

## Interpretation of Emotions as a Key to Understanding Cultures

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### Abstract

Non-native speakers of a language cannot decode emotionally conditioned meanings of stationary sentences without background knowledge. The interpretation of semantically independent expressions cannot be separated from culture. The discovery of universal emotions and the description of words and expressions related to the latter is a key to understanding cultures and societies.

**Key words:** language, culture, emotion, stationary sentences.

### Introduction

Emotionality is considered to be the pronounced stress on the feelings and their free expression. According to T. Kozlova (1999:232) expressivity is a common feature of the Russian culture of communication and according to the surveys conducted by A. Wierzbicka (1997:33-34), Russian speech is characterized by intensity of emotions and abundance of linguistic means to express emotions and emotional overtones.

In accordance with a Harvard study of the Russian national character, the Russians are considered to be “expressive and emotional”, they are characterized by “general expansiveness”, “easiness in expressing the feelings”, “impulsivity” (Bauer, Inkeles, Kluckhohn 1956:141). The Chinese scientist Li Inann, considers that the Russian national character “strikes out for being irrational, emotional, affective and polar [...]. The specificity of the Russian character seems to involve a combination of inconsistent features expressed in a bright, affected way with sharp and unpredictable changes of emotion and mood” (Inann 1999:153).

J. Duren considers emotions to be physiological reactions that occur in usual real-life situations and are “either simply a shout or an utterance of one or several words” (2002:278). The Chinese scholar Bao Khun writes that expressivity is in close interaction with emotionality, modality and evaluation. Directly reflecting the peculiarities of thought and speech, it reflects the nature of reality. The expressive means appear much closer to the described than non-expressive ones (2002:274).

Intonation (a manifestation of the emotional and expressive function of speech) is used to express the speaker’s emotional state as well as his/her attitude to the content of the utterance (approval, reproach, mockery, etc...). N.M. Amosov’s hypothesis of the availability of two programs in the brain which process any intellectual and emotional information is fundamental for the intonational expression of emotions and their relation to meaning. These programs are constantly interacting in the process of thinking (Amosov 1964).

J. Duren claims, that “intonation is usually more important than the segmental, lexical and grammatical structure of the utterance”. However, “the segmental part of such utterances becomes more or less independent in relation to the suprasegmental part. The

author can mention expressions such as *This is really too much!!!* or *What a fool he is!!!*, and the reader will immediately “hear” the characteristic intonation of disappointment and indignation” (2002:278). Such units are called reactive phrases or reactives (Duren 2002:278; Zolotova, Onipenko, Sidorova, 2003:398).

### **Polysemy of Utterance as the Result of the Speaker’s Emotional Reconsideration**

Russian colloquial speech is full of polysemantic utterances with various meanings. As a rule, the polysemy is developed when the speaker emotionally reconsiders the utterance, which is possible, according to Leontev due to “the double life of the meanings” (Leontev 1972:136). On the one hand, meanings are included in the social memory of the society; on the other hand, they are an integral part of the inner world of any human being (Leontev 1976:49). Such meanings (that are implicitly contained in the expression) are differentiated in the process of perception of meaning through intonation.

Hence, the Russian expression I have no time for you (*Mne ne do tebya/bas*) means, first of all, that the speaker is busy. The meaning of this expression can be interpreted in at least two ways:

1) *I am very busy now*, 2) *I am sad now*, with the general meaning, ...  
that is why I cannot spend time with you (talk to you, help you, etc...).

In certain contexts the expression *I have no time for you (Mne ne do tebya/bas)* can express “dissatisfaction”. For example,

[Viktor:] *Go away, Afonya, I have no time for you...*

(A. Arbuzov, Irkutskaya istoriya)

[Viktor:] *Uydi, Afonya, ne do tebya...*

Or the ***Big thrill/deal! (Podumaesh!)*** expresses, first of all, something that does not deserve serious attention from the speaker’s point of view. Cf.:

– *He is injured! – Big thrill! A small bruise.*

– *U nego travma! – Podumaesh, nebolshoy ushib.*

– *I have received a watch as a gift! – Big thrill! And I have a tape-recorder.*

– *Mne chasi podarili! – Podumaesh, chasi! A u menya magnitofon est’.*

The expression ***Big thrill/deal! (Podumaesh!)*** implies disagreement with the interlocutor’s opinion. In a certain context it can express “discontent”. Cf.:

[Viktor:] *Old chap, Irina Sergeevna called again. Left a message that she is waiting for your call. [Tumanskiy:] Ok. What? Irina Sergeevna? (Abruptly) Mind your own business! [Viktor:] Big thrill! You did ask me, and now – “mind your own business”.* (A. Afinogenov, Mashen’ka.)

