a visitor to Darwin can do in a day, with most tour companies including sightings of crocodiles (both \textit{‘freshie’} and \textit{‘salty’}) on their itineraries.
\end{enumerate}

Goddard and Wierzbicka (2008) argue that the use of this kind of ‘diminutive’ is different from the use of a ‘regular’ diminutive (e.g., \textit{birdie}, \textit{horsie}) in that it involves abbreviation and it does not convey a ‘childish effect’. The Australian forms reflect a ‘familiarity’ effect (they apply to objects or phenomena well familiar to people in Australia) and the ‘unimpressed’ or ‘undaunted’ attitude that ‘it is not a big thing’ (as a shortened form of the word indicates). Goddard and Wierzbicka (2008) propose the following explication for these forms:

\begin{itemize}
  \item [H] barbie, freshies
    \begin{itemize}
      \item (a) something
      \item (b) when I say this about it, I think about it like this:
      \item (c) “it is not something big
      \item (d) when I say something about it, I don’t want to say it with a big word
      \item (e) people here don’t have to think much about things like this
      \item (f) because they know things like this well”
      \item (g) when I think about it like this, I feel something good
    \end{itemize}
\end{itemize}

This explication demonstrates differences in meaning between the Australian forms and Russian and Spanish forms. It also shows differences at underlying cultural values in that rules of ‘emotion expression’ in Russian (scripts D–F) are not applicable to the Australian context where the expression of emotions is toned down.

Thus, with the help of a refined methodology of semantic analysis it can be demonstrated that ‘diminutive’ forms in Russian, Columbian Spanish, and Australian English convey cultural
attitudes and that these attitudes differ across these languages. Other well-researched examples of culturally salient morphology are honorifics in Japanese (e.g., Prideaux, 1970; Loveday, 1986), Korean honorifics and cultural scripts (Yoon, 2004), case in Polish (Wierzbicka, 2008), and reciprocal constructions (Nedjalkov, 2007; Wierzbicka 2009).

2.2 Syntax

We will now turn our attention to examples of culture-specific information embedded at the level of syntax. As an illustration, we will consider a link between dative impersonal constructions in Russian and the cultural themes of ‘fatalism’, ‘irrationality’, and ‘unpredictability’. We will rely on Wierzbicka’s (1992) and Goddard’s (2003) work. Examples will be sourced from the Russian National Corpus.

Russian is rich in impersonal constructions. Malchukov and Ogawa (2011: 20) define impersonal constructions as ‘constructions lacking a referential subject’. In this chapter we will consider Russian constructions of the type where the notional subject lacks typical subject properties. They are also called ‘dative reflexive’ constructions because the nominal subject occurs in the dative case and the verb is in the reflexive form. We will consider two types of constructions – with mental verbs and with other intransitive verbs.

The first construction combines a dative human subject and a mental verb in the third-person neuter reflexive form. Some mental state verbs occur in this construction – xotet’sja ‘to want itself’, dumat’ija ‘to think itself’, verit’sja ‘to believe itself’, pomnit’sja ‘to remember itself’:

(10) Kogda ja vperanye popal na stanciju, mne ne veriloš', čto ja mogu vynesti zdes' i nedelju.

‘When I first came to the station I-DAT didn’t believe-REF that I would be able to stay there for even a week.’

(11) Pokidat' stolicu emu ne xotelos', no on ponimal: moskovskoj konkurencii emu ne vyderžat'.

‘He-DAT didn’t want-REF to leave the capital, but he understood that he couldn’t withstand the competition in Moscow.’

(12) Mne dumaetsja, takie materialy budut interesny dlja šitatelj vašego žurnala.

‘I-DAT think-REF that such material would be interesting for the readers of your journal.’

(13) Mne jasno pomnitsja letnee utro i skameec'ka na dorožke, iduščej ot kalitki k terrase.

‘I-DAT clearly remember-REF the summer morning and the bench on the path leading from the gate to the terrace.’

Speakers of Russian also have an option of using nominative constructions with the verb in the active voice, such as ja dumaju ‘I think’, on xoćet ‘he wants’, ja pomnju ‘I remember’. However, in certain contexts it is preferred to use dative constructions. Overall, dative constructions are less frequent than nominal constructions, but their use is still quite significant. For example, according to the Russian National Corpus data, the form on xoćet ‘he.NOM.SG want.3SG.PRES’ is about three times more frequent than the form emu xoćetsja ‘he.DAT.SG. want.REF.PRES’ (10,824 uses vs. 3,293 uses) and the form ja xoću ‘I.NOM.SG want.1SG. PRES’ is about four times more frequent than mne xoćetsja ‘I.DAT.SG want.REF.PRES’ (21,318 uses vs. 5,366 uses).
Goddard (2003: 416) comments that this structure ‘implies that for some unknown reason the mental event simply ‘happens’ inside us’ and it suggests ‘a spontaneous and involuntary’ mental state. The choice of the dative construction over the nominative one suggests the denial of responsibility over the action and at the same time submission to it. The reflexive form of the verb, the absence of the nominative subject and the presentation of the experiencer in the dative case as a recipient of the state contribute these semantic elements to the structure.

In contemporary English there is no exact equivalent of such construction. English has a clear preference towards ‘active’ constructions, such as I want, I believe, I think, etc. The closest equivalent of the Russian construction would be the expressions It seems to me and It occurs to me. However, their frequency is significantly lower than the frequency of the active construction. For example, in the 550-million-word Collins Wordbanks Online corpus there are 232,607 occurrences of I think and only 2,245 occurrences of it seems to me, and 133 occurrences of it occurs to me (that is, respectively, 103 and 1749 times fewer). In the past, English also employed dative constructions, such as methinks (Bromhead, 2009), but they fell out of use.

The meaning of the Russian construction is represented in universal human concepts as follows (after Goddard 2003: 417):

[I] Mne xočetsja/veritsja (lit. ‘it doesn’t want/believe itself to me’)
something happens inside me
because of this, I want/believe this
I don’t know why

[J] Mne ne xočetsja/veritsja (lit. ‘it doesn’t want/believe itself to me’)
something happens inside me
because of this, I cannot not want/believe this
I don’t know why

Besides mental acts, numerous other verbs can occur in impersonal dative constructions in Russian. There is a range of verbs that are used in impersonal constructions either in negation or with evaluative adverbs. Below are some examples of such construction in negation:

(14) Prosto im čego-to ne spitsja.
‘They-DAT simply don’t sleep-REF.’

(15) Nado otsypat’šja, a kak-to ne spitsja.
‘I need to sleep, but I-DAT somewhat don’t sleep-REF.’

(16) Čeloveka po-svoemu neordinarnogo, ee tomila ‘oxota k peremene mest’ – ej počemu-to ne rabotalos’ v odnom i tom že teatre.
‘As a rather unusual person, she was driven by the desire for change; for some reason she-DAT didn’t work-REF in one and the same theatre.’

(17) Tolstoj pisal pis’ma, pisal dnevnik, no nad čem-to drugim v te nedeli počti ne rabotalos’.
‘Tolstoy wrote letters and the diary but he-DAT didn’t work-REF on anything else in those weeks for some reason.’
This construction can also be used with adverbs of manner:

(18) Emu ploxo rabotalos’ v etot den’.
    ‘He-DAT worked-REF badly that day.’

(19) Nam interesno rabotalos’ s togdašnim zamesitelem direktora.
    ‘We-DAT worked-REF with the deputy director of that time with enthusiasm.’

(20) – A doma vam ploxo žilos’? – Ja ne skazal by, čto ploxo, udovletvoritel’no.
    ‘– Did you-DAT live-REF badly at home? – I wouldn’t say badly, but satisfactory.’

(21) – A doma vam ploxo žilos’? – Ja ne skazal by, cˇto ploxo, udovletvoritel’no.
    ‘– Did you-DAT live-REF badly at home? – I wouldn’t say badly, but satisfactory.’

The construction with negation expresses inexplicable state when something that one wants or needs to do does not happen. It mainly occurs with verbs expressing an action one wants or is expected to do at a particular time (spat ‘sleep’, rabotat’ ‘work’, p’oˇsˇto ‘sing’). The ‘inexplicable’ attitude embedded in this construction is supported by a common use of indefinite pronominal adverbs pocˇemuˇto ‘for some reason’, kak-to ‘somewhat’, cˇtoˇto ‘for some reason/somewhat’. Its explication is as follows (after Wierzbicka 1992: 425–6):

[K] Mne ne spitsja/rabotaetsja (‘to me it doesn’t sleep/work’)
    I want to do something Y
    because of this, I am doing it
    at the same time I feel something because I think like this:
    I can’t do it
    I don’t know why
    it is not because I don’t want to do it