[Viktor:] *Starik, opyat' zvonila Irina Sergeevna. Prosila peredat', shto ona zhdyot tvoyego zvonka.* [Tumanskiy:] *Khorosho. A? Irina Sergeevna? (Rezko) Ne lez' ne v svoyo delo!* [Viktor:] *Podumaesh! Ti sam prosil, a to – "ne lez'."*  
(A. Afinogenov, Mashen'ka.)

Native speakers easily perceive implicit meanings. But foreigners often do not understand such meanings and that is the reason why this fact should be focused on when teaching Russian to foreigners.

The following joke justifies the urgency and the necessity of the present research: "A Russian woman, an Englishwoman and a Frenchwoman share the same hotel room. In the morning the Frenchwoman discovers that her shoes are lost. She does not speak Russian, but speaks a little English. The Englishwoman speaks a little Russian and French. The Russian woman does not speak any language except Russian. The Frenchwoman asks the Englishwoman to find out if the Russian has taken her shoes by mistake, and the Russian replies: *Hello, I am your aunt (Zdravstvuyte, ya vasha tyotyа).* The Englishwoman translates: *She says good morning and says, that she is your aunt.* The French is outraged: *I have never had any relatives in Russia. Let her give my shoes back!* Hearing the translation the Russian replies *A fat lot of use her shoes to me! (Ochen' oni mne nuzhni!).* The English translates *She needs your shoes badly.* The French is confused: *But I also need them!* After this translation the Russian retorts: *Horseradish I give her back! (Khren ya ey vernu),* and the translation follows: *She says that she will give you some vegetable instead...!*

This dialogue includes such stationary sentences as *Hello! I am your aunt, A fat lot of use her shoes to me, Horseradish I give her back! (Zdravstvuyte, ya vasha tyotyа; Ochen' nuzhni oni mne! Khren ya ey vernu!),* which are used in daily Russian speech both in direct and figurative meanings (*Hello* – as a "greeting" and as a "surprise"; *I am your aunt* – in direct meaning and as a "surprise-contradiction"; *A fat lot of use her shoes to me!* – as necessity and vice versa; *Horseradish I give her back* – in the direct meaning and in the meaning "I will give you back nothing") The homonymy of the given expressions is the result of the emotional reconsideration by the speaker. The linguist-practitioner should consider the task of describing the homonymous expressions while teaching Russian as a foreign language, because, as we can see, homonymous expressions very often hinder and even, in some cases, endanger the communicative process: the speakers cannot understand each other in a right way.

The translator in the joke did not understand the Russian expressions in a right way (if we exclude the factor of the translator's "deafness" to intonation). The translator did not know that these expressions have a figurative meaning in Russian, i.e. the accumulative function of the language, the function of accumulation of the public experience and knowledge equals zero. The next reason is that the given meanings do not exist in her native language: the given expressions are used in the mentioned meanings neither in French nor in English.<sup>2</sup>

Anna Wierzbicka mentions that the Anglo-Saxon culture disapproves of emotional behaviour (1997:41). "When comparing English language with Russian it is particularly interesting to note that the Russian language [...] particularly attaches much more attention to the emotions and has the copious vocabulary of lexical and grammatical expressions to distinguish emotional expressions" (Wierzbicka 1997:44).

Communication and mutual understanding are facilitated by the ability to feel and perceive all emotional and expressive shades of meaning, to choose the right expression in various situations and to find the correct intonation. The expressions set the style and determine the tone of the dialogues. According to J. O'Connor and J. Seymour (1998:34-35) the distinction is created not by what we say, but how we say it. Margaret Thatcher spent a lot of time and effort to change her voice. The tone of voice and language of gestures define if the word "hello" would sound as a simple greeting or threat or suppression or just as a charming exclamation. Each of us expresses numerous shades of meaning in daily conversations and, probably, has a dozen of different ways to say "no". Simply we never think about it consciously.