The construction using evaluative adverbs is explicated as follows:

[L] Mne xoroˇso/ploxo/interesno živetsja/rabotaetsja ‘to me it well/badly/interestingly lives/works’
    I am doing something now
    it happens in some way, not in another way
    I don’t know why it is like this
    it’s not because I want it to be like this

These constructions embed in their meaning the ideas of ‘not being in control’ and ‘irrationality’. More impersonal constructions in Russian reflect similar ideas or even something akin to ‘fatalism’ (Wierzbicka, 1992; Goddard, 2003). These ideas penetrate Russian lexicon at different levels. At the level of lexicon they are evident in the words sud’ba ‘fate’, rok ‘fate’, avos ‘perhaps/maybe’, among which sud’ba is most culturally significant. Sud’ba refers to an imaginary force which determines the course of a person’s life and to which a person must submit. These ideas also have been shown to be integrated in the meaning of some Russian emotion terms (Wierzbicka, 1999) as well as temporal terms and constructions (Apreajan, 2012; Gladkova, 2012). At the level of syntax it appears in impersonal constructions discussed in this chapter as well as in some passive constructions.
There is considerable variation in impersonal constructions across languages (Malchukov and Ogawa, 2012). Their meanings can be studied and compared across languages using the same set of linguistic universals embedded in NSM.

### 3 Grammatical structures and cultural influence on their use

In this section we provide an illustration of variation in the use of grammatical structures due to the influence of cultural factors. As a case study we will consider ways of wording ‘requests’ in English and Russian. Requests are a type of speech act. As a part of the speech act theory, Austin (1962) distinguished between statements (that is, utterances that may be assigned a truth value) and performatives (that is, utterances that perform some actions whose successful completion rests on felicity conditions). Searle (1979) proposed a further classification of performatives and, according to his classification, requests (along with commands) belong to the group of directives.

It is important to note that the word ‘request’ is used as a technical label and it is erroneous to equate all speech of this type in different languages with the English word request. While other languages might have a term close to ‘request’ it might not necessarily fully overlap in meaning with the English term. For examples, the closest term in Russian is просба. According to Zalizniak (2005: 283–4), the Russian word differs from its English equivalent and implies the idea of inequality between the speaker and the hearer; the hearer is perceived as someone being above the speaker in status. At the same time, Zalizniak argues, просба implies an establishment of some sort of a relationship between two people in that the speaker expects the hearer to do something for him or her out of good attitude towards the speaker. Therefore, the Russian word просба presupposes a certain intrusion into a private sphere of the hearer not only in the way that certain actions are expected from him or her, but also some feelings. The difference between the Russian and English terms well highlights the danger of ethnocentrism in linguistic analysis when terms of one language are used to analyse speech practices in another language.

We will use the term ‘request’ as a label due to existing conventions, but it should be borne in mind that the aspects of meaning of the English terms are not meant to represent the semantic and pragmatic reality of other languages. ‘Request’ as a technical term stands for a speech act in which the speaker expresses his or her want for the hearer to do something for him or her out of good attitude towards the speaker. At the same time, it is not obvious to both the speaker and the hearer that the hearer will perform this act under normal circumstances (Searle, 1969).

In this section, on the basis of English and Russian we will demonstrate how different languages employ different grammatical structures to express requests and how this choice is consistent with broader cultural ideas and understandings.

English employs a variety of ways for expressing ‘request’. One of the ways, often considered as most common, is to use an interrogative or interrogative-cum-conditional form, as in the following examples from Collins Wordbanks Online (Wierzbicka, 1991: 32):

(22) Will you give mother and father my love?

(23) Look, will you please stop it!

(24) Will you tell the court, please.

(25) Would you mind moving on, please?

(26) Captain Paterson, would you please come with me.

(27) Would you be so kind as escort Commandant Warner to the First Sister’s quarters?
Please would you come with me.

Would you mind telling me what you’re doing here?

Would you care to join me for a drink?

Why don’t you do one of your funny voices and cheer the kid up?

Could you be a little more specific?

Could you give me some guidance please?

Can you get in the front please?

Can you pass me a towel?

The use of an imperative form is also a possible way of wording a request (e.g., *Shut up!*), but using a bare infinitive form is considered rude and the imperative is often ‘softened’ by the use of modifiers, that is words like *please, just, dear.*

Hang on a minute, please.

Pass my monocle, dear boy, I’ll need a view of this.

Just be on your guard.

In English requests are also expressed by tag questions:

Meet him here, will you?

Cut it out, would you please.

You couldn’t possibly come back, could you?

You couldn’t give me his name, could you?

You can explain, can you?

Other ways to express requests is to employ speaker-oriented utterances which contain an indirect question:

Actually I wonder if you could excuse me for a moment.

Yes, but I wonder if you can tell me something else.

I wondered if you’d care to meet me for a drink or something.

One could employ declarative utterances expressing a hypothetical wish of the speaker:

I would like to ask you to sing one for me.

Utterances where the speaker expresses his or her gratitude to the hearer in case the request is performed are also possible:

I’d appreciate it if you’d be careful with her.

I would appreciate it if you made no mention of my existence.
Bowe and Martin (2009: 20) report on a survey of middle managers in business in the eastern area of Melbourne conducted in 1995. The aim was to find out which of the following forms are most commonly used in requests:

(a) Pass the salt (please).
(b) Can you pass the salt?
(c) Can you reach the salt?
(d) Would you mind passing the salt?
(e) I would appreciate if you would pass the salt.
(f) Would you pass the salt?

Their findings suggest that the most frequently used request forms were variants of (b) and (f) with the addition of the word please, that is, forms like Can you pass the salt please and Would you please pass the salt.

Russian also employs a variety of linguistic structures to express request, but their choice and distribution differs from English. The most commonly used structure is that of imperative (Larina, 2009). The following examples are taken from the Russian National Corpus:

(50) Rasskažite, kak četo proizšlo.
‘Tell, how it happened.’
(51) Prideš', pozvoni.
‘When you) come, call.’
(52) Devuška, skažite, novyx pravil uličnogo dvizhenija net?
‘Girl, say, are there new road rules?’
(53) Peredaj salfetku.
‘Pass the napkin.’
(54) Daj kakoe-nibud’ bljudečko?
‘Give any saucer?’

Unlike in English, this structure is considered neutral and not rude. However, it can also be ‘softened’ by the use of the following devices: the word požalujsta ‘please’ (example 55), the use of diminutive forms in the forms of address (names or kin terms) (examples 56, 57) and the use of minimizers or diminutive forms (examples 58, 59):

(55) Skažite požalujsta, a cvety četo?
‘Tell, please, whose are the flowers?’
(56) Babul', otkroj, četo ja.
‘Grandma-DIM, open, it’s me.’
(57) Lenčka, skaži tete, v kakom ty klasse?
‘Lena-DIM, tell aunty what grade you are in?’
Requests in the form of imperatives can also be intensified by the use of intensifying particles (as in 59 and 60), ‘double’ (or even ‘triple’) imperative (examples 61 and 62), and repetition (example 63):

(60) Nu pozovi-ka ego.
‘Well, call-INT him.’

(61) Slušaj, starik. Sgonjaj na Smolenku, a?
‘Listen, old man. Drive to Smolenk, ah?’

(62) Slušaj, bud’ drugom, pomogi matanaliz sdat’.
‘Listen, be a friend, help me to pass mathematical analysis.’

(63) Raskazyvaj-raskazyvaj.
‘Tell, tell.’

The use of a ‘double imperative’ in requests is characteristic of a ‘camaraderie’ attitude (Larina, 2009; Gladkova, 2013b).

Interrogative forms are also possible in the expression of requests in Russian, but their scope and frequency is much smaller than it is in English. Examples (22–30), if translated into Russian, would simply not be possible as an expression of request. In Russian the interrogative forms are used in the future (as in 64). Moreover, the use of negation can be regarded as a more polite form because it implies a possibility of a negative response:

(64) Vy ne podskažite, pjanornyvvidel’ “Boss” u vas est’?
‘Won’t you tell if you have “Boss” stain remover?’

Like English, Russian also uses speaker-oriented utterances in question and statement forms.

Larina (2009) conducted a study in which Russian and English native speakers performed a discourse completion task to several ‘request’ situations. According to this data, Russians speakers use imperative three times more often than English speakers, while English speakers use interrogative forms four times more often than Russians speakers (Larina 2009: 450).