It is interesting to describe emotional states and linguistic means which are used in certain "scenarios" since they make the native speaker interpret feelings and shape emotions and relations with other people. It is as well interesting to consider and interpret the sign through involving it in the structure of activity and behavior (Vigotski, Leontev, as well as Klaus 1967; Morris 1946).

The theory of "the culturally conditioned scenarios" has recently emerged and is not yet famous enough. The nature of the given theory is to discover and describe the secret rules that help "to be individual among other individuals". Such rules are specific for each culture. They teach "how to think, how to feel, how to want and how to act in accordance with one's wishes, how to gain or to transfer knowledge and, the most important, **how to converse with other people**" (Wierzbicka 1997:393). Thus, the English-American culture encourages complimenting people to raise their self-appraisal. Complimenting in one's face is not encouraged in Japanese culture; however, it is approved when one speaks "badly" about oneself (Wierzbicka 1997:397-398). Armenian culture approves of complementing, even if it is excessive, but not boasting as it can lead to disapproval, even reproof.

Therefore, "the characteristics of linguistic and cultural content of language based only on objectively conditioned semantic content of the sentence is not successful as well as its definition based on the internal, syntactic relations or on the mere activity of the subject" (Shaklein 1999:507). The distinction "language-speech" is not sufficient when attempting to discover the nature of the linguo-cultural content of the sentence – the differentiation of culture manifestations is layered, and it is no less complicated than the language.

*The discovery of universal emotions and the description of words and expressions related to the latter is, in our opinion, the invaluable key to understanding cultures and societies.*

Like other linguistic units, stationary sentences are less informative than non-stationary sentences due to their frequency in speech. However, this fact does not diminish the significance of their research, since stationary sentences are the result of the action (manifestation) of such a linguistic function as the function of acquisition of public and historical experience (coined by A.A. Leontyev) or the accumulative function, i.e. the function of accumulation of public experience and knowledge (coined by V.A. Avrorina).<sup>3</sup> Foreigners cannot decode emotionally conditioned meanings of stationary sentences without background knowledge (Khamzina 2002:52).

### Conclusion

The interpretation of semantically independent expressions cannot be separated from culture. V. Telia's (1996:226) "...the idiom is another culture" is true for stationary sentences whose content is not motivated and consequently is not transparent and reflective. The stereotype layer, which is considered to have a reflective nature and to be the structural basis of linguistic consciousness, is included in linguistic and cultural consciousness of the speaker. However, it is not reflected in the inophones' consciousness. In our opinion, this is a field of study to be considered by Communicative Linguistics, or more precisely, Communicative and Cognitive Linguistics.

We agree with G.V. Kolshanski who half a century ago wrote in his "Context Semantics" (1980:75-76), "The result of communication, namely the attainment of the absolute univocacy in speech and comprehension, is [...] the result of the interaction of linguistic (intra- and extra- factors) and paralinguistic factors".

### Notes:

1. There are no equivalents in English for stationary sentences *Zdravstvuyte, ya vasha tyotya* and *Khren ya ey vernu*. To avoid misunderstanding, word for word translation is made.
2. Moreover, the English do not "surrender to feelings". (The French artist, the character in the movie N, notes that "the English are emotionless" and the reply is "They just hide their emotions".)
3. About the functions of language see: Shmelyov 1977:10-11.

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### Հոյզերի մեկնաբանումը որպես մշակույթների ըմբռնման բանալի

Արտասահմանցիները, ի տարբերություն ռուսների, առանց համապատասխան ֆոնային գիտելիքների չեն կարող հասկանալ ռուսական հուզական կարծրատիպ ասույթները: Դրա համար անհրաժեշտ է մշակույթի իմացություն: Հոդվածում հույզերի մեկնաբանումը և լեզվի միջոցով դրանց արտահայտման տարբեր ձևերը դիտարկվում են որպես մշակույթների ըմբռնման անփոխարինելի բանալի:

### Толкование эмоций – ключ к пониманию культур

Иностранцы расшифровать эмоционально обусловленные значения стереотипных/стационарных высказываний без фоновых знаний, которыми обладают россияне, не могут. Обладая смысловой самостоятельностью, эти высказывания не могут быть правильно истолкованы вне соотнесения с фактами культуры. Описание эмоциональных состояний и языковых средств, обслуживающих определенные “сценарии”, является бесценным ключом к пониманию культур и социумов.