From the point of view of ethnosyntax, the difference in preference towards different grammatical structures in the expression of ‘request’ can be explained by prevalence of different cultural values. Wierzbicka (2006) relates a common use of whimperatives for wording requests, the cultural rules of using thank you and the avoidance of phrases like you must in suggestions in English, with the prevalence of the value of ‘personal autonomy’. She argues that the idea that ‘it is not good to impose and force other people to do certain things’ is a cultural idea shared by English speakers and that it finds its realization in language. Wierzbicka (2006: 52) formulates this cultural rule as follows:1

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[M] [people think like this:]
no one can say to another person:
“I want you to do this
you have to do it because of this”

[N] [people think like this:]
no one can say to another person:
“I don’t want you to do this
you can’t do it because of this”

She comments on these scripts as follows: ‘These scripts don’t say that people can do anything they
want to do or that there can be no rules legitimately preventing people from doing what they want to
do. Rather, they say that it cannot be another person’s expression of will that prevents me from
doing what I want to do or forces me to do what I don’t want to do’ (Wierzbicka, 2006: 52).

In Russian ‘personal autonomy’ and ‘privacy’ are not regarded as important cultural values. In
fact, Russian does not have a word that fully corresponds to the English word privacy. Therefore,
the idea of ‘distancing’ in a speech act like ‘request’ is not realized in Russian to the same degree as it
is in English. In certain forms of Russian requests, particularly when diminutive forms are used,
it is the idea of ‘expressing good feelings’, that is script [E], that becomes dominant.

4 Conclusions

Language is highly sensitive to cultural and societal processes. Grammatically elaborated areas of a
language commonly embed meanings or ideas that are particularly salient in the collective psyche
of a people. Knowledge of these meanings or ideas can equip cultural outsiders with more
effective and successful tools of communication with the representatives of the culture.

This chapter has provided some examples of studies illustrating cultural significance of
grammar within the ethnosyntax approach. These investigations can be of particular importance
to other areas of linguistics, including language teaching. The proposed formulae can be applied
in language teaching to explain meanings and use of grammatical constructions. Moreover,
appealation to broader cultural rules can explain to learners why there exists variation in gram-
matical constructions across languages. The use of universal human concepts makes it possible to
translate these formulae into any language without any change in meaning.

5 Future directions

Despite the fact that ethnosyntax was established as a new direction of research in linguistics more
than thirty years ago, it remains an area that has received limited attention. While detailed studies
of grammatical phenomena are common, only few studies attempt to establish connections
between grammar and culture. This calls for the following directions in future research.

Broader investigations of language and culture are required. Ethnosyntax studies are closely
linked with and will benefit from other investigations of lexicon and grammar that aim to
establish connections between language and cultural values.

Language-specific studies of grammatical structures at different levels in relation to culture are
needed.

Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies of grammatical structures will shed further light on
the issues of cultural specificity.

Methodological aspects of ethnosyntax studies need to be developed and universal metalanguage
needs to be employed in such studies to avoid ethnocentrism.

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Studies in ethnosyntax in a historical perspective can contribute to the research on the issues of grammatical variation and change in relation to cultural values.

The results of ethnosyntax studies have enormous potential for language pedagogy and cross-cultural training as they can make language-specific structures more clear and accessible to language and culture learners.

Related topics

the linguistic relativity hypothesis revisited; ethnosemantics; ethnopragmatics; language, culture, and politeness; cultural semiotics; language and cultural scripts

Further reading

Enfield, N. J. (ed.) (2002) Ethnosyntax: Explorations in Grammar and Culture, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Includes several studies on ethnosyntax on a broad variety of languages employing diverse methodologies as well as a good theoretical explanation of the approach.)


NSM homepage, www.griffith.edu.au/humanities-languages/school-languages-linguistics/research/natural-semantic-metalanguage-homepage (Online resource on the NSM approach with a basic explanation of it, an exhaustive list of publications, and several downloadable papers.)


Note

1 In more recent NSM scripts, scripts of this kind are usually formulated as ‘many people think like this’ (see Chapters 5 and 23 this volume).

References


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Zalianiak, Anna (2005) ‘Zametki o slovax obščenie, otnošenie, pros’ba, čuvstva, ēmocii’ [Notes about the words obščenie, otnošenie, pros’ba, čuvstva, ēmocii], in A. Zalizniak et al. Ključevye idei ruskoj jazykovoj kartiny mira. Moscow: Jazyki slavjanskoj kul’tury.